

2002 Sydney Taylor Body-of-Work Award:

Judye Groner and Madeline Wikler

Libby White: Since 1975 Kar-Ben Copies, Inc. has been the mainstay of librarians, teachers, and parents anxious to introduce Judaism to the young. Kar-Ben established a reputation as an independent publisher of quality works, promoting the development of a generation of new authors and illustrators. The Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee is pleased to honor Kar-Ben co-founders Judyth Groner and Madeline Wikler with the 2002 Body-of-Work Award for their unique contributions to the field of Jewish children's literature.

Judyth Groner is originally from Cleveland. She holds a BA in Jewish Studies from Brandeis University and an MSW in Community Organization from the University of MD. After moving to the Washington DC area, Judye worked in community relations for the Urban League, the Jewish Community Council, and B'nai b'rith Hillel. The first book published by Kar-Ben was a collaboration of the co-founders and friends. It was MY VERY OWN HAGGADAH, which sold over two million copies. How is that for a need being met? In the next 27 years Kar-Ben published more than 150 titles for children and their families on subjects such as holidays, crafts, cooking, folklore, and contemporary Jewish life. Many Kar-Ben books received high critical acclaim, including the Sydney Taylor Book Award.

Madeline Wikler grew up in Yonkers, New York. She now lives in the Washington area. Madeline is a graduate of Pembroke College of Brown University, where she majored in English and Art History. She worked as a public information officer in New Haven and later edited a Washington-based national association's newsletter. Madeline and Judye worked on over a dozen books together, including MY VERY OWN HAGGADAH, THANK YOU GOD, and COME LET US WELCOME THE SHABBAT. Madeline handled most of the firm's graphics and also illustrated several titles.

In 2001 Kar-Ben became a division of Lerner Publishing Group. Lerner is, of course, an old friend of AJL and primary exhibitor at our conventions. We all enjoyed the Lerner-sponsored reception in honor of the BODY-OF-WORK winners preceding the banquet. Judyth Groner and Madeline Wikler are now editorial consultants to the Kar Ben Division of Lerner. It gives me great pleasure to present this special award to two leaders in the field of Jewish Children's Literature.

Judyth Groner and Madeline Wikler:

Madeline: In the spring of 1974, Judye planned a seder focusing on the interests and attention span of our then four young children. Unable to find a suitable Haggadah, she wrote a simple text and asked me to supply some easy-to-color illustrations. The result was the photocopied and stapled version of MY VERY OWN HAGGADAH., and the rest, as they say, is history. That first edition set us upon an unexpected career path and

business venture that grew from a single book to 175 and made Kar-Ben a household name in Jewish libraries and bookstores world-wide.

Until now the Sydney Taylor Body of Work Award has been given to authors for books they have written. While we treasure the more than two dozen books that we ourselves wrote, we take great pride also in the more than 150 books that we have published. They are all our “children.” We chose and nurtured them, selected artists, saw them through editing, layout, printing, marketing, and sometimes even retirement. Therefore we share this award with more than 75 authors and illustrators, whose combined talents have created our “body-of-work”- one that has met the test of time, the rigors of critics, and the high standards of the teachers, parents, and you, the librarians, who have bought, read and loved them as we do. You prod and encourage us to publish more and better, and with the expanded resources, talent, and enthusiasm of our new family at Lerner, we hope we can do just that. We are honored and humbled to accept this award.

Judye: Our success stems partly from having been in the right place at the right time. The 70’s saw a new interest in ethnic awareness, and a new generation of young Jewish couples who were seeking to rediscover their Jewish identity and teach it to their children. Our books provided them a tool. Also at that time, while the library continued to be an important communal resource, people began to buy books, particularly new, inexpensive paperback editions, for themselves and for their children. As a result, dozens of children’s only bookstores opened, creating a market for multicultural books. And advances in the printing industry made it technically and financially feasible for a small press to produce quality books.

Madeline: And we worked hard, doing it all pretty much ourselves...not just the acquisitions, editing and design, the more “creative” side of the business, but shelving the inventory, packing the boxes, answering the phones, collecting the receivables, and dealing with printers and truckers. Our children helped with bulk mailings in a game fondly known as “playing Kar-Ben Copies.” We started with a big black bookkeeping ledger and a basement full of books. An overflowing washing machine led to our first warehouse space, and soon we had a PC to do our adding and subtracting. Then came the toll-free number, the credit card machine, the fax, the website. When we were acquired by Lerner almost two years ago, we had a 40000 square foot warehouse, three computers, our own forklift, and two terrific part-time employees.

Judye: We are pleased to have some of our family fan club with us here today. My sons Josh and Ben grew up literally “above the store.” Their first job was sticking labels on flyers, but they have graduated to more important tasks. “Ben of Kar-Ben” taught me how to upsell books, drawing on his experience as a singing waiter where he learned to upsell liquor. It was Josh’s inventive retelling of the Passover story-in which the Silver Spring Fire Department was called to put out the burning bush –that led me to write MY VERY OWN HAGGADAH. Josh designed Kar-Ben’s website, and he continues to solve our almost daily computer questions. “Tech support!” he answers his phone with a cheerful, yet exasperated sigh.

Madeline: My husband Joe, an investment advisor who is used to analyzing companies with many more zeroes in their bottom lines has been invaluable in helping us keep our focus and navigate the foreign waters of finance. Because of his enthusiasm and encouragement for our venture, we forgive him when he calls us “the girls.” Although my daughters, Karen and Judy, couldn’t be here, I know that my grandsons Elijah and Gabriel, who represent Kar-Ben’s newest generation of reader, are home reading and chewing on our books.

Judye: There are two people who contributed to Kar-Ben who are not with us today. The first is my husband “Rabbi Oscar,” whose sudden death two years ago left an empty chair at corporate lunch and our void in our hearts. Officially he was in charge of Buildings and Grounds at Kar-Ben, which meant changing light bulbs, recycling the trash, and doing the lunch dishes. Unofficially he was our “editorial mashgiach.” He read manuscripts and drafts, researched halachic questions, and educated and entertained us with his vast store of knowledge and wonderful sense of the absurd. The other is Debbie Karch, Kar-Ben’s office manager, customer relations expert., and proof-reader par excellence. Many of you no doubt spoke to Debbie when you called to place orders or request a catalog. Her untimely death just weeks ago has left us immensely saddened.

Madeline: The success of our 40 year friendship and 29 year business partnership is that we are so different—and yet so alike! In most cases, our skills and personalities complement each other.

Judye: I don’t know which side of a tennis racket is up.

Madeline: I still get Tisha B’AV and Tu B’Shevat confused.

Judye: I cook and crochet.

Madeline: I paint and pot.

Judye: I’m good with spread sheets and tax returns.

Madeline: I’m better with pixels and picas.

Judye: Between 8 and 10 every morning she runs, swims, bikes, works out or plays tennis...sometimes all of the above.

Madeline: Between 8 and 10 every morning she drinks coffee, reads the newspaper, and solves the Times crossword puzzle—in ink.

Judye: Yet, people insist we sound alike, “Which one are YOU?” they ask when we answer the phone.

Madeline: We can look at a 12-page menu and predict what each other will order.

Judye: Once we appeared simultaneously at the checkout counter of London Fog—she from the “petites,” me from “women’s”—with the same pink raincoat.

Madeline: And we can finish each others sentences, which has become increasingly important these days, because we’re lucky if between the two of us we can come up with enough words for a complete sentence.

Judye: While Oscar was not a congregational rabbi, he often led High Holiday services. I teased him that because he could never remember what he had said the year before, he gave the same sermon over and over. He responded that “if you have one really good idea during your life, you should go with it.” His “good idea,” the theme of many of his sermons, was the importance of memory in Jewish life. We know ourselves to be Jews,

he said, because of an act of memory, because our parents and grandparents remembered the tradition they had been taught and they, in turn, taught us. That tradition included Torah, philosophy, literature, music, food, Shabbat and holiday celebration, a commitment to tzedakah, a love for Israel. For centuries, the tradition was handed down family by family, and was remembered—or forgotten—family by family. Today, in many families the transmission has been interrupted. There is no memory. Parents and grandparents, in their search to become Americans, turned away from Jewish tradition. That tradition must be relearned, and because it can no longer be handed down family by family, by necessity it has become curriculum. I have always looked at the books we have written and nurtured as a means of handing down Jewish memories. I hope that along with my bubbe's chopping bowl and recipe for gefilte fish, the library I have left my children and grandchildren will inspire them to accept and, in turn, pass on this tradition. Again, we thank you for this wonderful honor.