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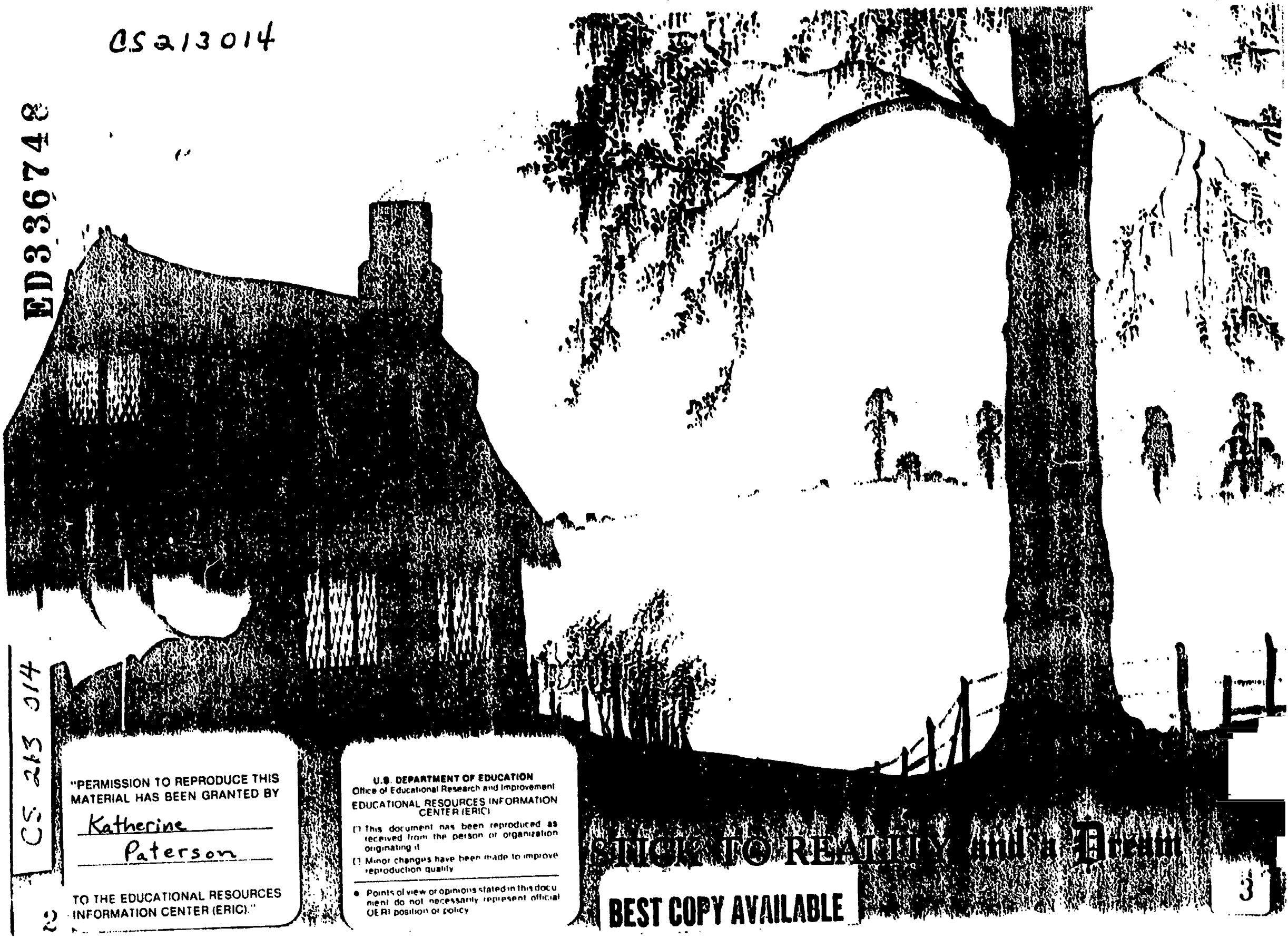
ABSTRACT

Arguing that children are not taken seriously in the United States, this lecture states that basic education is not simply computing and decoding, but also dreaming and imagining. The lecture urges educators not only to stick to the reality of budget cutting and deficit spending but, for the children's sake, also to stick to a dream. In the lecture, the speaker (an award-winning writer of children's literature) describes several instances in which young readers responded to her books by digging below the surface, generating thoughtful, probing questions and gaining insight through repeated reading of the same book. The lecture also argues that those people who do take children seriously should stop apologizing for what they do and take delight in caring for and nurturing young readers. The lecture concludes that adults can learn from the young how once again to come to the printed page with wonder and excitement and a humility which allows delight and compassion to flourish. (Fifteen notes are included.) (RS)



STICK TO REALITY and a Dream

STICK TO REALITY AND A DREAM

STICK TO REALITY and a Dream

CELEBRATING AMERICA'S YOUNG READERS

A Lecture for the Year of the Young Reader
Presented on November 17, 1988
At the Library of Congress

by KATHERINE PATERSON

A Publication of the
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FOREWORD

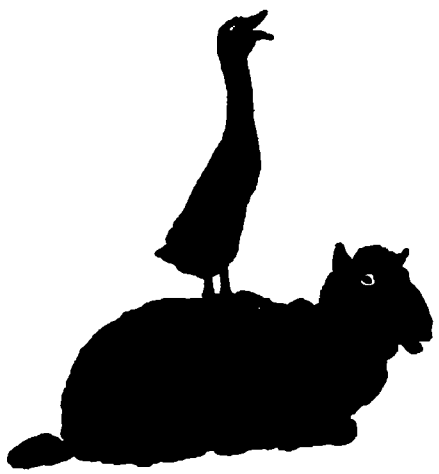
For more than twenty-five years, the Children's Literature Center in the Library of Congress has provided information to the national and international children's book and library communities. A resource, consultant, and facilitator for the use and study of children's literature by scholarly and professional groups, the center provides services to the general public as well.

The Children's Literature Center organizes symposia and celebrations, issues publications, and raises funds for special projects. The center participates in the Library's acquisitions process and cooperates with other units in the Library having reference, acquisition, custodial, and processing responsibilities for children's books, films, graphic art, and other media.

Underlying all of the center's work is its goal to further the development of children's literature as a scholarly resource and to raise the level of awareness of children's books as educational and recreational assets.

A celebration to mark the beginning of the 1989 Year of the Young Reader, officially proclaimed by President Ronald Reagan, was held at the Library of Congress on November 17, 1988, during National Children's Book Week. The celebration, organized and coordinated by the Children's Literature Center and cosponsored by the Center for the Book, welcomed more than four hundred librarians, educators, adults, and children to the Library's Coolidge Auditorium. The speaker was Katherine Paterson, a widely acclaimed author of children's books who has twice won the prestigious Newbery Medal and the National Book Award and who has received a host of similar honors in recognition of her many contributions to children's literature.

Katherine Paterson was born in the Jiansgu Province of China, in the city of Qing Jiang. Her parents were missionaries of the Southern Presbyterian church and Chinese was her first language, although, she says, she quickly became bilingual. She led an adventurous life growing up. Before she was eighteen years old, the family had moved fifteen times and twice fled from Japanese invaders.



The first time was in 1937, when she was five years old, and Americans were being evacuated from China and sent home as refugees; the second was the following year, after the family had again returned to China.

Despite all the discomforts and inconveniences, Katherine Paterson was happy being a "mish' kid," and her dream was to follow her parents' example, become a missionary herself, and "eat Chinese food three times a day." When she was ready to embark on that career, however, China was still closed to most foreigners, and a friend suggested she go to Japan instead. Reluctantly, she did, overcoming her misgivings and relinquishing memories of places she had lived and friends she had left behind in China. Once in Japan, however, she began to adapt. She learned to speak Japanese and to love the people, and she seriously considered spending her life in that country. But fate had other plans. While on home leave for a year of study, she met a young Presbyterian pastor, the Reverend John Paterson, and again her life took a new direction. They were married in 1962 and she has remained in the United States ever since, except for visits to the Orient. When she first thought of becoming a writer, though, Katherine Paterson turned to stories of feudal Japan, and three of these books—*Of Nightingales That Weep* (New York: Crowell, 1974), *The Master Puppeteer* (New York: Crowell, 1975), and *The Sign of the Chrysanthemum* (New York: Crowell, 1973)—are among the most popular of her writings. Other of her stories reflect contemporary scenes and themes, among them *Bridge to Terabithia* (New York: Crowell 1977) and *Jacob Have I Loved* (New York: Crowell, 1980), both Newbery Medal winners, and *The Great Gilly Hopkins* (New York: Crowell, 1978), a Newbery Honor book.

She chooses difficult subjects to write about—the death of a friend, sisterly jealousies, the rebelliousness of a foster child. She captures and holds the attention of young readers who may very well find themselves in situations like the ones she describes. Her stories engage their imaginations and emotions, presented, as they are, honestly, without sentimentality, and ending always on a note of hope.

In addition, Mrs. Paterson has become a spokeswoman for the children's book and library communities. She speaks out for the child and for those who nurture the child.

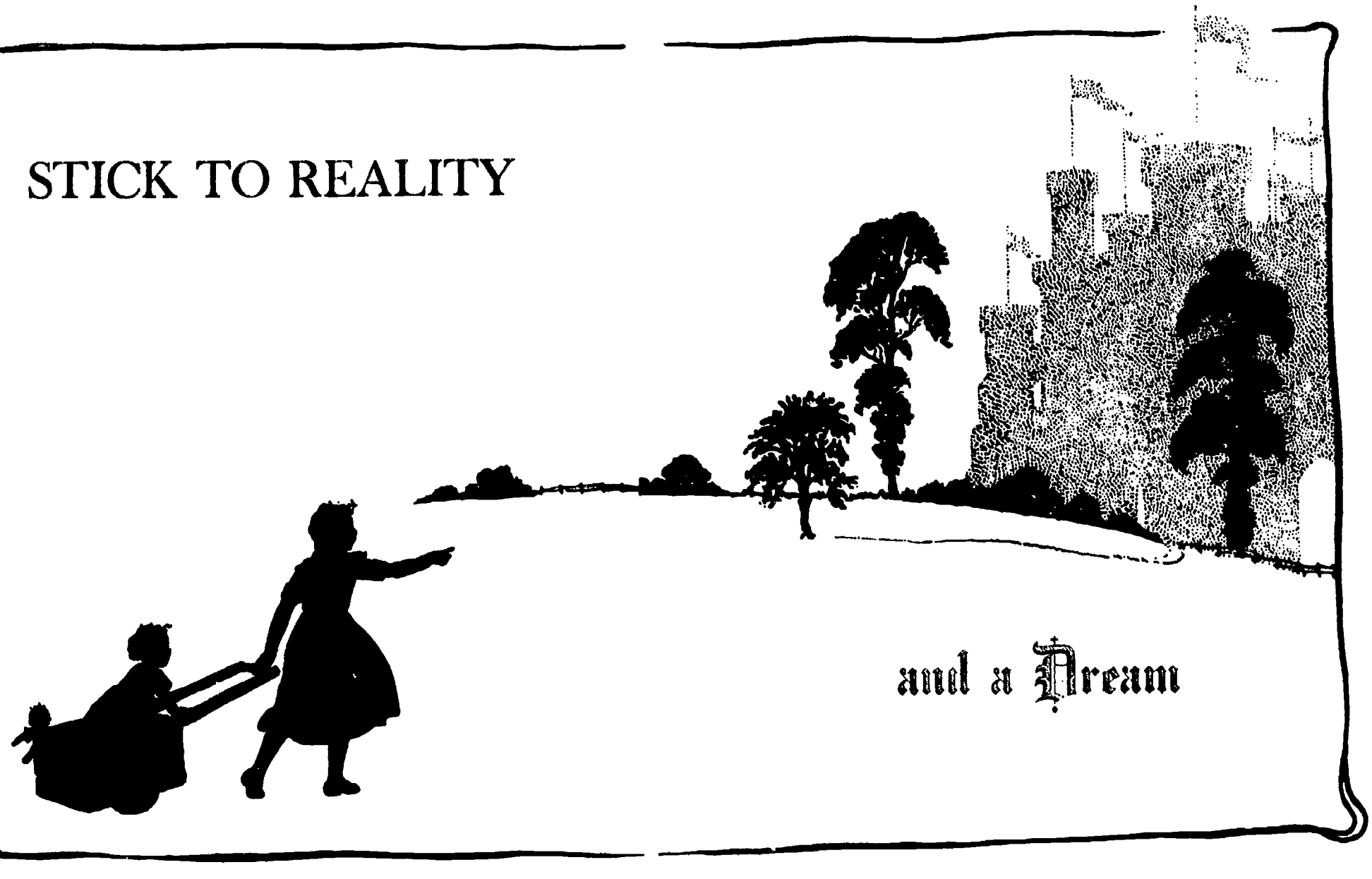
In her presentation at the Library of Congress, Katherine Paterson urged the audience to examine critically the collective perception and treatment of children, charging that in this country and throughout the world, we may abuse children or pamper them, but we do not take children seriously—which is why the school lunch is considered a frill and weapons a necessity.

Pointing out that when education budgets must be trimmed, the first to go is the art teacher, then the music teacher, then the librarian, she emphasized that "basic education is not simply computing and decoding. It is dreaming, it is imagining. We can stick to the reality of budget cutting," she admitted, "but for our children's sake we must also stick to a dream." She concluded her remarks by encouraging everyone present to "learn from the young how once again to come to the printed page with wonder and excitement and a humility which allows delight and compassion to flourish."

It is with pleasure that I present the words of Katherine Paterson, writer, spokeswoman, and friend.

SYBILLE A. JAGUSCH
Chief
CHILDREN'S LITERATURE CENTER

STICK TO REALITY



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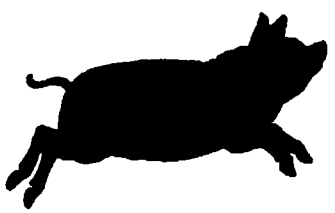


STICK TO REALITY AND A DREAM

Celebrating America's Young Readers

I GREW UP ON A STORY that one of the Roosevelts, I hope it was Eleanor, but it may have been Franklin, had been invited to address the Daughters of the American Revolution at their annual convention, and whichever Roosevelt it was began the keynote address to the august mothers and sisters of the DAR with these words: Greetings, Fellow Immigrants.

Tonight we are gathered to celebrate America's young readers, and it seems only appropriate to begin with an echo of those words: Greetings, Fellow Young Readers. For I daresay that most of us are here tonight because we once leaned hard against our mother's arm and gazed at the book on her lap as she read:

"Once upon a time there were four little Rabbits, and their names were — Flopsy, Mopsy, Cotton-tail, and Peter."[1] Or, "In the High and Far-Off Times the Elephant, O Best Beloved, had no trunk."[2] Or, "There was once upon a time a poor miller who had a very beautiful daughter."[3] Or, "They're changing guards at Buckingham Palace/Christopher Robin went down with Alice."[4] Or even, if we're younger: "In the great green room there was a telephone and a red balloon and a picture of the cow jumping over the moon. . . ."[5]

Then a few years later, but not so many years later, we were snuggled into the dark cave made by our bedclothes, holding in one hand a flashlight and in the other a fat book, shivering as Jim from the bottom of the apple barrel eavesdropped on Long John Silver's plot or weeping uncontrollably as Jody pressed the muzzle of the gun barrel to the back of Flag's smooth neck and pulled the trigger.[6]

For those of us who grew up loving books, it is hard to understand that there are people who don't. Often I am asked to cooperate in schemes to reward reluctant readers for reading. I find the idea appalling. "Bribe children to read?

The little ingrates ought to be down on their knees every day thanking God that they live in a land where they are free to read whatever they choose and where there are libraries filled to brimming over with books to choose from." I am told from time to time that I do not live in the real world — that in this day of MTV and VCRs and computers and Little League and dancing lessons, the child who reads is an anomaly.

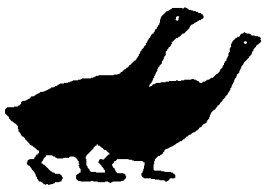
Indeed, I am a bit uncomfortable with the fact that we feel we must set aside a year for young readers as though they are an endangered species. I happen to think they are not. I know there are many children who read poorly or who read very little, but the children I talk to and the children who write to me are, for the most part, not only readers, but wonderful readers, the readers every writer longs to have.

They are readers not only willing to suspend disbelief but eager to give their whole lives to enter imaginatively into the story. They like to be entertained, of course, we all do, but they also enjoy being stretched. A great number of them seem not only willing to dig below the surface, they seem delighted to. "I didn't catch on the first time I read it, but when I read it again . . ." is a refrain I hear surprisingly often, and I must say, it is music to a writer's ears.

I got a compliment from one of those readers recently. I want to read you what she said because it occurred to me that it is the theme for what I want to say to you tonight.

"I really respected [*Bridge to Terabithia*] . . . I would recommend this book to everyone I know. You stuck to reality and you also stuck to a dream. . . ." Thank you, Megan, that's what I try to do every time — stick to reality and also to a dream.

I cannot tell you how grateful I am for such readers. They continue to teach me things about my own books. A fifth-grade boy asked me once if I had named Jesse Aarons after Jesse Owens. Of course I had — Jesse Aarons is a boy longing to be known as a runner, and the sounds of the names are almost identical. But until



that perceptive young reader asked me the question, I did not know where Jesse Aarons's name had come from.[7]

A sixth-grade boy in a rural school on the Eastern Shore asked me, "Don't you see a real resemblance between *The Sign of the Chrysanthemum* and *The Great Gilly Hopkins*?"[8] Well, I do now. I didn't when I was writing *Gilly*, but the relationship between the two books is obvious. Still, no adult critic has ever pointed out the relationship between my novel set in twelfth-century Japan and the one set in modern day Maryland — just a sixth grader from Exmore, Virginia.

But my books are not just for those some call "the special readers," thoughtful, academic achievers whose natural habitat is between the covers of a book. Young readers come in all sorts and varieties. Let me tell you about Eddy, who is one of my favorites.

Several years ago I was asked to speak at a junior high school in Northern Virginia. I had given the teacher who called me about the visit my usual spiel about what I do when I visit a school. No one has argued about which category I belong to — the quick or the dead. Neither has my biological species been seriously in doubt. Therefore, I do not go to schools to prove to children that I am a real, live person. I am not a rock singer or a magician, and I do not wish to feed the celebrity fever that inflicts our nation and poisons our children's sense of self-worth. So I will not stand in front of an auditorium full of children and try vainly to convince them that this mild-mannered, ordinary-looking housewife standing on the platform is somebody famous.

What I will do, and what I like to do, is sit down with a classroom of students who have read some of my books and want to talk about them with me. The students don't have to love anything I've written, they just have to be sufficiently interested to want to discuss it.

The women in charge of the day had me in a moving car on the way to the school before they began to explain to me what was about to happen. They hadn't-uh-exactly-uh-been able to arrange things the way I had requested. They knew I had

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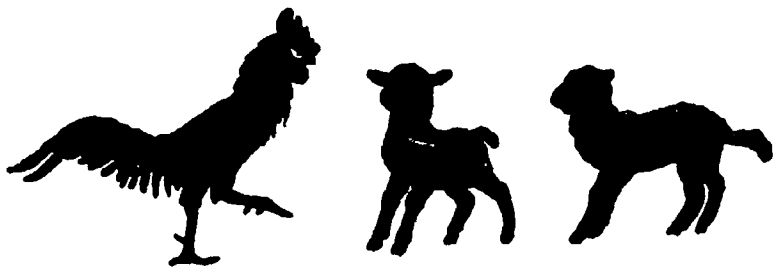


asked for a small group, so they had originally planned for me to speak to the students in the gifted and talented program, which would have made it a group of only about seventy. But the special education teacher had read *The Great Gilly Hopkins* to her class and had absolutely insisted that her twenty students be allowed to horn in on the program.

To my relief, things went pretty well. I couldn't tell which of the ninety-some students were from the gifted program and which from special education, since most of the questions were of the ordinary variety. There was, however, one boy in a red sweatshirt whom I kept watching. He was sitting off to the side quite by himself. He never spoke, but he listened to everything being said with extraordinary attention.

The session ended and the students began filtering back to their regular classes, but the boy in the red sweatshirt hung around, waiting for the library to clear. Then he came up to me. Who is Gilly? he asked. Where does she live? What are all the stories about her that didn't get into this book?

I knew it was one of those occasions when the real question has yet to be articulated, but before I could figure out what the real question was, one of the teachers told the boy that he must go to class and that I must catch an airplane.

"That was Eddy," the librarian explained to me. "He's a member of the special education class." And he went on to tell me about thirteen-year-old Eddy who had been a constant problem at home and at school, who had never shown the least bit of interest in anything remotely academic until the day his teacher had begun reading aloud *The Great Gilly Hopkins*. Suddenly Eddy had a passion. He had fallen in love with a book — here he was one of America's army of young nonreaders who up until then had seen the printed word as an unconquerable enemy — and suddenly, to the utter astonishment of everyone who knew him, Eddy was raving about a book.

So when his teacher heard that I was coming to the school, she begged and bullied her class into the event. She knew that no one had more right to be there than Eddy.

I went home that day, but I couldn't stop thinking about Eddy. He seemed to me a real live Gilly, who had set his seal of approval on my fictional one. It was better than having an expert on the Japanese puppet theater speak highly of *The Master Puppeteer*.[9] So I sent Eddy a copy of the book — a brand new hardback copy. Even if he won't read it, even if he can't read it, at least, I thought, he'll own a book he likes, and that will be one for our side, won't it?

Just before *Gilly Hopkins* won the National Book Award, I got a note from Eddy, which he gave me permission to read on that occasion and later to publish. I told him I could use a fictitious name if he liked. He made a point of asking me to use his full name whenever I told his story. He wrote:

> *Dear Mrs. Paterson,*
>
> *Thank you for the book,* The Great Gilly Hopkins. *I love the book. I am on page 16.*
>
> *Your friend always*
>
> Eddy Young

Eddy finished reading the book. In fact he reread it several times. He also read *Bridge to Terabithia* and went on to discover other books and other authors. He transferred the following year to a vocational school. I won't pretend that he became an academic prodigy, but he *did* become a young reader, because he had a teacher who not only stuck to reality, she stuck to a dream.

I can tell stories like this, and still people will ask me, "Why do you write for children?" They seem to think that a writer who is any good at all is wasting her efforts writing exclusively for children. No one will ever take you seriously, I'm told by perfectly intelligent adults who do not even realize that they have just relegated to non-personhood not only me but all the children who read my books and take them quite seriously. But perhaps that's because in this country we may abuse children or pamper them, but we refuse to take children seriously.

In 1981 I was invited to the Polish Embassy on Sixteenth Street where Ambassador Spasowski gave me a medal which a group in Poland had presented to *Bridge to Terabithia* in honor of Janusz Korczak.

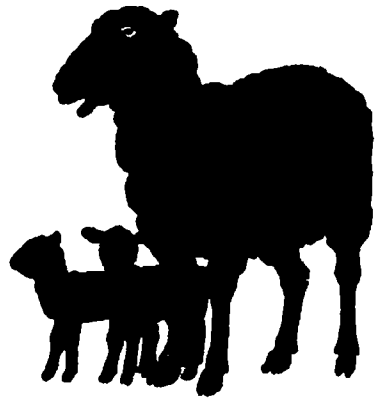
"I need to explain to you about this man," the ambassador said. And during the informal ceremony in the embassy parlor he talked of Korczak who was one of the first people in Europe to be concerned about the nurture and education and psychology of children. Korczak was a director of two orphanages in the city of Warsaw — one Jewish, the other Gentile. When the Germans invaded he was given a chance to escape the country, but he chose to move into the ghetto with his Jewish orphans, and when they were taken to Treblinka, he went with them. At the train station, he took two children by the hand. The rest followed him, heads held high into the box car. It is told that the guards who had patrolled the ghetto saluted as he passed.

"I cannot claim," the ambassador went on, "that my father and Dr. Korczak were friends, but my father, too, taught pedagogy at the University of Warsaw, so they were colleagues. And since my father also died violently during the occupation, I always think of them together."

In November of 1981, Poland, as you remember, was in turmoil. There were food riots in Warsaw on the same day that I was given the medal and had a leisurely lunch with the ambassador at his club. Three weeks later, Ambassador Spasowski resigned his post and defected, in order, he said: "To show my solidarity with the Polish people." I suppose that awarding that medal honoring a children's psychologist and protector to a writer of a book for children was among the last official acts of his long diplomatic career.

I'll never forget that day. Nor will I forget the commentary on it made by a friend of mine. "What other country do you know of," she asked, "that has for a hero someone who gave his life for children?"

You see, we are not accustomed to taking children that seriously. Which is why we call the school lunch program a frill and weapons necessities. That's why we

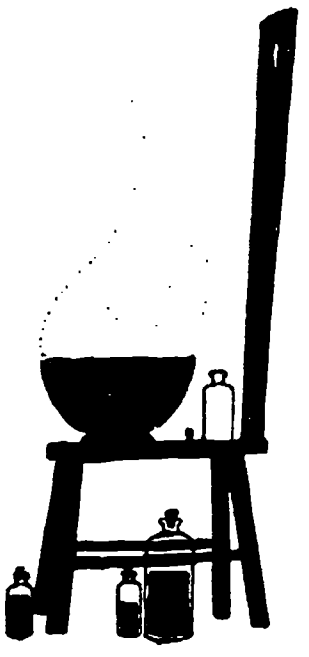


can mortgage our children's future with an unbelievable budget deficit and casually poison the environment in which they will have to live. Can you begin to imagine the difference it would make to the present and to the future of the world if we were to begin to take children seriously? For one thing, we would respect the adults who care for and educate children. At the very least we would make sure they were carefully selected, rigorously trained, and generously compensated. And, just for starters, can you imagine what would happen to the Children's Literature Center of the Library of Congress, if we were to become a nation that took children seriously?

I don't need to tell you how far from the real world such fantasies are, but at least those of us who do take children seriously should stop apologizing for what we do. "I am only a teacher." "I am only a librarian." "I am only a mother." "I only write for children." We've let the rest of our society sell us cheap. And in so doing we've betrayed the children entrusted to our care and nurture. We can stick to the reality of budget deficits and cost cutting, indeed we must, but for our children's sake, we must also stick to a dream.

The scientist Jacob Bronowski was one of those who took children seriously. He knew too that the dream must be part of reality — if society itself is to endure. The final chapter of his last book, *The Ascent of Man*, is entitled "The Long Childhood." Because he believed that it is the long childhood that has made civilization possible:

> History, of course, did not stand still between the nomad and the Renaissance. The ascent of man has never come to a stop. But the ascent of the young, the ascent of the talented, the ascent of the imaginative: that became very halting many times in between.
>
> Of course there were great civilisations. Who am I to belittle the civilisations of Egypt, of China, of India, even of Europe in the Middle Ages? And yet by one test they all fail: they limit the freedom of the imagination of the young. . . . [10]



"They limit the freedom of the imagination of the young." And what of our nation? Why is it that even in the most enlightened cities and states when budgets must be cut, libraries are expendable? Why is it when education budgets must be trimmed the first to go is the art teacher, then the music teacher, then the librarian? Basic education, my friends, is not simply computing and decoding, it is dreaming, it is imagining.

"How can I help my son become a mathematician?" a mother asked Albert Einstein. "Read him the great myths of the past," the wise doctor is said to have replied, "Stretch his imagination."

Perhaps it is only my imagination at work, but I hear in those words not a call to duty but a call to joy. So much of the discussion about teaching children to read these days is grim-faced and puritanical. "Children must learn to read because — ." "Children must learn to read or else — ."

What is missing is the element of delight that you and I remember — snuggled close to our parents or hidden away with our flashlights under the bedclothes, that delight wonderfully expressed by Clifton Fadiman:

> During those ten years [between four and fourteen] I read for reading's sake. I didn't do it to learn anything, though I found later on that I had learned a lot. I didn't read to prepare myself for a grown-up career, though I found later on that my ability to read helped me to make a living. I didn't read because anybody told me to. I didn't read to get ahead of anyone else, or to improve my marks in school. I read for the same reason we all like to open Christmas gifts. Each book was a surprise package stuffed with things I had no idea ever existed. [11]

Two weeks ago today I went down to Southern Vermont to hear Patricia MacLachlan speak. There among the almost uniformly female audience of teachers and librarians was a young man. He introduced himself to me as the principal of the elementary school in Bellows Falls. "It's wonderful to see a principal interested in books," I said. He smiled shyly. "I used to think my specialty was science," he said. "But a few years ago someone put me on to

children's books, and I haven't been able to get enough since. I invite little groups of children into my office and read out loud to them. I think," he said earnestly, "that they should know that the principal's office can be a happy place to be. And now all of our teachers are reading children's books. We've even got our janitor excited. Just yesterday, two of my teachers had laryngitis, and they both asked if I could come down and read aloud to their classes. I said yes to both of them and then realized because of the time I wouldn't be be able to. So I read to one class and the janitor read to the other." He was beaming all over.

"I bet you don't have any trouble getting children to read in your school," I said.

"Well, no," he said. "No, actually, we don't seem to."

We read for joy and sometimes we read for consolation, as witnessed by a story from one of my favorite books of this past year. The book is *Little by Little: A Writer's Education*. Jean Little is a Canadian writer who, all her life, has been stuck with the reality of her own blindness. One day when she was seven, her older brother was sick and she had to ride the streetcar home from school alone. Without her brother to help and protect her, other children on the car jeered at her strange crossed eyes, and a gruff man frightened her. Hurt, afraid, and unable to see her stop, she rode the streetcar all the way to the end of the line.

"When I finally arrived [home]," she writes, "dusk had fallen. I stumbled up the short front walk. Before I could get all the way into our house, mother was there, snatching me up into her arms."

> "You're safe!" she cried. "Oh, Jean, what happened? Where have you been?"
>
> Holding onto her for dear life, my face pressed into her shoulder, I sobbed out my story. Mother finally understood. . . . She said very little, just held me close for a long, long moment. Then she set me on my feet and spoke in her usual brisk voice.
>
> "Why don't you go and get your pyjamas on? You look like you are worn out. I'll call you when it's suppertime." . . .
>
> When I wakened an hour later, Mother brought my supper up and served it to me on a low table that went across my knees.

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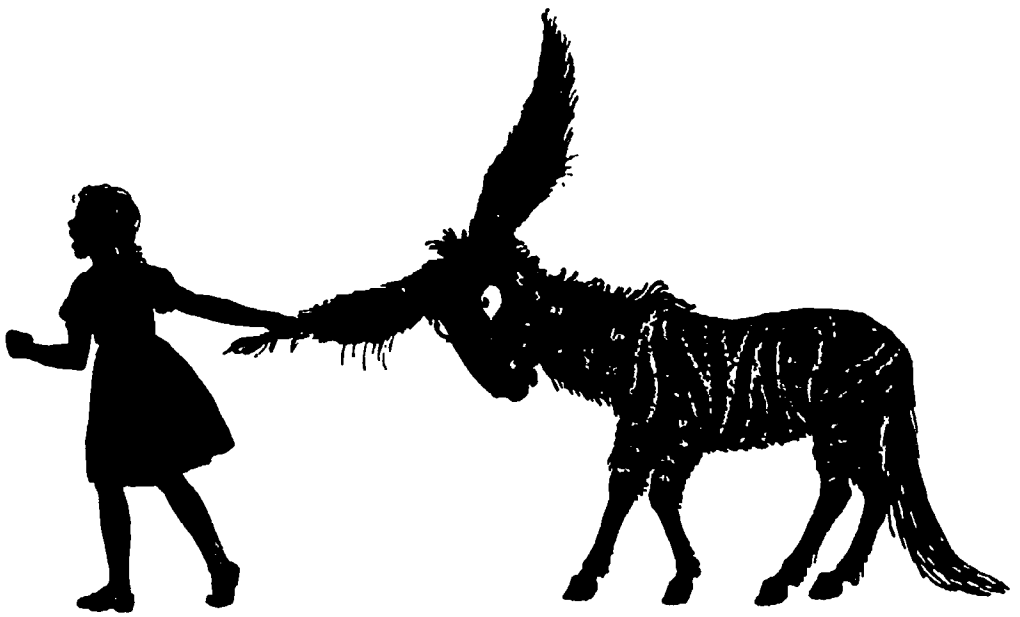


"Read to me while I eat," I said, knowing that she was feeling extra fond of me.

"All right," she said, "but wait till I get the others. I have a book I've been wanting to read to you but I want you all to hear it."

I did not protest . . . I knew I was ahead of my brothers already . . . I wanted them to see me, sitting up against my pillows.

The boys came . . . Mother opened the book and began. "When Mary Lennox was sent to Misselthwaite manor to live with her uncle, everybody said she was the most disagreeable child ever seen. It was true too."

I laid down my spoon. From the first sentence, *The Secret Garden* seemed especially mine. I did not wonder what Mary Lennox looked like. She looked exactly like me.

She, too, was selfish and bad-tempered and lazy.

Yet, little by little, she grew into somebody quite different. And the way it happened made perfect sense. I knew that I, too, would be different if I could find a hidden garden and friends like Dickon and Colin and the robin.[12]

Books can delight us and console us and even change us, but not without our permission. The reader gets to choose how or if a book will affect him. Another writer friend, Claire Mackay, told me of babysitting one night for her three-year-old grandson. She had brought him a present — a wonderful new edition of the *Three Billy Goats Gruff* illustrated by Paul Galdone.[13] Ryder was leafing through his new book in that serious way three-year-olds have when they are doing what they call reading. Suddenly his eyes widened. He had come to the double-page full-color spread of the Troll. He shut the book. "Nana," Ryder said, "please take this to your house and bring it back when I'm a bigger boy." Grandmother and grandson settled then on a comfortingly familiar story by Shirley Hughes and read it three times before they both fell contentedly to sleep.

Meantime the *Three Billy Goats Gruff* will wait patiently and unchanging for Ryder to grow big enough to enjoy it. We can trust books to do this for us. I think we can also trust young readers more than most of us dare.

We're fearful, we adults. We want to know if they read and when they read and

what they read and why they read, and if they don't understand what that Ferris wheel symbolizes in the first sentence of *Tuck Everlasting* we give them a C minus.[14] It doesn't count that the child loved the book and was able because of it to face his own mortality a little more bravely.

We're so occupied with our own agenda for their reading that we forget more important things. We forget the power a book may have for a child which is quite apart from the literal or even figurative understanding of the text. We want children to get from the book what we got from the book, forgetting the wisdom of readers of whatever age to choose from a book that which is appropriate for their own lives.

I often think of Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem "Spring and Fall," which he addresses to a child:

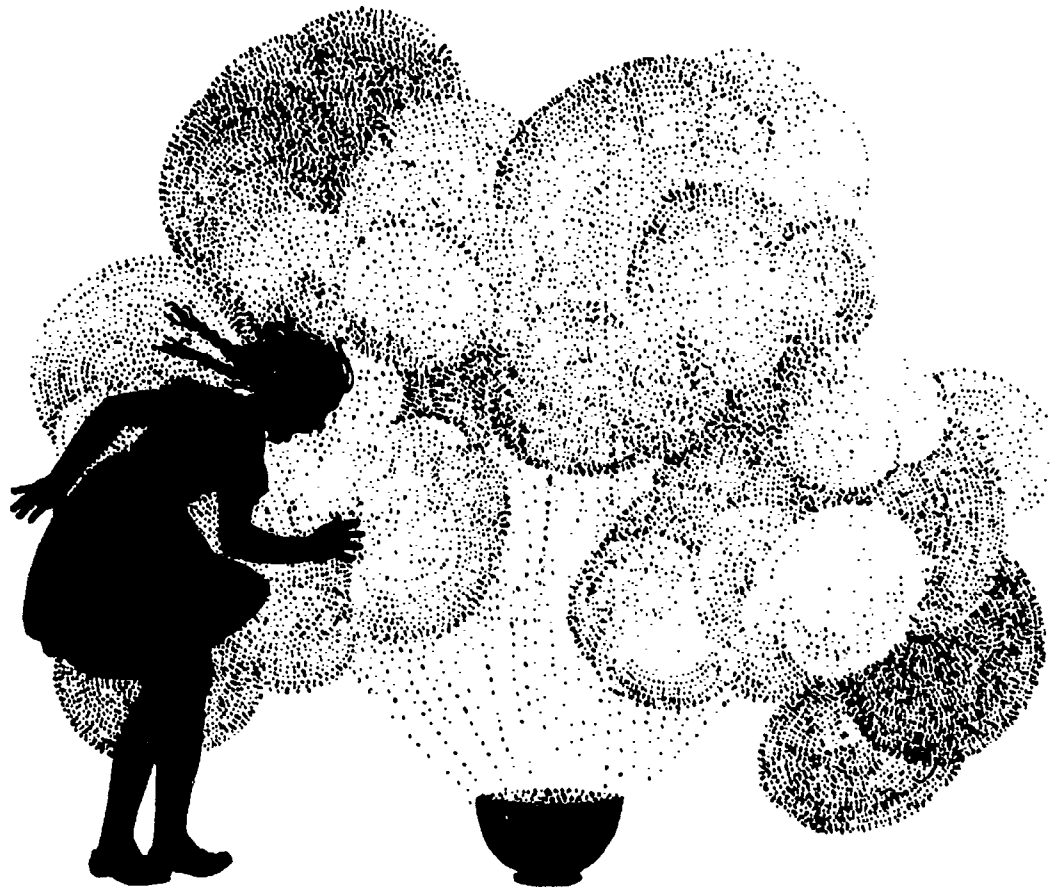
> Margaret, are you grieving
> Over Goldengrove unleaving?
> Leaves, like the things of man, you
> With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?
> Ah! as the heart grows older
> It will come to such sights colder
> By and by, nor spare a sigh
> Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie;
> And yet you will weep and know why.
> Now no matter, child, the name:
> Sorrow's springs are the same.
> Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed
> What heart heard of, ghost guessed:
> It is the blight man was born for,
> It is Margaret you mourn for.[15]

Those of us who write for young readers try to put into words what at three or ten or fourteen, mouth and mind cannot quite express, but that which heart has heard of, ghost guessed. And friends, if you ask us why we write for the young, it is because we choose the passionate heart over the cold intellect every time.

Why do we come to such sights colder as the years go by? Where did our uninhibited delight, our sympathetic sorrow go? Well, we're older now, we say. We have to live in the real world. Let me remind you that our children have to live in the real world too — a world that they have never made and often do not much care for. They're stuck to reality, like it or not, and they respect adults who don't pretend that this world is less than a tough place to live. But they're also stuck to a dream of how the world might be.

The poet William Stafford, when asked when he decided to become a poet, says: "My question is 'When did other people give up the idea of being a poet?' You know, when we are kids we make things; we write, and for me the puzzle is not that some people are still writing, the real question is why did other people stop?"

The puzzle for me is not that some people are still dreaming, but why did other people stop? The Year of the Young Reader is a year for us all. We can learn from the young how once again to come to the printed page with wonder and excitement and a humility which allows delight and compassion to flourish. And equipped with delight and compassion, we might even begin to shape our lives and the life of the planet entrusted to our care toward a vision of justice and freedom and wholeness. So that it may be said of all of us, young and old alike, that we stuck to reality but we also stuck to a dream.



NOTES

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