May Hill Arbuthnot Honor Lecture

Presented by Richard Jackson at Drexel University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on April 9, 2005

1. Mutuality

Others’ words have been my life—and so are they today. An editor’s—an actor’s—life. Here is William Stafford to lend his voice as prologue, with a poem he called “Story Time.” The two words of the title suggest the first and second acts of our afternoon together. Around midpoint, I promise, there will be an intermission. But also an epilogue where epilogues belong.

So, to the first act—Story.

Tell that one about Catherine who carried her doll to college and when her baby died she threw her doll in the river. Tell that one.

And the one when the old engineer liked his locomotive so much he lived there and they had to build him a house with a whistle. I like that.

And the successful racehorse with a fancy stall fixed up like a Western clubhouse with an old tennis shoe nailed for luck above the door. That’s a good one.

But I’m tired of this long story where I live, these houses with people who whisper their real lives away while eternity runs wild in the street and you suffocate.

Yes, and how about the boy who always granted others their way to live, and he gave away his whole life till at last nothing was left for him? Don’t tell that one.

Bring me a new one, maybe with a dog that trots alongside, and a desert with a hidden river no one else finds, but you go there and pray and a great voice comes. And everything listens.

“Story Time” first appeared in Stafford’s 1991 book, Passwords. On my shelves are many poetry books lichenec at their edges with Post-it notes.

On my desk—in a bedroom in Maryland, from which I work—you might find stacks of highlighted manuscript pages, articles, and books, all about writing, which have lent me many a ruminaton for this lecture. Most touch upon the subject of story, which I have been trying to puzzle out for years—specifically since September 1952, when I was sixteen—story’s importance to me, and, recently, its future in the age of cyberspace.

Robert Stone, in The Writer’s Chapbook, says, “We need stories. We can’t identify ourselves without them. We’re always telling ourselves stories about who we are: That’s what history is, what the idea of a nation or an individual is. The purpose of fiction is to help us answer the question we must constantly be asking ourselves: Who do we think we are, and what do we think we’re doing?”

Who and what indeed. “Always the beautiful answer,” wrote e e cummings, “who asks the more beautiful question.” I have always liked his line from the six non-lectures titled “T” and given at Harvard decades ago. Questions sum up editorial work and are what editors can most usefully offer writers and illustrators.

Among beautiful questions I might ask in the course of a day:

“How’s it going?”
“May I be of help?”
“How much more time will you need?”
“Did you get the check?”

In 1891, William Hazlitt observed: “It is utterly impossible to persuade an Editor that he is nobody.” In her Arbuthnot Lecture of 1998, Susan Hirschman cites the negotiation between two somebodies, Ursula Nordstrom and Ruth Krauss, over the repeated phrase “See?” in The Happy Day. Look it up—a delicious example of editing in its essence. Part flirtation, part surety—never insistence from Nordstrom.

Editors aren’t nobodies. They are of use; should be goads, good listeners, and allies—though invisible in the published work.

British writers are unused to editors squirreling about in their process. But
they have, I admit, contributed volumes to the literature about writing, and therefore have aided editors immeasurably. Stephen Spender lists the requirements for a literary composition as “a. inspiration, b. memory, c. concentration, d. faith, and e. song.”

Editors, I believe, play a role in each. Often they inspire a novel. I have, just by being an expectant friend. By being the reader for whom the story is intended, as confidence or declaration. Editors nudge memory into the light, so that a writer can hear the past—the wellspring of most literature—speaking aloud. Editors do, sometimes, exact concentration, so that the writer doesn’t lose it—or lose heart in what is long, slow work. One writer I know never wants to be paid until, in effect, she’s earned it. Pay her in advance of delivery and she puts her feet up. Editors, perhaps even more than writers, must have faith in the future; they’re banking their own futures on it, in that employers expect results from commitments of money—particularly the serious up-front money that has become common today. I am a dinosaur, old-fashioned enough to believe that publishers shouldn’t be expected to take all the monetary risk of book publication. Author advances or, just as likely, celebrity advance payments, which have faint hope of earning out, are edging our business onto the playground of the entertainment world. And we all remember that playgrounds were hardly fair grounds. One agent has said that if the advance earns back, she’s not done her job. I cringe to hear that; so anti-publisher, anti-process! Culturally books mean both too little and too much for warfare between interested parties.

Nobody can guarantee fans for a poem or a film, a sculpture or a dance. A first novel by an unknown may strike a rich vein in public interest; a well-known writer may come up with a clunker. Publishing advances—the upfront monies paid on behalf of an assumed, not guaranteed, audience for the work—historically were intended to tide over the writer or illustrator from the commencement of a project until it appeared and started to sell. Publishers were, historically again, expected to be bankers until the earning began and at comparable rates for everyone. I liked the business better when all of us—writers and their publishers—were traveling the same road, in the same direction.

But enough of this hobby-horse! I’ve left Spender’s fifth requirement—song—gasping in my dust. He defines it as “the expert use of language; not merely in the sense of correct usage, but in the sense that language is the means by which a certain music is created, a sound in the ears as well as logic for the mind. It is meter; it is rhythm; it is emphasis; it is even gesture,” he says. What help I can give comes from listening to the

which James Stephens in his Irish Fairy Tales calls, “the finest in the world.”

Critic Vivian Gornick writes in The Situation and the Story, her examination of fact-based narrative: “What happened to the writer is not what matters; what matters is the large sense that the writer is able to make of what happened. For that the power of the writing imagination is required. As V. S. Pritchett said, ‘It’s all in the art. You get no credit for living.’”

And yet many a children’s book is clearly the working out of some childhood splinter, the sensation of which is still sharp. Flannery O’Connor, sterner even than Gornick, says: “The fact is that anybody who has survived his childhood has enough information about life to last him the rest of his days. If you can’t make something out of a little experience, you probably won’t be able to make it out of a lot.”

Of course, O’Connor was talking of times prior to the Internet. Nowadays, the “experienced” voice may emanate from the inexperienced source. Brent Staples in a New York Times editorial piece observed, “Everyone has a pseudonym [in the online world], telling a story makes it true, and [bloggers and chatters] can create older, cooler, more socially powerful selves anytime they wish. The ability to slip easily into a new, false self is tailor-made for emotionally fragile adolescents.”

Yet are novelists not slipping into false selves every day? What’s the difference between any writer you want to name and Marcus Arnold, age fifteen, who posed as a twenty-five-year-old legal expert for an Internet information service? Marcus didn’t feel the least bit fraudulent, reports Michael Lewis in his book Next: The Future Just Happened. When real-world lawyers discovered his secret and asked whether he had actually read the law, Marcus responded that he found books “boring.”

The difference between Marcus and a storyteller is one of intent—he sought to cast a shadow, a novelist, light. A writer makes up not a false self, but a surrogate to get at some truth.
Now, we know that telling a story does not make it true necessarily, literal truth being incidental to a convincing tale.

Beguilement, diversion, delight, and companionship—these are what's crucial about story. And generosity uppermost, because story implies an opening out and a welcoming in. An acknowledgment of audience.

By way of illustration, here is a second poem. It's unpublished so far and is called "My Friend, the Starfinder," by my friend George Ella Lyon. You'll see its connection to the Stafford.

Once there was an old man.
I knew him
when I was no bigger than you are.

He wore old soft clothes
and sat in an old chair
on an old green porch
and told stories.

The stranger they were
the truer he looked
and I believed every one.

For starters
he told me once
he saw a star falling

and since he'd done his chores
and it was still light
he followed that star across the field.

Way, way ahead of him
it landed
so he kept walking
and when he got to the spot
he picked the star up.

It was warm and smooth
as an egg straight from the hen.

He kept it, of course.
Put it in my hand
glasy, blackish green
like puddles around a coal pile.

I held it tight
trying to feel its journey.

Another time he told me
how once he was walking along
not going anywhere in particular

when all of a sudden
he saw his hand
purple as a church window

and his arm was green—
green as this porch, he'd say—and his old khaki pants
were red and yellow and orange
as sunset
yellow and red
and orangey orange as fire.

He was at the end
of the rainbow
color pouring
over him
cool
warm
striped
air
on face and hair
shirt and shoes
and belt buckle.

Now he couldn't bring home
the rainbow
the way he did the star.
But when he told the story
holding out his hand
I could feel the colors.
I could see it was true.

And how he would have to tell it
just like I'm telling you.

Okay . . . so, what's true here? And who says it's true?

Picasso observed, "We all know that art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand. The artist must know the manner whereby to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies."

I find storytellers, joke-tellers, just captivating. It's the trouble they take to include me in some shared fact or flight of fancy.

For instance, recall the loopy logic of Bea Jones' father changing places with her in kindergarten, permitting the child to assume his life at the office . . . and, at the end of the day, not switching back! Now, there's a listening dad!

Ponder the serious humor of a nine-year-old girl in Miami for the 1947 winter season convinced that Hitler is hiding out in an apartment nearby. Well . . . her story suggests it could have happened!—especially in the life of a (future) novelist like Sally J. Freedman.

Or what of twelve-year-old Summer, whose grandfather makes whirligigs of such intricacy that they can be pictured only in the mind, not on any book jacket? (I know, because we tried picturing their magic at first. They showed up as demonic pinwheels and set flying all the wrong sparks.)

Or the jazzman, on his head with happiness: "Alphabet, alphabet, alphabet, alph . . . Chickadee, chickadee, chickadee, chick . . . Charlie Parker played alto saxophone," sings the text. "Never leave your cat a-lone."

Or the yarn about the cow in Kentucky who, once airborne, declines to come down to earth.
Or the one about a girl in Kentucky hunting an earth-bound bovine as elusive, as enchanted, as any unicorn.

Cows would seem to be favorites of mine, for there are also the adventures of Minnie and Moo.

As well as sagas of other brazen girls. For instance, Thorgil, who longs for the danger of being an eighth-century Viking berserker.

Or Charlotte Doyle in the more civilized nineteenth century, who takes to the sea disguised for safety in boys' clothing, and for her daring, is accused of murder, found guilty, and sentenced to death.

Or singing and dancing piratical dogs, tricked out as a Tintin comic.

Or Mudge.

Or the lone boy in a wintry woods, tracking a deer to touch it merely, so that his grandfather might have the story to remember him by. As a reader, I sense that boy's every slogging step.

I spy on three galumphing huntsmen in a different woods, outwitted at every turn by their animal quarry. A photo enlargement from that book provided a backdrop to the Bradbury Press booth at an ALA conference and there caught the eye of a passing notable. . . . She stopped, scowling a bit. I explained that the backdrop celebrated a new, young illustrator's reimagining of an old rhyme . . . from the animals' point of view. "As opposed," she asked, "to the children's librarian's point of view?" Later, we became friends—but I get ahead of myself; industry notables show up after halftime.

I am alluding to books I've loved publishing over the last forty-three years. Drexel graduate student Jennifer Burke prepared the intro show prior to this talk, presenting my peculiar take on what I've been stirred by and loved best from my years as a publisher—one book each from writers or illustrators who've meant most to me—and not necessarily the famous books you might expect. I fear I've forgotten some; for the oversight, I apologize. I pause here to thank Amy Kellman of Pittsburgh, whose home library of children's books from all publishers over the past forty years is extraordinary, as is her ability to come up with correct titles and the books themselves for jacket scanning.

The modest R. J. slice of history includes nonfiction projects about Leonardo's inventions, the wrestling boyhood of a well-known illustrator, the life of Eamon de Valera, and the battle of Trafalgar—twice. And the Sioux trickster, Iktomi, through many an outrageous adventure. And an account of Roy Chapman Andrews finding dinosaur eggs in the Gobi Desert. And a thriller about John Brown at Harper's Ferry. And a pan-orama based upon a fourteen-foot mural.

who disobeys his father and fires the BB gun his uncle's brought him for his birthday—just once and in the moonlight, causing "a thin disturbance in the air," which changes everything. For the next morning a cat shows up, a cat with only one eye.

A haunter, that cat. As is that novel.

Had I named titles or authors and illustrators you might have listened differently to such a list. You might have thought, Oh, I know that book, and then been less committed to leaning forward to listen closer, like Sultan Schahriar on his pile of silk pillows.

**Editors aren't nobodies. They are of use; should be goads, good listeners, and allies—though invisible in the published work.**

"Scheherazade avoided her fate because she knew how to wield the weapon of suspense," writes E. M. Forster in his classic *Aspects of the Novel*. "Great novelist though she was—exquisite in her descriptions, tolerant in her judgments, ingenious in her incidents, advanced in her morality, vivid in her delineations of character, expert in her knowledge of three Oriental capitals—it was yet on none of these gifts that she relied when trying to save her life from her intolerant husband. These were but incidental. She only survived because she managed to keep the king wondering what would happen next."

Perhaps you wonder at all these quotes. In the first half alone there are twenty-five voices that are not mine. "Others' words," you'll remember. They fill an editor's days, voices coming from this way and that and from many a different time zone. Editors are jugglers. The trick is to be so in tune with every caller or e-mailer that his book or her book seems to be the only one on your mind. (I once discoursed at length about a character before the writer stopped me gently to say: 'That's not someone in my story.' A humbling lesson.)

At any time I may have forty books in my mind—fewer now, but still several
in any one day, their dates of publication reaching forward into 2009. If I’m asked at a library conference what I particularly like for next season, I honestly can’t remember a single title—or even, sometimes, the next season itself. At Atheneum we have three seasons a year.

Recently, I’ve been trying to learn the importance of, say, the back-to-school selling span or national poetry month. I hardly think about such realities and sales aids, much to the impatience of more focused minds. Like the old family retainer, I am allowed to rock on—in the nineteenth century meaning of the word. I am indulged.

There are many who would say that the business uniting us today is an indulgence—and that fiction, particularly, doesn’t signify.

“The Survey of Public Participation in the Arts,” conducted by the Census Bureau in 2002, cited among its findings “that fewer than half of Americans more than eighteen now read novels, short stories, plays, or poetry; that the consumer pool for books of all kinds has diminished; and that the pace at which the nation is losing readers, especially young readers, is quickening. In addition, it finds that the downward trend holds in virtually all demographic areas . . .”

“What this study does is give us accurate numbers that support our worst fears about American reading,” That from Dana Gioia, chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, from an article in The New York Times.

The survey also noted that readers are far more likely than nonreaders to do volunteer and charity work; far more likely to attend art museums, performing-arts events, and ball games. “Whatever good things the new electronic media bring, they also seem to be creating a decline in cultural and civic participation,” Gioia lamented.

“It’s not just unfortunate, it’s a real cause for concern,” agreed James Shapiro, a professor of English at Columbia University. “A culture gets what it pays for, and if we think democracy depends on people who read, write, think, and reflect—which is what literature advances—then we have to invest in what it takes to promote that.”

Well, we are, aren’t we?

Our time, like times before us, will be remembered because of our art and artists; laws; recipes perhaps; oaths; and wars. Principally I would nourish the art and artistry natural to all people before our culture does its belittling.

I find storytellers, joke-tellers, just captivating. It’s the trouble they take to include me in some shared fact or flight of fancy.

When I was nine and in fourth grade, we were offered the opportunity to take an art class as part of the school week. Admittance was by jury selection; applicants were expected to show some interest or aptitude in art. As there was no assigned subject, I drew a theater portal with a great column in the center, upstage, and a female dancer balanced precariously on top. (Freudians, make of this what you will!) As a final flourish, I signed my name in an arc over the dancer as if she were juggling the letters of it en pointe.

I was told severely that one did not put one’s name in the center of a composition. But the stage setting was prophetic, as was the signature placement. The Richard Jackson logo with its small arched window harkens from the 1986 founding of Orchard Books, where it first appeared on half-title pages usually centered. When I moved to DK Ink in 1996, the name was promoted to the title page itself but the small window dropped because it too often intruded on illustrated title-page spreads.

Back in fourth grade, I was admitted to art class but remember only the signature admonishment. Most of us, I’ll guess, have memories of corrective adults, sure of the exact way to be, the way to write or draw, the way to think. “Culture,” one wag said, “is what’s done to us.”

Still smarting, I have tried to be the opposite of the corrective adult. Ambiguity’s helpmate, you might say. Unlike some in the spotlight, I do not know for sure that I am right.

In stories I would rather be shown a mystery than told a certainty. Through stories I’d rather be diverted toward my own ends than directed to the ends of others.

Last autumn, my wife, Nancy, bought a paperback edition of Judy Blume’s Blubber for our then-ten-year-old granddaughter, Kelsey. At the register the cashier volunteered crisply, “A mean book.”

This about the work of a woman honored in November by the National Book Foundation for her distinguished contribution to American letters. Perhaps, like some unlucky others, the cashier never had a childhood she could call her own. Paula Fox says that, “children are not a race apart but ourselves when new.” The sad fact is that some people seem never to have been new—that, or have repressed the sensation. Psychologist James Gillman, in an essay in Children’s Literature, writes that unless children are introduced to story when young—story read or told to them, not watched on a screen—they may not be able to organize their own experiences into story, and thus make sense of their lives.

Story is a tool for survival; it helps us understand (or at least unburden ourselves of) our journey. The cashier’s childhood has not survived. Yet she has not outlived her childhood, either. The poor woman.

I wasn’t there at the bookstore; never saw her. But I’ve heard and heard and heard attitudes such as hers about work I’ve published. I have no extrasensory bead on childhood, but I recognize that kid characters in adult books tend to be different than children portrayed in young peoples’ literature. For adult read-
ers, innocence is charm, and therefore appealing to writers. Underage readers know better; innocence is a hard-won state of mind. Lack of experience is not innocence—or so I feel. And that’s the reason R. J. books drive adults nuts with their darkness, spikiness, or ambiguity. I like “shapely,” not “smoothed out.” I don’t want stories that are better than life, which so often is ambiguous—yes, I know how frustrating children find that—but I want the balance of art, not the dollop of “cute” or “tidy.” Stories can assuage, but they ought not to solve. That’s what living’s for.

Blubber tells a story about meanness. But mean in itself? Please. Granted, the story does not say right out that cruel behavior is wrong. Blume does not directly punish the nasty kids. Often enough, neither does life. Blume leaves the matter of morality to the conscience of the reader, in the belief that some of the thinking must be left up to the kid.

I leave the books up to kids, because they are unprofessional readers. They haven’t read enough, whereas we, as adults, often have read too much. Children have no agenda. They will like a tale or toss it aside. They’ll see in it either more or less than we can see. They’ll take it to heart. Or take us to task as in the following anecdote: A writer friend was asked to do a local library program for adults. A seven-year-old boy and his grandmother showed up, and though they were assured it would be okay to duck out after the opening reading of a picture book, they stayed for the whole presentation. Afterward, the grandmother approached the writer, all thanks and enthusiasm. The boy then piped up: “I thought I would die. It was worse than church.”

A classmate of Kelsey’s, and a member of her after-school book group, had her own cold water to throw upon me, though I was not on hand to holler. With utmost seriousness the girl dismissed my flap copy on the advance galleys of Nancy Farmer’s The Sea of Trolls, as “not very good.”

Excuse me? I thought upon hearing this appraisal. But I wrote that, as many an editor does for his projects. Many of us want to. I used always to do it, with words addressed to the child reader, not to the parent or the reviewer. I’ve had two stalwart assistants at Atheneum, and in the last years they’ve both helped me with jacket flaps: Virginia Skrelja and now Hilary Goodman. Of course, they are two generations closer to the audi-

ence than I, and neither is wild for adjectives, which suits my flap-writing style just fine.

Kelsey denies saying it about some schoolroom classic taught for decades, but I swear I heard her call that classic “li-torture.”

I’ve published some so high-minded you need a ladder to scale them. From time to time, editors do succumb to a writer’s unrestless solemnity. Even their own solemnity, now and then—particularly in pursuit of stick-on metallic disks. We all recognize—don’t we—that awards reflect a moment in time and chemistry around a table as much as they do acclamation or a single book’s infinite superiority. I’d rather that prizes not be doggedly annual anointings, but rewards for bodies of work—as some recent honors have blessedly become. The original impulses behind the Caldecott and Newbery Medals—to encourage writing and illustrating for children—have long past. We don’t live in undiscovered country; children’s literature is mainstream and Main Street now. (I was once told by a boss—not an editor—that my job was to win prizes. Say that to a man at a blackjack table; he’d agree but the dealer might have other ideas.)

My advice: Forget prizes as much as you can; don’t publish toward them. Writers and artists should think on their work, not their place in the pantheon—a very hard assignment in this culture of inveterate contest. What any writer wants essentially is simpler than a prize: an engaged audience and a book that stays in print. And a further thought: after the hullabaloo subsides, it’s a rare prizewinner who’s a happier human; oppressed by expectation is the more likely aftertaste.

But with solemnity in mind, I must—at last—get to my acceptance of Pat Scales’s invitation, extended almost two years ago, to undertake this lecture.

Eyes shifting left and right, she drew me out of the Atheneum booth at ALA and walked me away down the aisle, past anyone’s hearing. “Am I in trouble?” I wondered aloud. She thought not; told me about today, added: “Oh, come on, say yes . . . In honor of the career.”

My thanks to Sandra Hughes-Hassell and Denise Agosto of Drexel University, to the university itself, to ALSC, and to Pat’s Arbuthnot Lecture Committee for spurring me into two years of self-appraisal. Talk about therapy! My wife says I’ve twitched in my sleep since July 2003.

But who, after all, can say no to Pat Scales?

Whether, before the commencement of the career in 1962, I knew why story mattered so deeply, I do not recall. Do the young think of such things? The lucky ones know that the experience of a tale can reach out and catch them, hold them
suspended but secure in a net of imagining. In third grade the web of Greek mythology caught me, a dreamy, dyslexic boy with seriously dramatic yearnings. And, ah, those myths—the vigor, enormity, and wildness of them! And the sets! The costumes—or absence thereof! The preposterous but convincing logic of cause and effect on the heights and in the depths of the Olympian world! And the magic of Mrs. Spencer’s storytelling voice in class!

So: Yes, Pat. In honor of the career. After five minutes. Four seconds. Of intermission—the precise length of the following... 

(Excerpt from Into the Woods, “Children Will Listen,” words and music by Stephen Sondheim)

II. Time!

That, you may remember, is the title for act two. And these Dockers and sandals are the costume, which is rather more typical than the suit.

Return with me to my bedroom office, the floor littered with bits and pieces of lives. In the corner with the poetry is a bookcase of R. J. books. Aside from this shamefully incomplete library, there’s little evidence of my work—a fact that puzzled my then-six-year-old grandson, Alexander. He’d been standing at my shoulder for some minutes, watching me on the computer, and finally had to ask, “Papa, do you even have a job?”

Now, the answer is: No job, but a need.

I wish to have been a different son when I was my readers’ age—be it four or fourteen. I wish I’d known this poem by Walker Gibson. It’s called “Advice to Travelers.”

A burro once, sent by express, His shipping ticket on his bridle, Ate up his name and his address, And in some warehouse, standing idle, He waited till he like to died. The moral hardly needs the showing: Don’t keep things locked up deep inside—

Say who you are and where you’re going.

It was clear that I wasn’t going to follow my father, who followed his into the automobile business. The aforementioned dreamy boy was drawn to magic—and performed on the birthday-party circuit (cousins mostly) as the “Precocious Prestidigitator.” I was drawn to music—first “Malaguena,” then Mozart sung by Bidu Sayao from a stack of 78s an inch high. I was drawn to the Bil Baird Marionette Theater that, during my sixth-grade year, visited Detroit.

I was an artist from an upper-middle-class suburb where scions of industry were supposed to be... industrial. Art was a pastime only. I wonder: Was it fear of poverty or fear of feeling that threatened them? Or was art “unmanly”? Whatever; here was a conundrum, because my parents were both drawn to artistic achievers. One of their closest friends was Alexander Girard, a local architect, who, in my youth, designed his first house for my father on the lake of a northern Michigan hunting- and fishing club. Girard became color consultant for both GM and Braniff Airlines and founded the now famous folk-art museum that bears his name in Santa Fe. For him I did, at age ten, a painting called “The Octopus and the Snowflake,” which he actually bought and framed for his wall. And yet, yet... art was somehow suspect. Taste, on the other hand, was encouraged, a critical eye—and, I fear, tongue. “Never be average,” my father advised. Oh, how, how I longed to be just that—wanting even to like football. It’s so much easier in America if you do! But team sports were crude. Fishing bored me, hunting appalled me, and sailing—which I remember best for clandestine voyages across Lake St. Clair during World War II, when rationed cigarettes were exchanged for meat with a Canadian family from the opposite shore—scared me speechless. Not the crime, I confess, but the danger of capsizing.

“Dick is an anxious child,” I overheard my mother say to the doctor downstairs, who’d just made a house call to swab my throat with a yard-long Q-tip. But I was quite fierce inside. And eventually able to whip off fifty-five push-ups to win a bet with another infantry draftee. Though I shuddered at the prospect of military service after Yale, I let it happen without protest or scooting off to Canada, and in 1958 at age twenty-two became a machine-gunner slated for two years in a tent near Schweinfurt, Germany. Perhaps it was my age—old among seventeen-year-olds—or my typing ability, but I was asked—in the Army, mind you, asked—if I’d write an article for the Fort Benning newspaper. The proffered subject: basic training.
I wrote a piece about tear gas, quoting the training sergeant in a flashy first line: “You, you, and you would have been dead!”

Fort Benning, as you may know, is the United States home of the infantry; the hub. The general’s office noticed my article and asked—again, asked—if I’d write speeches for him about battle groups and aircraft for the foot soldier. An absolute fluke, but I stayed in Georgia for my stint, speechifying like mad and was discharged several weeks early to seek a master’s degree in English at Columbia, where I met Nancy. Years trying to convince the New York Herald Tribune’s drama critic, Walter Kerr, that, really, he’d enjoy a perilous helicopter flight into the city from Connecticut to review the performance.

After six grim weeks—it was a Civil War drama in blank verse with no love interest and a cast of twenty-three men—we sank into the slush. Convinced at last that after a BA in drama, after a summer acting and doing lights in an Adirondack stock company, after another summer of stage-managing at the American Shakespeare Festival, the theater was at were I a writer I’d write her, in honor of her story and importance to me.

Not long into the fall term, Keene suggested I seek out Margaret Lesser, a friend of hers and editor-in-chief of Doubleday Books for Young Readers, because, as she observed, I was interested “in visual things.”

Indeed I was—black and white and all colors except infantry camouflage, of which I’d seen enough. Shortly after my Fort Benning days, I inherited from my paternal grandmother my grandfather Roscoe Bradbury Jackson’s library of glorious eighteenth- and nineteenth-century collected works of Sterne, Thackeray, Eliot, Shakespeare—in three separate editions—Montaigne, Molière, Thoreau, Carlisle, and Stevenson because I’d long admired the bookmaking beauties they had represented on her library shelves. These were and are art objects from other times. The smell and feel of them! The weight! I can attest to this, having moved them twice across the country.

In 1961, I knew little about children's books; I was rarely read to as a boy. But I called Margaret Lesser from my semi-desk in the production department at Doubleday and asked if she’d see me. (Do you remember Seth Agnew? He was then head of all Doubleday manufacturing and he gave me a long-range assignment during my NYU apprenticeship days. I was still at it when I called Peggy Lesser. My job for Seth was counting recipes in cookbooks in order to make a precomputer grid, comparing the number of, say, casseroles listed to the cost of printing the book. I know, I know—it does sound whimsical.) Peggy said, sure, come see her, but wondered in her direct way what she might do with me: “After all,” she noted, “you’re a man.”

In the spring of 1962, after I’d graduated from NYU with my publishing MA, but while I was still counting recipes, Peggy called me to see if I’d consider a secretarial job. Yes, I said. Aside from typing letters and reading manuscripts, my first real editorial assignment was preparing the index for the D’Aulaires’ Book of Greek Myths. Mrs. Spencer, wonder-weaver of my third-grade year, would have been proud. My first work remains in print to this day! I wrote two books—that is, matched words with existing pictures, some by Erik Blegvad—for little kids; I have copies of these somewhere, but no particular pride in their authorship.

So, I was employed in the children’s department of Doubleday for a year and a half, and married by then, when Keene, mentor of old, called to say she was assuming the editorship at Macmillan. Would I like to come along as her associate?

You bet, and in their beautiful building on Fifth Avenue and 12th Street, where Margaret Mitchell had been feted in a paneled room that, by my time, housed the company’s telephone system, I soon met writer Paula Fox and colleague Janet Shulman. Not then an editor and fine writer, but a marketer, Janet introduced me to her college friend, Virginia Hamilton. When I left Macmillan in 1966, Paula followed me to the small David White Company; Virginia stayed and thrived under the tutelage of Susan Hirschman, who had succeeded Keene at Macmillan as editor-in-chief, and taught me everything I hadn’t learned about publishing by age twenty-nine. This was a lot. When I told her I was leaving for the David White job, Susan surprisingly but pleasantly heaved a chair across the floor in displeasure.

During my Macmillan time, I received my favorite letter from a writer. I’d said yes to a manuscript of Felice Holman's, and the next day received a reply. No note, just an envelope filled with multicolored stars.

This memory was prompted by Alexander’s question, “Papa, do you even have a job?” No job, but a need. I enjoy being thanked.

So much so, I’m still unretired. Can’t give up the gratitude!

“All literature is to me me,” said Gertrude Stein. But, then, she was a writer. My words are usually a means for others—like the words of all editors in this hall today. In some way I do not understand, editors can free or inspire writers, even painters, to take up Robert Stone’s challenge to show us who we are and what we’re up to.

“Your father is dead,” Uncle Jim said on the phone the next morning. “Get your mother.”

She wasn’t home, and by the time she’d heard, the enormity of the news had crashed wordlessly around us. I say wordlessly, because no one told me how or where—or certainly why he was dead.

At forty, he had shot himself in his car on Lake Shore Drive. This I learned only from the evening paper.

Earlier that day, when I could do so unseen, I slipped alone into my parents’ room, around to his side of the bed, and slid open the delicate, ivory-handled drawer of his night table. Throughout my youth I had sneaked looks at its contents, had pressed a finger to the weapon there, loaded for our safety: a Luger pistol.

His means.

That day, I knew it would be gone.

That day, September 13, 1952, there was no story other than the first version of the fifty-year-long riff I’ve told and told myself. It keeps changing. And may change tomorrow.

For today, I read another poem, partly because it pertains, partly because I love it—the title poem from “Stories I Ain’t Told Nobody Yet” by Jo Carson.

Words, in my family at least, stayed polite, bantering. You skimmed the surface with them, but did not dive.

Beneath, there was a deep unspeakable-ness. In 1949, my four-year-old sister drowned in a neighbor’s pool. My parents, I think, never recovered—if anyone can—after such a blow. My other sister, Linda, was eight, and I fourteen the June morning Julie died, and I recall my father telling me softly that the women would gather together in the living room for the comfort of talk, while in the library we men wouldn’t be saying much. At the time, I thought quiet to be a comfort. Two years later, in the same library, I saw my father for the last time, surrounded by office paperwork while I, from the doorway, resisted doing the dishes and slammed out of the house to be with friends I’d only just discovered that summer.

I am asking you to come back home
before you lose the chance of
seeing me alive.
You already missed your daddy.
You missed your uncle Howard.
You missed Luciel.
I kept them and I buried them.
You showed up for the funerals.
Funerals are the easy part.
You even missed that dog you left.
I dug him a hole and put him in it.
It was a Sunday morning, but dead
animals don’t wait no better than dead
people.

My mama used to say she could feel herself.
runnin’ short of the breath of life.
So can I.
And I am blessed tired of buryin’
things I love.
Somebody else can do that job
for me.
You’ll be back here then; you come
for funerals.

I’d rather you come back now and
get my stories.
I’ve got whole lives of stories that
belong to you.
I could fill you up with stories,
stories I ain’t told nobody yet,
stories with your name, your blood
in them.
Ain’t nobody gonna hear them if
you don’t
and you ain’t gonna hear them
unless you get back home.

When I am dead, it will not matter
how hard you press your ear to the
ground.

Did I mention the comfort of stories?
It wasn’t so much the facts I was miss-
ing or had to gather second-hand that
September day; what hurt was the non-
inclusion of me.

Years later our eldest, Adam, then five,
lay with me in a hammock and asked,
“Daddy, why wasn’t I baptized? Wasn’t I
good enough?” The answer I gave
him, that in our eyes and in God’s
he was good enough without need-
ing water to make it official . . .
these words may not have eased
his mind.

The subject didn’t come up again.
But for me, it’s a constant. The
children of suicides never feel
good enough—and quite possibly
their grandchildren too. My sister
Linda and I have lived lives as artists (she
as head of the Altar Guild at Washington’s
National Cathedral—if you’ve watched
a state funeral on television, you’ve
seen her flower work), I as encourager,
enabler, eminence grise of story upon
story upon story. I admit it—a remedial
effort. Our father should have lived as
the artist he was; we’re doing it for him.

Lucy Larcom wrote in 1889 in A New
England Girlhood:

. . . when I heard that there were
artists,
I wished I could sometime be one.
If I could only make a rose bloom
on paper.
I thought I should be happy! Or if I
could at last
succeed in drawing the outline of
winter-striped boughs
as I saw them against the sky, it
seemed to me
that I should be willing to spend
years in trying.

The expenditure of years is somehow my
text, and I’ve strayed far from it. And I an
editor, too! I’ve left the career dangling
in 1966, the year our second child, Tess,
was born—on a day, in fact, when I was
to take Armstrong Sperry to lunch. I also
met Robert Verrone in 1966.

Bob was well-known in children’s pub-
lishing as director of the library sales
force at Prentice-Hall. He was enlisted
by his mentor, the CEO, to search for a new
editor for their children’s department,
and in that capacity, interviewed me. We
liked each other right off, but it was clear
that the job in question—and the com-
mute to New Jersey—wasn’t for me.

I ended up with the long drive, anyway.
After months of surreptitiously scroung-
ing for money to start ourselves in chil-

I don’t want stories that are better than life, which
so often is ambiguous—yes, I know how frustrat-
ing children find that—but I want the balance of art, not
the boloney of “cute” or “tidy.” Stories can assuage,
but they ought not to solve. That’s what living’s for.

Cooper, Harold Goodwin, Cynthia
Rylan, Denys Cazet, Janet Taylor Lisle,
Avi, Donna Maurer, Emily McGully, and
Gary Paulsen followed.

Some seasons there might have been only four new books, but most seasons
welcomed newcomers or sometimes new
discoveries such as Elizabeth Fitzgerald
Howard, Ursula Landhoff, Emily Hanlon,
Amy Aiken, Christian Garrison, Luke
Wallin, Robert Casilla, M. C. Heldorfer,
Sue Stevenson, Judie Angell, Sheila
Garrigue, Judie Wolkoff; or recognized
names such as Stephen Gammell, Riki
Levinson, Mary Szilagyi, Peter Silsbee,
Mae Durham, Mitsu Yashima, Scott
Russell Sanders, Irene Trivas, Milton
Meltzer—who wrote his only novel for
us, Kin Platt, Barbara Murphy, and Paul
B. Janeczko through whose series of mar-
vellous poetry anthologies I met George
Ella Lyon. As long back as 1968, a friend
of Bob’s, Mary Elizabeth Ledi of the
Milwaukee Public Library, introduced us
to John Reiss, who had a book dummy
called Colors that he shyly dislodged from
a bottom drawer. We loved it. We bought
it. And we subsequently first published
John’s wife, Lois Ehler.

Judy Blume, because of our Englewood
Cliffs address, sent us a manuscript unso-
licted: Iggy’s House. She later revealed
that she did so because she disliked driv-

dren’s book publishing, Bob went to
his CEO with word that he had found
another job—true—and would leave
Prentice-Hall unless said mentor would
give us money for a start-up. Hence
Bradbury Press was born in February
1968. Our first list, which appeared
that fall, featured Paula Fox and Arnold
Lobel. Rosemary Wells and Susan Jeffers
came along as both were chums from
Macmillan. Next, Amy Schwartz and
Diane Goode. Paul Goble, Margare
of it—moved permanently to Florida. His successor had no interest in a small children’s imprint that directly competed with his own. We were told to close up shop.

Bob had two children; I had three. We had some books to our joint credit, some stars from the journals, some slight recognition. We were stunned.

But not to be done in.

After more futile money searches (a Texan in a cape was the favorite), we put our future where our money wasn’t, and, borrowing from our families, bought the Bradbury name and backlist. We moved closer to home and set up shop (again) in a building full of dentists near the Metro North rail lines out of Manhattan. We stayed there in Scarsdale for the next fourteen years, until Bob died stoically and terribly at the age of forty-nine.

Over those years, Beverly Horowitz; Jane Botham; Norma Jean Sawicki, who brought Suse McDonald, Giulio Maestro, and Matt Novak to the list; Lauren Wohl; and Virginia Duncan all worked at Bradbury, which moved into the Macmillan building on Third Avenue, New York, in 1984. Please remember that the Bradbury experiment, for so it was, could hardly thrive now. We needed books, unlike so many publishers today who can no longer read over-the-transom submissions. Bob and I needed books, so we were a boon, particularly to writers and artists just beginning, or those looking for a new—or additional—home.

The Bradbury staff started out as two, using shirt cardboards from the laundry as layout sheets spread along the useful length of Nancy’s ironing board, for the paste-up, or “mechanicals,” of the text for Eros Keith’s 1968 picture book, A Small Lot. We drove into Manhattan to meet Arnold Lobel when he handed in the finished art for The Comic Adventures of Old Mother Hubbard and Her Dog . . . on a street corner. Later, Avi’s S. O. R. Losers arrived by secretarial error from his agent. It was supposed to go to Harper, advance monies, snazzier promotion budgets, and the like. I do not blame them. We lost one writer over a requested ten-thousand-dollar advance—piddling by today’s standards, but simply beyond us at the time—in 1975, if I remember rightly. I learned from Bradbury that, as my wife says, “People do what they want to do.”

So, serious thanks to the writers, illustrators, and agents who remained loyal to me at whatever company. After Bradbury, which we sold to Macmillan in 1982 because Bob’s health was failing and which I left in 1986, these other companies were: Orchard Books, until 1996, then DK Ink, and finally Atheneum, from 1999 to today. I take no credit for the fact that Macmillan, David White, Bradbury Press, and DK Ink have all faded into the haze of publishers past. I do take pride that I’ve been attendant at three corporate births and want you to know it’s to Sandra Jordan, noted writer, photographer, editor—and Bob Verrone’s widow—that I owe the R. J. imprint and the Orchard job. She encouraged me about working from home, which saved my sanity. I am impatient with meetings; and publishers, these days, have many. Consensus must prevail, whereas nerve and hunch were enough at Bradbury—and sometimes highly profitable.

We did work hard, it’s true; publishing a novel requires reading it in various forms maybe nine times, the effort of a year or more after it’s written. A picture book wants two years—and at the end of a long prep process, needs watching on press. In the early Bradbury days, full-color books (we could afford only a couple a year) were printed two colors at a time, black and blue inks first for the whole print run of, say, ten thousand copies, then red and yellow inks on top. If you made a color-intensity mistake on either the black or blue, you were stuck with it—or faced with junking the whole ten thousand sheets. We did that with the first printing of Three Jovial Huntsmen, not because of a goof but because Susan Jeffers hated what she’d done originally and asked to rethink the art-preparation process. Two copies of the initial run were bound up; Susan has one, I have the other. Real rarities. Bob was particularly good at adjusting in val-

My advice: Forget prizes as much as you can; don’t publish toward them. Writers and artists should think on their work, not their place in the pantheon—a very hard assignment in this culture of inveterate contest. What any writer wants essentially is simpler than a prize: an engaged audience and a book that stays in print. And a further thought: after the hullabaloo subsides, it’s a rare prizewinner who’s a happier human; oppressed by expectation is the more likely aftertaste.
ues on press, and did it, as well as a lot of typography, on most of Bradbury's picture books. I was better at driving home in the dim light of dawn after what were some eighteen-hour printing ordeals.

Once I remember asking Bob at a printer's elbow how one spells "huge," for on the sheet of paper we were watching, there was the fateful word spelled "h-u-g-h." (Ah, dyslexia!) The job was printing in northern Connecticut; to correct that error—our own, after who knows how many readings!—required two days. Replacement type had to be set, a new black plate made (in Manhattan), and then trucked north to the printing plant, and, of course, there was our second blumin', numbing car trip back.

I suppose I've watched more picture books and novel jackets print than most editors. At Bradbury the two of us did nearly everything. At Atheneum I was recently asked to participate in some first-proof color correction for a fall 2005 title. But nerve-racking, I thought of Bob and his excellent eye. At least nowadays all four colors are printed at once, so adjustments at press time are possible. Also it's not to Connecticut one travels to but rather the Far East. Editors don't make such journeys today. In fact, the roll-up-your-sleeves overall "thinginess" of book publishing is out of our hands. Now we have teams, departments, staffs, and crews—all specialized.

Nineteen years ago, however, even large companies permitted—or hardly noticed—renegade bands. The Orchard founding four was one such.

Our launch in 1987 was almost ideal in that Franklin Watts, the imprint's original owner, gave us a year to prepare ourselves. Orchard newcomers, though not all on that first list: Peter Catalanotto, who painted the program cover for this afternoon, giving me an airborne send-off plus a full head of hair and who's promised me watercolor lessons when I have the time; Chris Raschka; Megan McDonald; James E. Ransome; Susan Patron; Barbara Ann Porte; Greg Henry; Phyllis Gershator; Holly C. Kim; Wendy Anderson Halperin; Rosanne Litzinger; Dan Elish; Zack Rogow; Suann Kiser; John Gurney; Steve Sanfield; Emily Lisker; Jerome Brooks; John Ward; Kate Spohn; Jenny Davis; Anne Shelby; Tres Seymour; Paul Brett Johnson; Jim Wayne Miller; Marie Bradby; Jo Carson; Jeff Daniel Marion; and Marguerite Casparian—the last nine all referred by our modest starfinder, George Ella Lyon. Sheila Gordon and Evan Levine were sent by Paula Fox; Brian Floca (my recording engineer) was sent by Avi; Theresa Nelson by Judie Angell; Rachel Vail by Orgel, M. J. Engh, Maxie Chambliss, Virginia Walter, Katrina Roeckelein, Ursula K. Le Guin, Gibbs Davis, Dan Andreasen, Karen Ray, Julie Downing, Liz Rosenberg, Jack Driscoll, Marsha Carrington, Diana Cain Bluthenthal, and Nancy Farmer. Of these Orchard names, twenty-five appeared for the first time anywhere on an R. J. list. I believe "talent scout" is part of my nonjob description as it is with all editors. Certainly, first-time writers or illustrators are delighted with their good fortune—and this makes them delightful, in the main, to publish. I've introduced eighty-eight first-timers, if my count is correct.

Other conferees to credit: cofounders with Sandra Jordan at Orchard, loyal friend Norma Jean Sawicki again, and Ann Beneduce. Manufacturing maven Margaret La Mare at both Bradbury and Orchard; copyeditor Maggie Herold; designers Mina Greenstein and at DK Ink, Jennifer Browne. And, while I'm at it, other editors who might enjoy and surely warrant this lectureship: Michael Di Capua and Janet Schulman from old, old Macmillan days, or the following whom I have never worked alongside: Walter Lorraine, Frances Foster, Phyllis Fogelman, Patricia Gauch, or Kate and John Briggs (a Yale classmate) if it's a matter of longevity on the planet. Or if it's not, Regina Hayes, Stephen Roxburgh, Dinah Stevenson, and Brenda Bowen (who gave me my job at Atheneum).

This original artwork was created by illustrator Peter Catalanotto for the Arbuthnot Honor Lecture program book. Used with permission of the artist.

Judy Blume; Annie Cannon by Gary Paulsen; Dawna Lisa Buchanan, Angela Johnson, and Dav Pilkey by Cynthia Rylant; and, in turn, Rhonda Mitchell by Angie Johnson. Great godparents, all.

To augment the list—so many became friends, actually—Sheila Hamanaka, Cynthia Saint James, Brian Swann, Ponder Goembel, Vera Rosenberry, David Soman, Chris K. Soentpiet, Frances Temple, Valerie Hobbs, Karen Lynn Williams, Floyd Cooper, Ted and Betsy Lewin, Lucy Cullyford Babbitt, Doris
“There is no moral position stronger than to be suddenly wanted by those who have treated you badly. . . .”

Whoever will write a novel inspired by that line will get a reading from me, guaranteed. Expiration date on the offer,

**Stories are the essences of lives, reminders of mutuality, reworkings—artful or not—of what’s to be made of living; of being human; of being responsible; of being silly; of being one among many. And of being alone.**

though, is June 30, 2005, my real retirement. So, it’s time to get cracking! Or you can take up a recent issue of *The New Yorker* and find this small but terrifying ad and Web address for “Storybase: Software for Writers. Spark your creativity,” the copy says, “as you explore 2,363 essential narrative situations.” Umm. Think of mine just now as idea number 2,364. I couldn’t be retiring at a better time. One of an editor’s most useful functions is nonencouragement of the unreadily discouraged.

“Mr. Jackson, you’re a downer,” one hopeful writer complained to me at a literature conference in Key West. I thought I’d help her see that writing needn’t have anything to do with publishing; one does not imply the other—nor should it. The process of writing—of finding out what you think—should be its own reward. But this is America, I realize. Here, the press conference is more powerful than the reason for calling it. As I say, it’s time to go.

The excellent Betty Carter distinguishes between children’s books for the shelf and those for the toy box. Without the latter, children’s publishing as a business would be in trouble; without the former, I’d perhaps be not an editor, but a school-crossing guard or aging actor, playing Chekhov’s Firs or Marley’s ghost.

In half one, I referred to “an editor’s—an actor’s—life.” When Bradbury was threatened with premature demise in 1970, Bob and I found ourselves with editorial energies and nowhere to expend them. I took up acting again in several suburban community theater groups. Bob was a particularly fine director, and we collaborated on several occasions. For the next eighteen years I played roles that many a professional actor never gets to try: Shakespeare’s Oberon and Edmund; heroes in Congreve and Goldsmith; clerics in The Crucible and The Runner Stumbles; one saint—Thomas More—twice; various suited or bathrobed gentlemen in Pinter, Shaw, Giraudoux, and Coward; and the part John Gielgud originated in *Home*, by the aptly named Englishman, David Storey. My least favorite role, as the German spy in *Stalag 17*, occupied me for several tedious weekends, but inspired an ad-lib that made the long run worth it. I can take no credit. After being revealed as the Nazi spy—think Peter Graves in the movie—I was trussed up, trundled toward the door of the prison shed, thrown into the cold, and (usually) gunned down by recorded machine gun-fire just outside. One night, however, the *rat-a-tat* didn’t sound. There was silence. Finally the actor playing the William Holden role ran to the window to look out, and bellowed to wild guffaws: “Ho, *man*! The dogs ate ‘im.”

There was some prophesy in this . . .

My farewell theatrical involvement I shared with our younger son, Sam the soccer player, as we became fog makers for the dream ballet in *Oklahoma!* Despite our best efforts, the ornery stuff rolled, like cotton batting, downstage and into the orchestra. For dress rehearsal, the musicians showed up with gas masks, and the effect was cut.

It happens that my theater years were among my most productive as an editor. When they were over, when the Jacksons had left the suburbs of New York City and moved to California, and I saw that I’d have to interrupt any rehearsal or performance schedule with business travel, I focused again on my long-standing audience—American children, whose laughter or sighs, sniff or silence I can only imagine in the playhouse of my mind.

Of course, I do sometimes hear responses from children; writers often hear and send me copies of the best letters. Avi sent me this:

- Criteria for a Good Book:
- Correct spelling
- Good paragraphs
- Understandable—makes sense and words aren’t too hard
- Beginning, middle, end
- Action (not dull)
- Complete sentences
- Good character description
- Lots of details
- Funny once in a while
- Friends
- Nice size letters
- Solution to problem—and problem
- Lots of money in it
- Has to have letters not blank pages
- Characters have clothes on
- You know where you are without using a book mark

It’s adults who sometimes get lost. One of my favorite books from the early Bradbury days was Jim Copp’s *Martha Matilda O’Toole*, with pictures by Steven Kellogg. The child is naked throughout. I had little ones at home, then; for me, nakedness was a glory, not an offense—but this most innocent book came in for some hard, puritanical knocks. The text was first a song, which our kids loved and thought hilarious; once pictures were added, the affrontable . . . well, were affronted.

And I guess, all along, I knew they would be. Mischief does appeal to me, in spirit still the teenage magician.

Even if you can’t deduce it, there is a reason for the publication of every book. Mischief it is, occasionally. Most often
the reason is the ongoing relationship between author or illustrator and the publishing house; author and the audience; or author and the growth of his work. Publishers not only send books into the marketplace, where half of them make no money for anyone, but they invest in lives.

There is a near-fatal contradiction in a mass-produced art form, made odder still by the fact that our audience is not our market.

In the late eighties, when Grolier bought Watts with Orchard attached and shuffled it in with another subsidiary, Children's Press, the incongruity of the Orchard list with the others' was inescapable. Our writers and illustrators expected to find their work on shelves in bookstores—big and small. In 1996, I left Orchard and, with good chums Melanie Kroupa and Neal Porter, my music consultant for this afternoon's performance, started DK Ink. Perhaps an unlikely adjunct to their nonfiction list, but the parent company did offer excellent retail recognition.

My three DK years brought me Mindy Warshaw Skolsky, E. R. Frank, Joan Abelove, Shelley Jackson, Lucy Frank, Charlotte Agell, Marsha Chall, Susan Marie Swanson, Howard Kaplan, Marc Talbert, Douglas Rees, Diane Palmisciano, Jean Jackson, Diane Greenseid, Alison James, Tsukushi,Ann W. Olson, Herve Blondon, Martin Matje, Shane Evans, Randy Blume, and Cynthia Zarin—two of whom are represented on the tables of Dick's Picks at the upcoming reception across the street. A small list of seventeen, drawn from the intro you've seen. (I'm such a wuss, I could not whittle it down to the customary ten—and it could readily have topped twenty-five!)

Mindy's novel, Love from Your Friend, Hannah, is one of them. I'd read her manuscript years earlier and never forgotten her heroine—though I didn't know how to help the book back then. In 1996 I wrote her, asking of its fate. Luckily, Hannah had waited for me. When the book was published at DK, Mindy was in her seventies, so the story's emergence after long incubation was a particular pleasure. Sometimes I haven't a clue what to do for a novel I like. However, I...
have a long memory, and more than once I've asked to see a book again. Sometimes I'm too late, and the project has found a home—a reassurance, of sorts. It's frustrating for those around me that I keep most everything in my head. Files reside on the floor; phone numbers on small scraps of paper or on a Rolodex organized by an alphabet more Hawaiian than English. It's a wonder I get anything done—but then, there I am, literally just around the corner from my office. A professional secret from recent years: Naps are altogether good friends. After lunch, I'd give blankets to all of publishing, broadcast Saint-Saëns’ "The Swan" along every corporate hallway, and feel confident of the restorative effect on creativity and temper—just as this ritual was beneficial to me in first grade on the hard, hard gym floor at Detroit University School. During my teens, I started having migraine headaches. Thirty years later, I would have to lie flat and motionless on the office rug in Scarsdale to ease them; I didn't remember until much later the magic of "The Swan."

Naps restore optimism. And for publishers, optimism is important. Nonpublishers would be surprised, perhaps, to learn how few copies of most books sell in this wide country compared to, say, Game Boys.

Carol Bly, in her famous essay "Six Uses of Story," cites the following as use number five: "Story gets us away from our peers for a time. . . ."

"Solitude—not togetherness," she says, "is the site for genius. . . ."

Meaning, quality solitude. It's the other kind that troubles me. I'vesupped with more than one kid uneager to be pulled away from that blinking, buzzing little plastic playing field—or killing field.

A contest such as those enacted summons no empathy, but only the will to win or kill. Story, on the other hand, assumes empathy. And, if it's well done, evokes empathy. Heart failure is what worries me about the dimming of story on our cultural horizon. And isolationist thinking. Other people are both unique and the same—a truth the world needs reminding of. Story does that. Story means that. Lewis Hyde in The Gift states: "The work of art is a copula, a bond, by which the many are knit into one."

Before Dana Gioia picked up the tattered NRA standard, Robert Hughes, the art critic, wrote bracingly:

One of the ways you measure the character—indeed, the greatness—of a country is by its public commitment to the arts. Not as a luxury; not as a diplomatic device; not as a social placebo. But as a commitment arising from the belief that the desire to make and experience art is an organic part of human nature, without which our natures are coarsened, impoverished, and denied, and our sense of community with other citizens is weakened. This may sound like rhetoric, but after twenty-six years of writing in America I know it to be true—I know it in my heart—my sometimes mean and irritable writer's heart. The arts are the field on which we place our own dreams, thoughts, and desires alongside those of others, so that solitudes can meet . . .

Substitute the word "story" for the word "art" in Hughes' paragraph, and you have my point. Exclusionism is ungenerous, ungracious—the very opposite of the harmonizing, ordering, and bringing forth that underpin the spirit of story sharing, Story matters because it is communal and inclusive—even while leading us to answers all our own. If any of you have served on a grand jury, you'll know that many stories can be spinning out in one's head simultaneously, and as case after case is presented by the district attorney, patterns between stories begin to emerge. Grand-jury duty is wonderful editorial experience.

Stories are the essences of lives, reminders of mutuality, reworkings—artful or not—of what's to be made of living; of being human; of being responsible; of being silly; of being one among many. And of being alone.

For—despite the longing of the interval lyric—alone we are. Which is not to say unintended. We are children of God.

(Now, I rarely talk intimately about belief, except in public. Were ours an editorial proceeding, I'd want you to do the talking. I'm happier hidden, and not on the spot about religious, political, or financial conviction. The thing to be said for editing . . . it's all about someone else. I'd like to trade places in this hall; hear what you think about the world.)

What I think is this: The greatest fear we face today is not terrorism—it's ignorance. Of language, for starters. Illiteracy is a terror for those cordoned off by it. Imagine the pain of not being able to read a job application, a tax form, or prescription. Further, there's the ignorance of who we are, of what's come before us, or where our future might be heading, which seems implicit in a society whose young are raised not on reading or listening, but on SpongeBob. Like many an iconic daytime character, he has no story—only repetitive setup—resolved by a prank or a pratfall or an aquatic pie in the face in narrative situations of only thirty seconds' duration. There is pace, action, and humor involved, but no urgency. Nothing much depends upon the outcome, which is never really in doubt. SpongeBob is intentionally not memorable—at least in his TV incarnation. He may inspire gut response, but not ideas—unless, as he has recently, they be serious frets from the right. I like watching him with the grandies, but I and they, too—happily—have additional matters on our minds. Books among them, or in fact, SpongeBob SquarePants: The Movie, which I'm afraid to see lest it blast my theory, as it were, out of the water.

"Every work of literature," writes Vivian Gornick, "has both a situation and a story. The situation is the context or circumstance, sometimes the plot; the story is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer: the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say."

I've come this afternoon to say thanks for that envelope of stars, and the stars that have reassuringly followed. To give credit to others for writing what has been, for me, an autobiography of sorts, since all these years I've depended upon others to express myself, to understand and to forgive myself—the boy in the library, sad at the death of a little girl, sad, sad among
silent men. Then, two years later, sadder, still, the morning after a surly set-to with my father, longing for others’ words that did not come.

But let’s not leave me there. There’s music in what didn’t happen, too. Whole lifetimes can be built on yearning: mine on the muffling of voice. More than anything, I wish to have been a singer. Schubert and Sondheim—storytellers both.

And now, finally, finally, comes the threatened epilogue: my Athenaeum period from 1999 until today—and a bit beyond. New names: Mariah Fredericks; Lisa Wheeler; Frank Ansley; Jennifer Donnelly; Henry Garfield; J. David Smith; James Yang; Marilyn Sachs, whose first book I read in manuscript forty-three years ago at Doubleday; Jennifer Richard Jacobson; Leonid Gore; Stephanie Anderson; Roderick Townley; Jacqui Robbins; Matt Phelan; Cor Hazelaar; Mark and Sienna Siegel; Evelyn Coleman; Pierre Pratt; Alexandra Boiger; Amy Reichert; and Franny Billingsley, whom I inherited from Athenaeum’s founder, Jean Karl.

Many new names—but one old goal. I could tell Alexander a third time: No. No job, but a need. And that is to publish what I haven’t seen, haven’t read before. I know that few kids see even a sampling of what we produce annually. If book publishing—the whole industry—were to go on a cruise for a couple of years, there would be feasts for savoring still in libraries, those imaginatively unsafe havens, as well as in bookstores. But we, as artists all, must not send our hearts on cruises.

We must be ourselves, hearts and minds and consciences.

Publishing is personal. We must mean what we do. We must not look too anxiously over one another’s shoulders. (Whoops! There goes the whole business of book auctions between sweaty competitors.)

And we ought not to publish for reviews, pleasant as the positive ones are. I think of stars next to a book’s title as escapes, averted disasters, second chances that someone in the world may be able to love a book as I have. A favorable notice gives the go-ahead, the come-on, the nod of acceptability for public consumption—and funds.

I regret it when reviewers compare the galleys before them to the book they’d have written had they written it. As an editor I daily decline books I don’t warm to; I wish reviewers would do the same, wish they’d say, “I’m not right for this one,” instead of launching forth on how wrong the book is. Maybe some do and I don’t hear about them; they have my thanks.

A couple of years ago, a writer whose career I started off sent me a second manuscript, which I knew would appeal to kids, but for reasons of taste I didn’t admire. When I declared, he sent the novel elsewhere and sold it quickly. A friend of his asked why I hadn’t taken it, and the writer’s reply was: “Well, you know Jackson. He’d have wanted the dog to die.”

Several Athenaeum doggies have escaped my murderous pencil; sheep, pigs, reindeer, and a rat, too. As the body has settled, my need has sustained me. I have felt renewed—and seven titles on the Dick’s Picks reception tables have come from this final sunset time. When I stop talking—and I will—when I stop publishing—and I will—I hope a kid or two finds beauty there. The R. J. list this fall is a good one. But I’ve had such help. In California until 2003, my one-day-a-week assistant, Dennise Weidenhofer. In New York, Ginee Seo, Anne Schwartz, and Caitlyn Dlouhy, editorial fellows; Emma Dryden and Rick Richter, enablers; art directors Ann Bobco, Lee Wade, Russell Gordon, and Polly Kanevsky who laugh at my jokes and produce, alongside Abelardo Martinez, Kris Smith, and Sonia Chaghatzbanian, one deliciously designed book after another—you’ll find Polly as a 2006 author on the reception tables; Jean Ng, our copy editor, who suppressed all principles and allowed me sentence fragments galore this afternoon, because, as I told her, I had to breathe; marketers and publicists Suzanne Murphy, Michelle Padalla, and Tracy van Straaten, who subtly tell others what to think of the books. Cheers to them and their helpers. To the sales folk who daily deal with truths about this world I’d rather not acknowledge.

And particularly to Nancy, who, over the years—when we discussed children’s books that were her life as a librarian and mine as an editor—inevitably had an insight, often had an opinion, and didn’t burden me with them except when I asked. What I always wanted to know was: “Who published it?” And what she’d reply was always: “Heavens, I didn’t notice.” So much for editors and our ilk. My own depends upon the long-range future of Alexander and Kelsey, and to several abiding fictional characters: Brian Robeson, Jessie and Ras, Summer, Margaret, Deenie, Sally J., Lawanda, Philip Malloy, Peter Cassidy, Tendai, Rita, and Kuda Matsika, a boy named America, Annabelle Swift, the Bunyip of Berkeley’s Creek, Buffalo Woman; oh, I hope there may be more!

Now, instead of following pattern and closing where I opened, with poetry—say the two hundred and ten rhyming couplets of Alexander Pope’s “Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot”—I will close with a tip, a picture, and a confession from America’s fourth Hans Christian Andersen medalist.

The tip comes from a modest writer, who asked for anonymity: If there’s something in the room older than you are, there’s a story in that room. Seek it out—and, I add, “pass it on.”

If you want to think back to other times in publishing, picture Astrid Lindgren on Fifth Avenue, grabbing my hand after lunch near the old Macmillan building in 1965 and saying, “Come on, Dick. Let’s skip.” She was, I believe, the second Andersen medalist, in 1958.

Or if you will, steal again into my bedroom office, search the floor, recently more littered than usual with speech-writing pages, pick up this letter from 1987, and share with me my good fortune: “Thanks for the PW review.” It begins, “The three reviews seem okay to me, really better than I hoped for, for such was my blindness about Lily and the Last Boy. Other people’s expectations are rough—but, oh—one’s own are a torment. Mine are, anyhow. I can’t write One-Eyed Cat twice. I did my best for that time of writing Lily

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**ARBUThNOT HONOR LECTURE, continued from page 19**

and can’t have done it otherwise than I did. I hope some young people and old people like it.” Signed: Fox.

Lest we forget, thinking takes work. Writing takes thinking over an arc of time to arrive at some meaning in the end, and, as I’ve found myself telling writers for years, “It’s not easy saying what you mean; harder still is meaning something.”

Hardest of all . . . meaning something without a nap. I’ve talked right through mine—and so much about the art and so little about the practicalities—the years of trying to get it right, of skipping stones from whatever address across the sea of chance in hope; in hope of seeing the stone hop-hop, hop, hop. I read recently that the longest recorded sequence is forty. Imagine that stone as a book, and know that even as it sinks finally it doesn’t disappear but washes up again in some new form on some new beach. So, yes, let’s skip!

I’ve talked little about children and such a lot about just one child, who wasn’t much read to and couldn’t much read. I used to wonder how people could go to work and not have something to bring home with them at the end of the day. The making of things—books, in my case—seems to me to be everything. For the made thing needs naming, and naming is the beginning of writing, and writing is the beginning of books, which so surprisingly offered me a career, an audience, and a home. May others be so lucky. You’ll see that editorial work and myself are finally one and the same. Mutuality indeed.

Paul Tillich said it: “The first duty of love is to listen.”

Today, I feel loved especially.

Thank you, all.

You wanted the Antiques Show, right? The aisle of two-legged mouth-breathers?

Good. This is the place. ☺

Permission to reproduce the following poems has been granted by: HarperCollins for “Story Time” by William Stafford from his *Passwords* (1991).

George Ella Lyon for “My Friend, the Starfinder.”

Saturday Review for “Advice to Travelers” by Walker Gibson from his *New Poems by American Poets* (1956).