

The May Hill Arbuthnot Honor Lecture

Unleaving: The Staying Power of Gold

Lois Lowry



Lois Lowry delivered the 2011 Arbuthnot Lecture Friday, April 15 at the St. Louis (Mo.) County Library.

It's a pleasure to be here this evening. Thank you all for coming, and a special thanks to the Association for Library Service to Children, which sponsors this event; to its Arbuthnot Committee, for selecting me to be with you this year; and to the St. Louis County Library for hosting this occasion. I feel as if I am in a cozy living room with a group of longtime friends. We should light a fire in the fireplace and pour some wine.

But I'll confess at the outset that when I was asked to deliver this year's May Hill Arbuthnot Lecture, one of my first (secret) reactions was "Darn!"—not because I wasn't deeply honored by the invitation, not because I didn't want to give this speech (and I confess I kind of liked the element of mystery about location), but because it fell into the category once again (this has happened before) of—how shall I describe it?—giving a lecture named for a person I never got to meet.

Darn. I think we would have liked each other. And we could have met, May and I. We could have met, say, in 1962. She would have been seventy-eight then, and probably quite vigorous—she lived to be eighty-five. I would have been twenty-five in 1962.

What would we have talked about?

My life, when I was twenty-five, centered around my children. That year, the year that I am fantasizing about a meeting with May Arbuthnot, they would have been four, three, one, and the youngest one newly born.

She never had children. But clearly she cared about them, and she would have been interested, I think, to hear about my little family, and our collection of books—some from my own childhood—and how we curled up in the evenings, and I read aloud to them. She would have enjoyed hearing how the oldest, a girl, at four, suddenly leaned closer and pointed to a word—the word "LOOK"—on the page from which I was reading. Then she moved her finger back a few paragraphs, and found it again, the word "LOOK," and she said, in a voice of amazed discovery, that it was the same word that was printed on the street, at the corner where we crossed to go to the

grocery store—the same word, with its two big circles like eyes, telling you to "LOOK!"

"I can read this word!" my daughter said with delight, at four. And it wasn't long until she put it together in her head, the sounds of the letters, how they went together and formed words. I think May Arbuthnot would enjoy hearing about that. After all, she was one of the ones who wrote the Dick and Jane books, the books of my own first grade. They used the "L" word a lot. I seem to recall a lot of pointing in the illustrations. "Look!" said Dick, pointing at Father with a rake. "Look!" said Jane, pointing at baby Sally, or Puff, the kitten.

(I always wished, actually, that their pointing fingers would be aimed at something a little more interesting. "Look! A man robbing the bank!" said Dick. Or "Look!" said Mother, "the house is on fire!" But those were different times.)

"Look! Look! Look! I can read this word!" From there my daughter went to *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish*, and to the realization that every one of those books, of those stories she loved, was made up of letters and sounds and words. And then, when she was five, I found her one day curled on the floor with a volume of the encyclopedia opened to a picture that fascinated her, index finger moving slowly along the syllables as she sounded out *Ex . . . ter . . . nal . . . Gen . . . i . . . tal . . . ia*.

No, I guess I won't tell May about that. I don't know her well enough.

But I think I would mention 1947 to her. 1947 was a momentous year not only for her but for a previous Arbuthnot lecturer, and for me, as well.

In 1947, the first edition of May Hill Arbuthnot's ground-breaking *Children and Books* was published. She was sixty-three years old.

In 1947, a physics text called *Atomics for the Millions* by Dr. Maxwell Leigh Eidinoff, was also published. It was illustrated by Maurice Sendak. He was nineteen years old.

And in 1947, a children's magazine called *Jack and Jill* published a letter from a little girl in Pennsylvania who said, "I am writing a book." Her name was Lois. I was ten years old.

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In late January, I was in New York for a conference, and I had enough free time that I caught up with a favorite nephew named Michael. Michael's a smart guy, a Harvard graduate with a lovely wife and a good job. What he really wants to be, though, is a playwright. He spends his spare time attending playwriting workshops and writing new plays and revising plays he wrote two years ago, or ten years ago; and every now and then something Michael has written is produced off-off-off Broadway briefly. But writing plays is a very tough profession. Over lunch he confessed that sometimes he thinks he should just quit. Forget about it. Take up a new hobby.

Of course someone with his passion—or mine—can't and doesn't quit. Michael and I talked about why we do what we do.

"I just feel the need to record everything," Michael said. "Take it down." He looked through the windows—we were sitting in a restaurant near the New York Public Library, looking out toward a park—and said, "I want to record that woman in the striped coat. And that baby in the stroller . . . and this!" He touched the cement shelf beside us, below the window, on the wall of the restaurant—"I want to make a record that this exists, this piece of cement."

I knew what he meant. Michael is one of the people Henry James was referring to when he said that a writer is someone on whom nothing is lost.

Our conversation digressed then because we had family gossip to catch up on, but had we continued talking about the writer's need to take it all down, I think we would have agreed that our need is not just for the recording of things, but also for the finding of the meaning of things, and the connections. And here I'll quote not James, but E. M. Forster: "Only connect!" Everyone recognizes that phrase, but so few people recall its

context. Forster said: "Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer."

The connections, the making sense of things, the giving meaning to things—and then, the giving of all of it to readers—that is the passionate need of the writer.

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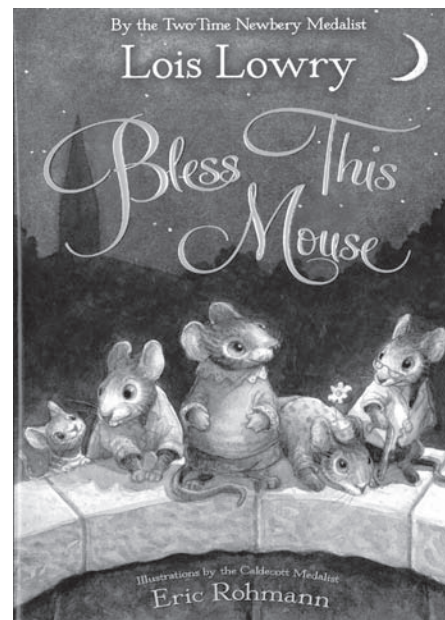
The same little girl, the daughter I described earlier, the one who was four when I was twenty-five, was with me the morning that I got the news of my sister's death. My sister lived in Texas when she was stricken with cancer at the age of twenty-seven, but that fall, terminally ill, she had been moved to a hospital in Washington, D.C. I lived in Massachusetts and was expecting my fourth child momentarily. My doctor, my husband, my parents—everyone—told me not to go to Washington. I should wait until after the baby was born. There would be time.

So I waited. And on a crisp fall morning my last child, my son, Ben, arrived. My sister sent me a card from her hospital bed in Washington that arrived when I was still in my hospital bed in Boston. I wept when I saw how frail and shaky her signature was.

But it turned out that there wasn't time. One day, suddenly, it was over, and she was gone. I had not had a chance to be with her. My little girl asked me again and again why I was so sad, and I would try to explain to her by telling her the story of two sisters—how the older one taught the little one to read; how they got into mischief together; how they wore matching dresses; how they giggled at night in their side-by-side beds.

But it wasn't fair, and I knew that it wasn't, to burden my own child with grief she was too young to comprehend.

So I began, instead, to tell the story of the two sisters—to tell it all the way to its incomprehensible ending—to myself. I did so over a period of years. Not obsessively. I had a busy, happy life. I had those four children, after all, and when



the youngest went off to kindergarten, I had returned to college. In my thirties, I was an absolutely passionate student of literature. Over-passionate, I think now, because I had interrupted my education when I married at nineteen and somehow felt the need to catch up. My professors must have shaken their heads, or chuckled, in private over this startlingly enthusiastic student in her thirties. If I was assigned a novel by Henry James, I not only read the novel, but then I read biographies of Henry James, and the collected letters of Henry James—and in the midst of that, the professor would assign something by, say, Willa Cather, and I'd be in the library again, reading not just the assigned novel but everything she'd ever written, and then histories of frontier Nebraska; and by now the professor would have moved on to Edith Wharton, and I had to learn about New York society and the Gilded Age, and when I realized Wharton and Henry James had been friends—well, everything pieced together like a jigsaw puzzle and I felt a happy kind of hungry all the time.

Then I went to graduate school, and was studying photography as well as literature. There were times when I tried to combine those two passions: the photography—the learning to see things, to frame them—and my love for the writers I was studying; I remember writing a paper on Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* in which I spoke of the sweeping beam of light bringing things briefly into sight, focusing on something

important, the way a camera can—to point, to say “LOOK! LOOK! Remember this. Notice this.”

I tried in my mind to illuminate my own story. I found that whenever something, often something small—a smell, a song, a turn of phrase—reminded me of my sister, Helen, I would focus on that and run through the narrative again in my mind, recording it, shaping it, examining it, connecting it, trying to make sense of it, trying to make its outcome comprehensible.

Then, in early 1976 I think it was, I received a letter from a children's book editor at Houghton Mifflin. She wondered if I would consider writing a book for young people. It surprises me now that I had never considered doing that before. I had been writing for years, and studying writing for years, and dreaming about

young people, something quite mysterious and wonderful happened. I began to hear the voices of some of those writers I had studied so assiduously for so long. All of those novels and plays and poems I had studied, all of the hours in the university library, all of the exams and papers I had written—bits and pieces surfaced and whispered to me.

Shakespeare whispered, in the voice of Prospero:

*We are such stuff as dreams are
made on*

And our little life is rounded by a sleep

and I put those words into the voice of Meg's English professor father as he tries to comfort his angry, uncomprehending daughter.

undergraduate survey course in British poetry, once—smatterings of this and that. But now here he was, and the words were right for the young fictional Meg to hear—and for me to hear as well:

Margaret, are you grieving

Over Goldengrove unleaving?

The character named Will Banks quotes that phrase to Meg in the book. Recalling the poem, writing it into the dialogue, my memories were vague. What was Goldengrove? A place of some sort. A place with an evocative name, and the poet used it metaphorically to bring to mind the dying of the leaves in autumn, the reminder that things we hold dear will inevitably disappear. It fit. I wrote the words in the voice of the elderly man, and then the concluding lines came to me:

“As I continued working on the book that would eventually be called A Summer to Die and would be my first book for young people, something quite mysterious and wonderful happened. I began to hear the voices of some of those writers I had studied so assiduously for so long. All of those novels and plays and poems I had studied, all of the hours in the university library, all of the exams and papers I had written—bits and pieces surfaced and whispered to me.”

writing for years—and I had four children to whom I had read and read and read—and I lived in a house where one stumbled over books as often as Legos and dolls and baseballs and damp mittens. But I had been writing, all that time, for adults.

With that editor's invitation, I suddenly had a place to put down the story I had been telling and retelling to myself. I rolled a piece of paper into my typewriter—anyone remember typewriters?—and began writing the story of two sisters by describing an actual scene from my memory: the day my sister, using a piece of chalk, divided our bedroom into two parts and said to me: “Keep your mess on your side; this side is mine.” I called my sister Molly. I was Meg.

As I continued working on the book that would eventually be called *A Summer to Die* and would be my first book for

“That's Shakespeare, Meg,” he says to her.

“What did he know?” she replies furiously. “He never knew Molly!”

But he did, didn't he? Shakespeare knew every form of grief. He knew how to rage, how to comfort, how to comprehend. When I let him speak through the fictional father in the book, he was speaking of course to the grieving girl—but he was speaking as well to me, and to the wide audience of readers that the book eventually found.

I had studied Shakespeare in depth for several semesters in both college and graduate school, so it wasn't surprising to have those familiar words from *The Tempest* appear in my consciousness. But now Gerard Manley Hopkins came to me, too—and when had I studied him? I could barely remember. An

It is the blight man was born for.

It is Margaret you mourn for.

And I was back in my own memories, and knew that indeed in retelling the story I was mourning for myself.

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When I was asked, too soon (it is always too soon) for a title for this lecture, the question happened to come on the same day that I had received a somewhat startling e-mail from a stranger.

Her e-mail had to do with body art.

Full disclosure: I am not into body art. And though I am not going to ask for a show of hands from this audience, recently I read a statistic that tells me that 36 percent of people between eighteen

and twenty-nine have decorated their bodies in some way. Okay, we're talking tattoos here. And in fact, I have one child (out of four) and one grandchild (out of four) and one step-grandchild (out of five)—so far—who have done so, who have decorated themselves in that way.

But I am seventy-four. My idea of “body art” is maybe a little lipstick. Pink, probably.

I had once had an e-mail from an eighteen-year-old, asking my permission, she said, because she was uncertain how copyright law applied, to have her favorites lines from *The Giver* tattooed across her shoulder blade. I answered her a little vaguely because I didn't have a clue about the copyright question (how on earth, if it were a violation, would it be prosecuted?).

But this more recent e-mail was from a woman in her thirties. She wasn't concerned about copyright. She said she had read *A Summer to Die* more than twenty years ago, as a young girl, and it was the lines from the Hopkins poem that had haunted her ever since. They had come to have increasingly important meaning for her, and now she was planning to have them tattooed on her lower back. She wasn't asking permission. She just wanted to tell me how much the book—and those lines, not by me, but by Gerard Manley Hopkins—meant to her.

I sat at my desk after I had replied to her and thought about that woman. I didn't waste time visualizing or worrying about the outcome—how wide a lower back one might need, or what font size the body artist might use—all of that would soon be a *fait accompli* and wouldn't matter.

What I thought about—and was profoundly moved by—was the fact that many years before, an eleven-year-old girl reading a book had encountered four lines from a very complex poem by a nineteenth-century British clergyman, and because it spoke to her for reasons we'll never be privy to, she had incorporated it into her personal knowledge and understanding of the world as she continued to grow and mature.

It made me think of another poem, the one called “There Was a Child Went

Forth” by Walt Whitman, the one that begins:

There was a child went forth every day,

And the first object he look'd upon,
that object he became,

And that object became part of him
for the day

or a certain part of the day,

Or for many years or stretching
cycles of years.

Did the woman who wrote to me ever go to college? She didn't say. Had she studied literature, learned anything about Hopkins' life or work? No way to know. The only thing I know is that as a child, she went forth. She looked upon a poem. And that poem became part of her for the day and for many years and for stretching cycles of years.

We can chuckle and cringe a little at how it became literally part of her. But that's not really important, is it?

It was because of her e-mail that when I was asked shortly after that to come up with a title for this lecture, I replied “Unleaving: The Staying Power of Gold.” I was picturing in my mind the purity and gleam of words; the nuggets that a child can take from the pages of a loved book—and how they say “Look! Remember this! This connects to me!”

* * * * *

But now I want to talk a little about someone else who read my books many years ago. I want to talk about Tim Wadham, assistant director of Youth and Community Services for St. Louis County Library. I'm assuming it was Tim who pulled the necessary strings (Or greased a few palms? No, surely not that!) that made it possible for the Arbuthnot Lecture to be delivered this year in St. Louis (even though I was kind of rooting for Honolulu). Thank you, Tim.

What I want to describe goes back many years, probably twenty-six. Tim Wadham was a student at Brigham Young at the

time—I thought I remembered him being a freshman, but he corrected me yesterday and said he was actually in graduate school at the time—and he was visiting Boston, where I then lived. He called me up to tell me he was a fan of my work, and I invited him over for lunch.

(Timing is all. I wouldn't do that today. But back in 1985, I didn't have that many fans!)

So Tim and I sat and talked about children's books throughout a summer afternoon. He had been reading my Anastasia books to his younger sisters—one of whom is here tonight. (In fact, during his visit we called them up. He said, “Guess who I'm standing next to?” and they said hi to me and giggled.) What I especially remember is his describing how each time he came to a reference they didn't recognize, he expanded on it for them and it had become kind of a project.

Let me explain.

Remember a few minutes ago, in talking about a tattoo, I said *fait accompli*? Thirty years ago, I used that phrase in the first book of the series, when the Krupnik parents tell their astonished and outraged ten-year-old daughter that they are expecting another child.

“So,” said Anastasia, finally. “You're not going to change your minds?”

Her mother rubbed her middle softly. “It's too late for that, Anastasia.”

“It's a *fait accompli*,” said her father.

“You know I can't understand Greek, Daddy.”

“French,” he said.

“Well, French then. I can't understand French, either. What's a *fait accompli*? Another word for baby?”

“In this instance,” said her father, “I guess it is. A baby boy.”

The book continues, and it continues without any additional explanation. But Tim would have stopped to teach his

little sisters some French, to show them how the words actually mean an already-accomplished deed.

It became a challenge, a project, for them. When, later in the first book, Anastasia sits in a Harvard classroom and listens to her father teach—or try to teach, to a group of bored students—a Wordsworth poem, Tim found a copy of the poem for his sisters to read and talk about.

In the second book, *Anastasia Again*, Anastasia wanders into the living room one afternoon to find her father, with his eyes closed, conducting—and singing along with—the Verdi Requiem, which is playing on the stereo. Here, I'll read you this section:

Anastasia cringed. She lived in mortal fear that someday one of her friends would be there when her father was belting out the tenor solo from the Verdi Requiem, with his eyes closed and sweat on his bald head. . . .

Toward the end, at the very high part, her father stood on his tiptoes while he sang. Anastasia giggled.

He opened his eyes when it ended and bowed to Anastasia who applauded politely; then he went and switched the stereo to OFF. He wiped his damp face with his handkerchief.

"I'm always too exhausted to conduct the next section after I sing that section," he said. "How did I sound?"

"Pretty good. You're getting better, I think."

"*Inter oves lacum praesta et ab haedis me sequestra*," he said. She recognized them as some of the words he had sung. "Know what that means?"

"Nope."

"You will after you've studied Latin. It means, 'Give me a place among the sheep and separate me from the goats.'"

Anastasia laughed. "Okay," she said. "You're among the sheep."

Again, the book continued on. But Tim didn't. Tim got a recording of the Verdi requiem and played it for his little sisters, and then the Sibelius Violin Concerto because of this conversation between Anastasia and her mother:

"Men don't cry much."

"No. Men don't cry much," said her mother.

"Daddy does, sometimes. He always cries when he hears the Sibelius violin concerto."

"Sweetie, that's one of the reasons I married your dad."

I seem to recall that after reading the conversation between Anastasia and her father in which they agree that the French film called *Diabolique* is the scariest movie ever made, Tim tried but couldn't find a copy of that film in Utah. It's probably just as well.

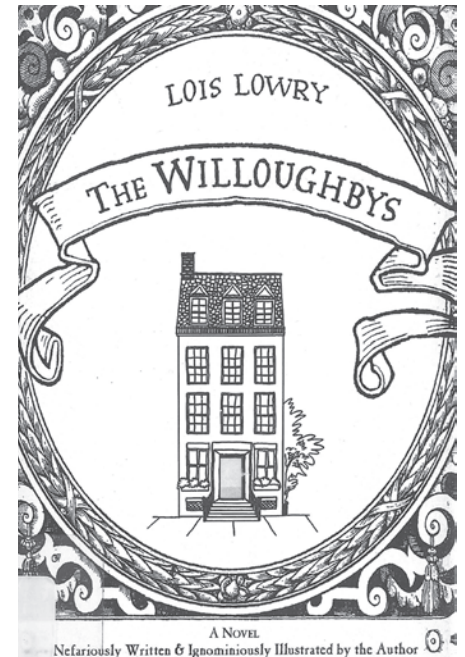
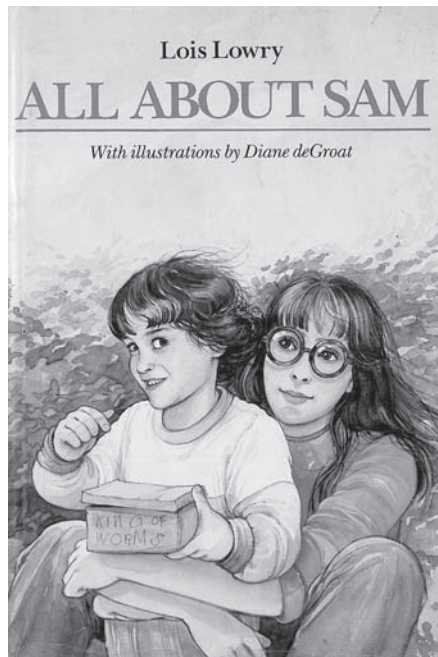
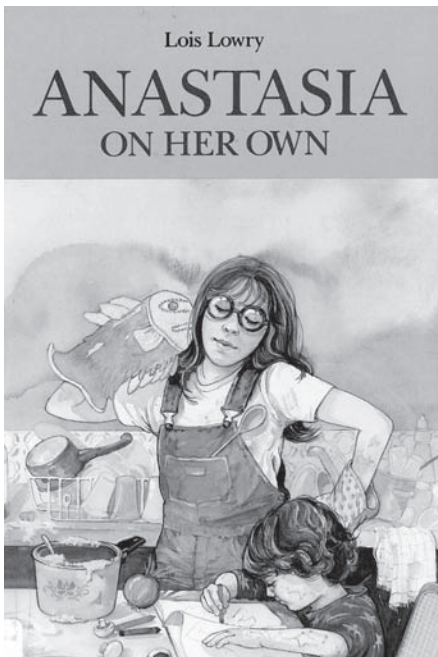
So what am I saying, beyond the fact that Tim Wadham is a good guy and was a good brother and I am pleased to be his guest here tonight?

I'm saying that his sisters—like all young readers—were like miners hunched over their pans at the edge of a creek. There were little sparkles, tiny flecks, of gold here and there. Tim's sisters—all grown up, probably untattooed—one of them may suddenly think of a Wordsworth poem, or chuckle at a reference to Gertrude Stein, or recognize a passage from a violin concerto, and perhaps not even recall the moment when that little golden nugget of knowledge became, as Whitman said, "part of the child."

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Not long ago I got a text message from a nine-year old grandson who lives in Maine. It said: "Guess where I am at this moment."

I replied: "I don't know. Paris? Moscow? Mars?"



He texted back: “No, we went to New York for a bar mitzvah. I’m in the car heading back to Maine.”

My reply: “Long drive. Do you have a good book?”

And his: “I don’t need one. I have my iPod Touch.”

That was, to say the least, depressing. I don’t need one. I wanted to text back: “Yes, you do need a book. You need lots of books in order to become a literate, intelligent member of society.”

Instead, I replied: “Oh, good. Have a safe trip.”

But this is not a child I worry about. He lives in a world filled with books. He reads. His brother reads. His parents read. One of his grandfathers is an English professor.

He and his brother have always called me “*Oma*,” the German term for Grandma. They visit me often at my old farmhouse in rural Maine, forty miles from where they live. Last summer, I ordered a tent from L. L. Bean, and after it arrived, we staked out a place in a distant, hidden corner of a meadow and spent a week-end setting up the tent and furnishing it with battery-operated lanterns, sleeping bags, insect repellent—all the stuff two boys needed for happy summer weekends. They made the requisite NO TRESPASSING sign and nailed it to a post and hammered the post into the ground.

When they came in for supper that evening, they announced to me, “We’ve changed your name. You’re not going to be ‘*Oma*’ anymore.”

“I’m not? What’s my new name?” I asked them.

“You are Omar the Tentmaker!” they announced with glee. And indeed they have called me Omar ever since.

Now I don’t have a clue how they happened to know the name of a 1922 movie about Omar Khayyam. I doubt if they know, either. It is simply part of their accumulated knowledge, because they went forth, in the Whitmanesque sense,

as children and everything they heard and experienced became part of them.

So I don’t really worry about them and their damned iPod Touches.

But I do worry a lot about other children out there. I worry about the ones who are raised in homes without books. Whose dads are in prison. Whose moms are working two jobs. Who are living in shelters. Who are angry and frightened and poorly served by our system.

“And what if the banquet consists of literature, as mine would, as mine has? There have always been less than memorable books. There will always be celebrity biographies and novelized versions of animated movies and how-to books to help you improve your love life or your golf game. But now and then, here and there, you would find bits and pieces of pure gold.”

I worry about those children whose schools no longer have libraries. Whose towns have curtailed the hours of their public libraries, those structures of sanctuary for so many children. More than sanctuary—libraries are the repositories of our cultural heritage; when those doors close, something precious is taken away.

It reminds me of 2001, when the Taliban destroyed the ancient Buddhist statues while the world watched in horror, and the leader of the Taliban Islamic

Afghanistan at the time said, “All we are breaking are stones.”

What are we closing down, what are we breaking, when we close the doors of libraries?

A well-known poet and anthologist told me recently that he received the news—by e-mail—from his publisher that they are not going to be publishing his books any longer.

Poetry doesn’t sell.

All we are breaking is . . . fill in the blank.

* * * * *

My only granddaughter lives in Germany. She has grown up there, and attends German schools, but every summer she comes to visit her *Oma* in America (I haven’t told her that her cousins have renamed me Omar). Once when she was eleven, she brought her best friend, Annika, who had never been to the United States before. In Boston, where I live, I took them to see the Blue Man Group, the iMax theater at the science museum, and to an Italian restaurant, and to the aquarium.

Then we went to Maine. My old farmhouse there is surrounded by meadows and lakes. Bridgton, Maine, has a population of under five thousand. It has one main street, called Main Street, and on Main Street is the Bridgton Public Library.

The girls had spent hours at the beach, and they had created a puppet theater in the barn, and they had had manicures at the local nail salon. I had taken them to a dance performance at the summer theater. Then one afternoon, they came along with me while I returned some library books. In the library that afternoon, a story hour was taking place in the children’s room; the woman telling stories had a golden retriever lying at the feet. In the main section of the library, vacationing tourists were using every computer, checking their e-mail. Other people were reading newspapers and magazines. I dropped my books off, checked out a couple of others, and headed with the girls back out to the parking lot.

Annika said something in German to my granddaughter, who translated for her. “She wants to know how much it costs to use the library.”

I told them it was free.

“Free?”

Yes. Free.

“Do other towns have free libraries?” they asked.

By now we were in the car. I sat there for a minute, thinking about the geography of the area, then said, “I’m going to show you something.”

“In 1947:

- *The first edition of May Hill Arbuthnot’s groundbreaking Children and Books was published. She was sixty-three years old.*
- *A physics text called Atomics for the Millions by Dr. Maxwell Leigh Eidinoff was also published. It was illustrated by Maurice Sendak. He was nineteen years old.*
- *A children’s magazine called Jack and Jill published a letter from a little girl in Pennsylvania who said, ‘I am writing a book.’ Her name was Lois. I was ten years old.”*

First I drove them back past my house sitting in its meadow outside of town, and about two miles farther, to North Bridgton, Maine; and I stopped in front of the little white house with a front porch and its sign—North Bridgton Public Library.

About two miles from there, I pulled up in front of a little stone building with a green roof in the village of Harrison, Maine. Its sign said, “Public Library.” Harrison has a population of two thousand.

Finally, I drove about five miles along the edge of Bear Lake until we got to the little stone building that houses the Waterford

Public Library. Waterford, Maine, has a population of sixteen hundred.

After that, we stopped for ice cream and then drove home. I could hear the girls chattering in German, conferring with each other, in the back seat. Then my granddaughter said to me, “Annika and I think libraries are the best thing in the United States.”

* * * * *

Back in 1986—twenty-five years ago—I wrote a book no one remembers but me, and I remember it because it has always been one of my favorites. It was called *Rabble Starkey*. The title character is a

“The Red Pony,” he read. “That’s the title.” Then he began. . . . While Mr. Bigelow read, I could hardly take my eyes from him and from the book in his hands. . . .

I knew that each one of us could see it in our own minds. And probably we saw different things. A book with no pictures lets you make your own pictures in your mind. A guy who writes a book like that really trusts the people who read it to make the kind of pictures he wants them to. Of course he helps them along with the words. Like Mr. Steinbeck told us all about that old dog named Smasher having only one ear because the other got bit off by a coyote, and how his one good ear stood up higher than the ear on a regular coyote. So we could all picture Smasher in our minds, just the way he was supposed to be, but at the same time each of us had our own private Smasher, built out of all the dogs we had ever known.

* * * * *

My hope for these real-life kids who have so much missing in their lives is that someone, somewhere, will sit down with them the way Mr. Bigelow does and read them a story that will invite them in, and that they will create their own world—build their own private Smasher—because this is the way all of us navigate our existence. We walk into the world created by the writer, and it becomes our own world, built of words.

I’ve spoken before, and probably some of you were there when I did, about the eighth-grade boy in South Carolina whose teacher wrote to me to describe this—the disruptive underachiever, the troublemaker in the class, who, on a day when unexpected snow canceled school, called his teacher on the phone and begged her, ordered her, to read him the next chapter of *The Giver* aloud.

He had entered a fictional world and become part of it, and part of a boy like himself, a disillusioned boy who needed to find a way out of the impossible place where he was trapped—a place, incident-

twelve-year-old girl in West Virginia: a culturally-deprived (but curious) child; an at-risk (but attentive) child; the only child of a single, twenty-six-year-old mother who works as a domestic.

There is a scene in it that I love, a scene in which the young girl is read aloud to for the first time. (Imagine being twelve and never having experienced that joy!) Her friend’s father is settled in his big chair with a book, and the children are listening:

He turned through the pages until he found the story he remembered from when he was younger.

tally, from which all literature had been taken away.

I realize that in all my books, even the most lighthearted of them, I have always alluded to the power and importance of literature in our lives. I never set out consciously to do that. It creeps in, I suppose, because it has always been so much a part of me and reflects my own experience. I remember being eleven and leaving the United States to live in Japan after World War II—leaving everything familiar behind, feeling friendless and displaced—and then finding, in the little American library in Tokyo, my favorite companions: *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* and *The Yearling*. I reread them with a sense of familiarity and comfort, having Francie and Jody with me once again.

At the end of the book *Rabble Starkey*, the young protagonist is sitting beside her mother in a car, as they drive away from the life they have known into a future that has yet to unfold. She says this:

“Remember those two books? My very favorite ones—*The Red Pony* and *The Yearling*? Both of them with a boy named Jody?”

Her mother, watching the road, nods.

“I’m just now realizing that they’re both about the same thing. About all kinds of loving, and about saying goodbye. And about moving on to where more things are in store.”

“They’re about growing older,” her mother replies.

“And growing up,” says the girl.

* * * * *

Several years ago, when one of my children was killed in a tragic accident, many of you wrote to me. I kept—and value still—all of those letters with their messages of sympathy and affection. But the one that I remember best came from an old friend, Albert Duclos, who was a Shakespearian actor. He simply wrote to me what Shakespeare wrote in the sixteenth century, in the scene from *Macbeth* where Malcolm says to the stunned and grieving MacDuff—and

Albert Duclos wrote to me only this—“Give sorrow words.”

My book *The Giver* is about people who are unable to do that. They have relinquished words. Oh, they have language, of course; they even insist on what they call “precision of language” so that there are never misinterpretations or misunderstandings. But they have lost the lyricism and subtlety of language. Poetry is gone, and stories are forgotten. The library has closed down. Literature is lost.

Give sorrow words? Oops. Can’t. Don’t remember how.

Two books later, in *Messenger*, the third book of what has become known as *The Giver* trilogy, words have returned. The disillusioned boy, Jonas, is there, older, changed, in the new place; and books are there, too, and words from the past. They mourn the loss of the boy Matty with the words—written a hundred years ago—of A. E. Housman. Give sorrow words? Now they can:

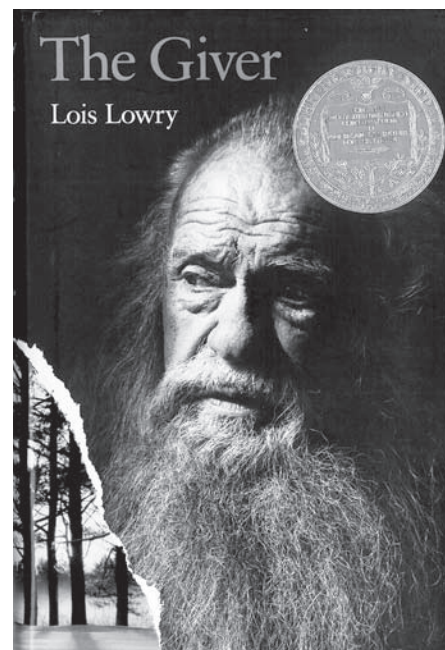
Today, the road all runners come,
Shoulder-high we bring you home,
And set you at your threshold down,
Townsmen of a stiller town.

* * * * *

In December, I spoke at a large conference, and afterward someone called my attention to the blog of someone who had been there that day. The person had enjoyed my presentation—I suppose that if she hadn’t, no one would have directed me to the blog post. But in referring to me, she had described me as “the venerable author Lois Lowry.”

I gulped. I took it to mean old. Ancient. Well, why not? Fair enough. I’ve already told you that I’m seventy-four. But still! I brooded about it a bit. Then I looked it up and found, to my relief, that it can also mean respected and wise. That felt a little better than plain old *old*.

But I must have become a bit obsessive because I found myself thinking, sud-



denly, about the Venerable Bede. Where did that memory come from? No idea. Who here—show of hands?—knows exactly who the Venerable Bede was, even if you recognize the name?

I Googled him. Just for the record, he was a seventh-century Northumbrian monk, a scholar and writer of English Ecclesiastical History. His works—no longer under copyright (so you don’t have to ask permission if you want to have some lines tattooed on your shoulder) are available online, in Latin, of course. (Perhaps Myron Krupnik would translate for you after he finishes singing the tenor aria in the Verdi Requiem).

But here is one lovely bit from my research into the Venerable Bede which I am so happy to have come across: he wrote that our life is such a little thing, it’s like a bird in the darkness suddenly finding a way into a banquet hall and flying through it and looking down at all the banqueters and then flying out the other side.

Do you love that image as much as I do? I picture the bird looking down at the feast that our lives consist of . . . maybe swooping low here and there to taste something, to savor it, before he glides on. Maybe even spitting something out, because we all know that at any potluck (and that’s what our lives are, a collection of things that others bring to it) there is always going to be the occasional tuna

casserole, and Aunt Grace always brings her molded Jello salad with marshmallows in it.

And what if the banquet consists of literature, as mine would, as mine has? There have always been less than memorable books. There will always be celebrity biographies and novelized versions of animated movies and how-to books to help you improve your love life or your golf game. But now and then, here and there, you would find bits and pieces of pure gold.

That's what I've found. And I've tried to give them back, to pass them on. I've spoken tonight of Housman and Hopkins, Shakespeare and Steinbeck. But there are so many others. And they are pure, pure gold.

* * * * *

Twenty-eight years ago this past January, I received a letter from a father who enclosed a photograph of his seventeen-year-old son. The boy's name, I recall, was David. Typical high school senior, wearing a jacket with the name of a sports team on it. Hair in his eyes. Big grin. He looked like a nice kid.

His father's letter continued with a description of his much-loved only son but concluded with an account of the boy's sudden death during an asthma attack the previous September.

Why had he written to me? He told me that their surviving child was a fourteen-year-old daughter. (I remember that her name was Bronwyn—isn't it amazing, to remember such a detail after twenty-eight years?)

He told me that she had read and loved my book *A Summer to Die*, my first book, the one about my sister. A month before, the whole family still reeling from David's death, Bronwyn had gone to that book, had copied one paragraph in fine calligraphy, framed it and given it to her parents for Christmas.

He told me that the words she copied were these:

Time goes on, and your life is still there, and you have to live it. After a while you remember the good things more often than the bad. Then, gradually, the empty silent parts of you fill up with sounds of talking and laughter again, and the jagged edges of sadness are softened by memories.

Much more recently—probably two years ago—I spoke at an evening event at a library someplace. There were a lot of kids, and whole families, and I showed pictures of my own childhood and talked about the origins of various books. Then I signed books, and the evening was ending, when a gray-haired man came up to me.

"I wanted to tell you," he said, "that we do remember the good things more often than the bad.

"I'm David's father. I don't know if you'll remember me."

I did remember him, then. We talked briefly, and hugged and said goodbye. But what has stayed with me was the realization that the words that had spoken to him, that he had carried with him for almost three decades, were words

of mine—that in the same way writers from the past had whispered to me, I had whispered to this man's daughter, and through her to him, and they had found comfort in those words.

* * * * *

The poet Howard Nemerov, in a poem called "The Makers," speaks of the earliest poets:

They were the ones that in whatever tongue

Worded the world, that were the first to say

Star, water, stone, that said the visible

And made it bring invisibles to view

I know that for some reason, this evening, I seem to have focused on sorrow. Perhaps those times, when Goldengrove is unleaving and winter is coming and we are mourning for ourselves—and, as Will Banks told Meg in the book, we all do—those are the times when we most need the burnished and golden words that have brought invisibles to view through generations.

But I'm grateful as well for those countless generations—centuries—of poets and writers who have also given words to courage, to joy, to humor, to integrity, to memory—and who have nourished me and compelled me to add my own words, and to give them, then, to children.

Thank you. ☺

INCOMING PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE, continued from page 4

I will communicate value within ALSC. *Children and Libraries* and our newsletter, *ALSCconnect*, will include my columns. You also may see my efforts to communicate our value in the wider world, as every ALSC president fields many media requests. If you're at conference, sit in on a board meeting to see

how our board makes decisions about value and how to communicate it.

I hope that I will also be hearing from you. ALSC is your association, and your participation is essential.

In future months, through our various

media channels, we will continue the conversation on communicating value. Many thanks for the opportunity to serve as your president during the coming year. I look forward to communicating the deep value of ALSC and our work to you and with you as we make our positive difference in the world! ☺