

AJL Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award Competition

Introduction by
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The AJL Sydney Taylor Manuscript Competition offers an unpublished writer the unique opportunity to submit a work of fiction geared to the 8 to 12-year-old reader. It is my great pleasure to officially inform this body tonight that the 1988 award winner, Frances Weissenberg, will have The Streets Are Paved With Gold on the Spring 1990 list of Harbinger House. So watch for it! [For a description of this book, see *Judaica Librarianship* vol. 4 no. 2 (Spring 1988–Winter 1989), pp. 174–175.—Ed.]

As a synagogue librarian for the past 17 years, I like to think that I have learned a few things. I hope I have gleaned a feel for the material that will appeal to a particular reader. Sometimes I am even right. There are few rules in this area; one of the few is the predictable reaction I would get from a fifth grader if I suggest he try a Bible story. (Need I remind you how sophisticated a fifth grader likes to think he is?)

But that predictability is now history. The story that has won the Sydney Taylor Manuscript Competition this year is—of all things—based on a Biblical event. This work is cast in an entirely new mold. It is a mystery, it has warm, engaging characters, sibling rivalry, flowing literary style, and a gripping story. One of our reviewers wrote me that she could not leave it to go to sleep, and was compelled to read until after 1 a.m. to finish the manuscript that night.

There was stiff competition this year. It is a measure of the quality of the writing that this work is the winner. The 30-page first draft of this manuscript won the 1985 New Jersey State Arts Council Award for a work-in-progress.

The author is Suzi Wizowaty, the Outreach Librarian in the Fletcher Free Library in Burlington, Vermont. She grew up in Houston, Texas, went to Princeton University, and has a Masters Degree in Jewish Feminist Studies and Creative Writing, via an independent study program at Goddard College, in Vermont. She is currently the President of the Children's and Young Adults' section of the Vermont Library Association.

I am very pleased to present the 1989 Association of Jewish Libraries Sydney Taylor Manuscript Competition Award to Suzi Wizowaty for her historical novel, *Borders*.

Remarks by Suzi Wizowaty

I am thrilled and honored to be here. I love librarians . . . and I'm proud as can be to appear in this company.

Two weeks ago I spoke to my temple sisterhood, at our annual dinner, about one of my favorite subjects, which is Jewish books. I ended up talking about children's books—as I always do with adults—because I like to encourage adults to read children's books for themselves, and not just for their children.

I read children's books because I like what they say. But I didn't set out to write one. I set out, rather, to explore some ideas I'd touched on in a new feminist Haggadah I was putting together. The Exodus story is a terrific adventure, but there is a lot missing. Where, I wondered, were the *women*? What were the women doing in Egypt while the men were slaves? There is a midrash that says bondage in Egypt meant women had to do men's work, and men had to do women's work—but this seems unlikely. But what, then?

I wondered what it would have been like for an Israelite girl who knew only her own extended family, and maybe a few others, to suddenly meet an Egyptian girl her age. What if they became secret friends? How would she experience all the strange and terrible things that happened, like water turning to blood or frogs appearing everywhere? How would she feel when they happened *at first* to both her family and her friend's, but then only to her friend's family?

I wrote and wrote . . . and suddenly I had a story that eventually became a book. Actually I'm slow, and it took three years.

Of course, I want my book to bring the Exodus story alive for kids in a new way. But what I really hope is that it will give *girls* a way into what is our people's most crucial, foundational event, so that they, too, can be personally involved. On Passover we say that in every generation a man should look upon himself as if *he personally* had gone out of Egypt. I want girls to know and to be able to *feel* that they, too, were there—that they count and are important as Jews.

I'm now in the middle of my second novel for children, and thus seem to be on a path I didn't anticipate even five years ago, when I was a staff writer for a newspaper. I am pleased to be here for many reasons—not the least of which has to do with a feeling expressed by a woman at the sisterhood dinner two weeks ago.

When adults talk about an adult book they've enjoyed, they're likely to say something like, "Yes, that was a great book. A brilliant novel." But what kids—and adults—say about a children's book that has meant a lot to them is more like, as this woman said: "I *loved* that book. That was my *favorite* book."

This is music to a librarian's ears—and certainly to a writer's. I hope that some day, kids will say that about my books.

To Ralph Taylor, Lillian Schwartz, the Association of Jewish Libraries, and the judges who chose my book for the Sydney Taylor Manuscript Award, thank you so much for your vote of confidence and for helping me on my way.

Lillian Schwartz, Librarian of Temple Emanu-El in Providence, Rhode Island, has been Coordinator of the AJL Sydney Taylor Manuscript Competition since its inception in 1985.