The 2000 Caldecott Medal Acceptance Speech

By Simms Taback

The er-er Menschen-ah shay-hem donk. Thank you very much. I want to begin by saying here and now that I'm not going to get a swelled head about all of this, which is what I promised everyone at the Penguin Putnam party back in February. I said everything was happening so fast: my Hollywood agent had called that morning to say that he had signed with Miramax for Joseph, the Movie! and that Bruce Willis was considering taking the role of Joseph, except that he wasn't comfortable with the sewing part (didn't fit his persona) and they were thinking about casting Meg Ryan to play his wife and she would be the one mending the coat. I just want to make clear that I was only joking—yes, I was—and I'd like to apologize. I didn't mean to call Meg Ryan a shiksa.

What's really wonderful about getting this award is that I feel like a relative newcomer to the world of illustration, as if I have only just arrived as a practitioner of this craft. But actually, I have been illustrating for forty years, making pictures for just about everybody: Eastern Airlines, McDonald's, Kentucky Fried Chicken, American Express, CBS, NBC, ABC, many national consumer magazines, Sesame Street, and Scholastic's "Let's Find Out."

I also illustrated about thirty-five books during this time, although sometimes I was careless in my choice of manuscript and material. Only a few of these sold well. My father used to ask, "From this you can make a living?" Well, he wasn't far wrong, yet I always knew I would end up being a children's book illustrator. And if the Caldecott committee has any doubts at this point about awarding me the medal, let me assure you that I really deserve it. Let me tell you why.

I did my very first children's book for Harlan Quist, and I was very excited. It was called Jabberwocky and Other Frabjous Nonsense (selected poems from Alice in Wonderland.) I was quite pleased with the results and it was reprinted in several languages. The only problem was that Harlan Quist, the editor, ran off to Europe with all the royalties.

I illustrated a book called Thump, Thump, Thump for Mister Roger's Library, a start-up, independent imprint. On the day I delivered the artwork—four months of work—Mister Rogers had second thoughts and cancelled the whole project.

I was offered a book on concrete poetry for children. I was convinced to take it on as a special favor. Everyone knew it was a dud. I said to the editor, "You will always remember me for this book and never offer me another." Well, you couldn't give this book away. I was never offered another.

I illustrated a picture book called A Bug in a Jug. All the artwork was lost before it was printed, and I had to create all new illustrations.

I illustrated a book called Please Share That Peanut! Though I had a lot of respect for the author, Sesyle Joslin, I didn't quite understand the title. That is—until I received the royalty statement. And I could go on from here, but I'll spare you.

But I did have some success; I won't deny it. I have a piece in the Smithsonian Collection. This is the very first McDonald's Happy Meal box, which I designed and illustrated with riddles, puzzles, and old Henny Youngman-type jokes, "It's raining cats and dogs. I know, I just stepped in a puddle." I bet this is the first time anyone has tried to impress librarians with a McDonald's Happy Meal.

But there is a downside to this experience, too. It was presented to me as a low-budget assignment because it was only going to be a test print run. It turned out to be seven million boxes.

I know the Caldecott committee does not give its prestigious award for failure—or even a string of failures. But what you should understand here is that I am making a kahnahora; that is, I am warding off the evil eye. Up in the Bronx, where I lived, if you praised someone, he or she would say, "Don't give me a canary."

If I had told my mother, "Ma, I won the Caldecott Medal," she would reply, "Yeah! I should live so long." And when it finally sinks in that perhaps it's true, she would add, "Caldecott, Shmcaldecott... will it put some food on the table?" Any

Simms Taback is the winner of the 2000 Randolph Caldecott Medal for Joseph Had a Little Overcoat, published by Viking. His acceptance speech was delivered at the Annual Conference of the American Library Association on July 9, 2000, in Chicago.
other reaction and you are courting dis-
aster. The old-world Jews understood not
to take themselves too seriously.

There is an old joke, told in Yiddish,
about a very religious, pious man who
complains to God one day: "I go to shule
and pray every day. I study Talmud for
hours and hours. Why, O Lord, do you
reward my brother, and not me, with
riches, when he is a goni (a thief), and
a person of low morals?" There is a long
moment of silence and then God replies,
"Because you bother me too much!"

But I will break with tradition here
because what is even more wonderful is
that you have awarded me the medal for
this book—this book which is set in
a world I heard so much about as a child
and tells a story which is so personal to
me. This book is filled with my family
and I am kvelling, which means to feel
immense pride and pleasure.

Joseph Had a Little Overcoat is adapt-
ed from a Yiddish folk song and is a good
example of Yiddishkayt, meaning "Jewish
life or Jewish world-view." It embodies
the values and struggles of life in the
shtetl—the small villages where Jews lived
in Eastern Europe. These were not big-
city Jews, but families of farmers and
tradesmen of mixed economic classes.
The Kohn (or Cohen) family lived in one
of these villages where my zada, my
grandfather, Meyer Kohn, earned his liv-
ing as a blacksmith. I use the Kohn name
in the book as Joseph's family name—
Joseph Kohn of Yehupetz, Poland. The
painting of Joseph having his tea is
inspired by a fond memory of my zada,
the way I remember him, placing a cube
of sugar under his tongue and sipping his
glass of tea, reading his Bible with a
handkerchief always tied loosely around
his neck.

Yiddish was my first language. I
know little of it now. But most American
goyim speak some Yiddish or some
Yiddish inflection, whether they are
aware of it or not; Yiddish has become so
much a part of everyday English. Goy
means Gentile or non-Jew. To the Jews of
the shtetl there were only two ethnic-
ities—either you were Jewish or weren't
Jewish. This is typical of how an
oppressed people see the world. Goy is
also used as a put-down, as in Goyishe
Kup (non-Jewish brain) meaning that
you're not very smart. Here is a sample of
the words we all use:

- Chutzpah
- Megillah
- Yenta
- Nosh
- Kvetch
- Tchotchke
- Shlep
- Schlock
- Kibitzer
- Klutz
- Nebbish
- Mishmash
- Shmo

I hear that Webster's Unabridged
Dictionary contains some five hundred
Yiddish words. And who has not heard
some of the following phrases and used
them:

- Get lost.
- All right, already.
- I need it like a hole in the head.
- So, who needs it?
- It should happen to a dog.
- OK by me.
- He knows from nothing.
- A person could go bust.
- Excuse the expression.
- Go fight City Hall.
- I should have such luck.
- It's a nothing of a dress.
- You should live to a hundred and
twenty.
- As long as she's happy.

The following could be overhead in
any Hollywood restaurant, "Listen,
bubeleh, that guy is a shlepper. What's
his shtick anyway? All he has is cockamammy
ideas." The use of the suffix nik, as in
negoodnik, is very common. We say beat-
nik and peacenik. The Wall Street Journal
once carried a headline: "Revolution,
Shmevolution." This was found in a
review in the Times Literary Supplement:
"Should, schmould, shouldn't schmould-
't." This was seen on a button worn at a
university campus: "Marcel Proust is a
yenta."

OK, enough already. I don't mean to
knock your head against the wall. But
what about the influence of Yiddish
inflection in the telling of a joke or story,
I listened to klezmer and Jewish liturgical music, looked at old family photographs, and did all I could to immerse myself in this old-world culture. I wanted to reflect its emotional life, yet I needed it all to be upbeat. I sang, I danced. I did the troika.

I grew up in a working-class neighborhood in the Bronx, made up mostly of socially aware Eastern European Jews. Even though it was the Depression, they built their own cooperative housing project. It was called the Coops. The people who lived there were called coop-niks. We were all poor, but it was a very special place for me. We had a community center, science and sports clubs, art classes, and even our own own library. I spent my summers at Camp Kinderland (Land of Children) and Camp Nish-kar-dieget (No need to worry). These camps were supported by Jewish labor organizations like the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, the IWO, and Workmen’s Circle. They were secular camps. You could attend Yiddish classes there, but it wasn’t compulsory. It was here in these camps that I was encouraged to develop my talent and to go to Music and Art High School, even though I hated leaving the neighborhood. Upon reflection, I see my old neighborhood as an extension of the shtetl life these European Jews had experienced as children. They left Europe for a new life in America, Der Goldenah Medina (Streets Paved with Gold), far away from pogroms, but still with a sense of community, humor, and values learned from generations of family.

I don’t know how many shtetl communities existed in Eastern Europe (the word shtetl does not appear in the Encyclopedia Britannica) but they are all gone now. So is my neighborhood in the East Bronx. It is said that Yiddish is a dying language and perhaps that is true. But as long as I can say, “I am making a gontse megliah (a big deal) here,” and as long as a good number of people here tonight understand me, who knows enough already.

I have many to thank here this evening:
To Music and Art High School and Cooper Union who trained me and gave me a free education: my thanks.

To the Caldecott committee: Thank you so much for saying that a book with a novelty aspect is worthy of this prestigious medal and that yiddishkayt can be of interest to young children if presented in an appealing way. Thank you for this mitzve, and Ah maaltov to you!

To my editor and publisher Regina Hayes: Thank you for seeing the possibility of successfully redoing a story I had published before. It took some chutzpah to let me do this. Thank you for your confidence and optimism.

To my art director, Denise Cronin: You are a real mensch and just a pure pleasure to work with. Thank you for guiding Joseph through a difficult production process.

Thank you Nina Putignano, Janet Pascal, Elizabeth Law, Stephanie McCarthy, and the rest of the Viking staff. Thank you Doug Whiteman for your support. And to my wife, Gail Kuenstler, Az meer binst du shayne. Der einen oif der velt. And to everyone here tonight: Zayn gezundt and may you live to be one hundred and twenty. Thank you.

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there, I’m kind of tall and husky myself, they didn’t have to tell everyone that stuff. I mean the brother can’t help it if he’s got tall genes in his family. The brother can’t help it if he likes a sandwich every now and then!” Ouch!

The other example took place in New York City in March. Melanie Chang, my publicist at Random House, and I were walking through the lobby of the Doubletree Guest Suites in Times Square when a woman spotted me and came up to us very excitedly and said, “Oh my God, I don’t believe it, aren’t you the guy who wrote that book?”

I smiled humbly and said, “Yeah, that’s me!”

Melanie asked the woman if she was in New York to attend the NCTE conference.

The woman replied, “No, I’m here on vacation, and I’d heard about your book and picked it up for the flight. I love it!”

“You!” I replied even more humbly.

The woman said, “I’ve got my copy right upstairs, is there any way I can get you to sign it?”

Melanie told her, “We’re going to lunch here in the hotel, we’ll be here for the next hour or so.”

The woman beamed and said, “Thank you so much, I’ll be right back.”

I don’t know which of us was more pleased—Melanie because the Random House publicity machine was so potent that here was a non-teacher, non-librarian who had heard of her author, or me because I’d been recognized in the heart of New York City. I mean it’s one thing to be recognized in downtown Flint, Michigan, but it’s a whole ’nother world to have a stranger know you in the Big Apple.

Melanie and I went to the restaurant and sat at a table where our fan could easily spot us. A few minutes later the woman came squealing and gushing to our table and handed me her book.

It was Monster, by my hero, Walter Dean Myers.

Once again, thank you, thank you, thank you to the Newbery committee for giving me the freedom to be myself. Thank you so much to the many librarians and teachers who have through their recognition also encouraged me to be myself, and who have permitted three voices from Flint, Michigan—Kenny Watson, Bud Caldwell, and Christopher Curtis—to be heard across this land.