

Galveston, O Galveston: Benjamin Taylor's award-winning coming-of-age novel, set in one of America's major ports of entry, blends Southern and Jewish storytelling traditions.

The New York Jewish Week

March 7, 1997

Review of *Tales Out of School* by Sandee Brawarsky

Galveston, O Galveston: Benjamin Taylor's award-winning coming-of-age novel, set in one of America's major ports of entry; blends Southern and Jewish storytelling traditions.

Benjamin Taylor's tale of turn-of-the-century Galveston Island has been named the winner of Hadassah Magazine's 1996 Harold U. Ribalow Prize, now in its 14th year.

Behind "Tales Out of School" (Turtle Point Press), a first novel, is a publishing Cinderella story. Turned down by many publishers who praised Taylor's writing but declined taking it on, the book was published by a new small press, to prompt acclaim: the kind of advance reviews writers dream, the sale of reprint rights to Warner Books (who will publish a paperback edition next month) and then the distinguished Ribalow award.

"Don't expect much," friends advised Taylor, as he recounted to the audience gathered for the award ceremonies at Hadassah House in December. "Not much. I'm merely over the moon."

The Ribalow Prize, presented annually to a work of fiction of a Jewish theme by an author "deserving of recognition," is particularly meaningful to writers because the selection is made by their peers. This year's judges were Elie Wiesel, Thomas Keneally, author of "Schindler's List," and Magda Bogin, the 1995 winner for "Natalya, God's Messenger." Past recipients also include Chaim Grade, Max Apple, Anne Roiphe, Francine Prose and Louis Begley, a friend of Taylor, who gave the keynote address at the ceremonies.

"Tales Out of School" is a coming-of-age story. In 1907, Felix Mehmel is 14 and bright, "with good and bad - everything still to come." He is the only member of the third generation of a German-Jewish immigrant family, the first born in Galveston Island, the family's port of entry to America. Felix's grandfather founded a successful brewery and achieved great wealth, but the business and family fortune were in decline as Felix was

growing up. The boy's father was killed in a storm "when an angry God rolled the waters of earth over Galveston"; his mother, who converted to Judaism, was slowly losing her mind, and grasping the faith of her youth. Felix, "a hankerer for the wizardry of words," finds his own way.

The novel is peopled with unforgettable characters: A freed slave who runs the Mehmel household, a pair of women who welcome Felix into their shared home, Felix's bachelor uncle who's the patron of two locals building a flying machine, the class bully who shifts from tormenting Felix to awakening his sexuality, the Breslau-educated rabbi whose faith is slipping, and a mute, mysterious stranger who arrives from Grodno Gubernya who is, among other things, a puppeteer, and, perhaps, a prophet.

Taylor's prose is luminous and poetic. The novel's unfolding reflects the tradition of Southern storytelling, a dose of magic realism and also the tradition of Jewish storytelling, with the tales of Reb Nahman of Bratslav a connecting motif between themes of love, loss, knowledge, madness, faith and redemption.

In an interview last month, Taylor emphasizes that his book is "not Jewish apologetics." He sees his critical stance as "part of the Jewish tradition, going back to Job." A fiction writer, he says, "isn't supposed to be the bearer of good tidings."

Among the writers he admires - in addition to William Maxwell, Eudora Welty and John Cheever - are Philip Roth and Saul Bellow, whom he describes as "no-longer-halachic Jews who are still very Jewish ... with no interest in public relations, in whether what they write is good for the Jews." Does he see himself in that tradition? With characteristic modesty, he replies: "As a spear carrier in that tradition."

Taylor grew up in Fort Worth, Texas, five hours from Galveston, and explains that he "relocated" his memories for the novel. Around 1907, three of his grandparents immigrated from small villages in Lithuania and Byelorussia through the port of Galveston. Now 44, Taylor grew up hearing only fragments of their stories, although one grandfather talked incessantly about his early life when he was quite old and suffering from Alzheimer's. Before writing the novel, he researched the family's history.

In talking about his connection to Judaism, the author admits that for a while he "hated being Jewish." But at some point he discovered that "Judaism was an interesting religion, not just legalistic." He got very excited reading writers like Buber, Scholem and Kafka.

Now, he sees Jewish identity as "ineradicable as sexuality." He adds: "My curiosities run along Jewish lines. Everything is a question to be worried, life is book-centered. ... These are the things that make you Jewish."

As a kid in Texas, Taylor says he "always wanted to be somewhere else." He was interested in theater, poetry and writing, and imagined living in New York City, "the capital of the 20th century." He now spends part of the year at Washington University in St. Louis, where he is writer-in-residence, and the rest at his home on eastern Long Island. "I dreamed of the life I got," he says, reaching for something wood to knock on.

Taylor is also the author of "Into the Open: Reflections on Genius and Modernity," which is based on his doctoral thesis at Columbia University. A self-described slow writer, he likens the process of writing to "making a tapestry or lace." He's now working on a new novel with a Jewish theme and imagines that all of his books will be "about Jews in North America."

Taylor says he is delighted and surprised" to win the Ribalow Prize. The award is named in the memory of Harold U. Ribalow, the late editor, writer, literary critic and anthropologist who served as publicity director of Israel Bonds and wrote 18 books.

Thane Rosenbaum, author of "Elijah Visible" (St. Martin's), was named the winner of the 1996 Edward Lewis Wallant Book Award. The award - named for the author of "The Pawnbroker," a novelist and advertising executive who died at the age of 36 in 1962 - is given to an American writer for a novel or collection of stories of significance to American Jews. Previous winners include Rebecca Goldstein, Cynthia Ozick, Chaim Potok and Melvin Jules Bukiet.

David Wisniewski was awarded the 1997 Caldecott Medal for "Golem" (Clarion). A children's story of a man-made giant who helps the Jews of 16th-century Prague overcome persecution, retold from Jewish folklore, Wisniewski's version is illustrated by intricate papercuts. Presented by the American Library Association, the award honors the illustration of the most distinguished picture book published in the United States. Wisniewski's distinctive, masterful illustrations are based on techniques used by a puppet theater company he co-founded with his wife