

Motivated by a strong interest in international cultures, **Margaret Chaiken** spent high school and college summers teaching English and interning with various NGOs in Nepal, Thailand, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Kenya and the Ukraine. After earning a Bachelor's degree from Vanderbilt University, she studied International Relations at the Sorbonne and received a Master's degree from New York University. After a year as a research associate at a think tank in Israel, Ms Chaiken returned to New York where she worked as a teacher at Park East Day School. Originally from Phoenix, she now lives in New York with her husband and young daughter.

Acceptance Speech Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award Margaret Chaiken

Thank you to Aileen Grossberg for her time, energy and effort invested in the operations of the Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award.

An in absentia speech was not my first choice and I appreciate Aileen's special understanding as my family goes through this difficult time.

I'm grateful to the Association of Jewish Libraries for this special recognition. Having read several of the now published past winners, I am proud to rank among them.

Before I included Sydney Taylor's "All-of-a-Kind Family" in my list of class novels, my principal cautioned me about its appropriateness in an overwhelmingly male class. But every year, I have at least one student who falls in love with the All-of-a-Kind- Family and reads the rest of the series. And it's always the Yellow Belt in Judo whom I have to pry off of the other kids at recess. In the vivid specificity of Sydney Taylor's depictions, there arises universal appeal. The story of Dona Gracia Nasi, though proudly Jewish and very sixteenth century, also carries universal and contemporary themes.

Several years ago I took my fourth grade class to see a biographical play of Harriet Tubman, the African American slave who ran an underground railroad to free Southern slaves. When my class returned to school we were stuck with one of those awkward fifteen minute periods, Day schools are so famous for. I asked each student to share something he/she had learned from the play. I expected them to regurgitate facts strewn throughout the presentation. You know, "Harriet Tubman was a slave," or more likely "Harriet Tubman had two arms."

Instead I got, “I learned you can smile even when things in your life are tough,” and “I learned you can be proud of who you are even if you’re different from other people.” It impressed me that a middle aged black woman from a different century could speak so intimately to these Manhattan Jewish children.

At around the same time I discovered Andree Aelion Brooks’ biography of Dona Gracia Nasi, “The Woman Who Defied Kings.” Her story spoke to me the way Harriet Tubman had spoken to my students. When I brought in the Brooks’ biography to share some excerpts with my students, I received a typical middle grade response to the presence of a five hundred page book. “Put that away, Mrs. Chaiken, you’re scaring us.”

A hard target search of every bookstore and library in our area yielded nothing on Dona Gracia and very little on the Inquisition at the middle grade reading level. So I began writing *Stealing the Show* and then shelved it. When my daughter was born last year, I dusted off the project with renewed enthusiasm. Part Carla Fiorini, part Malkat Esther, Dona Gracia Nasi was a widowed, single mother who rose to CEO of a large European conglomerate and yet remained fiercely loyal to her people, her G-d, and to herself.

Dona Gracia Nasi was a modern woman whose life equaled more than the sum of her riches.

Stealing the Show is a historical fiction story based on her life during the Inquisition in 16th Century Europe. In addition to action and adventure, the novel offers an age-appropriate glimpse at the Inquisition but the story also resonates with modern themes of tolerance and diversity.

The night ten year old Ana is supposed to receive her MVP soccer trophy falls on the first night of Pesach. What will her teammates say when they find out she can’t go to the annual soccer banquet because of a stupid family dinner? Upset, she heads to her father’s shoe store where she tries on a pair of old shoes that magically transport her to the home of Dona Gracia Nasi in 16th Century Antwerp.

The adventures begin as she must fake devotion to a new religion, escape the searches of the powerful Inquisition clerics, hide from the Queen who wants to marry her off to a sweaty middle aged man with wooden teeth, and survive an attack by bandits. Other conversos around her have been thrown into prison or put to death. Will she give in, get caught, or will she survive the grueling journey to freedom? We’ll have to leave some suspense for when you read the book.

Just as an African American stretched across centuries to speak to a fourth grade immigrant from Russia struggling to adapt to American life and to a ten year old

coping with the challenges of a disabled sibling, I hope that through *Stealing the Show*, Dona Gracia's story will reach across barriers to speak to children from diverse backgrounds.

Perhaps someone will learn that "in order to be yourself, you don't have to pretend to be someone else." That integration doesn't mean assimilation. That Turkey is a place and not just something we eat on Thanksgiving. That only when we're true to ourselves can we be truly free.

Thank you.