

2002 Sydney Taylor Award Winner for Older Readers:

Hana's Suitcase

By Karen Levine

Libby White: Karen Levine is the author of HANA'S SUITCASE: A TRUE STORY, winner of the 2002 award for Older Readers. HANA'S SUITCASE, Karen's first book, was published by Second Story Press in Toronto. The US rights have been sold to Albert Whitman Publishers. HANA'S SUITCASE is being translated and will soon be available in many languages. Karen Levine is a native of Ottawa who now makes her home in Toronto. She is a producer for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Her accomplishments have been many. For 7 years Karen was executive producer of "As it Happens." She created long-running series for "This Morning" and "Sunday Edition." Karen has twice received the prestigious Peabody Award for documentaries. One of the Peabodies was presented for her work "Children of the Holocaust." HANA'S SUITCASE was originally a documentary which won a gold medal in New York in 2001. The Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee is not alone in honoring Karen Levine HANA'S SUITCASE has been named winner of the Issac Frischwasser Memorial Award in Children's Literature of the Canadian Jewish Book Awards. Congratulations, Karen!

Karen Levine: Thank you so much for this wonderful honour. It's truly a thrill to be the winner of this year's Sydney Taylor Award for Older Readers, and to be among you here at the Association of Jewish Libraries Convention in Toronto. Yes, in Toronto. In the beautiful, vibrant, enormously multicultural and very safe city of Toronto. I salute all of you who braved the storm about SARS to come here, and I hope you have a wonderful time in the city.

I first read about Hana's suitcase in December 2000. I read about Hana's suitcase in The Canadian Jewish News. My heart started to beat. I fell in love with the story instantly. This was a different kind of Holocaust story. It had at its centre a terrible sadness, one we all know too well. But it had a modern layer to it that lifted it up, that had connection, and even redemption.

Fumiko runs a small Holocaust education centre for children in Tokyo. She receives a loan of some artifacts connected to children from the museum at Auschwitz. One of the objects—the only one with a name and a birthdate on it—is a suitcase. Encouraged by the children who come to the centre, she spends a year scouring the world for the story behind the suitcase. Her search—full of pitfalls, setbacks, coincidences and miracles finally leads her to Toronto and George Brady, Hana's surviving brother.

I've worked in public radio here—for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation for 24 years. I knew right away that I wanted to make a radio documentary of Hana's suitcase. I did. It aired in January 2001. After it aired my friend Margie, who is a publisher and the daughter of survivors, called me and said I had to turn the story into a book. But I'd never written a book before and I had a full time job, and I have a son, Gabriel, who was then six years old. My partner Michael Enright heated up the campaign. Six months later, I started to write. And the book got done.

The response from children –and their wonderful teachers and librarians—has been astounding. George, Fumiko and I are all inundated with letters. Children respond to a whole range of things in this story. They respond to the simple story of one child as one thing to make the world a better place. The idea of Holocaust fatigue,” so much talked about now, has no meaning for them. They connect the experience of Hana, George and Fumiko to their own lives. They are shocked to learn that racism can have deadly consequences, they say they’ll appreciate their siblings differently and maybe behave differently in the schoolyard when someone is treated badly for who they are.

I want to tell you about one other award. It’s called the Silver Birch. Every year the Ontario Library Association picks a list of ten fiction and ten nonfiction books. 1100 schools across the province have reading clubs, and 55,000 children vote for their favourite books. HANA’S SUITCASE was declared the non-fiction winner at an amazing event with 1500 kids all screaming for books. George and I felt like rock stars. But the most amazing little story to come out of the Silver Birch was this. A teacher from one of Toronto’s suburbs took me aside to tell me proudly that her club had voted 100% for HANA’S SUITCASE. 80% of the kids in it were Muslim. In Toronto, where every classroom is a little United Nations, this story resonates as much with kids from Sri Lanka and Chile as it does with kids who were born here.

But here’s the greatest thrill. George’s daughter Lara told me that about terribly George suffered with nightmares about his sister, for as long as she could remember. With the discovery of the suitcase and the publication of Hana’s story, George’s nightmares have stopped. His sister’s death and life now have tremendous meaning—beyond his memory—and are tools in the fight against anti-semitism, racism, against intolerance of all kinds. And Hana Brady has finally realized her dream of becoming a teacher

In the course of her acceptance speech, Karen Levine asked George Brady to join her at the rostrum. George Brady addressed the audience briefly.