

The Importance of Wonder

Mordicai Gerstein

The Man Who Walked between the Towers
Roaring Brook Press
2004 Caldecott Medal Winner

I think that being human is probably the most difficult, incomprehensible, and sometimes seemingly impossible thing in the world. And I believe that all of us who live the lives of human beings every day, bravely, as well as we possibly can with the cards we're dealt, should hear our phones ring one morning and answer them to hear what sounds like thousands of librarians cheering for us, telling us we've won the great prize. This should happen to everyone, as it seems to have happened to me.

I say *seems* because even now, months later, it's still hard to believe that I'm standing here full of gratitude and a feeling that if I were to lift both feet off the ground at the same time, I would not fall.

Disbelief struck me dumb when [Caldecott committee chair] Kathy East called me with the news. When I was finally able to speak, much to my surprise I heard myself say, "I have always loved librarians!"

And it's true. Ever since my first visit to the Wabash Avenue branch of the Los Angeles Public Library when I was four-and-a-half and took home my first book, *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street*, by a Doctor named Seuss, I have loved librarians and libraries and books. Books are still one of the greatest of all human inventions. In a book you can hold the imagination of another person in the palm of your hand and explore it at your leisure—true magic. I am very grateful to be part of this magical world of books, and, especially, of books for children.

I am often asked, "How do you write for children? How do you know what they'll like?" I'm always surprised by the question because I'd never given it much

thought. I feel as if I'm being asked, "How do you write for penguins? Or wombats?" The shocking truth is: I myself was once a child. In fact, all of us, without exception, either are children or have been children. Many people seem to forget that children are ourselves as we were and as we are and not a different species. Maybe it's as Wallace Stevens wrote:

There is so little that is close and warm.

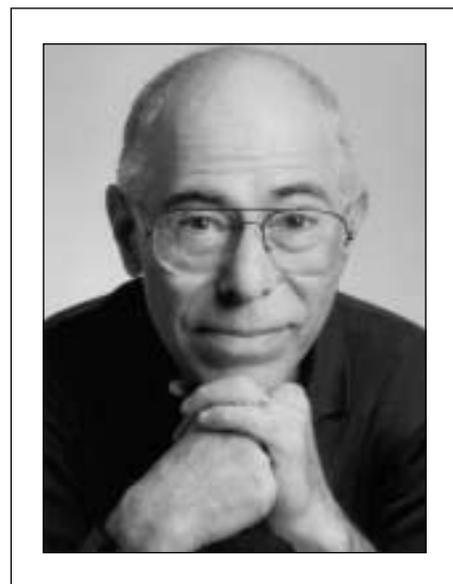
It is as if we were never children.

I think being in touch with your childhood keeps you in touch with what really matters to you, and who you really are. My earliest years are still as vivid and important as anything that has happened since. I was surprised to learn that this is not true for everyone. Tragically, many people have had childhoods best forgotten. But essentially, I'm sure I haven't changed much since I was four.

I have a snapshot of myself then, smiling proudly, brush in hand, beside my first easel, on which stands my very first painting—a bowl of flowers. Well more than sixty years later, I am still at it. Same smile.



The Man Who Walked Between the Towers
by Mordicai Gerstein



Mordicai Gerstein

My dear mother Fay, now long gone, cut photos of famous paintings from *Life* magazine and made a scrapbook museum for me, with artists ranging from William Blake and Michelangelo to Picasso and Cézanne. Lying on my belly on the floor, I studied those pictures over and over and over again till they all became part of me. I've found that the books I loved then, I still loved when I later read them to my children; they were still important, still meaningful to me as an adult. *Alice in Wonderland* is almost everything I love in a book: hilarious, scary, full of surprises and bizarre characters, all in a strange and bewildering world. It could be the story of my life. As a child I was interested in almost everything, and as an old man I am interested in absolutely everything. And one of the things that interests me most is that special, overwhelming feeling that I remember first having when I saw the full moon for the first time—wonder.

From wonder into wonder
Existence opens.

So writes poet Witter Bynner in his translation of Lao Tzu.

Remember being a child, and the full moon will always provoke wonder.

The important question for me has not been how to write for children but

how to write *anything*. As a painter, animated-film maker, and illustrator, I came late to writing, and it was in order to make picture books. I am always looking for subjects that puzzle or disturb or amuse me, subjects that make interesting pic-

who bicycles to the moon on a tightrope. My editor told me that it was simply not believable, which surprised me. It seemed quite plausible to me, but I put the story away.

less believable and therefore more truly wonderful!

The text came to me quickly. When Roaring Brook agreed to publish it, I learned that Philippe was about to publish his own book for adults about his walk, *To Reach the Clouds*. I was able to get an advance copy and found that it was a fascinating, hilarious, and moving true account of a young man's years-long obsession and struggle to carry out something beautiful and impossible.

Best of all for me, the book was full of photos and diagrams that were invaluable for making my pictures. The story of Philippe Petit's walk is, for me, one that addresses the question, "What is a human being?" He proposes that we are creatures who can leave fear behind and walk

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tures. I make books for people, most of whom happen to be children, and I try to address the most essential parts of all of us.

Though I no longer lived in New York City on September 11, and lost no friends or relatives, I experienced the destruction of the Towers in a personal way, as did all

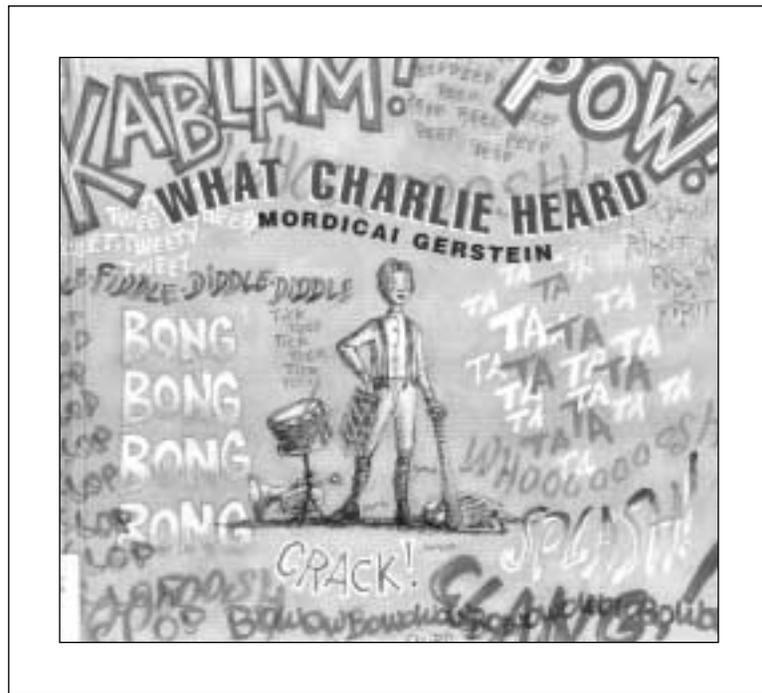
In creating a picture book, I try to make the sentences and pictures as clear and simple as possible. I feel that in the simple and obvious, paradoxically, one can find the utmost complexity and ambiguity. What could be simpler than a soap bubble? And what could be more mysterious and complicated?

My books come from many sources: myths and legends, biographies, and my imagination. *The Man Who Walked between the Towers* came off the streets and out of the sky.

In the 1970s I saw a young Frenchman perform on the sidewalks of my New York neighborhood. Philippe Petit was a high-wire walker and unicyclist whose juggling was as witty and full of surprises as Charlie Parker's solos. When I picked up *The New York Times* one day and saw that Philippe had walked a wire between the Towers, I was thrilled to my toes and thought it was one of the most wonderful things anyone had ever done.

Later, in 1987, a *New Yorker* article about Philippe reminded me of his walk, and I started playing with a story about a boy

through the air—that life can be exciting and fun and may be lived in learning to do the impossible; that the human imagination has no bounds. For Philippe, the Towers were there for no other reason than to provide two anchors for his wire, just as for a spider the most heroic statue is only a place to spin a web. Entrepreneurial and architectural imagination created the Towers; Philippe's imagination transformed them into his art; and other imaginations destroyed them, showed them to be as ephemeral as Philippe's walk.



What Charlie Heard by Mordicai Gerstein

New Yorkers. I still consider myself a New Yorker, just as I still consider myself a Californian, and now a whatever-you-call-people-from-Massachusetts. The Towers were part of my home, my furniture. Over the years, I'd seen them in different light and weather from different parts of the city. I'd passed them on my morning runs and painted watercolors of them in the evenings. The idea came to me that instead of concocting a fictional parallel to Philippe's walk, I should tell the story of what actually happened; it was

Books take us to places we will never go and let us be people and creatures we can never be. I didn't want to just tell the story of the walk—I wanted the book to be the walk between cardboard covers. I think of a picture book as a hand-held theater, entered by opening it and operated by turning its pages (no batteries, you don't have to plug it in); I wanted this book to cause real vertigo, to put the reader, child or adult—and of course myself—on the wire.

I admit there are differences between adults and children, wonderful and often

maddening ones. Children do need adults; I think children make us become the adults they need. We must give them love and nourishment and books, which, as we know, are part of a healthy diet. My intention in all my books is to give children just what I want to give everyone: something beautiful, magical, funny, and soulful; something that provokes good questions—questions about what an incomprehensible, beautiful, and seemingly impossible thing it is to be a human being in this incomprehensible, beautiful, and seemingly impossible world. What could be more difficult and more wonderful?

So here I am, still that child standing proudly and happily beside his easel. I simply have a bit more experience, which hasn't kept me from believing, more than ever, that life should be fun!

And what fun it is, after all the countless hours alone in my studio talking to

myself, to be standing here telling all this to you. I want to first thank the members of the committee, for honoring my book, and then all of you, for listening. My heartfelt thanks to Simon Boughton, my editor and publisher who embraced *The Man Who Walked Between the Towers* wholeheartedly, and to Filomena Tuosto, our designer, who helped make the book as effective as it is. My continuing thanks to Joan Raines, my longtime agent, champion, fairy godmother, and friend, who sent the book to Simon, despite my telling her, after two turndowns, to put it away and forget it because I wanted to make books that everyone wanted. Joan, sadly, could not be here today, but she wept like a baby when she heard the news of the award, and that made me cry, too.

My thanks always to my dear wife and love, Susan Yard Harris, and our dear and beautiful daughter, Risa, for their love and support on the crazy, careening, roller-coaster ride that has been my picture

book career. In 1996 Theron Raines, Joan's partner and husband, described my ups-and-downs prophetically. He said, "I wish Mordicai would stop going over Niagara Falls in a barrel and walk across the Grand Canyon on a tightrope!" I've had those words taped over my desk for the past eight years.

My eternal gratitude to Philippe Petit, who is also a marvelous writer, for doing what he did and still continues to do, for all of us.

I feel, thanks to the award, a new sense of freedom, and I see at the horizon of my imagination picture books barely-dreamed-of waiting to be born . . . and I wonder what they'll be. Thank you. ☺

We Need to Understand

Julia Alvarez

Before We Were Free

Knopf

2004 Pura Belpré Medal for Narrative Winner

Recently, a close writer friend asked me, "What is it with you Latinas and thank you? Every Latina writer I read has at least a page of acknowledgments. You're all so polite!"

I thought about this for a while because, of course, she has a point. But what I didn't agree with was what she assumed was the reason for our gratitude. Yes, we are being polite, showing our *buena educación* when we thank our helpers, but I think it's more than good-girl gush. Growing up in extended families, many of us know that for any task, any event, there's always a battalion of relatives (*tías*, especially) marshaled into action. There's *la tía* who makes the best *pastelitos* and *la tía* who sews so well and *la prima* who has a *repostería*. No one does it alone in our cultures.

In fact, no one does it alone anywhere, but we tend to forget that in our North American life where we pay for services. But you can never really pay for service lovingly and passionately done. And so when I look at my little book, *Before We Were Free*, what I see are fine filaments like spider webs connecting it to the people who helped me write it. Every time someone comes up to me and says, my favorite of all the chapters is "Freedom Cry," I think, thank you Andrea [Cascardi, my editor] for finally convincing me that I couldn't just jump from the abrupt close of the diary to the final chapter with snow butterflies. A reader strokes the cover and says, "I really love this picture," and I think, thank you Maury [my big sister] for sending me a postcard with that photo twenty-five years ago when I was really sad in San Francisco and for writing such encouraging words on the back that I kept that postcard in my box of stuff and never threw it out, and thank you Greg McIsaac for storing that box and many other boxes in your basement when I was roaming around the USA as a migrant writer here and there and couldn't have any extras but what would fit inside my little VW. And Erin [Clarke, my



Julia Alvarez

in-house editor at Knopf] for listening to me when I said this had to be the cover because I looked at this photo every day I was writing *Before We Were Free*. On and on it goes. . . .