

## JEWISH CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: WHAT'S HOT AND WHAT'S NOT

### *The Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee*

**Description:** Who's invited? Everyone, of course, but especially Day School Librarians, Hebrew School and Synagogue Librarians, Community and Education Center Librarians, Children's and Young Adult Public Librarians, Authors, Illustrators, Booksellers and Publishers! Convention time means the return of the "FEW-HOLDS-BARRED PANEL". As usual, the panel—consisting of Susan Berman, Baltimore Hebrew Congregation, Baltimore, MD; Kathleen Clotfelter, Donna Klein Jewish Academy, Boca Raton, FL; Andrea Davidson, The Temple-Tifereth Israel, Beachwood, OH; Heidi Estrin, Congregation B'nai Israel, Boca Raton, FL; Fred Isaac, Temple Sinai, Oakland, CA; and Libby White, Beth Israel Congregation, Owings Mills, MD—takes on a selection of books published in 2002. The fast-paced program will consist of two parts, separated by a break to allow all involved to catch their breath and unscramble their senses. Meet Sydney Taylor Book Award winners. Celebrate the achievements of retiring STBA Committee members and greet new members. Pick up "Notable Books of Jewish Content: The Best of the Bunch", our 2002 bibliography, STBA bookmarks, and award seals, and purchase our committee's spiral bound compilation of reviews. As always, the committee will seek audience feedback to energize, and who knows, to elevate our presentation!

**Heidi Estrin** is librarian for Feldman Children's Library at Congregation B'nai Israel in Boca Raton, Florida. Her library serves the temple's huge preschool and after-school religious classes, and she often does over 25 story times a week. Heidi has been the president of AJL's South Florida Chapter since 2000, and a Judaica librarian since 1998. Previously she worked as a children's librarian for public libraries in Broward County, FL, and Pittsburgh, PA. Her MLS is from the University of Pittsburgh.

**Libby White** is librarian at Beth Israel Congregation Hebrew School in Owings Mills, MD. Previously, she was a Reference Librarian at a large public library system in Upstate New York and Coordinator of the Summer Seminars in Judaic Studies Program at Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY. Libby reviews for the *AJL Newsletter*, *Jewish Book World*, and *School Library Journal*. Currently, she is working toward a doctorate in Jewish History at Baltimore Hebrew University. Since 1999 Libby has been a member of the Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee. This is her second year as chair. She will take part in the What's Hot, What's Not program and present awards to Sydney Taylor Book Award Winners at the banquet.

**Fred Isaac** is currently Librarian at Temple Sinai in Oakland, California and a Judaica Library consultant and writer in the San Francisco Bay Area. He is a past President of the Association of Jewish Libraries SSC Division, and a departing member of the Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee. He is also on the planning committee for the AJL 2005 Convention. He has presented papers and published in the field of detective fiction and is a long-time member of the Popular Culture Association.

**Susan Berman** is the director of Library Services of the Myerberg Library (Baltimore Hebrew Congregation).

**Kathleen Clotfelter** was a librarian at the Donna Klein Jewish Academy.

**Andrea Davidson** is the Judaica Librarian at the Temple-Tifereth Israel.

## PART I

**Libby White, Chair:** When I look at the literature produced in the last year, an ancient Chinese aphorism comes to mind—an aphorism so often quoted in Western society that it has become a cliché. We have all heard it, and many of us have used it: “May you live in interesting times.” All Jewish times are, by definition, interesting times. All Sydney Taylor Book Award years are interesting years! Now, I have deep respect for Chinese culture, but I must stress that we Jews have an equally durable aphorism in our tradition. Our aphorism is from Pirke Avot, The Ethics of the Fathers, 2:21. It goes like this: “It is not your obligation to complete the task...but neither are you free to desist.” In the year 2002 the Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee consisted of Susan Berman of Baltimore Hebrew Congregation, Baltimore, MD; Kathleen Clotfelter of Donna Klein Judaic Academy, Boca Raton, FL; Andrea Davidson of The Temple-Tifereth Israel, Beachwood, OH; Heidi Estrin of B’nai Israel Congregation, Boca Raton, FL; Fred Isaac of Temple Sinai, Oakland, California; and Libby White of Beth Israel Congregation, Owings Mills, MD, Chair. We have taken our charge seriously, yes passionately. We all agree that reviewing books for the Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee is fun but that it is definitely not child’s play.

I would like to mention some trends represented in the books submitted in 2002. In the interest of full disclosure, I must say that my remarks are a consensus view—the insights of committee members and former members who remain deeply involved in the field of Jewish children’s literature. In 2002 most books reviewed dealt with holidays and the Holocaust. These are familiar subjects. Librarians have often voiced the hope that authors would explore additional themes. Nevertheless, fine works on holidays and the Holocaust were submitted and honored. A few titles, including the winner for Younger Readers, featured Jewish children in contemporary settings. The eagerness of librarians for such titles has another side. We are beginning to see a surge in books with characters who are identified as Jewish, but the text exhibits little Jewish involvement. Perhaps such works reflect the accelerating pace of American Jewish assimilation.

In 2002 the Younger Readers category was weak. As in recent years, several works looked like picture books in format, but were suitable only for Older Readers. There were many distinguished nonfiction titles for Older Readers. Two new editions of esteemed works were reviewed and named an Honor Book and a Notable. A welcome trend was the wave of Canadian Jewish literature, mainly of high quality. As you know, the Younger Readers winner is a Canadian publication.

Most of our winners, Honor Books, and Notables were authored and illustrated by names familiar to ADL members—Chaikin, Gelman, Schwartz, Waldman, Zalben. Andrea Cheng and Anne Wilson were new names whose work was recognized. Jewish publishers with books on our lists are Hachai, JPS, Judaica Press, and UAHC. Among general publishers, Clarion and HarperCollins were well represented.

Now I would like to make some important introductions. I hope that you will get to know these people as the convention progresses. Esther Hershenhorn, the author of CHICKEN

SOUP BY HEART, the STBA winner for Younger Readers has joined us from Chicago. Karen Levine, author of HANA'S SUITCASE: A TRUE STORY, the Older Reader winner is here and will speak shortly. The 2002 Body-of-Work winners, Judyth Groner and Madeline Wikler, co-founders of Kar-Ben Copies, Inc. have arrived from the Metropolitan Washington DC area. Kar-Ben is now a division of Lerner Publishing Group of Minneapolis. We are very pleased that Lerner, represented by Harry Lerner and Susi Siegel, is, as in previous years, a convention exhibitor. Lerner is sponsoring a reception in honor of Judyth and Madeline at 6:00pm this evening before the banquet.

Karen Levine has agreed to speak to us about HANA'S SUITCASE: A TRUE STORY. Karen is a producer for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. In her career there she has created long-running series for "This Morning" and "Sunday Edition." She has received the prestigious Peabody Award twice. One award was for the documentary "Children of the Holocaust." HANA'S SUITCASE was originally a documentary program, which won a gold medal at the 2001 New York Festival. This is Karen Levine's first book.

**Karen Levine:** When I wrote the book, I never imagined that so many people in so many countries would be interested in the story. HANA'S SUITCASE is a story that reaches over 60 years of history, three generations, and three continents. It is the story of Hana Brady—who was born in Nove Mesto, Czechoslovakia on May 13, 1931 and died in a gas chamber at Auschwitz at the age of 13. It is the story of Fumiko Ishioka, a remarkable young woman, so dedicated to sharing the story of Hana with Japanese children that she spent a year searching for it. And it's the story of George Brady, Hana's brother, the only member of his family to survive the Holocaust. It's a tragedy, a mystery, and a tale of perseverance and hope. And it all came together because of an old brown suitcase.

I first became interested in the Holocaust as an almost-teenager. Every Sunday morning, after a grumbly morning at Jewish School, my Dad would take me to Kardishes delicatessen to buy a treat. At the counter Mrs. Kardish was always there to serve us, and on her arm, on the inside of her forearm, was a number. I don't remember how I was told, but I learned that the number was branded into her when she was in a concentration camp. I never asked her directly about it—I was too shy—but I couldn't stop looking at it.

Then, when I was thirteen, my family went to Europe. One of the places we visited was Buchenwald. I'll never forget the piles of shoes, the piles of hair, of glasses, and leg braces, and the suitcases I saw there. In fact, that visit changed my life. From the moment I got back from that trip I was obsessed with the history of the Holocaust and read everything I could get my hands on.

I wanted to try to understand how such evil could have been allowed to happen. I wanted to understand how survivors could walk straight after living through the horror. And I always felt—and it's a very strange feeling—that if I'd been born in a different place, at a different time—it could have been me or my parents or my sister in that nightmare.

In school, I wrote essays on the subject. In 1989 I made a six-hour documentary series called *Lost Innocence: The Children of World War Two*. One hour was about children in the resistance movements—gun-runners, couriers, decoys. Another was about teenage romance during wartime. And one was on children in the Holocaust. It told the story of two girls—one about six, one about twelve—who lived through and survived the concentration camps. I interviewed about 50 survivors for this piece, but the final product had just these two voices. I chose them, in the end, for their remarkable ability to re-enter their childhood worlds and describe them—not as an adult looking back—but as a child might. That meant that the loss of a beloved yellow Schwinn bicycle took on as much importance as the loss of a house and that a little girl’s belief in the omnipotence of her mother was the only way she could hold on. The story of the Holocaust is so huge so overwhelming that these small entry points are often the most powerful. That’s true for adults. It’s even more true for children. I thought that after producing *Lost Innocence* that I was finally finished with the subject, at least professionally.

Then in December 2000, I read about Hana’s suitcase in a community newspaper. At the centre of the story was a beautiful, happy, athletic European girl whose life was torn from her. There was a brother in Canada who never forgot her. There was a determined, passionate detective who wanted to share her story with Japanese children. Unlike many Holocaust stories—where darkness and tragedy are unremitting—this story had hope, connection and redemption. In fact the key for me—and what pulled me back—was the inspiring work of Fumiko, which has allowed a little girl like Hana to be known, to be honoured, and have her story told.

I decided first to turn it into a radio documentary for the CBC. After it aired, my friend Margie, who is a publisher, called me, in tears, and said I had to turn the story into a book for young readers. Both of Margie’s parents survived the Holocaust, and she felt very strongly that stories like this needed to be told. But I had never written a book before, and I had a full time job, and a son who was then six. But the story wouldn’t leave me alone, and about six months later I started to write.

I spent a lot of time with George, picking his brain, trying to dredge up any little memories he had of his sister, so that we could tell people as much as possible about her. Fumiko and I emailed back and forth getting the whole story straight. And George and I went through his amazing collection of photographs and artifacts, hidden by a Christian uncle throughout the war.

Until a little more than a year ago, I never thought of myself as a writer. And most days I still don’t. But my work as a radio producer has taught me a lot. Most importantly how to tell stories that are accessible, gripping, and, I hope, moving. That’s what I tried to do with *HANA’S SUITCASE*. The other thing I’ve learned in my radio work is this: Give them a good story and they will come. My sister—an organizer in adult workplace literacy—made me promise that I would say this. Now she and I are happy co-conspirators in the promotion of plain old good stories—as a teaching tool, as a weapon in the battle for literacy, and as one of the great joys of life.

My radio work gave me good writing training. I worked for years at a programme called As It Happens, so I learned to write fast. But more importantly, I learned to write in clear short sentences, and to draw pictures with plain words. When I was writing the book, I realized what a huge help this was. The fact that I cared so deeply about the story also helped. When we write about what matters to us, what is closest to our hearts, it actually gets a little easier.

We have all been stunned by the huge response to HANA'S SUITCASE, from kids, parents, teachers, community groups. The kids respond to many different things—to the photographs, to the truth of the story, to Hana as a rambunctious candy sneaker, George learning a trade at 14, to the image of the two Brady children writing out their anger at all the injustice and unfairness around them and burying it in a glass bottle under the swings. They can connect the story of Hana to things that go on in their own schoolyards—where a fat kid—a brown kid—a gay kid—a disabled kid—may be taunted simply for who they are. They are shocked by the idea that intolerance and racism can mean that children can lose their parents, or a sibling. And they love the notion that kids in Japan are trying to do something to build a more just and peaceful world—the idea that kids can make a difference. When I go to schools, children are full of questions. Questions about fighting back, about resistance and racism, about Jews, about how people go on after horrible trauma and tragedy, about Japan, about war and its costs. When they meet George they want to touch him, and hug him. If they are lucky enough to see the suitcase—when Fumiko is with us—they are quiet and respectful. Then the questions start again.

The suitcase and an exhibition about Hana are traveling all over Japan and the book is now out in Japan. It's in the USA, France and about to be published in Australia, Korea, Germany, Iceland, Finland, Belgium. In Canada, the book is into its sixth printing. It's being used by children and teachers in schools all over the country.

I think it's a strange mix of past devastation and hope for the future that makes the story of HANA'S SUITCASE special. My challenge in writing this story for young readers was to intertwine Hana's story with Fumiko's. I structured it in parallel lines that move back and forth between the 30's and 40's and the present. So as hope is slowly lost for Hana, it grows for the survival of her story. Children find out about the absolute worst in people—in what the Nazis did to Hana and to so many others. And they learn about the very best in people—how a young woman and a group of children so many thousands of miles away—are working—in a way—on Hana's behalf, against anti-semitism, racism and intolerance, and for the sake of all kids. George and Fumiko are devoted friends. He is her hero. She is his heroine. They are both mine.

**Libby White:** Well folks, It is now time for the “Few Holds Barred Panel” In four lusty rounds they will designate a selection of books which were reviewed last as “hot” or “not” They will also review Notable Books and personal favorites which “Should have been, Could have been” Contenders. The panel consists of the present Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee. The moderator is Anne Dublin, librarian of Holy Blossom Temple, Toronto. Anne is a AJL Division officer, a published author. She coordinated the gathering of titles from Toronto area libraries for use in the Sydney Taylor Book Award

sessions.” Evaluations of titles considered are to be found in REVIEWS OF BOOKS SUBMITTED TO THE COMMITTEE FOR THE YEAR 2002 COMPILATION. At 10:00am there was a break during which coffee was served, and the exhibits were open. Authors autographed books in the exhibit area.

## PART II

The “Few Holds Barred Panel” continued its presentation of reviews. Libby White then made further announcements.

**Libby White:** It is a traumatic moment when we are forced to say goodbye to committee members with whom we have worked closely for the four year STBA term. Our sadness is lessened by the knowledge that the contributions of outgoing members will sustain us far beyond their tenure and by the knowledge that friendships forged on the battlefield of book reviewing will continue to be nurtured. I now want to present certificates of recognition to Kathleen Clotfelter and Fred Isaac—both stalwarts, dependable and devoted. Kathleen, we shall never forget your work on the wonderful Boca Raton convention. And Kathleen, thank you for keeping our panel honest as our timekeeper. Fred, you will be a very busy AJLer as co-chair of the upcoming San Francisco Area Convention. I know how persuasive you were in getting your Northern California colleagues to commit to this event. I thank you, Fred, for all the thoughtful and helpful things you have done for others during your Sydney Taylor tenure. I don’t want to embarrass you, but you have been our all-around committee mensch! As we look ahead, it gives me great pleasure to introduce the two new Sydney Book Award Committee members. You will see them on the panel at next year’s convention in Brooklyn, New York. I would like to formally introduce Rachel Erlich Kamin of Temple Israel Libraries, West Bloomfield, MI, and Marion Stein of Abraham Heschel School in New York City. Beginning in January, 2004, Heidi Estrin of Bnai Israel Congregation, Boca Raton, FL, will become chair of our committee.