



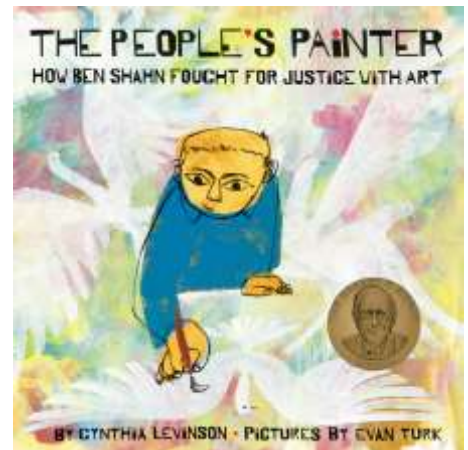
Robert F. Sibert Medal Acceptance Speeches



*Cynthia Levinson and Evan Turk are the winners of the 2022 Robert F. Sibert Medal for **The People's Painter: How Ben Shahn Fought for Justice with Art** (Abrams Books for Young Readers, an imprint of ABRAMS). They delivered their acceptance remarks* during the ALSC Awards Program held Monday, June 27, 2022, during the ALA Annual Conference in Washington, DC.*

Cynthia Levinson

Some years ago, an author who was experienced with the ALSC/ALA media awards mentioned that members of the Sibert Committee that year were concerned that not just the general public, but even many children's writers, were unfamiliar with the Robert F. Sibert Medal for Informational Books. The committee apparently felt they had to explain what the award is for.



I found this comment inconceivable. As the members of this year's committee know from my blubbing throughout our Zoom call in which the chair let Evan and me know that *The People's Painter* had won, I've known about this award, first as a teacher and then as a writer, for many years. To me, this is a pinnacle of achievement and recognition for which I am overwhelmingly grateful. And, while I'm acknowledging my gratitude, I also want to thank my editor, Emma Ledbetter, the team at Abrams Kids, including our inexhaustible School and Library Marketing Director, Jenny Choy, publicists Brooke and Mary, and, of course, our ideal illustrator, Evan Turk. Your support for this book has been deeply gratifying.

I'd like to share with you briefly two pairs or poles of issues that I wrestled with while working on *The People's Painter*. One is Serendipity vs Planning. The other is Doubt vs Persistence.

In regard to the former—Serendipity vs Planning—we writers of informational books pride ourselves, possibly even sometimes vie to out-adventure-travel each other, in the nether reaches to which we will go to gather information. For instance, although it would be inappropriate and inaccurate to call a subway ride from Manhattan to the Bronx “adventure travel,” I did go three times to see Shahn murals in the post office there. I never did see them because the building had been bought by a private investor, who reserved only a tiny corner of the building for a post office while he renovated the rest of the space. When I saw his daughter’s wedding announcement in *The New York Times*, complete with photos of the murals, after my second failed attempt, I assumed the building was open to visitors. Silly me. He had cleaned it up for the wedding and promptly shut it down again. Fortunately, the other field trips I took—to a federal building in Washington, DC that’s also closed to the public, but I talked my way in and was monitored by a guard, to Roosevelt, NJ, where I had arranged interviews with Ben’s son and a friend and the school principal, as well as to various museums and libraries—were better planned and more successful.

But my research for *The People’s Painter* began not with these organized excursions but, serendipitously, nearly 30 years ago, when I happened to meet Ben’s second wife, Bernarda Bryson Shahn, at a high school reunion. We had gone to the same school about 40 years apart! I had known of her husband, but this was long before I started writing for children. Still, something about her aura stuck with me, and I consider that encounter a fortuitous connection to Ben himself. Then, when I learned that Emma Ledbetter had grown up in a synagogue with a Shahn work, and Evan Turk had precociously written a report about Shahn when he was in the fifth grade, well, the book was bashert. That’s a Yiddish word that’s not in the Glossary of the book, meaning ‘meant to be.’

Or, was it? I struggled with this manuscript for years. So much so that I consulted not only writer-friends and my two critique groups ad their nauseum but also a professional editor about what to do. I was advised to abandon the story. Biographies aren’t selling, especially about artists, especially soup-to-nuts, life-long stories. There are too many themes. Too many issues. Too many words. I was completely flummoxed about what to do.

I wish I could explain or even just understand why I, fortunately, persisted in pursuing this story. If I could, that would help me decide whether to abandon or continue other stories I’ve worked on for years and am unsure about. I could also probably bottle the answer and sell it for a fortune to other authors, since almost all of us deal with doubt about our work and ourselves.

All I know is that, for me, there is apparently no clear path. With every book, I start all over in learning how to write one. To produce a book as beautiful as the Abrams team made this one entails, if I'm involved, a mashup of carefully organized research, openness to serendipity, questioning the entire project and then every word until it goes to press and even beyond because the questioning never stops. But, if I didn't have doubts, which raise questions, I wouldn't be writing informational books.

There were many wonderfully informative books published last year by thoughtful and eloquent authors and illustrators, some of whom are here. Thank you for recognizing us and for this very special world-renowned medal for *The People's Painter*.

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Cynthia Levinson photo © Sam Bond

Evan Turk

When Emma Ledbetter reached out about illustrating a picture book biography of Ben Shahn, I barely even had to read the e-mail to say yes! Of course, once I did, and once I read the beautiful manuscript, I was blown away by Cynthia's wonderful treatment of Shahn's life, and I knew I had to illustrate it. I first learned about Ben Shahn in fifth grade, when I did a project on one of his paintings about the Sacco and Vanzetti trial (which I ended up including in the book!). I'm not sure what drew me to his work then, but I think there is something so clear and communicative about his work that can really speak to children as well as adults.

Years later, I was reintroduced to his work in art school by my teachers, Veronica Lawlor and Margaret Hurst, and his work really clicked for me. He became one of my favorite painters and illustrators. His work is powerful, sensitive, and sometimes dark, but always with a sense of humor and a sense of humanity. When I thought about illustrating a book about his life, that was the spirit that I wanted to capture in the illustrations.

When Ben Shahn was at the height of his career, he was a household name in the United States. Today, he's widely known in Jewish circles and amongst illustrators, but not much outside of that. I think, though, that so many of his themes echo just as loudly today. As Cynthia carried through as the central theme of the book, his work focused on uplifting the downtrodden, and amplifying the voices of those who weren't being heard.

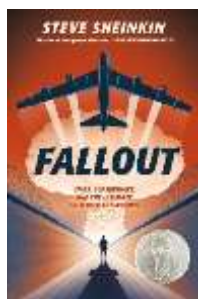
I dedicated my work in this book to my grandmother, Lenore Dove Kadish Klein, and said that I drew each dove in this book for her. She passed away not too long after the book came out, but one of my favorite recent memories of her was her saying that the illustrations reminded her of the way her mother used to talk about the shtetl she grew up in. My grandmother was also an illustrator, an incredible woman, and my biggest fan, so to be able to share it with her was beautiful. I know she would be so proud today.

Thank you so much to the Robert F. Sibert committee members for honoring this book. It means so much to me, and I know that you all do not take your job lightly! I'm so proud of the book that Cynthia and I, and the whole team put together. Thank you to Emma and Pam, Sara, Jenny, Gaby, and everyone at Abrams for bringing this book into the world; to my agent, Brenda, for all of your guidance over these years; to my teachers Ronnie and Margaret, for showing me how to see the world like an artist; to my mom and dad for everything; to my wonderful husband, Chris, for his love and patience (and always reassuring me that no, the illustrations are not terrible, whenever I start a new book); and to my Nana for being who she was. It makes me so happy that more children will get to see and learn about Ben Shahn's work, and hopefully be inspired, like I was, at such a young age, to grow into the next generation of artists.

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* Emma Ledbetter, editorial director of picture books at Abrams, delivered remarks on behalf of Evan Turk who was unable to attend the ALSC Awards Program.

2022 SIBERT HONOR BOOKS



Fallout: Spies, Superbombs, and the Ultimate Cold War Showdown

written by Steve Sheinkin

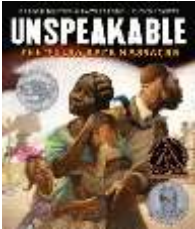
Roaring Brook Press, an imprint of Macmillan Children's Publishing Group



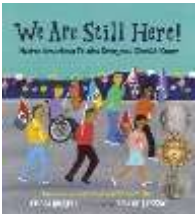
The Great Stink: How Joseph Bazalgette Solved London's Poop Pollution Problem
written by Colleen Paeff; illus. by Nancy Carpenter
Margaret K. McElderry Books, an imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing



Summertime Sleepers: Animals That Estivate
written by Melissa Stewart; illus. by Sarah S. Brannen
Charlesbridge



Unspeakable: The Tulsa Race Massacre
written by Carole Boston Weatherford; illus. by Floyd Cooper
Carolrhoda Books™, an imprint of Lerner Publishing Group



We Are Still Here! Native American Truths Everyone Should Know
written by Traci Sorell; illus. by Frané Lessac
Charlesbridge

