

Introduction of Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award Winner 2009

By Aileen Grossberg, Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award Committee

Aileen Grossberg, the chairperson of the Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award Committee, is the volunteer librarian at Congregation Shomrei Emunah in Montclair, New Jersey. She has previously served AJL as chair of the Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee. As a public school librarian she is active in the Essex County (NJ) Educational Media Association. Mrs. Grossberg also works part-time as a reference librarian at the Montclair (NJ) Public Library.

Good evening, everyone.

It gives me great pleasure to stand here this evening as Chair of the Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award Competition, not only because we have an outstanding recipient for this year's award, but also because this is the first year since I became chair that both the presenter and the recipient have shared the same space.

Before I speak about our winner and her manuscript, let me give you an idea of what's incubating in the Jewish children's lit world. Many of us grew up on the stories of Ktonton, the Bible, Jewish heroes and holidays, maybe a few folktales, The Diary of Anne Frank- and, of course, The All of a Kind Family series.

It was not a very varied diet. Nor did it reflect the life of the reader. Today's literary diet is much better balanced. You saw this reflected in the Sydney Taylor Award winning books earlier in the evening. Although we did receive many manuscripts about the three "Hs": holidays, heroes, and Holocaust, there is much more. Today our undiscovered writers give us stories about the real world: the adjustments that American transplants to Israel must make; bullying; wilderness survival; anti-semitism as it affects today's young people, and Jewish response to contemporary events.

And when today's authors do write about the well worn topics of holidays, heroes and Holocaust, they try to give those topics an original twist such as setting the story among the Portuguese Jews of Surinam.

So what made this year's winning manuscript stand out?

- freshness and originality: Hurricane Kristina. We were unaware of any other books that told the story through the eyes of a Jewish child.
- a Jewish sensibility permeates the story: from the Jewish calendar, to Jewish ritual, to Jewish ethics.

- lifelike characters and situations: we knew that this could happen and had happened. The manuscript incorporates details with which we were familiar from the national news. Gertie, the protagonist, is an appealing character and we get to know her.

- competent writing: the style is accessible to 8 to 11 year olds

- wide appeal: Gertie and her family are regular people and, while they are Jewish, any reader can relate to Gertie's problems.

- finally, appropriateness for the target audience : the main character's emotions and sense of disconnect are expressed so that our target audience can read and relate. Gertie's voice is appropriate.

So after scores of emails back and forth, **When the Hurricane Came to New Orleans** has been selected as the 2009 Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award Winner.

The story begins as Hurricane Kristina is about to strike New Orleans. Eight year old Gertie and her family evacuate, leaving behind friends, school, everything familiar. Gertie spends the next few months in Memphis living with relatives, adjusting to her new life and learning many life lessons about loss and healing from loss, about tzedakah and giving and about what's really important in life. It is NOT "stuff."

I'd like to thank in absentia the members of the Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award Committee for their diligence, thoughtfulness, and seriousness. Unfortunately, none of the committee members could be here this evening. Thank you to Shelly Feit who will be retiring from the committee; Sandy Gottesman Breger; Sonia Silva; Barbara Silverman; and Marcia Tatz Wollner. Special recognition and thanks go to Sydney Taylor's daughter, Jo Taylor Marshall, who continues to support this award.

Now I'd like to tell you a little about our winning author, Nechama Liss-Levinson. Dr. Liss-Levinson is a psychotherapist who used her own experience as inspiration for this story. She and her husband went to New Orleans after the hurricane to help in the rebuilding. She based the characters on a conglomerate of people she met. And at the same time she infused this American story with Jewish concepts especially Tikkun Olam.

In November, she attended the Jewish Children's writers conference in New York and heard me speak on the topic of why bother to submit a manuscript. It certainly was worth the bother.

Nechama has always had writing in her soul: as a child she wanted to be a muckraker. As an adult she has written professional articles as well as a children's nonfiction book entitled **When a Grandparent Dies** meant to help children understand the Jewish mourning process. Some of you may have met her at the writers' luncheon this afternoon.

Nechama is a graduate of Barnard College and Southern Illinois University. She is married- her husband has joined her this evening. She has 2 daughters, a son-in-law and 2 grandchildren who may someday be able to read their grandmother's books in hard copy ,no longer in manuscript form. And in keeping with the theme of **When the Hurricane Came to New Orleans**, Nechama is the co-founder of her synagogue's Hunger Initiative.

While the Sydney Taylor Manuscript Competition is more than 25 years old, because of the Award's high standards this is only the 18th time that it has been awarded. It is my privilege and pleasure to present the 2009 Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award to Nechama Liss-Levinson.