

The 2001 Laura Ingalls Wilder Medal Acceptance Speech

Milton Meltzer

What can I say to you, the librarians to whom I have owed so much from early childhood on? I am deeply grateful to you for the Wilder Award. And for unlocking the treasure house of literature. For we had no books at home. My mother and father had neither the money to buy nor the time to read them. When I was old enough to reach the library by myself, I found a world full of jewels. My appetite for the printed word was insatiable.

But what to read? Where to start? It was a librarian who asked me gently what I was interested in, and guided me to the pleasures packed into those long, long shelves.

I never thought that one day I would write books to place on those same shelves, awaiting the eager eyes and the greedy grasp of kids like me. But without your warm welcome to my work, your continued concern for what I try to say to young people, the books I write would reach a much smaller circle of readers.

Well, here I stand today, just beginning my eighty-seventh year. And I'm still writing. How did I get going? Like Laura Ingalls Wilder, I was a late bloomer. Only not as late as she was. (Her first book appeared in 1932, when she was sixty-five.) My first book came out in 1956, when I was forty-one. I began to think of trying my hand at a book back in the early 1950s. I had become painfully aware that my fortieth birthday was not far down the road. I was making my living as

a writer, journalism mostly. Little you produce in that field endures. Yesterday's piece winds up in today's wastebasket. I'd lived nearly half the expected lifespan, and with luck might have another forty years to go. But would any part of my work survive me?

Then I thought, Why not try to write a book? Maybe, if it's any good, people will still want to read it long after I'm gone.

But what to write about? I had no natural bent for fiction. It would have to be nonfiction, history most likely, for it had always fascinated me. Suddenly an idea struck me. I'd try to write a book about something I knew very little about, but wanted to know a lot more about: African American history, or Negro history as everyone called it then.

Why that? I was raised in Worcester, Massachusetts, a town that had once been a station on the Underground Railroad. I had not forgotten the anti-slavery poets I'd read in school. They made me conscious of a terrible injustice at the root of American life. In Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" I came across these lines:

I am the hounded slave, I wince
at the bite of the dogs . . .
I clutch the rails of the fence, my
gore dribs . . .
Agonies are one of my changes
of garments;
I do not ask the wounded
person how he feels, I myself
become the wounded person.

There had been no black children in the schools I went to. Nor did I see them in my neighborhood, or read about them in the newspapers. Invisible? Almost. Yet they had lived in Worcester since the early 1700s. Some of the colonial families owned slaves. But free blacks too lived in my hometown, among them a minute-

man who had fought the redcoats. Some of the fugitive slaves heading north to freedom had settled down in Worcester.

But my mind was not a blank page on this subject. For Walt Whitman wrote on it. And then James Russell Lowell. Lowell's lines hurt, for he indicted whites of his time who failed to protest slavery:

They are slaves who fear to
speak
For the fallen and the weak . . .
They are slaves who dare not be
In the right with two or three.
Would I have had the guts to act
if I'd been alive then?

And there was John Greenleaf Whittier. That militant Quaker's poems proved to me that words had consequences. Brutally for himself: four times Whittier's life was endangered by pro-slavery mobs. And consequences too for millions of others. Apart from William Lloyd Garrison, the abolitionist editor, no other writer did so much to rouse public opinion against slavery.

In those early 1950s the civil rights movement was just getting underway. The Supreme Court in 1954 ruled that segregation in the public schools is unconstitutional. Soon after came the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, led by Martin Luther King.

Yet as I began research on black history, I found it was still almost entirely omitted from school books. Just as in my own school days many years before. Educators, textbook authors, most teachers seemed blind to the truth that African Americans have been an inseparable part of American life from the very beginning. Neither white life nor black life can be understood without an understanding of the other.

I found back then, in my early days of research, that university scholars too

Milton Meltzer is the winner of the 2001 Laura Ingalls Wilder Medal. His acceptance speech was delivered at the ALA Annual Conference on June 17, 2001, in San Francisco.



Milton Meltzer, winner of the 2001 Laura Ingalls Wilder Award

Finally, after ten publishers turned it down, the book, with more than a thousand illustrations, was published in 1956. It has remained in print ever since, going through six revised and updated editions. Some years ago, Scholastic's textbook department adapted it for school use.

That first book, and nearly everything I've written since, has to do with social change. How it comes about, the forces that advance it and the forces that resist it, and the moral issues that beset men and women seeking to realize their humanity.

I don't pretend to be objective or neutral in my books. Like any writer, I start with what and who I am. With my mother and father, immigrants, my mother a seamstress in a garment sweatshop, my father a window cleaner. Jews who fled poverty and oppression in Eastern Europe in the hope of finding a better life in America.

Nothing unique about that; it's the story of millions of others. I've tried to recapture the story of many of these others. And how it shaped their time of growing up.

At the heart of my work is the effort to help readers understand the part that ordinary people—like themselves and their families—play in making history. My method is to let men, women, and children of the past speak in their own words. Where possible, I've tried to build that primary evidence into my biographies, too.

My aim is to challenge young people to examine the past as they move into their future. You cannot do that without stirring their feelings so that they live the lives of others as though it were their own personal experience.

How do leaders—whether a Hitler or a Stalin, a Lincoln or a Roosevelt—gain and hold power? How do they use that power? Does it tell us anything useful about the abuses of power one often sees in the school, in the workplace, in local, state, or national government? If the young won't do it, who will question and inquire and push forward against the powerful?

An honest book can serve that end. It can help the young reader to see that

while stupidity and folly and greed and injustice are all manifest in our world, good people have been willing to risk much, even life itself, in the hard fight against them.

As one of these agitators once said, "Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope."

This is why nonfiction should give the reader more than facts, more than information. It must be a work of revelation, as well as information. It must help young readers to understand the world as it is, and to realize that we need not accept that world as it is given to us. Can we achieve a more just, a more humane society?

Can we break free of the widely held notion that human fulfillment comes from piling up material goods and private privilege? With little concern for what happens to other members of humanity? Just think: today there are three billion people who live on two dollars a day, or less.

Historians are not mere distributors of facts about the past. They have not seen the events of the past with their own eyes. They have to imaginatively re-create them.

Or, as George F. Kennan puts it, the historian has:

as a rule, only the hieroglyphics of the written word as preserved in crumbling old documents, and sometimes a few artifacts that have survived the ravages of time and neglect. . . . But these evidences only hint at the real story—they don't tell it. It is up to the historian to examine them critically and imaginatively, to select among them (for they are often multitudinous in number), to try to penetrate the reality behind them, and to try to depict them in a way that reveals their meaning. And to accomplish this task, what does he have to draw upon? Only what he already has within him: his

continued on page 34

may be as biased and prejudiced as anybody else. The work they published served to harden racism and entrench inequality.

After intense research, I decided the book should strike a balance between narrative text and illustration. I realized how powerfully images worked on the mind. Movies and television had created an audience not only open to the visual but eager for it. So with the help of a friend who was a book designer, I structured a pictorial history that used several images on every two-page spread.

The pictures included paintings, photographs, prints, drawings, cartoons, posters, broadsides, facsimiles of documents. . . . I hoped with this approach to reach readers on every level.

I decided I needed a collaborator. For two reasons: I wasn't black, and I wanted to be sure I understood the implications of everything the book would go into. Without any experience at this, I worried about carrying so large a project to completion.

I was unbelievably lucky to find that Langston Hughes was willing to work with me. He looked over everything I had done to that point. He thought the book was a great idea, long overdue, and badly needed. And he said yes, he'd be happy to collaborate.

campaign. Further suggestions included using the library's home page to promote books, and bookmarking sites for authors, publishers, booktalks, etc.

They had lots of ideas for publishers, too. A whopping fifty-eight respondents asked (pleaded!) that publishers advertise on popular teen sites or get linked from these sites in some way. Some publishers may feature YA books and authors on their own Web sites, but are teens finding their way there? Placing ads or linking from hot teen sites may also send the message that these books or authors are cool. Fifteen librarians suggested creating new sites that combine teen interests with books and authors—connecting the books to the things they're interested in. Another fifteen librarians said Web sites should be more interactive in order to hold their

JOYS on the WEB

A report of the survey findings including additional write-in response is available on the JOYS Web site: www.ala.org/alsc/joys.

attention; suggestions included contests, giveaways, and teen reader reviews. This call for more active input from teens came up in responses to almost every question, touching on all areas of publishing from jacket art and book development to packaging and promotion. Yet how many publishers have any direct contact with their ultimate audience?

What's Next?

Following an interactive program at a previous ALA Annual Conference, this survey was designed to give librarians the chance to speak out further about their needs. Now that we've heard some of their requests, librarians may want to hear what publishers have to say in return. Many of the issues that came up here—paperbacks, jackets, rising costs, teen marketing—are ripe for more discussion. And maybe we need to take our own advice and give teens the chance to speak for themselves while we're all there listening. ALA Annual Conference 2002, anyone? ●

2001 WILDER AWARD ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

MELTZER

continued from page 25

knowledge, of course, of the historical background, his level of cultural sensitivity, his ability to put the isolated bit of evidence into the larger context, and, above all, . . . his ability to identify with the historical figures he describes, his educated instinct for what is significant and what is not—in other words, his creative imagination.

For me, one of the most precious moments in my writing life came a few years after the book I created with Langston Hughes appeared. It was early in 1960, just after those four black college students in Greensboro, North Carolina, sat in at a Woolworth lunch counter, challenging its segregation policy. Langston phoned me excitedly to say he'd just heard that when a reporter asked the students why this was happening, one of them replied he had been reading about

earlier protest movements in a book called *A Pictorial History of the Negro in America*. And decided it was long past time his generation too got up and hollered, "Stop! This oppression must not go on any longer!"

The other most precious moment for me is to stand here today and receive the great honor you have bestowed on me.

I thank you, one and all, for remembering me. ●

@ your library™

Campaign for America's Libraries

A five-year commitment to speak loudly and clearly about the values of libraries and librarians.
Sponsored by the American Library Association.