

# May Hill Arbuthnot Honor Lecture

## Books As Shelter: Going Home Again and Again

*Kevin Henkes*

**Kevin Henkes**, Caldecott Award medalist and renowned author of picture books and novels for children, delivered the 2007 May Hill Arbuthnot Honor Lecture at the McConnell Center for the Study of Youth Literature at the University of Kentucky School of Library and Information Science in Lexington on Sunday, March 4, 2007.

First things first: Thanks to the American Library Association and the Association for Library Service to Children for administering the Arbuthnot Lectureship. And thanks to Bill Teale and his committee for selecting me as the Arbuthnot speaker for 2007. I must admit, this honor was unexpected. Frankly, I'd thought I was too young to be standing before you today. But here I am. And I'm grateful. I'm also grateful to Sharon McQueen, chair of the Arbuthnot Lecture Host Committee, for making me feel so at home in Lexington.

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The house in which I grew up was not fancy. It was modest, familiar, squarish. Clapboard. When I was very young, it was painted a beige color, although more than a few people called it pink, which did not please my mother, for some rea-

trying to decide for an awkward moment if I'd betray my mother by doing so.

When I was still a boy we painted the house blue—a gray blue that seemed to be the color of a stormy sky, especially against the quintessential pale blue skies of summer that I remember best. As I grew up, strangers appeared at our door from time to time to request the name of the paint color and the store at which we'd gotten it. This made my mother smile, although I have no idea what she told them. The house remained blue until my parents sold it a handful of years ago, after living in it for nearly half a century.

This house was my only home for eighteen years, the only place I lived until I left for college. And yet, already, I remember it selectively. The porch is important as far as my memories are



Kevin Henkes and Lilly

son. "It's tan," she'd correct. One could sense her annoyance. I remember very clearly when a classmate's mother once said to me, "I know where you live—in the pink house on Carlisle Avenue." A simple nod from me would have sufficed—and I finally managed to produce one—but, being a sensitive child, I recall

concerned. As is the pantry, its size and the smell of it. And the kitchen, especially the table, the feel of it. So is the way the light would play with shadow on my plaid bedspread on summer afternoons, as it filtered through the rustling leaves of the big maple tree out my west-facing window.

I'm not sure if it's because I was a young artist or simply because I was observant, but stamped on my heart and in my head are the colors, smells, sounds, and textures of my house. These details mattered to me, but there were the other things as well, the bigger things. The life of a house holds them all—from birth to death. Just think of all the stories a house could tell.

In her book *A House, A Home*, M. B. Goffstein wrote:

A house has skin  
and eyes  
and bone,  
a head,  
a breast,  
a heart.  
We move around  
inside a house,  
and look out through its eyes.  
What the house sees,  
we see.  
What it feels,  
we feel more gently.  
Our backs grow against its steps.

I was six years old when my parents announced that my mother was pregnant. At this time, I was the youngest in my family, the fourth. We were in the kitchen, all of us. We had finished dinner and were just starting dessert. The news came with the bowls of applesauce, which were sprinkled with crushed cinnamon graham crackers—one of my favorite foods as a boy. I remember a blurriness, and then quiet. I remember cheering. And I remember eating my dessert very slowly, carving shapes on the surface of the applesauce with my spoon. As long as I had my bowl of applesauce before me, nothing would change.

I was eleven when I answered the telephone call from the hospital the day my maternal grandmother died. The telephone was mounted on the kitchen wall. It was black, with a curly black cord that was tangled more often than not. The voice on the line asked for my mother, in a very serious manner. That was all. The voice did not identify itself, nor did I say, "May I ask who's calling, please," which we were supposed to do. No real information was given to me, and yet I knew instinctively that there was something about this call that was extremely impor-

tant—it was more important than any call I'd ever answered before. My mother came to the phone, grabbed it, pulled it and the cord around the corner into the pantry, and closed the door behind her. I don't remember how much time passed before my mother came out of the pantry to tell us that my grandmother, her mother, had died. But I remember, with great clarity, answering the telephone and passing it to my mother.

Birth and death. There is a commonness to both these experiences and a mysteriousness. It's interesting to me that the dominant memories of my brother's birth and my grandmother's death are not seeing my brother in the hospital for the first time, nor seeing my grandmother in her coffin at the funeral home, nor the funeral itself. The dominant memories are the dinner announcement and the telephone call—two scenes from my life that played out in my house, in the kitchen.

In both cases, ordinary time seemed temporarily suspended. The air became thick, is how I'd describe it. And electric. At once exciting and troubling. These were moments full of meaning, although at the time I wouldn't have been able to articulate what that meaning was. The unspoken message was that everything would be different from these moments on, like watching a spreading stain and knowing it will leave a permanent mark.

During bewildering times like the two just mentioned—and many, many other times, just because—I sought out the corner of the living room behind the big red armchair. I know now, from seeing photographs, that it wasn't really very big; and when I knew it and loved it, it was already faded, the color of watermelon. Still everyone referred to it as the red chair. It was worn in spots, so that you could see the weave, the crisscrossing of the threads. Despite its flaws, it was the perfect shield or barrier. The corner behind the red chair was a sanctuary of the highest order.

It was also my favorite place to read.

Here's a memory: I am a boy. I love books. I love to read them, and I love to look at them. Examine them. Smell them. Run my fingers over the paper. I'm huddled

in the corner behind the big red chair, with a stack of new library books. I feel complete. Happy. I feel as if nothing can disturb me. I'm enveloped. It's just me and my books behind the big red chair.

What is it about books? A well-made book is a most beautiful object. Square or rectangular. Compact. Solid. Trim. Relatively small, and yet, inside: the world.

When I first have contact with a new book by a favorite writer or illustrator, my excitement is real. I am radiant. And when I return, as I often do, to a book I particularly cherish, I feel at home and am again excited, again radiant.

Jane Smiley wrote the following in her book *13 Ways of Looking at the Novel*:

Many people, myself among them, feel better at the mere sight of a book. As I line up my summer reading . . . I realize that I have gained so much and such reliable pleasure from so many novels that my sense of physiological well-being (heart rate, oxygenation, brain chemical production) noticeably improves as I look at them. I smile. This row of books elevates my mood.

In her book *Letters to Alice on First Reading Jane Austen*, Fay Weldon wrote:

Truly, Alice, books are wonderful things: to sit alone in a room and laugh and cry, because you are reading, and still be safe when you close the book; and having finished it, discover you are changed, yet unchanged!

My house felt safe to me as a child. And books felt safe, too. If I'd had a troublesome day at school, just opening the back door and stepping into the hallway brought relief. More to the point, just seeing my house as I approached the corner of Albert and Carlisle and looked to the left brought relief. And then, losing myself in a book lightened my burden even more. Books were a shelter within a shelter. A home within a home.

Books as shelter. It seems as though books can provide the same basic things a house can: Protection. Safety. Comfort.

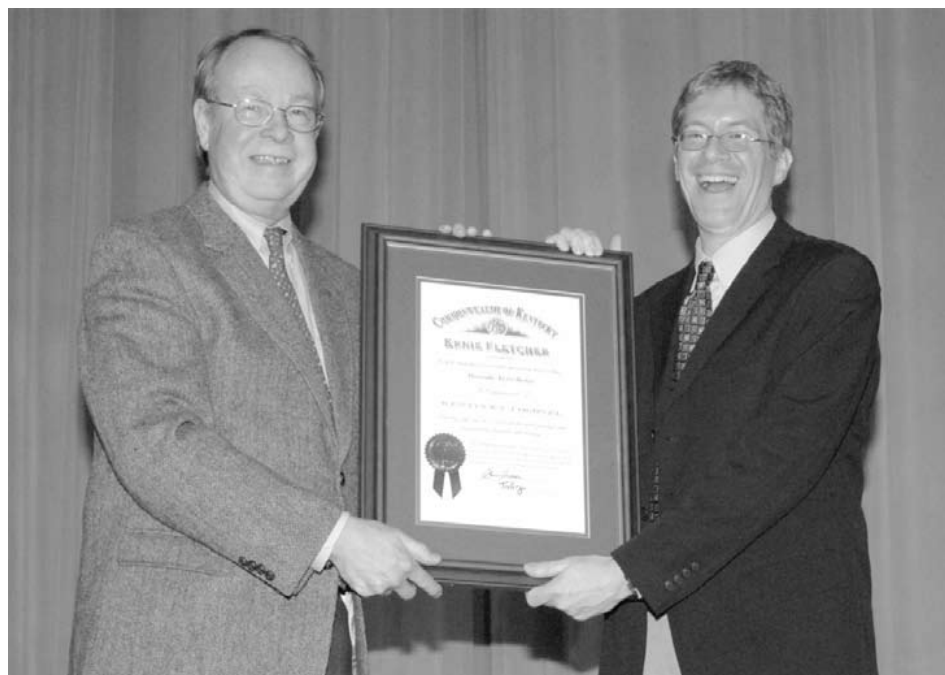
When you're lost in a book, it doesn't matter if you're the most popular kid in class. Or if you're the smartest. Or the best basketball player. Or if you hate your brother. Or if you're lonely and filled with a certain despair. What matters is the book and the world it brings you.

I led a rather sheltered life as a boy. But my interior life was anything but, thanks in part to books. Although I loved reading Beverly Cleary's Henry Huggins books, Keith Robertson's Henry Reed books, and Robert McCloskey's *Homer Price*, sad novels drew me in, in a profound way, and *Call It Courage* by Armstrong Sperry, was my favorite. I reread it many times.

I've read it again only once as an adult, a few years ago, to see what it was about this book that captivated me so. *Call It Courage* had everything for a shy, artistic boy from Wisconsin who would one day become an illustrator and writer—a dead mother; a brave, strong, distant father; a guilty coward of a son, who proves to have, surprisingly (or not so surprisingly), the bravest heart of all; a dog; an exotic setting; a journey; a triumphant return home; and then a wonderfully ambiguous ending. I never could figure out if Mafatu died in his father's arms or not. I know what I think *now*. But that's not important. What's important is that I loved this book deeply, and that I could be truly frightened and have an incredible adventure and still be safe, at home.

At the time I was intrigued that Armstrong Sperry had not only written the book but illustrated it, as well. And one illustration, or its essence, anyway, remains clear to me to this day. In it, Mafatu and his dog, Uri, are in an outrigger canoe riding an ocean swell, with a wall of wave rising up behind them—a monstrous, jagged mountain. Shafts of light reach down dramatically from the sky to the water, like knives. The sail on the outrigger is white, like the small wing of a bird, against the looming darkness of the sea. It's a heart-stopping image that terrified and thrilled me more than thirty years ago. It still does.

John Updike understands this reaction and wrote about it eloquently in his book *Self-Consciousness*:



Jim Nelson (l), recently retired Commissioner of the Kentucky Department of Libraries and Archives, presents Kevin Henkes with a framed Kentucky Colonel Commission. The Governor of the Commonwealth of Kentucky appointed Henkes to the Honorable Order of Kentucky Colonels. He is now Honorable Kevin Henkes, Kentucky Colonel!

Illustrations affected me more strongly than reality; a picture of falling snow, for example, whether in black-and-white line drawing or blurry four-color reproduction, moves me more than any actual storm.

That mere ink and paper can work such wonders is a miracle.

*Is This You?* by Ruth Krauss, illustrated by Crockett Johnson, and *Rain Makes Applesauce* by Julian Scheer, illustrated by Marvin Bileck, are two books that I especially loved from an earlier time in my childhood. I owned *Is This You?*, and *Rain Makes Applesauce* was a library book that I checked out repeatedly. I was passionate about both of them.

In *Is This You?*, Ruth Krauss poses questions such as “Is this where you live?” and “Is this your family?” and “Is this your friend?” Crockett Johnson's illustrations show very silly, incongruous answers to the questions. The reader or listener is then urged to draw his or her own picture answers in order to make a little autobiographical book.

This is the book in which I truly fell in love with Crockett Johnson's artwork.

There is no other way to put it. I tried to copy his pictures. I wanted to draw exactly the way he did. Now, I'd say that Crockett Johnson's line work is simple, direct, and sure, and that his sense of design is to envy. I'd also say that his sensitive and comic view of childhood is masterful. Back then, I just knew what I liked.

As with *Is This You?*, there is a nonsensical quality to *Rain Makes Applesauce*, which is part of its draw for children, I'm sure. But there is a haunting quality to it, as well. Two lines of text and their accompanying illustrations, in particular, left their mark on me: “The wind blows backwards all night long” and “Clouds hide in a hole in the sky.”

The words by themselves are thought-provoking enough for a particular kind of child. Add to them Marvin Bileck's artwork—intricate, calligraphic line and faded color that remains somehow bright, even luminous—and you have a combination that works beautifully, playing dark against light, silly against somber, familiar against mysterious.

Returning to these two books is like returning to a well-loved childhood home. Well, sort of.

A book stays the same, remains unchanged, even as the reader changes and grows. A childhood house can, and often does, change. I've driven past my childhood home several times since my parents sold it and have felt, strangely, that what made it mine is no longer there. It's gone, along with the maple tree that once stood in the front yard; it's hidden behind the new aluminum siding.

I used to make a point of driving by the house each time I was in my hometown, visiting. I don't any longer. But even if the house were torn down today, what it gave me is mine to keep.

The novelist Richard Russo has said, "Nobody leaps into the air from the air. We all leap into the air from something solid." The "pink"/blue house at 1431 Carlisle Avenue represents my something solid. It's where I'm from and where I was formed.

Readers of my books can catch glimpses of my childhood house: the bathroom I drew in *Clean Enough* and the porch and the kitchen in *Margaret & Taylor*. The houses in my early novels *Return to Sender* and *The Zebra Wall* offer glimpses without pictures.

Now, my novels tend to be set in houses very much like the houses I've lived in as an adult and as a parent. I realized recently, though, that whenever I'm writing a scene for one of my novels that takes place in a kitchen, I always see my childhood kitchen first, and then I must alter it, shape it differently to fit the book I'm working on. When I'm writing, I often reach back and find that what I'm looking for, or the seed of what I'm looking for, lies between the walls of 1431, both physically and emotionally. Perhaps all writers must look back before they can look ahead.

In the preface to his book *All the Days and Nights: The Collected Stories*, William Maxwell as an octogenarian wrote the following about himself at age twenty-five:

I had no idea that three-quarters of the material I would need for the rest of my writing life was already at my disposal. My father and mother. My brothers. The cast of larger-than-life-

size characters—affectionate aunts, friends of the family, neighbors white and black—that I was presented with when I came into the world. The look of things. The weather. Men and women long at rest in the cemetery but vividly remembered. The Natural History of home: the suede glove on the front-hall table, the unfinished game of solitaire, the oriole's nest suspended from the tip of the outermost branch of the elm tree, dandelions in the grass. All there, waiting for me to learn my trade and recognize instinctively what would make a story or sustain the complicated cross-weaving of longer fiction.

I was in high school when I discovered another book that became wildly important to me: Barbara Bader's *American Picturebooks from Noah's Ark to the Beast Within*. I found it at the Racine Public Library. If a book is a house, this book was, for me, a mansion. It was filled with reproductions of illustrations I loved and those I would soon love, by artists from Wanda Gág to Marie Hall Ets to Garth Williams to Palmer Brown to Maurice Sendak to Edward Gorey. I didn't read the book so much as absorb it and look through it. And look and look and look.

This was where I first learned of Jean Charlot, an artist who is now a favorite of mine. Although I recognized some of his art, I hadn't known his name nor his body of work.

And, this will show my age, my naïveté—I couldn't believe that there was an entire chapter devoted to Crockett Johnson. I thought that I was the only person in the world who knew of his greatness.

Barbara's book became the roof over my head while I prepared to become a published author and illustrator. Here was a big, thick, serious volume about picture books. Its mere existence legitimized, in a way, my career choice. I knew no one else my age, or otherwise, who wanted to do what I wanted to do: spend my life writing stories and drawing pictures to go with them.

A footnote: I finally got a copy of my own on my thirty-fifth birthday. My editor,

Susan Hirschman, gave it to me, and it was signed by Barbara Bader.

There are three addresses that have had an indelible effect on me. Three addresses that have a permanent home in my heart and that roll off my tongue without my thinking: 1431 Carlisle Avenue, for obvious reasons; 2716 Northwestern Avenue, the address of my grandparents' house when I was a boy; and 105 Madison Avenue. 105 Madison Avenue was the address of Greenwillow Books when I made my first trip to New York City in 1980.

Of course, I have fond memories of most of the places that I've lived as an adult, especially the house we lived in when both of our children were born and the house we live in now, which is everything I've ever wanted in a house. But there is something about those other addresses that is different. And that something is that they were experienced when I was a child. Or, in the case of 105 Madison Avenue, when I was a nineteen-year-old who was in the midst of realizing a dream, a nineteen-year-old who was, at the time, feeling everything with that raw immediacy of childhood.

Greenwillow Books moved from downtown to midtown Manhattan in 1991. Sometimes I find myself walking past the old building when I'm in New York. And invariably, the air is charged with high emotion. In this building—simply "105" is how I used to think of it—I began my work life. My first day in this "house" marked the beginning of the best time of my life (which I'm still living). Much about that day is hazy. Aside from being offered a contract for my first book (no small matter, to be sure!), I do remember the view from Susan Hirschman's corner office. It was substantial and spectacular, breathtaking for anyone, and particularly so for a kid from the Midwest who'd seen very little of the world beyond Racine, Wisconsin. The city was before me, around me, like a forest. I could see the Empire State Building. The Chrysler Building was right there, gleaming. I felt as if I were in the clouds, weightless.

Susan's office was filled—with things, color. Shelves were brimming with books and toys. The walls were covered with art. I wanted to look at everything.



Susan Katz, president and publisher of HarperCollins Children's Books; Kevin Henkes; Virginia Duncan, vice president and publisher of Greenwillow Books; and Susan Hirschman, founder and former publisher of Greenwillow Books.

I was particularly drawn to a painting that hung on Susan's wall. This painting came to symbolize for me everything about New York, books, and Greenwillow, my second first-home.

The scene depicted in the painting is that of a fair or carnival. A tent and a Ferris wheel rise up in the background against a cloudy, mottled sky. The foreground is comprised of a yellow green horizontal band—a field of grass. Above this is a darker green band erupting with brilliant, winking flowers of many kinds and colors. The dominant element is a gate. Two soldiers form the sides of the gate. The panel that connects the soldiers is red, white, and blue. Right in the middle of the panel is the image of a clown. The clown's elongated white face is wreathed by a yellowish gold collar that resembles flower petals or the rays of the sun. The clown's deeply furrowed brow and ruby red lips, and the streaks of dark makeup streaming down from his eyes like tears, add a melancholy edge to the happy scene. The painting is direct and fresh. There is a naive or folk-art quality to it that reminds me of the work of Henri Rousseau.

I learned much later that this painting was done by a man named Tom Jaleski, who just happened to be married to the writer Mary Stolz. The painting had been a gift to Susan and her husband from Mary and hers.

I was so taken by this painting—a captivation that grew over the years—that about

a decade after first seeing it, I wove it into my novel *Words of Stone*, the way I'd woven other parts of my life into the book. I very shyly asked Susan if we could reproduce a detail of it on the jacket. She said yes. Mary and Tom were thrilled. And I had a book jacket that will probably be my favorite forever.

In 2001, to mark the first Christmas in our then-new house, Susan sent us the painting. To keep. We hung it so that it's one of the first things you see

as you enter our house, and one of the first things we see as we come down the stairs each morning. I love the fact that the painting will be part of my children's memories, memories of the house in which they grew up.

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My children are now nine and eleven. They're growing up right before my very eyes, and because of their continuous, sometimes rapid changes, I'm acutely aware of the passing of time. And because of my children, I often think back to my own childhood. I find myself trying to remember what I was like when I was their respective ages. I try to remember how I handled certain life experiences similar to those that they are facing.

When we moved into the house in which we now live, my son was four years old and my daughter was two. My wife and I were worried about the transition of the move, particularly for our son. He was sensitive and did not like change. In this instance, I had no similar childhood experience of my own to think back to, to draw upon, and neither did my wife. Perhaps this added to our uneasy feelings.

We tried to prepare him for the move long before it was to happen. We read picture books about moving to him. We walked by the new house, which was vacant and was only three blocks away. We played in the new yard, reminding him that he wouldn't have to make new friends, and that we weren't leaving the

neighborhood. We talked about his new room, and envisioned it together in all its potential glory, remembering to assure him that everything that he loved in his room—toys, books, posters—would, of course, move with us. His bed would be the same bed, his dresser the same dresser. We owned the new house for a few months before we moved in, so he got to be in the new space, actually see the room that would soon be his. We thought we were doing everything right.

I'd lie awake at night worrying about all the things that come with buying a house and selling one, including how my son would react to this new chapter in his life.

As it turned out, he made the transition to the new house unfazed. And it was his two-year-old sister who had a difficult time, who longed for the old house, who could not see the new house as hers. We had to go out of our way so as not to drive by the old house on our way to the new one. If we did drive past it, she'd lean over in her car seat and press her hand against the window. "Mine go home," she'd say plaintively.

"Mine go home" became her mantra.

Time passed, and when we hadn't heard her plea for a while, my wife and I took her for a testing stroll through the neighborhood. We were holding hands, the three of us, when we approached our former house.

My daughter broke free from my wife and me, ran up the front steps, and reached for the familiar, loose doorknob. "Mine go home," she said, her voice brimming with longing and fierce determination.

I suppose my wife and I shared a look of desperation. I suppose we pried my daughter's tiny fingers from the doorknob and scooped her up. I suppose my wife and I tried to divert her attention as best we could.

I don't recall the particulars. And I don't recall how or when this was no longer an issue. "Mine go home" disappeared from our lives. Time, like a balm, can heal, form a skin over things one thinks will never be overcome or forgotten.

Friends bought our old house and we go there for dinner regularly. Now it seems as if we'd never lived in the house, as far as my children are concerned. Even my daughter.

What our old house means to my daughter, to my son, to my wife, to me, is obviously not the same. And the meaning it holds for each of us can change. Even the painting at the bottom of our stairs that we all share, all live with, all see every day is a different painting to each of us.

It's the same with books. We all bring our own selves, or lives, to the reading of a book. As seen through different eyes, a book is many books.

One of my favorite examples of this involves the picture book *Benny Bakes a Cake* by Eve Rice.

Eve Rice is an author/illustrator who seems to know children inside and out. She knows what they care about and understands acutely their emotions and motivations. At first glance, her books seem light, simple—round, even. But they are oh-so-rich and full of angles.

Eve Rice is, I think, one of our finest writers for children. Her texts are carefully crafted—not one word is out of place or off. Her words flow gracefully from page to page and beg to be read aloud. Like Margaret Wise Brown, she understands rhythm and pacing. They seem to come easily to her.

My son connected passionately with her books *Sam Who Never Forgets*; *Goodnight, Goodnight*; and especially *Benny Bakes a Cake*.

When, in *Benny Bakes a Cake*, Ralph, the dog, knocks Benny's birthday cake off the table—the cake Benny helped make—real horror registered on my son's face, even after dozens of readings. Delicious horror. And each time we came to the illustration of Benny crying by the kitchen sink, my son would tenderly stroke the image of Benny with his finger.

He identified with Benny. I remember thinking at the time that Benny mirrored my son—his abilities, activity

level, accomplishments, failures. Most interesting to me, however, was how, as my son grew older, his loyalties shifted. He came to empathize with Ralph, the “bad” dog.

I have a memory of reading the book with both of my children: my daughter, the younger, is stroking Benny on the page exactly the way her brother used to do, saying, “Poor Benny.” And my son is stroking Ralph, saying, “No, poor Ralph.”

What Eve Rice has done, and done marvelously, is essentially given us two children—two children at different developmental stages. One could make the case that Ralph is “older”—an abandoned older sibling to a younger, attention-grabbing sibling.

I think what my son came to identify with in Ralph was Ralph's independence, his struggle to get what he wanted by himself. Ralph tried to do something on his own—to get the cake—without Mama. He did not have unblemished success. What child does?

Eve Rice has done all this indirectly, and has therefore made it all the more interesting.

My son and daughter each found something different in the book to latch on to. They both had interpretations that fit the shape and shadow of their lives. They both, for different reasons, gravitated to this book.

Reading a book can be like stumbling upon a well-lit house on the darkest of nights. One can see in, see clearly, see—perhaps—something one has never seen before; or see oneself clearly, perhaps for the first time, particularly if one is a young child. And what *I* see through the window will not be exactly what *you* see. Do you empathize with Benny? Or with Ralph?

When I'm truly in love with a book, absorbed fully by it, I'm in that well-lit house. I've entered it, I'm living in it. There can be a sea of darkness surrounding me, but I'm consumed, I'm in a container of light, oblivious to all but my interpretation of the book.

One's world can shrink and expand at the same time while reading a book. I know that feeling. When I read *Call It Courage* the first time, the world cracked open for me—I was reading about a kid who lived a life so very unlike mine. At the same time, because I was so involved, my “real” world shrank. I was oblivious to homework or chores or smells from the kitchen or bedtime or time itself. I had happily shuttered myself into my new little house and locked the door.

I'm sure that something similar was happening to my son with *Benny Bakes a Cake*. Sometimes he would look at the last illustration first, checking, I think, to see that the happy ending was still there—Benny hugging Ralph, with party hats and smiles for everyone. Sometimes he would flip right to the illustration of Benny crying. He wanted to look at it—really study it—before I read the book to him. And, sometimes, he just wanted to look at that particular picture. Nothing more. He was totally involved. He wasn't in our living room. He was in Benny's kitchen.

In the introduction to the Vintage paperback edition of her selected stories, Alice Munro, one of my favorite writers, had this to say about houses and story:

I don't always, or even usually, read stories from beginning to end. I start anywhere and proceed in either direction. So it appears that I'm not reading—at least in an efficient way—to find out what happens. I do find out, and I'm interested in finding out, but there's much more to the experience. A story is not like a road to follow . . . it's more like a house. You go inside and stay there for a while, wandering back and forth and settling where you like and discovering how the room and corridors relate to each other, how the world outside is altered by being viewed from these windows. And you, the visitor, the reader, are altered as well by being in this enclosed space, whether it is ample and easy or full of crooked turns, or sparsely or opulently furnished. You can go back again and again, and the house, the story, always contains more than you saw the last time.

What my son was doing with *Benny Bakes a Cake* was not exactly what Alice Munro described, but it was similar—no doubt a child’s version of this way of experiencing a story. The Munro quote made me think about how, within a story, a writer crafts his or her words differently. In the same way in which rooms in a house are different and have different functions, the parts or pieces of a narrative are different and have different functions.

Fay Weldon wrote that Jane Austen knew “when to allow the audience to rest, when to and how to underline a statement, when to mark time with idle paragraphs, allowing what went before to settle, before requiring it to inform what comes next.”

A hallway is not a kitchen, nor a bedroom. Crisp, trenchant dialogue is not a descriptive paragraph, nor a climactic action sequence. The differences are vast, but they’re all part of the structure, equally important. Now, it’s easy for me to think of a piece of writing as a house, to think of “idle paragraphs” as meandering hallways, for example, or to see a character’s interior monologue as a window into his inner world, his soul. And sometimes, like a ghost in a house, what is left *unsaid* can have a real presence. The writing between the lines can be just as meaningful as the lines themselves.

The writer at work—the man or woman constructing the house—is an individual and has his or her own way of building the structure, the story. The writer has a voice.

When I was a boy, I could easily identify the houses in my neighborhood by smell. To this day I can close my eyes and draw up the different smells that distinguished these houses. One of the houses in my neighborhood had an odor so sharp that I found it unpleasant to be inside, although I liked the people who lived there quite a lot. Sometimes just standing on their front porch with the door open was enough to cause me to breathe through my mouth in an attempt to mask the smell. If I played with the kids who lived in this particular house, I wanted to do so outside or at my house.

Voice is like smell, in a way. Open a book and read, and very often one need not read much to know who is doing the writing. Take picture books, for example. Just read (forget the illustrations for the moment), and you know quite quickly if you are in the house of Margaret Wise Brown or Ruth Krauss or William Steig or James Marshall.

Listen to a novel. It doesn’t take long to be aware that you are in the house of, say, Beverly Cleary or Paula Fox. Both of these women are experts at what they do, although the music of their words is surely different. They each have their own way of bringing their “houses” to life. And each does so with great eloquence.

Book becomes house, house becomes real.

When one loves a house, it can become a living thing, take on human qualities, as in the M. B. Goffstein prose poem I quoted earlier. A house does indeed have “skin and eyes and bone.” I love to describe the houses in my books. They are the stage sets where my stories take place. Sometimes, depending on the particular story, a house carries considerable weight and is more like a character itself. In some books more than others, a house plays a big role.

In my novel *The Birthday Room*, the idea of “house” is extremely important. The book’s main character, twelve-year-old Benjamin Hunter, a young artist, is given two surprising birthday gifts. One is an invitation to visit his only uncle, Ian, a man he hasn’t seen since Ben was two years old. The other gift—this one from his parents—is an empty room in the newly remodeled attic of the family house. Benjamin’s parents’ intention is for Ben to use the room as an artist’s studio.

At the beginning of the novel I describe Ben’s house like this:

The room was on the second floor of the house, in the tree-shaded corner of what until a few months earlier had been a musty, unused attic. Ben’s parents had reclaimed the attic by having it remodeled to add extra living space to their small,

cramped bungalow. Two dormers had been raised—one on the front and one on the back of the house—and three rooms had been built. The largest room was for Ben’s mother to use as a weaving studio. The other good-size room was for Ben’s father; he had been dreaming for years of a quiet space all his own where he could work on his poetry and listen to his jazz CDs. And the third room, long and low roofed, had been planned as a reading room with a comfortable overstuffed chair, a skylight, and plenty of shelves to accommodate the overflow of books that seemed to multiply in stacks all over the house, starting in corners and spreading to end tables, countertops, and ottomans like some persistent growth.

Ben watched the progress of the renovation with great interest. Seeing the exposed structure of the house fascinated him—the beams and wires, the ancient plaster and lath stripes. The crew working on the house, he thought, wasn’t unlike a surgical team performing an operation. At the height of the project, the house was a body, skin peeled back to reveal muscles, bones, veins, arteries, and organs.

This is how I introduced Uncle Ian’s house:

Soon Ian turned off the highway onto a narrow dirt road, hemmed in by a dark wall of trees. The trees thinned, and the road wound past a few outbuildings. Ian’s voice found a different pitch. “Here we are,” he announced. “We’re home.” The car came to a stop near a rustic cedar-shingled house.

Ben lumbered out of the car, stretched, and looked around.

Lights were on inside the house, and there were many uncovered windows. The house appeared before them like a lantern, glowing brightly in the middle of a thicket at the end of the world.

Houses, and what they imply, became an integral part of the imagery of the book.

I wove nests and eggs into the story, as well, which tie in to other themes in the book: birth; rooms of different kinds, including wombs; interior versus exterior; keeping secrets versus telling them.

Some crucial scenes take place inside, others outside—always for a reason. In a couple of instances, I chose to have a character standing on a threshold as he or she was making a decision, or if he or she felt caught or somehow trapped, out of sorts.

The cool blast of indoor air met Ben like a wall. He stood on the threshold, separating the cold and the light within the house from the heat and the darkness without. Soon he would drift off to his room and to sleep, a bit relieved for having been honest, and a bit something else, but what he didn't know. Sad for his mother?

Thresholds, porches, windows, mirrors, staircases. All these can be more than props. I'm reminded of William Maxwell's "The Natural History of Home," which I talked about earlier. I'm also reminded of the painter Giorgio Morandi. Morandi spent his life painting the same bottles and tins repeatedly. Are they ordinary? Yes and no. As objects—yes. As subjects in his paintings—absolutely not. Morandi painted them so that they transcend their humbleness and homeliness and speak volumes about grace and form and, yes, complexity.

An object as ordinary as a table can be revealing, can help inform a character, can be a symbol of greater things, can be a way to get at the larger meaning. In this passage from *The Birthday Room*, a table provides information about Ben, building his characterization. It also hints at the hidden truths to be disclosed later:

The letter lay open between them on the ancient, wavy pine table at the far end of the store office. The paint on the table was robin's-egg blue and blistering. When Ben was little, he often amused himself while his parents worked by pretending that the tabletop was a great sea, the deck of cards stored inside the table's one drawer was his personal fleet of fifty-two ships, and he was

an admiral. Kneeling on a chair piled with oversize books, he guided the ships through dangerous waters infested with sleek paper-clip sharks and translucent cough-drop stingrays.

With his thumbnail, Ben broke open a cracking bubble of paint on the table. He blew the paint chips aside to reveal a honey-colored patch of wood. He wondered how much he didn't know about his uncle, how much his mother did. He decided that his mother was a bottle of secrets, and he wanted to know everything he deserved to know.

Here is another table, this one from Ian McEwan's novel *Enduring Love*:

There was comfort in reiteration, just as there was in the familiar weight of the wineglasses and in the grain of the deal table, which had once belonged to Clarissa's great-grandmother. There were smooth, shallow indentations in its surface near the knife-scarred edges, worn by elbows like ours, I always thought; many crises and deaths must have already been considered around this table.

I love Ian McEwan's table. He presents it simply and elegantly. If you're a fast reader, you might miss it altogether. The image of a table bearing witness to the ebb and flow and the great sorrows of life made me pause when I first read it. Without being flashy, without a self-conscious flourish of any kind, Ian McEwan makes the ordinary extraordinary.

I wrote *The Birthday Room* as my wife and I were having the attic in our first house remodeled. Life and work blended together, as they often do. Much of the actual writing of the book took place in our car, because it was too noisy and chaotic at home—the work crew coming and going, pounding and drilling, sanding and sawing, from breakfast till dinner—and because our daughter needed to nap. I'd kill two birds with one stone.

I'd toss my notebook into the car, strap our daughter—a baby—into her car seat, and drive until she fell asleep. (It should

be noted that neither of our children were good sleepers nor nappers. Driving them around in the car seemed to be the only way to get them to nod off.) I learned how to drive from our house in such a way as to avoid stop signs and traffic signals because, if the car slowed down before she'd fully gone to sleep, she'd start, then fuss and wriggle and cry. Once she'd been asleep for a fair amount of time, I'd pull over, grab my notebook, and get to work. I'd guess that a good third of *The Birthday Room* was written in the car.

This experience taught me something invaluable. I learned that I could, indeed, write in a car parked on some quiet side street in Madison, Wisconsin, in rain or shine. I learned that the only "house" I needed in which to write was the house inside my head.

If, before I had become a parent, someone had told me that this would be the case, I wouldn't have believed him. Before my son and daughter appeared in the world, I thought I needed perfect quiet, no interruptions, and the promise of no responsibility to anyone or anything but the book on which I was working.

Now, if I miraculously find myself with extra time alone or if the children are gone overnight, I feel a bit off-center, as if something is not quite right. I find that I need the dailiness of life to feed my soul for working, even if, oddly enough, the dailiness of life sometimes keeps me from doing just that—working.

Fay Weldon touches on this in *Letters to Alice on First Reading Jane Austen*:

For many, if life provides uninterrupted leisure for writing, the urge to write shrivels up. Writing, after all, is part of life, an overflow from it. Take away life and you take away writing.

Weldon also says:

Writing is an odd activity—other people have occupations, jobs; the writer's life is work, and the work is the life, and there can be no holidays from it. If the pen is not working, the mind is thinking . . . the unconscious ponders on. Even in sleep you are



not safe: dreams pertain to life, and life to dreams, and both to work.

I spend less time actually putting pen to paper than I did before I became a parent, but I don't work less. I can't simply turn the "writing button" off. I might be in the grocery store or at a soccer game or out for dinner when something strikes me, when some plot point or description nudges its way into my consciousness, and I'm diverted because I can't *not* be. If I'm lucky, and whatever it is that pops into my head is something I've truly been searching for—a perfect adjective, a closing sentence for a chapter, a line of dialogue that will be the turning point of an important scene, a missing piece of the narrative puzzle—then I become intoxicated by this undercurrent. I never mean to appear distant or distracted in these instances, but I suspect that sometimes I do. I'm in the magnetic, shadowy periphery between my real life and the life of the book I'm working on.

Chekhov once said, "Every person lives his real, most interesting life under the cover of secrecy."

I think that this is even more the case for writers. Writers have their own lives, and then they have the lives of their characters to deal with. Lives to be created out of thin air, lives that are a part of them for months and years.

To an onlooker, I could easily have seemed to be some odd character, myself, as I sat in the car scribbling in my notebook, working on *The Birthday Room*. But once my daughter was asleep, I was far away from my own life and world. Under the cover of secrecy, I was altogether somewhere else, someone else.

Consider another house—the White House. In the spring of 2003, I was asked by one of Laura Bush's assistants to participate in the annual White House Easter Egg Roll. I happened to be in New York when the request came to my publisher.

When I was told of the request, I felt a rush of excitement. I pictured us—my family—as if in a scene in a large candy egg, standing tall, dressed-up, shiny, with that famous house as a backdrop.

But it didn't take long—minutes? seconds?—for a dark feeling that more than rivaled my excitement to exert its pull. Over the course of a few days, I tried to convince myself that the White House belonged to all Americans, and that I should go. It was to be the 125th anniversary of the event, I reminded myself. I think I tried to be judiciously ignorant. But it didn't work. Given what was happening in the world and within the administration, I knew in my heart that I couldn't accept the invitation.

When I told Virginia Duncan, my editor since Susan's retirement, that I wouldn't take part in the celebration, and again after I'd written Mrs. Bush to tell her as well, I felt the weight of the world lifted from my shoulders. I felt the sense of enormous relief that accompanies making the right decision.

The relief didn't last long, however—during this time, I felt uneasy in general, the world's troubles looming like a black cloud over everything. It was much like the way I'd felt after September 11, 2001. Most books couldn't work their typical magic during those tense, horrid, numbing weeks and months that autumn and winter. I couldn't read—couldn't concentrate on—novels, novels which had always been a saving grace for me in troubled times. But I did find a certain solace in picture books, in those worlds between two covers that, frankly, seemed better than the real world I was living in.

I would try to work, but what I'd usually end up doing would be sitting in my studio listening to NPR. And I'd look at picture books.

I was scheduled to do a book signing in my hometown on September 22, 2001. The arrangements had been made months prior. I telephoned the owner of the bookstore shortly after the disastrous day to say that I assumed that the signing would be cancelled or postponed and that I understood. The owner said that, no, the planned event would not be changed in any way, and that children needed something like this more than ever. She was adamant. "They need books," she said.

I went to the store in a fog, unprepared for the goodwill that met me. I even

experienced moments of real joy that day. Because of books.

After those first awful weeks, I still couldn't write, but I could draw. It was the artwork for my board book *Wemberly's Ice-Cream Star* that finally got me back on track. And I continued to look at picture books. Sometimes for hours. Perhaps I was seeking a temporary haven. I returned to the same books again and again, day after day.

These are some of the picture books that were my daily bread: *A Child's Good Night Book* by Margaret Wise Brown, illustrated by Jean Charlot; *Minou* and *The Thank-You Book* by Francoise; *Me and My Captain*, *Natural History*, and *Our Snowman* by M. B. Goffstein; *The Carrot Seed* by Ruth Krauss, illustrated by Crockett Johnson, and *Charlotte and the White Horse* by Ruth Krauss, illustrated by Maurice Sendak; *Goodnight, Goodnight* by Eve Rice; and *The Moon Jumpers* by Janice May Udry, illustrated by Maurice Sendak.

What the picture books I turned to have in common is a gentle touch, and genuine beauty with substance to match it. They are quiet, quietly lovely. None of them is very big, physically; most are small. They aren't all books I loved as a child or even knew, nor are they all favorites of my children, so it wasn't nostalgia that drew me to them. Each, in its own way, is about longing, in some cases deep longing. I can only guess that this was part of the appeal of these books at this particular time in my life. It's interesting that as an adult, it was picture books that I needed, but in the words of William R. Scott, the brilliant publisher, a picture book is "the simplest, subtlest, most communicative, most elusive, most challenging book form of them all."

Where houses are concerned, there are many notable children's books, from Virginia Lee Burton's *The Little House* to Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House books. Two of my personal favorites are *A Very Special House* by Ruth Krauss and Maurice Sendak, and *Owl at Home* by Arnold Lobel.

Another favorite house of mine, this time a single image, is Arnold Lobel's

from *Whiskers and Rhymes*, which shows a cat reading a book, sitting beside a little house overflowing with books. Books stream out of windows and the chimney and rise in curving, colorful piles, drawn with a flinty, energetic line, to more than twice the height of the house. A similar image of Arnold's that graced the cover of *The Horn Book Magazine* in the late 1980s shows, once again, a cat reading by a house, but this time the house itself is formed of books, with the roof, an open book, providing perfect protection.

My favorite house of all, though, is really not a house. It is Sendak's little structure in Ruth Krauss's *Charlotte and the White Horse*. It's actually a stable, but it looks so like a house, a house the way a child might picture one, and so it is a house to me, a perfect one, and always will be.

The front of the structure is open, so we see into it. And because there is one large window on the back wall, we see out, as well, at the same time. This delighted my daughter when she was young. "It's inside out," she'd say, smiling and pointing. And it is, in a way. Inside/outside. Precise and abstract. Small and vast. Dreamlike and real. It's nothing and everything at once. In its sparseness it seems to include all things, the world.

Consider the window. In the first illustration Charlotte fills the window, hinting at the moon to come, a look of pure love on her round face. In turn, the window frames land and sky in all their variety: blue sky and green grass divided into triangles; a square of creamy snow; a night sky of darkest blue with stars like sparkling white flowers; and another night sky, this time much paler with a luminous full moon and a soft nimbus about it. At one point, layers of clouds swarm in, packing the window frame, looking like foamy, rolling, surging waves. Elemental.

This little house is a symbol—clear-eyed, central, sincere, profound.

\* \* \* \* \*

Thinking about books and thinking about houses led me down a diverging path (or hallway), led me to construct, in

my mind's eye, the perfect house interior from children's book art.

My house would have a kitchen like the one in *Benny Bakes a Cake*. It would have the great green room from *Goodnight Moon*, and a bedroom like Max's in *Where the Wild Things Are*.

There are a number of memorable beds in children's books; I'd have Crictor's long, long jaunty one from *Crictor*; Peter's off-kilter, knobby one from *A Snowy Day*; Curious George's charming egg-yolk-yellow one with its chirping birds atop each bedpost; and Frances's from *Bedtime for Frances*, which is the most solid, sturdy, childlike box of a bed imaginable.

The staircase in my house would be Owl's from *Owl at Home*—chunky and strong with a most impressive newel post.

My house would have two bathtubs: Babar's with its bright green feet from *The Story of Babar*, and the one in Marc Simont's *The Stray Dog*, which can comfortably hold a boy, a girl, and a dog, with room to spare. And of course I'd want to paint my bathrooms blue.

Scattered throughout my house I'd have several of Vera B. Williams's chair from *A Chair for My Mother*, and several of Crockett Johnson's ottoman from *Ellen's Lion*. If a hippo were an ottoman, this is what it would look like.

M. B. Goffstein would provide a shelf of knickknacks from *Me and My Captain*. I'd include rugs and carpets courtesy of William Steig, wallpaper and drapery courtesy of Anita Lobel, and cozy clutter courtesy of Margot Zemach.

My house would have a piano—Barbara Cooney's majestic piano from "*I Am Cherry Alive*" *the Little Girl Sang* by Delmore Schwartz—not because I play one, but because we had one when I was a boy and because my wife thinks all houses need one. And there would be only one book on the piano: *Chansons de France pour les Petits Francais*. I don't read music and I don't read French, but no matter. This is one of the most beautiful books ever made. Maurice Boutet de Monvel's soft colors and striking compositions make

for some of the most gorgeous illustrations I've ever seen.

And last, I'd keep Harold's purple crayon on hand, just in case there was something I forgot.

Even though I created it, my imagined house is fragmented in my mind. It's comprised of bits and pieces, after all. I may be the architect, and yet those bits and pieces don't fit together neatly into a solid form. It's not a real house with a real floor plan. I've never lived in it.

Even my childhood house has become a little fragmented in my mind, distorted; I suppose this is due to my age. I no longer remember everything in perfect detail, and yet I sense that I carry it all with me in some corner or deep pocket inside me. I suspect we all carry many things we're not aware of. I wonder if we, in one way or another, carry all the books we've read.

I was one of those parents who read to his children in utero. And, as I write this, I still read aloud to them every day, in the morning from 6:30 to 7 A.M. as they eat breakfast before school. We keep track of the novels I've read on a list in the back hallway. We're currently at number eighty-nine.

I had a fairly large collection of children's books long before I became a parent. It was something of a struggle to give up my collection when my son was born. My books were in nearly perfect condition, and I knew that if I moved them from "my bookshelves" to the "family bookshelves" their condition would take a nosedive.

They did, of course, but it was worth it. I reclaim books as they're outgrown. Jackets are often long gone. Pages have been ripped. Bindings have been strained and stained. But the books have done what they were meant to do.

If only I'd known Anne Fadiman's essay "My Ancestral Castles" earlier, sharing my books wouldn't have been a struggle at all. She begins her essay like this:

When I was four, I liked to build castles with my father's pocket-

sized, twenty-two volume set of Trollope. My brother and I had a set of wooden blocks as well, but the Trollopes were superior: midnight blue, proportioned to fit a child's hand, and, because they were so much thinner than they were tall, perfect, as cards are, for constructing gates and drawbridges. I own them now. . . . I can think of few better ways to introduce a child to books than to let her stack them, upend them, rearrange them, and get her fingerprints all over them.

Since reading Anne Fadiman, my wife and I have allowed, many times now, our copy of the substantial Riverside Shakespeare and our two volumes of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* to be used as part of grand constructions with blocks, Tinkertoys, and plastic animals.

Houses without books make me uneasy. That's why ours is filled with them. And that's why I put them in my books, both my picture books and my novels. I checked my picture books to make certain that this was true. And it was. Books—thick and thin—are placed here and there about the houses, necessary clutter. I'm guessing Anne Fadiman would approve.

My copy of *Benny Bakes a Cake* is now back in my possession, and it is a wreck, but a well-loved one. It's the same story for *Rain Makes Applesauce* (which I'd acquired as an adult, but before I'd become a parent). I do, from time to time, imagine some of these gems in their previous, pristine lives, and sigh. But then I think of what they've done for my children.

Books are important and powerful. I truly believe that they can help shape young lives. They can help one learn empathy, increase understanding of other people and ideas in a time in which intolerance is pervasive. They can provide ballast in an unpredictable world. They can also provide escape and be pure fun—no small feat.

Books, in the words of the British publisher Diana Athill, "have taken me so far beyond the narrow limits of my own

experience and have so greatly enlarged my sense of the complexity of life: of its consuming darkness, and also—thank God—of the light which continues to struggle through."

I sometimes wonder how many of the books from their childhood my kids will remember, and how far back their memories will go. When they're middle-aged, will *Benny Bakes a Cake* be part of an important memory?

Who knows? The brain is such an intricate, complicated thing. Why do we remember some things and not others? Why do I still remember the smells of certain houses from my childhood?

Not long ago, on a book tour, I was at lunch with a group of people my age and a little older, all connected to books in some way. The topic of earliest memories came up, and we took turns sharing them. Here's mine: I'm sitting on my grandmother's lap, in her house (2716 Northwestern Avenue), by a window. I'm looking out the window, watching my father walk away. It's gloomy outside. The room is shadowy, dark around the edges. The only light is the thin light from the window. I remember a lacy curtain; I move it back and forth. I remember feeling happy and sad at the same time.

That's it. It's not a complete memory—just a dreamlike glimpse, a fragment, but an enduring fragment nonetheless. It haunts me.

If my father had left my mother or died when I was young, this memory would have more weight, but neither of these instances is the case.

In comparison with those of the others, my memory was somewhat disappointing, less interesting. I was the only writer or artist in the group, and I had the least dramatic memory and the least complete one. Some of the others' memories were earlier than mine and they were fully formed and had a narrative thrust that mine was lacking.

I felt odd for a few minutes, as if this were a contest and I'd lost. Wasn't I, the artist, the writer, supposed to have the better memory? The thought was fleet-

ing; we moved on in the conversation to other things. Later, I came to realize the power of my own first memory. If nothing else, this particular memory is part of the foundation—one of the fundamental building blocks—of the house that is me. I am what I am.

In 1976, Elizabeth Coatsworth wrote in her book *Personal Geography*:

One's past is not something we leave behind, but something we incorporate. . . . Outwardly, I am eighty-three years old, but inwardly I am every age, with the emotions and experiences of each period.

We have what we have, and we take it, and live, and live some more, building upon what we've been given and what we've learned, building and living, living and building.

And so the house goes.

\* \* \* \* \*

We return to things we love. We go home.

It makes sense: we return to things we love. Including books.

I returned to *Call It Courage* when I was a boy. Again and again. My son returned to *Benny Bakes a Cake*. Again and again.

Ending a journey, ending a book, ending a speech . . . home is a good, fitting destination.

At the end of *Call It Courage*, the boy, Mafatu, makes it home, barely so, "wasted and thin," to a father whose "face was transformed with joy."

At the end of my book *Kitten's First Full Moon*, Kitten goes home after a frustrating, somewhat perilous journey "and there was a great big bowl of milk on the porch, just waiting for her."

At the end of *Where the Wild Things Are*, Max returns home to the place "where someone loved him best of all." We never see his mother, but his supper is waiting for him "and it was still hot." We know she loves him. We don't need to hear it in her words. We see it. It's hard to describe

what a home can do, what a family, when it works, can be. Sometimes, words are beside the point.

T. S. Elliot wrote:

There's no vocabulary  
For love within a family, love that's  
lived  
in  
But not looked at, love within the  
light of  
which  
All else is seen, the love within  
which  
All other love finds speech.  
This love is silent.

Max goes home again and again—every time someone reads the book.

Kitten goes home again and again—every time someone reads the book.

Mafatu goes home again and again—every time someone reads the book.

They are reliable, unfailing.

People, in real life and in books, go home, whatever and wherever it might be. Home. It's a likely place.

For Max and Kitten and Mafatu and Peter Rabbit and scores of others, home is the final destination. Home is also the final destination for Martha, the main character in my novel *Olive's Ocean*.

This is how I ended *Olive's Ocean*; and it's how I'll end this speech:

She'd only run a short distance when she realized that what she wanted was to be home. She turned at the next corner to take the fastest way. Within minutes, she was in her own yard.

After catching her breath, she opened the front door and stepped into the familiar light of the entryway. Everything was safe here, stamped on her heart: the noises, the smells, the look and feel of each room. And even though she hadn't gone far or been gone long, she needed to say it, for her own sake, and she did so, loudly: "I'm home." 🐾

## 2007 Wilder Medal

The 2007 Laura Ingalls Wilder Medal was awarded posthumously to James Marshall, author and illustrator of the George and Martha books, the Fox easy reader series, *The Cut-Ups*, and *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*—a Caldecott honor book in 1989. He also illustrated the Miss Nelson books and

The Stupids series, written by Harry Allard. Marshall died in 1992.

ALSC heartily thanks Houghton Mifflin Children's Books, the Penguin Young Readers Group, and Weston Woods Studios, a division of Scholastic, for the creation of a special video highlighting Marshall's career, "Remembering James Marshall: The Laura Ingalls Wilder

Award." The video was shown at the Newbery/Caldecott/Wilder Banquet during the ALA Annual Conference in Washington, D.C., in lieu of an award acceptance speech. We thank also Bill Gray, who accepted the Medal on behalf of Marshall and thanked the committee "for acknowledging the triumph of his monumental silliness."