

# The 2000 Caldecott Medal Acceptance Speech

By Simms Taback

**T**ie-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 man-

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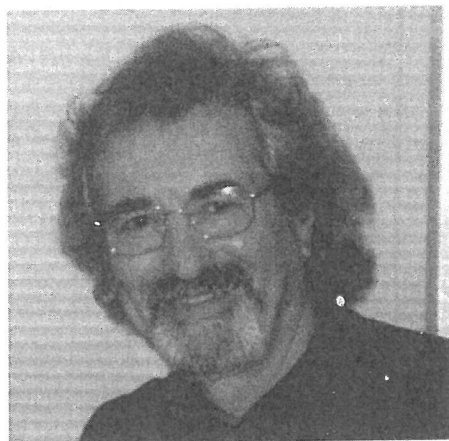


photo courtesy of Ransie Ransone

uscript 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 poodle." 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 *kaynahora*; 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, Shmaldecott . . . will it put some food on the table?" Any

other reaction and you are courting disaster. 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 *gonif* (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 adapted 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 living 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 ethnicities—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 overheard in any Hollywood restaurant, "Listen, *bubeleh*, that guy is a *shlepper*. What's his *shtick* anyway? All he has is *cockamamy* ideas." The use of the suffix *nik*, as in *nogoodnik*, is very common. We say *beatnik* 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-n'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,

or only to make a point? Leo Rosten in his *Joys of Yiddish* reminded me of this joke: During a celebration in Red Square after the Bolshevik Revolution and after Trotsky had been sent into exile, Stalin stood beside Lenin's tomb and read the following telegram from Trotsky: "Joseph Stalin, Kremlin, Moscow. You were right and I was wrong. You are the true heir of Lenin. I should apologize. Trotsky."

In the front row sat a little Jewish tailor. "Psst . . ." he whispered to Stalin, "Such a great message, Comrade Stalin, a statement for history, but you didn't read it with the right feeling." Whereupon Stalin quieted the crowd and raised his hand to say: "Comrades, here is a simple worker and a loyal communist who says I have not read this statement with enough feeling. Come up to the podium, comrade, and read this historical statement." So the tailor took the telegram from Stalin and read: "Joseph Stalin, Kremlin, Moscow. *You* were right and *I* was wrong? *You* are the true heir of Lenin? *I* should apologize? Trotsky?"

And finally, there are at least a dozen words to describe a fool, like *shlimazel*, *shlemiel*, *shmegegge*, *shmendrik*, etc., but "Yiddishists" would agree that there is no Yiddish word for disappointment.

When I started school, I forgot all the Yiddish I knew as a child. So when I started to do the artwork for Joseph, I knew I had research to do. I started at the Workmen's Circle bookstore on East 33rd Street in Manhattan. I found five or six books on Jewish life in Poland and Russia with many wonderful photos and a video of the Jewish section of Vilna in Poland before World War II. I visited the Jewish museum to see articles of clothing and other artifacts. The clothing was quite drab, probably faded, though beautifully sewn, and the patterns were quite plain and simple. For the book, I decided to take some artistic license and mix it up with more traditional Polish and Ukrainian designs. This made it more like the *shtetl* of my imagination. I illustrated the ethnic clothing by using collage fragments from various catalogues. So even as I created the artwork for Joseph, I was making something new from something discarded.

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 very own library. I spent my summers at Camp *Kinderland* (Land of Children) and Camp *Nish-ka-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 megillah* (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 mazaltov* 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 Kuentler, *Az meir binst du shayne, Der einer 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!"

"Thank 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 nonteacher, nonlibrarian 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. ●