

## CHOOSING THE BEST ADULT JEWISH BOOK FOR THE GENERAL READER: SERVING ON THE SOPHIE BRODY AWARD COMMITTEE

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Arthur Brody lived in the San Diego area, so he was a local guy. He died May 10, 2012, a month shy of his 92nd birthday. He was the son of pharmacy owners who had a small lending library in their store and who instilled in him a life-long passion for the written word. In college at Columbia, he wanted to provide waterproof protection for textbooks, so Arthur developed a way to turn clear photographic film into a protective cover; by the time he left Columbia University he had eight employees turning out his invention. That was the beginning of the company he built, the Brodart Company, where we buy library supplies and furniture, books, and even lease books through their McNaughton plan.

Arthur Brody and the Brodart Foundation created the Sophie Brody Award, given by the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) of the American Library Association to encourage, recognize and commend outstanding achievement in Jewish literature. The award is named for Arthur's wife, Sophie Brody, a philanthropist and community volunteer who held major leadership positions in the Jewish community. She served as a member of the Executive Board and Board of the Women's Division of United Jewish Federation. With her husband Arthur, she created the Sophie Brody Leadership Development Fund to enable the United Jewish Federation to train future leaders for the Jewish community.

The Sophie Brody Award was first presented in 2006 and includes a medal for the winner, as well as citations for selected honor books. Books have to be for the adult, general reader and published in the United States in the preceding year.

In the context of this award, according to RUSA, Jewish literature is defined as fiction, nonfiction, or poetry that has as its central purpose the exploration of the Jewish experience. The religious affiliation of the author is not considered. In support of the stated purpose, the following criteria are used to determine and select the winning title and any honor books:

A book may be selected for at least one, and preferably more than one, of the following reasons:

- It possesses exceptional literary merit.
- It presents the many aspects of the Jewish experience through a lens that expands the reader's understanding.
- It explores Jewish characters, settings, themes, philosophies, or other identifiably Jewish aspects through a literary context.
- It broadens the understanding of the reader in regards to Jewish history, culture, and identity.

Books requiring highly specialized knowledge for their use are not eligible. Books are not excluded on the basis of their unsuitability for younger readers; however, books intended for a younger audience but which hold wide appeal for adults and meet the selection criteria may also be considered. Information about the award and all the past winners and honor books can be found on the RUSA Web site at <http://www.ala.org/rusa/awards/brody>.

I served as the AJL representative on the award committee last year and am a member this year. Like many of you, I have served on other book award committees, but this was a very different experience for me, which I'd like to share with you.

I receive dozens and dozens of books, which I donate to my temple library. This is the main reason I volunteered for the committee; with no book budget for the library, I can give the library the result of the hours of work I have given to this committee. I spend every free moment reading, reading, reading. I can't imagine anything better than reading, but there are some negatives. A few of the books are wonderful, some are good, but most aren't worth considering.

Last year, there were six committee members, and this year there are 10. We are each to nominate three titles. To get to my 3 last year, I read 41 books. The deadline for nomination is early December. Through the year, we read book reviews and suggest books to be considered for nomination. The publishers send us the books that are suggested. I also received a couple of piles of unsolicited books directly from the publishers. I read the AJL book reviews, Jewish Book Review, Jewish Review of Books, the Jewish Book Council, Hadassah, and Lilith. Until the nominations, I only read the books I suggested and some of the unsolicited ones.

To tell you the truth, with all the books I have to read, I did not read completely through all the books, although I did read to the end of some mediocre books to see if the end can pull off a great book, but that never happened. I keep hoping I've learned that if it's not good in the first 1/3 to 1/2 of the book, I should give up on it, but even this year, I've found myself finishing books that I was pretty sure would not be nominated.

One important aspect is that the book has to be for a general audience, so if I start one of the more scholarly books, especially one published by a university press, and it's too esoteric or tedious, I don't read any further. I had yet to have found a university press book that I felt met this award, but I continue to try, and I think I found one this year. It's a page-turner. I also had a lovely book of poetry and one of short stories, but the collections did not have enough Jewish subject matter.

I read some fiction that I finished, though I didn't like them. There was an article in the *Jewish Journal* in 2007 about Jewish historical pulp fiction, what I would call the Jewish bodice ripper, and these books fit that moniker for me. The stories were interesting enough; however, I felt that the sex was stuffed into the stories because the authors felt they had to include it to make the book sellable. I have talked to book reviewers and heard authors talk about this, so I know that I am not the only one who feels this way.

I read many translations (the book had to be published in the United States, but the author did not have to be American or even Jewish). I read several translated from Hebrew, which I thought were awful. It may be the translation; it's hard to know. I started one translated from Serbian, but there were no paragraphs, and I couldn't get past page 30. I did read some fabulous translations, two of which were among my three nominations last year. It's interesting to read a translation and not know if it's the writing itself or the translation.

Some books were interesting but not general enough, such as a book directed at community leaders for dealing with the issue of sexual abuse in the Orthodox community. It's a very important issue but is not appropriate for this award. Others cover a very narrow area, like very particular aspects of the bible or prayer.

I met for five hours on Friday afternoon at the ALA Midwinter Conference. Five of the committee members worked in college or university libraries,

and one was a public librarian. Not everyone was Jewish, and one committee member said she is Jewish by birth but was raised with no religion. This turned out to be very interesting, because the award is for the best book for the general reader, and a public librarian or someone not raised with a Jewish education would speak for the general reader differently than I would.

Each committee member spoke for his/her nominations, the other committee members each gave opinions on the books, and then we voted. It took several tallies and much discussion to get the award winner, although the four that rose to the top were fairly easy to determine.