

# AMERICAN **Educator**

Two-thirds of American children have TVs in their *bedrooms*, co-ed sleepovers are the latest teenage fad, and nine-year-olds are being treated to Britney Spears parties.

## Why Aren't We Saying *No*?

# The Word Is Out.

"National Board Certification addresses professionalism in teaching ... It's a tool that the profession really needs."

*USA Today, October 19, 2000 article*

"Education leaders, legislators, school boards, administrators, union negotiators and teachers ... should join forces to promote the value of National Board Certification and give teachers incentives to achieve it."

*The Portland Oregonian, December 30, 2000, editorial*

"Better teachers get better results ... Students of nationally certified teachers show high comprehension of the subjects taught."

*Cleveland Plain Dealer, October 28, 2000, editorial*



"National Board Certification is the country's highest teaching honor. When teachers are good, students are more motivated, parents are more engaged and (a school) administration's work is ... less daunting."

*Los Angeles Daily News, December 8, 2000, editorial*

"These are not good teachers. These are not outstanding teachers. (National Board Certified Teachers) are the very best in America."

*Austin American Statesman, December 11, 2000, editorial*

"Good teachers hold the key to student success ... National Board Certified Teachers and their students significantly outperform their ... peers."

*Charlotte Observer, January 5, 2001, editorial columnist*

## National Board Certification promotes: *Better Teaching – Better Learning – Better Schools*

National Board Certification offers a way for teachers to take a new look at their teaching and feed their desire for professional growth. Comparable to established standards in other professions, certification is a highly regarded process created and judged by teachers for the **National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS)**.

To become a National Board Certified Teacher, teachers complete a performance-based assessment that requires documenting subject matter knowledge, demonstrating the ability to teach subjects effectively and showing a proven ability to manage and measure student learning.

According to a recent study by the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, National Board Certified Teachers outperform their peers in teaching expertise and student achievement. And many experts agree that National Board Certified Teachers have a positive impact beyond their classroom, improving teaching, learning and schools.



1525 Wilson Boulevard  
Suite 500  
Arlington, VA 22209  
703 . 465 . 2700  
fax: 703 . 465 . 2849  
[www.nbpts.org](http://www.nbpts.org)

To learn more about the benefits of becoming a National Board Certified Teacher, please contact the NBPTS at 1-800-22TEACH or visit [www.nbpts.org](http://www.nbpts.org).

## 4 **Parenting: The Lost Art**

By Kay S. Hymowitz

*When parents fail to define a moral universe for their children, they set them adrift—unmoored and vulnerable—in a sensationalist, media-saturated world.*

## 10 **Why Geography Matters**

By Walter A. McDougall

*Whatever happened to the study of geography? Unless students can “do the map”—and many cannot—they have no way of understanding why the world is the way it is.*



## 16 **A Tribute to Jeanne Chall**

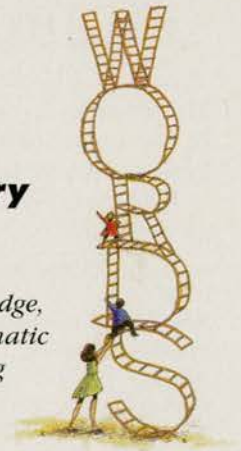
*Due in large part to Jeanne Chall's lifelong dedication to the field of reading education, countless children who otherwise would be hopelessly struggling are now on a secure path to literacy.*



## 24 **Teaching Vocabulary**

By Andrew Biemiller

*Comprehension rests to large degree on vocabulary knowledge, but by grade 5 there are dramatic vocabulary differences among children. We can do something about that.*



## 29 **Real Heroes**

By Dennis Denenberg



*Pop quiz for your students: Who are Elizabeth Blackwell, George Marshall, Matthew Henson, Jonas Salk, and Yo-Yo Ma? If they don't know, here's just the book they need.*

## 38 **E.B. White and Charlotte's Web**

By Scott Elledge

*Fifty years ago, on January 19, 1951, E.B. White finished the first draft of Charlotte's Web. Eleven million copies later, it remains one of the most beloved children's books of all time.*



The Professional Journal  
of the American  
Federation of Teachers  
Volume 25, No. 1  
Spring 2001

**SANDRA FELDMAN**  
President  
American Federation of Teachers

**Elizabeth McPike**  
editor

**Marcia Reecer**  
deputy editor

**Sandra Hendricks**  
production coordinator

**Laura Baker**  
copy editor

**Debbie Johnson**  
production support staff

**Andrew Bornstein**  
design consultant

The *American Educator* (USPS 008-462)  
is published quarterly by the  
American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO  
555 New Jersey Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20001-2079  
Telephone: 202-879-4420

*American Educator* is mailed to all AFT  
teacher, higher education and other school-  
related professional members. Annual  
subscription price: \$1.75 (included in  
membership dues) and available only as a  
part of membership.

Subscription for others: \$8.

Periodicals postage paid at Washington, DC  
and additional mailing offices.

**Postmaster:** Send address changes to  
*American Educator*

555 New Jersey Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20001-2079

**Members:** To change your address, please cut  
out your label with code numbers from the  
back of the magazine and mail it with your  
new address to the address above.

*American Educator* cannot assume respon-  
sibility for unsolicited manuscripts. Please  
allow a minimum of four weeks for copyright  
permission requests. Letters to the Editor may  
be sent by regular mail or via e-mail to  
amered@aft.org.

Signed articles and advertisements do not  
necessarily represent the viewpoints or  
policies of the American Federation of  
Teachers.

**General advertising office**

555 New Jersey Ave., NW  
Washington, DC 20001-2079  
Telephone: 202-879-4420

**Advertising Sales Representative**  
**Peter Li, Inc.**

801 Wells St., Suite 901  
Chicago, IL 60607  
800-799-5080  
312-939-1344

*American Educator* is produced with the  
assistance of members of Local 2, Office and  
Professional Employees International Union,  
AFL-CIO, and members of AFT Staff Union.  
Composition and printing are done in 100  
percent union shops.

© American Federation of Teachers, 2001.



# LETTERS

## APPLAUSE

Congratulations on a superb issue (Winter 2000-2001). Your lead article about Layle Lane highlights the social concerns and contributions of women in this organization (and dramatically underscores the courage of this remarkable black woman). Al Shanker would be proud of you!

Also, the article "Verbicide" deserves to be required reading for all professionals who try to understand today's children.

I have read every word of this issue and thank you for it.

—CARL L. KLINE

VANCOUVER, BRITISH COLUMBIA

## LAYLE LANE

I'd like to commend you on Jack Schierenbeck's lengthy and informative article about Layle Lane (Winter 2000-2001). Hopefully it will make educators more appreciative of what has come before in terms of labor history. Thank you for publishing it.

—NAOMI HEILIG

NEW YORK, NEW YORK

Layle Lane sounds like a hero to me. I plan to do a research project with young girls on women's biographies. I would like to include her in the list of choices. Thanks for a great introduction to an outstanding woman in American history.

—IRENE YOZZO

POUGHKEEPSIE, NEW YORK

## VERBICIDE

I am a retired psychologist; my wife is a middle school computer science teacher. This evening, as I was preparing dinner, she read to me David W. Orr's article, "Verbicide" (Winter 2000-2001).

Professor Orr has scored a bulls-eye, in my judgment, with this very perceptive and accurate appraisal of the state of language, communica-

tion and our ability to perceive, study, identify problems and formulate solutions. No wonder we seem to be at such loggerheads so much of the time. As he states, our diminished vocabulary is not just a paucity of word understanding and usage—it represents a decline in our capacity to think.

Considering the obvious long-term contribution of teachers to this sad state of affairs, matched only by equally detrimental input from academe, I was amazed when my wife told me that the article was in an official AFT journal. We salute you for having the courage to print this article. Fixing our educational system requires addressing issues brought forward by Professor Orr.

—LORING & LUCY MCALLISTER

AFTON, MINNESOTA

In his very bold and "call-to-arms" article "Verbicide," David Orr exposed what I consider to be the real threat to our country: the demise of American English. The misuse, fragmentation, and utter ignorance of our language is so common and

(Continued on page 48)



## Write Us!

We welcome comments on *American Educator* articles.

Address letters to Editor,  
*American Educator*,  
555 New Jersey Ave., N.W.,  
Washington, D.C. 20001-2079 or  
via e-mail to amered@aft.org.

Letters selected may be edited for  
space and clarity. Please include a  
phone number or e-mail address so  
we can contact you if needed.

*AFT PLUS keeps coming up with benefits that are...*



*...peachy keen.*

You've got to hand it to the folks at AFT PLUS. The benefits of union membership keep getting better and better. Take a look at what's new:

**UNION PLUS  
MOTOR CLUB**

Feel the security of *total* coverage the next time you get in your car ■ Emergency towing and road service ■ Up to \$100 per call for covering things like a dead battery, broken fan belt or flat tire ■ Emergency locksmith ■ Free personal trip service ■ \$5,000 stolen auto reward ■ \$39.95/year for the first union family member; \$47.95/year for the first member plus one additional; \$12 per year for each additional family member

**1-888-330-8801**

**UNION PLUS  
HEALTH SAVINGS**

Save up to 40 percent on generic or name brand prescription drugs at more than 26,000 participating pharmacies nationwide ■ Free 30-day trial period ■ Save on mail-order drugs ■ Save on glasses, frames and contact lenses ■ Free access to Nurse HelpLine ■ Free access to Health Library and recorded health messages ■ Quarterly savings statements ■ \$29.95 per family, per year

**1-800-228-3523**

**INSURANCE PLANS**

Great savings on a wide variety of insurance plans. **NEW!** ...individual major medical and short-term medical plans. Plus, group term life insurance, disability insurance, accident insurance, senior whole life insurance and MORE! Call today:

**1-800-272-4AFT (4238)**

**GET IN TOUCH TODAY!**

Visit us at: [www.aft.org/aftplus](http://www.aft.org/aftplus)



*With AFT PLUS, there are no minuses.*

# PARENTING: THE LOST ART

BY KAY S. HYMOWITZ

LAST FALL the Federal Trade Commission released a report showing what most parents already knew from every trip down the aisle of Toys R Us and every look at prime time television: Entertainment companies routinely market R-rated movies, computer games, and music to children. The highly publicized report detailed many of the abuses of these companies—one particularly egregious example was the use of focus groups of 9- and 10-year-olds to test market violent films—and it unleashed a frenzied week of headlines and political grandstanding, all of it speaking to Americans' alarm over their children's exposure to an increasingly foul-mouthed, vicious, and tawdry media.

But are parents really so alarmed? A more careful reading of the FTC report considerably complicates the fairy tale picture of big, bad wolves tempting unsuspecting, innocent children with ads for *Scream* and *Doom* and inevitably raises the question: "Where were the parents?" As it turns out, many youngsters saw the offending ads not when they were reading *Nickelodeon Magazine* or watching *Seventh Heaven* but when they were leafing through *Cosmo Girl*, a junior version of Helen Gurley Brown's sex manual *Cosmopolitan*, or lounging in front of *Smackdown!*—a production of the World Wrestling Federation where wrestlers saunter out, grab their crotches, and bellow "Suck It!" to their "ho's" standing by. Other kids came across the ads when they were watching the WB's infamous teen sex soap opera *Dawson's Creek* or MTV, whose most recent hit, "Undressed," includes plots involving whipped cream, silk teddies, and a tutor who agrees to strip every time her student gets an answer right. All of these venues, the report noted without irony, are "especially popular among 11- to 18-year-olds." Oh, and those focus groups of 9- and 10-year-

olds? It turns out that all of the children who attended the meetings had permission from their parents. To muddy the picture even further, only a short time before the FTC report, the Kaiser Family Foundation released a study entitled *Kids and Media: The New Millennium* showing that half of all parents have no rules about what their kids watch on television, a number that is probably low given that the survey also found that two-thirds of American children between the ages of eight and eighteen have televisions in their bedrooms; and even more shocking, one-third of all under the age of seven.

In other words, one conclusion you could draw from the FTC report is that entertainment companies are willing to tempt children with the raunchiest, bloodiest, crudest media imaginable if it means expanding their audience and their profits. An additional conclusion, especially when considered alongside *Kids and the Media*, would be that there are a lot of parents out there who don't mind enough to do much about it. After all, protesting that your 10-year-old son was subjected to a trailer for the R-rated *Scream* while watching *Smackdown!* is a little like complaining that he was bitten by a rat while scavenging at the local dump.

Neither the FTC report nor *Kids and the Media* makes a big point of it, but their findings do begin to bring into focus a troubling sense felt by many Americans—and no one more than teachers—that parenting is becoming a lost art. This is not to accuse adults of being neglectful or abusive in any conventional sense. Like always, today's boomer parents love their children; they know their responsibility to provide for them and in fact, as *Kids and the Media* suggests, they are doing so more lavishly than ever before in human history. But throughout that history, adults have understood something that perplexes many of today's parents: that they are not only obliged to feed and shelter the young, but to teach them self-control, civility, and a meaningful way of understanding the world. Of

---

Kay S. Hymowitz, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute and contributing editor at City Journal, is the author of *Ready or Not: What Happens When We Treat Children as Small Adults* (Encounter Books, 2000).



course, most parents care a great deal about their children's social and moral development. Most are doing their best to hang on to their sense of what really matters while they attempt to steer their children through a dizzyingly stressful, temptation-filled, and in many ways unfamiliar world. Yet these parents know they often cannot count on the support of their peers. The parents of their 10-year-old's friend let the girls watch an R-rated movie until 2 a.m. during a sleepover; other parents are nowhere to be found when beer is passed around at a party attended by their 14-year-old. These AWOL parents have redefined the meaning of the term. As their children gobble down their own microwaved dinners, then go on to watch their own televisions or surf the Internet on their own computers in wired bedrooms where they set their own bedtimes, these parents and their children seem more like housemates and friends than experienced adults guiding and shaping the young. Such parent-peers may be warm companions and in the short run effective advocates for their children, but they remain deeply uncertain about how to teach them to lead meaningful lives.

If anyone is familiar with the fallout from the lost art of parenting, it is educators. About a year ago, while researching an article about school discipline, I spoke to teachers, administrators, and school lawyers around the country and asked what is making their job more difficult today. Their top answer was almost always the same: parents. Sometimes they describe overworked, overburdened parents who have simply checked out: "I work 10 hours a day, and I can't come home and deal with this stuff. He's *your* problem," they might say. But more often teachers find parents who rather than accepting their role as partners with educators in an effort to civilize the next generation come in with a "my-child-right-or-wrong" attitude. These are parent-advocates.

Everyone's heard about the growing number of suspensions in middle and high schools around the country. Now the state of Connecticut has released a report on an alarming increase in the number of young children—first-graders, kindergartners, and *preschoolers*—suspended for persistent biting, kicking, hitting, and cursing. Is it any wonder? Parent-advocates have little patience for the shared rules of behavior required to turn a school into a civil community, not to mention those who would teach their own children the necessary limits to self-expression. "'You and your stupid rules.' I've heard that a hundred times," sighs Cathy Collins, counsel to the School Administrators of Iowa, speaking not, as it might sound, of 16-year-olds, but of their parents. Even 10 years ago when a child got into trouble, parents assumed the teacher or principal was in the right. "Now we're always being second-guessed," says a 25-year veteran of suburban New Jersey elementary schools. "I know my child, and he wouldn't do this," or, proudly, "He has a mind of his own," are lines many educators repeat hearing.

In the most extreme cases, parent-advocates show (and teach their children) their contempt for school rules by going to court. Several years ago, a St. Charles, Mo., high schooler running for student council was suspended for distributing condoms on the day of the election as a way of soliciting votes. His family

promptly turned around and sued on the grounds that the boy's free speech rights were being violated because other candidates had handed out candy during student council elections without any repercussions. Sometimes principals are surprised to see a lawyer trailing behind an angry parent arriving for a conference over a minor infraction. Parents threaten teachers with lawsuits, and kids repeat after them: "I'll sue you," or "My mother's going to get a lawyer." Surveys may show a large number of parents in favor of school uniforms, but for parent-advocates, dress codes that limit their child's self-expression are a particular source of outrage. In Northumberland County, Pa., parents threatened to sue their children's *elementary* school over its new dress code. "I have a little girl who likes to express herself with how she dresses," one mother of a fourth-grader said. "They ruined my daughter's first day of school," another mother of a kindergartner whined.

Parent-advocates may make life difficult for teachers and soccer coaches. But the truth is things aren't so great at home either. Educators report parents of second- and third-graders saying things like: "I can't control what she wears to school," or "I can't make him read." It's not surprising. At home, parent-advocates aspire to be friends and equals, hoping to maintain the happy affection they think of as a "good relationship." It rarely seems to happen that way. Unable to balance warmth with discipline and affirmation with limit-setting, these parents are puzzled to find their 4-year-old ordering them around like he's Louis XIV or their 8-year-old screaming, "I hate you!" when they balk at letting her go to a sleepover party for the second night in a row. These buddy adults are not only incapable of helping their children resist the siren call of a sensational, glamorous media; in a desperate effort to confirm their "good relationship" with their kids, they actively reinforce it. They buy them their own televisions, they give them "guilt money," as market researchers call it, to go shopping, and they plan endless entertainments. A recent article in *Time* magazine on the Britney Spears fad began by describing a party that parents in Westchester, N.Y., gave their 9-year-old complete with a Britney impersonator boogying in silver hip-huggers and tube top. Doubtless such peer-parents tell themselves they are making their children happy and, anyway, what's the harm. They shouldn't count on it. "When one of our teenagers comes in looking like Britney Spears, they carry with them an attitude," one school principal was quoted as saying. There's a reason that some of the clothing lines that sell the Britney look adopt names such as "Brat" or "No Boundaries."

Of course, dressing like a Las Vegas chorus girl at 8 years old does not automatically mean a child is headed for juvenile hall when she turns 14. But it's reasonable to assume that parent-friends who don't know how to get their third-graders to stop calling them names, never mind covering their midriffs before going to school, are going to be pretty helpless when faced with the more serious challenges of adolescence. Some parents simply give up. They've done all they can, they say to themselves; the kids have to figure it out for themselves. "I feel if [my son] hasn't



learned the proper values by 16, then we haven't done our job," announces the mother of a 16-year-old in a fascinating 1999 *Time* magazine series, "Diary of a High School." Others continue the charade of peer friendship by endorsing their adolescent's risk-taking as if they were one of the in-crowd. In a recent article in *Education Week*, Anne W. Weeks, the director of college guidance at a Maryland high school, tells how when police broke up a party on the field of a nearby college, they discovered that most of the kids were actually local high schoolers. High school officials called parents to express their concern, but they were having none of it; it seems parents were the ones providing the alcohol and dropping their kids off at what they knew to be a popular (and unchaperoned) party spot. So great is the need of some parents to keep up the pretense of their equality that they refuse to heed their own children's cry for adult help. A while back, the *New York Times* ran a story on Wesleyan University's "naked dorm" where, as one 19-year-old male student told the reporter: "If I feel the need to take my pants off, I take my pants off," something he evidently felt the need to do during the interview. More striking than the dorm itself—after all, when kids are in charge, as they are in many colleges, what would we expect?—was the phone call a worried female student made to her parents when she first realized she had been assigned to a "naked dorm." She may have been alarmed, but her father, she reports, simply "laughed."

Perhaps more common than parents who laugh at naked dorms or who supply booze for their kids' parties, are those who dimly realize the failure of their experiment in peer-parenting. These parents reduce their role to exercising damage control over kids they assume "are going to do it anyway." For them, there is only one value left they are comfortable fighting for: safety. One mother in *Time*'s "Diary of a High School" replenishes a pile of condoms for her own child and his friends once a month, doubtless congratulating herself that she is protecting the young. Safety also appears to be the logic behind the new fad of co-ed sleepover parties as it was described recently in the *Washington Post*. "I just feel it's definitely better than going to hotels, and this way you know all the kids who are coming over, you know who they are with," explains the mother of one high schooler. Kids know exactly how to reach a generation of parents who, though they waffled on whether their 8-year-old could call them "idiot," suddenly became tyrants when it came to seat belts and helmets. The article describes how one boy talked his parents into allowing him to give a co-ed sleepover party. "It's too dangerous for us to be out late at night with all the drunk drivers. Better



Teenagers in suburban Maryland at a co-ed sleepover party.

PHOTO BY JAMES A. PARCELL / ©2001 THE WASHINGTON POST

that we are home. It's better than us lying about where we are and renting some sleazy motel room." The father found the "parental logic," as the reporter puts it, so irresistible that he allowed the boy to have not one, but two co-ed sleepover parties.

NOTHING GIVES a better picture of the anemic principles of peer-parenting—and their sorry impact on kids—than a 1999 PBS *Frontline* show entitled "The Lost Children of Rockdale County." The occasion for the show was an outbreak of syphilis in an affluent Atlanta suburb that ultimately led health officials to treat 200 teenagers. What was so remarkable was not that 200 teenagers in a large suburban area were having sex and that they had overlapping partners. It was the way they were having sex. This was teen sex as *Lord of the Flies* author William Golding might have imagined it—a heart of darkness tribal rite of such degradation that it makes a collegiate "hook up" look like splendor in the grass. Group sex was commonplace, as were 13-year-old participants. Kids would gather together after school and watch the Playboy cable TV channel, making a game of imitating everything they saw. They tried almost every permutation of sexual activity imaginable—vaginal, oral, anal, girl-on-girl, several boys with a single girl, or several girls with a boy. During some drunken parties, one boy or girl might be "passed around" in a game. A number of the kids had upwards of 50 partners.

To be sure, the Rockdale teens are the extreme case. The same could not be said of their parents. As the *Frontline* producers show them, these are ordinary, suburban soccer moms and dads, more affluent than most, perhaps, and in some cases overly caught up in their work. But a good number were doing everything the books tell you to do: coaching their children's teams, cooking dinner with them, going on vacations together. It wasn't enough. Devoid of strong beliefs, seemingly bereft of meaningful experience to pass on to their young, these parents project a bland emptiness that seems the exact inverse of the meticulous opulence of their homes and that lets the kids know there are no values worth fighting for. "They have to make decisions, whether to take drugs, to have sex,"

the mother of one of the boys intones expressionlessly when asked for her view of her son's after-school activity. "I can give them my opinion, tell them how I feel. But they have to decide for themselves." These lost adults of Rockdale County have abdicated the age-old distinction between parents and children, and the kids know it. "We're pretty much like best friends or something," one girl said of her parents. "I mean I can pretty much tell 'em how I feel, what I wanna do and they'll let me do it." Another girl pretty well sums up the persona of many contemporary parents when she says of her own mother: "I don't really consider her a mom all that much. She takes care of me and such, but I consider her a friend more."

So what happened to the lost art of parenting? Why is it that so many adults have reinvented their traditional role and turned themselves into advocates, friends, and copious providers of entertainment?

For one thing, this generation of parents has grown up in a culture that devotedly worships youth. It's

true that America, a nation of immigrants fleeing the old world, has always been a youthful country with its eye on the future. But for the "I-hope-I-die-before-I-get-old" generation, aging, with its threat of sexual irrelevance and being out of the loop, has been especially painful. Boomers are the eternal teenagers—hip, sexy, and aware—and when their children suggest otherwise, they're paralyzed with confusion. In an op-ed published in the *New York Times* entitled "Am I a Cool Mother?" Susan Borowitz, co-creator of *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, describes her struggle with her role as parent-adult that one suspects is all too common. On a shopping expedition, she is shocked when her 10-year-old daughter rolls her eyes at the outfits she has chosen for her. "There is nothing more withering and crushing," she writes. "I stood there stunned. 'This can't be happening to me. I'm a cool mom.'" Determined to hang on to her youthful identity, she buys a pair of bell-bottom pants to take her daughter to DJ Disco Night at her school where

## The Parent as Career Coach

THERE IS one exception to today's parents' overall vagueness about their job description: They *know* they want their children to develop impressive résumés. This is what William Doherty, professor of family science at the University of Minnesota, calls "parenting as product development."

As early as the preschool years, parent-product developers begin a demanding schedule of gymnastics, soccer, language, and music lessons. In New York City, parents take their children to "Language for Tots," beginning at six months—that is, before they can even speak. Doherty cites the example of one Minnesota town where, until some cooler—or more sleep-deprived—heads prevailed, a team of 4-year-olds was scheduled for hockey practice the only time the rink was available—at 5 A.M. By the time children are ready for Little League, some parents hire hitting and pitching coaches from companies like Grand Slam USA. So many kids are training like professionals in a single sport instead of the more casual three or four activities of childhood past that doctors report a high rate of debilitating and sometimes even permanent sports injuries.

Of course, there's nothing wrong with wanting to enrich your children's experience by in-

troducing them to sports and the arts. But as children's list-worthy achievements take on disproportionate and even frenzied significance, parents often lose sight of some of the other things they want to pass down—such as kindness, moral clarity, and a family identity. One Manhattan nursery school director reports that if a child receives a high score on the ERB (the IQ test required to get into private kindergarten), parents often conclude that the child's brilliance excuses him or her from social niceties. "If he can't pass the juice or look you in the eye, it's 'Oh, he's bored.'" Douglas Goetsch, a teacher at Stuyvesant High School, the ultra-competitive school in New York City, recently wrote an article in the school newspaper about the prevalence of cheating; in every case, he says, cheating is related to an "excessively demanding parent." Other educators are seeing even young children complaining about stress-related headaches and stomachaches.

Katherine Tarbox, a Fairfield, Conn., teen, describes all this from the point of view of the child-product in her recently published memoir *Katie.com*. At 13, Katie was an "A" student, an accomplished pianist who also sang with the school choir, and a na-

tionally ranked swimmer. Impressive as they were, Katie's achievements loomed too large. "I always felt like my self-worth was determined by how well I placed. And I think my parents felt the same way—their status among the team parents depended on how well their child placed." Like many middle-class children today, the combination of school, extracurricular activities, and her parents' work schedule reduced family time so much that, "Home was a place I always felt alone." Aching to be loved for herself rather than her swim times and grade point average, she develops an intense relationship with a man on the Internet who very nearly rapes her when they arrange to meet at an out-of-town swim meet.

Even after their daughter's isolation stands revealed, Katie's parents are so hooked on achievement they still don't really notice their daughter. Katie complains to her therapist that her mother is always either at the office or working on papers at home. The woman has a helpful suggestion that epitomizes the overly schematized, hyper-efficient lives that come with parenting as product development: She suggests that Katie schedule appointments with her mother. □

she spots other “cool moms...pumping their fist and doing the Arsenio woof.” Finally Borowitz comes to her senses. “This was a party for the kids. I am not a kid. I am a mom.” No one could quarrel with her there, but the telling point is that it took 10 years for her to notice.

Related to this youth worship is the boomer parents’ intense ambivalence about authority. The current generation of parents came of age at a time when parents, teachers, the police, and the army represented an authority to be questioned and resisted. Authority was associated with *Father Knows Best*, the Vietnam War, Bull Connor, and their own distant fathers. These associations linger in boomer parents’ subconscious minds and make them squirm uncomfortably when their own children beg for firm guidance. Evelyn Bassoff, a Colorado therapist, reports that when she asks the women in her mothers’ groups what happens when they discipline their daughters, they give answers such as “I feel mean,” “I feel guilty,” and “I quake all over; it’s almost like having dry heaves inside.” A survey by Public Agenda confirms that parents feel “tentative and uncertain in matters of discipline and authority.” And no wonder. Notice the way *Time* describes the dilemma faced by parents of Britney Spears wannabes; these parents, the writers explain, are “trying to walk the line between fashion and fascism.” The message is clear; the opposite of letting your child do what she wants is, well, becoming Hitler.

It would be difficult to overstate how deep this queasiness over authority runs in the boomer mind. Running so hard from outmoded models of authority that stressed absolute obedience, today’s parents have slipped past all recognition of the child’s longing for a structure he can believe in. In some cases, their fear not only inhibits them from disciplining their children, it can actually make them view the rebellious child as a figure to be respected. (Oddly enough, this is true even when, as is almost always the case these days, that rebellion takes the form of piercings and heavy metal music vigorously marketed by entertainment companies.) It’s as if parents believe children learn individuality and self-respect in the act of defiance, or at the very least through aggressive self-assertion. Some experts reinforce their thinking. Take Barbara Mackoff, author of *Growing a Girl* (with a chapter tellingly entitled “Make Her the Authority”). Mackoff approvingly cites a father who encourages a child “to be comfortable arguing or being mad at me. I figure if she has lots of practice getting mad at a six-foot-one male, she’ll be able to say what she thinks to anyone.” The author agrees; the parent who tells the angry child “calm down, we don’t hit people,” she writes, “is engaging in silencing.” In other words, to engage in civilization’s oldest parental task—teaching children self-control—is to risk turning your child into an automaton ripe for abuse.

But the biggest problem for boomer peer-parents is that many of them are not really sure whether there are values important enough to pursue with any real conviction. In his book *One Nation After All*, the sociologist Alan Wolfe argues that although Americans are concerned about moral decline, they are also opposed to people who get too excited about it. This inherent

contradiction—people simultaneously judge and refuse to judge—explains how it is that parents can both dislike their children watching *Smackdown!* on TV, talking back to them, drinking, or for that matter, engaging in group sex, but also fail to protest very loudly. Having absorbed an ethos of nonjudgmentalism, the parents’ beliefs on these matters have been drained of all feeling and force. The Rockdale mother who blandly repeats “her opinion” about drugs and sex to her son is a perfect example; perhaps she is concerned about moral decline, but because her concern lacks all gravity or passion, it can’t possibly have much effect. All in all, Wolfe seems to find the combination of concern and nonjudgmentalism a fairly hopeful state of affairs—and surely he is right that tolerance is a key value in a pluralistic society—but refusing to judge is one thing when it comes to your neighbor’s divorce and quite another when it comes to your 13-year-old child’s attitudes toward, say, cheating on a test or cursing out his soccer coach.

WHEN PARENTS fail to firmly define a moral universe for their children, it leaves them vulnerable to the amoral world evoked by their peers and a sensational media. As the Rockdale story makes clear, the saddest consequences appear in the sex lives of today’s teenagers. Recently in an iVillage chat room, a distraught mother wrote to ask for advice after she learned that her 15-year-old daughter had sex with a boy. The responses she got rehearsed many of the principles of peer-parenting. Several mothers stressed safety and told the woman to get her daughter on the pill. Others acted out the usual boomer uneasiness over the power they have with their children. “Let your daughter know you trust her to make the ‘right’ decision when the time comes,” wrote one. “Tell her that you are not ‘giving your permission,’” another suggested, “but that you are also very aware that she will not ‘ask for permission’ either when the time comes.” But it was the one teenager who joined in that showed how little these apparently hip mothers understood about the pressures on kids today; when she lost her virginity at 14, the girl writes; “it was because of a yearning to be loved, to be accepted.” Indeed, the same need for acceptance appears to be driving the trend among middle-schoolers as young as seventh grade engaging in oral sex. According to the December 2000 *Family Planning Perspectives*, some middle school girls view fellatio as the unpleasant price they have to pay to hang on to a boyfriend or to seem hip and sophisticated among their friends. The awful irony is that in their reluctance to evoke meaningful values, parent advocates and peers have produced not the freethinking, self-expressive, confident children they had hoped, but kids so conforming and obedient they’ll follow their friends almost anywhere.

And so in the end, it is children who pay the price of the refusal of parents to seriously engage their predicament in a media-saturated and shadowy adult world. And what a price it is. When parenting becomes a lost art, children are not only deprived of the clarity and sound judgment they crave. They are deprived of childhood. □

# WHY GEOGRAPHY MATTERS

BY WALTER A. MCDUGALL

I SUPPOSE I am an old-fashioned teacher. My subject—diplomatic history and international relations—could not be further removed from the avant-garde of post-modern cultural studies. My methodology is traditional, centering on the critical interpretation of documentary evidence and the logic of cause and effect in the belief that facts exist and falsehood, if not perfect truth, is discoverable. My lectures and books are in narrative form, because in political history sequence is critical to understanding why decision-makers acted or reacted as they did. And my assignments require students to demonstrate knowledge of at least the most important names, dates, and events because concepts and theories are empty unless one knows what factual evidence inspired them and what phenomena they are advanced to explain.

Old-fashioned, demanding, some would say boring, and yet my courses in diplomatic history draw hundreds of students. Evidently, the collegiate consumers of history—never mind the book-buying public—find more value and enjoyment in rigorous studies of the origins of wars and peace than in speculative studies of, for instance, the “gendering” of gravestones in

---

*Walter A. McDougall is chairman of the Foreign Policy Research Institute's History Academy, editor of Orbis, and the Alloy-Ansin Professor of International Relations at the University of Pennsylvania. His book, with David Gress, on history, education, and American culture is forthcoming. This essay is excerpted from a paper commissioned by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation as part of the History-Geography Project for publication in the Middle States Yearbook 2001.*

*The maps that accompany this article are reproduced by kind permission of Andromeda Oxford Limited, [www.andromeda.co.uk](http://www.andromeda.co.uk), ©1999 Andromeda Oxford Ltd. They are part of a four-volume series for children, World Atlas of the Past, published in the United States by Oxford University Press.*

17th-century France. The downside of having large classes, however, is that the only students I get to know personally are those who stop by during my office hours or come to voluntary discussion sections. So it was that I was taken aback when one anonymous face from my 19th-century European diplomacy lectures visited my office accompanied by a big and decidedly businesslike black Labrador retriever. I was about to make a joke, or a protest, when I looked up and realized the young man was blind

He felt for a chair and asked for my help: He had received a B+ on the midterm, but was used to getting straight A's. His problem, he said, was with maps. He could understand the ideological or commercial motivations for the foreign policies of liberal Britain, Napoleonic France, the multinational Hapsburg Empire, or reactionary tsarist Russia. But he had trouble visualizing the strategic, balance-of-power relationships among the various states. Suddenly I felt both wholly inadequate and ashamed of feeling inadequate given the courage he boldly displayed. If a student unable to read by himself could aspire to study history, it was incumbent upon me to assist him. So I pulled out a map of Europe, took the boy's finger in my hand, and traced for him the coastlines of the continent and the location and boundaries of the various states. I showed him where the mountains and rivers were located, and tried to convey their strategic significance. I described how large the countries were—hoping that he had some notion of distance—and told him how swiftly (or slowly) pre-indus-



# ANCIENT EGYPT 6000–332 BC



*Above: It is impossible to understand the development of Ancient Egyptian civilization without appreciating the role played by the Nile River.  
Left: the Louisiana Purchase all but doubled the size of the young republic.*

trial sailing ships and armies could move so that he might imagine how railroads and steamships exploded the old equation between space and time. Never letting go of his finger lest he become disoriented, I repeated the lessons until he stopped me. His memory was extraordinary, and he soon displayed a better feel for the geopolitics of Europe than many, perhaps most, of my students blessed with sight. He would return periodically, however, for more information, such as the locations of the provinces of Italy and Germany that united into national states between 1859 and 1871, and I recall him having an especially difficult time when the European colonialism of the 1880s ushered in the era of world politics. But he finished with an "A" in the course.

The blind student had to learn his geography in order to understand history. My own love affair with history began with a fascination for geography. As a youngster in the 1950s, I enjoyed sports and games but was transfixed by atlases, globes, stories of the explorers, my parents' *National Geographic* magazines, and travel and nature programs on television. I traced my own maps and prided myself on knowing all the countries and capital cities, highest mountains and longest rivers. By high school, this thirst for information about the world turned into a thirst for history, including the origins of civilizations; the rise and fall of empires; the "lost worlds" of South America or Africa; the flora, fauna, and human cultures that characterized different climatic zones; the patterns of politics and military strategy. If someone had asked me then to distinguish between geography and history as distinct academic fields, I could not have done it. And I cannot do it today, anymore than a blind person can explain European diplomacy without a mental image of the map. But I was not the whiz at geography I imagined, as I found out in graduate school at the University of Chicago. The professor asked our seminar on Central Europe why after 1918 the new nation of Czechoslovakia was uncomfortably dependent on Germany. Disgusted by the silence that ensued, he gave us a clue: "Where does the only major river of landlocked Czechoslovakia reach the sea?" After a few flustered movements I replied, "But, the Vistula runs through Poland."

The professor fixed a cold stare on me and hissed, "Look at a map!" The answer, of course, was the Elbe River, which runs from the Czech heartland to the great German port of Hamburg.

**I** LEARNED then that one can never know enough geography—or, to put it another way, one must learn more geography whenever one endeavors to learn more history. That is why it is so disheartening that most Americans emerge from their schooling as functional illiterates in geography despite the fact that 90 percent of U.S. adults consider some geographical knowledge a prerequisite to being a well-rounded person. A poll, conducted on behalf of the National Geographic Society, showed that only one-third of Americans could name a single country in NATO and that half could not name any members of the rival Warsaw Pact. The average adult could identify only four European countries from their outlines on a map, and fewer than six of the 50 United States. One in four

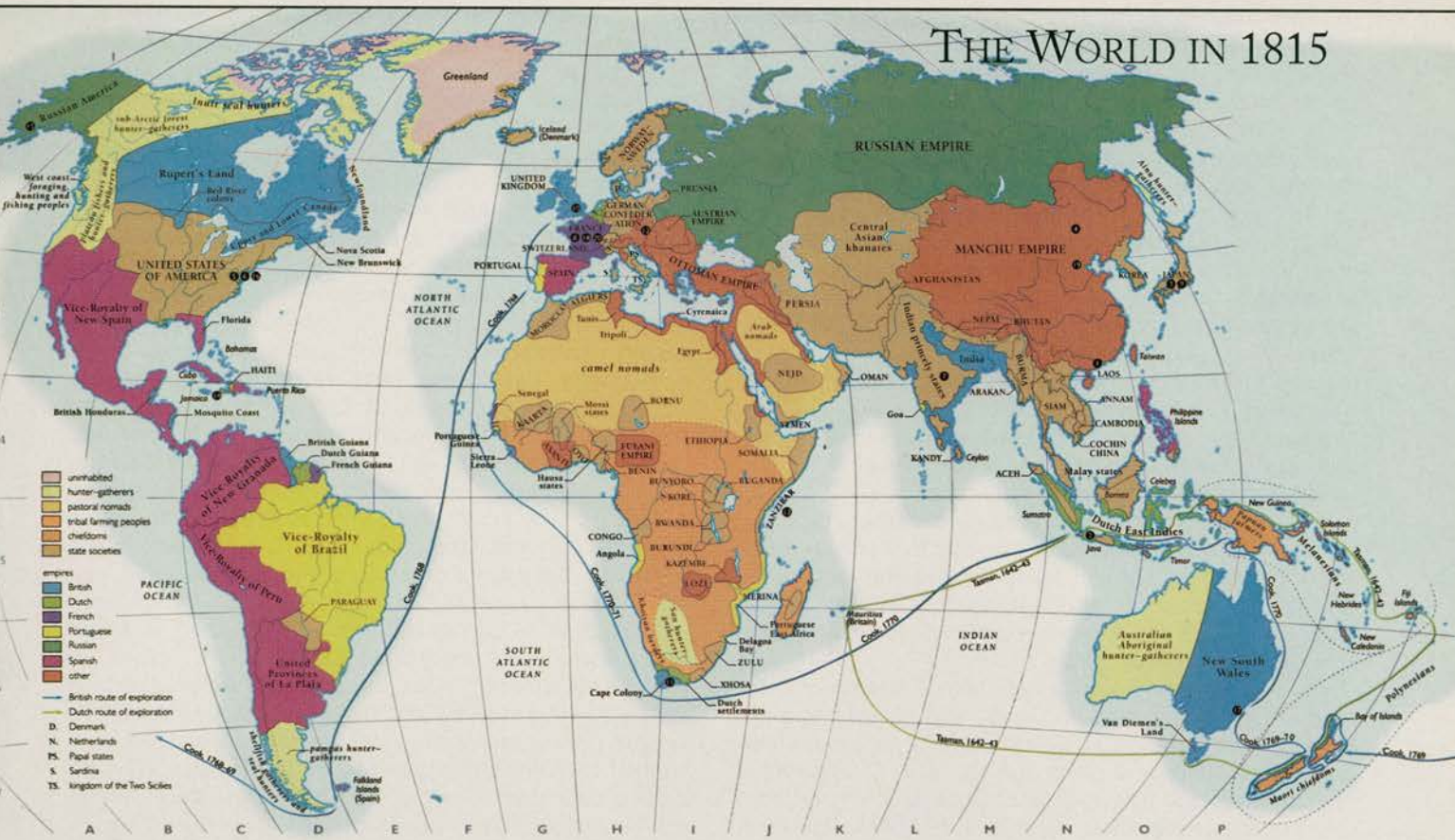
could not find the Pacific Ocean. What is more, the group that performed the worst in the survey was those ages 18 to 24, a finding that would not surprise those of us who teach history in universities. For it appears that many American students were not even given a chance to learn much geography in their elementary and high school years. Why is that? Is it because educators have just been unaware of the importance of geography to many branches of knowledge, not least history? Is it because they once knew, but have forgotten? Is it because geography seems to involve rote learning of "boring" facts rather than development of the "thinking" faculties? Is it because the influential political correctness and multiculturalist movements are suspicious of a subject that emphasizes distinctions among regions, invites unflattering comparisons and hierarchy among nations and cultures, and has been used in the past as an intellectual tool of empire? Is it because geography just seems passé in an era when communications technology, commerce, and ideas "transcend boundaries" and make the earth a "global village"? Or is it because geographers themselves have failed to define and promote their subject?

Whatever the answer (it is probably "all of the above"), the Rediscovering Geography Committee, appointed by the Board on Earth Sciences and Resources of the National Research Council in 1997, lamented not only the "astonishing degree of ignorance in the United States about the rest of the world," but also that most people think of geography as a matter of memorizing place names. The committee rebutted,

A central tenet of geography is that location matters for understanding a wide variety of processes and phenomena. Indeed, geography's focus on location provides a cross-cutting way of looking at processes and phenomena that other disciplines tend to treat in isolation. Geographers focus on "real-world" relationships and dependencies....

That would seem to be such a commonsense proposition that no one would challenge it. It is, in fact, the first fundamental reason why geography is indispensable to a sound school curriculum. We are all geographers, after all, from the moment we learn to navigate the playpen or find the bathroom and refrigerator, to the years we explore the neighborhood on our bicycles and take a family vacation, to the careers we pursue as adults. The general, admiral, or statesman is a geographer, but so too is the common soldier or sailor, the corporate executive deciding where to build a plant and which markets to target; and so too the salesperson, not to mention the farmer, fisherman, miner, oil worker, pilot, engineer, truck or taxi driver, real estate agent, manufacturer, consumer or, for that matter, golfer. One Jimmy Sneed, a legendary caddie at the Pinehurst resort in North Carolina, was unschooled, but he knew his golf course and golfers so well that he invariably chose the right club to use for each shot...until, after World War II, Pinehurst began to provide yardage markers on the fairways, whereupon "Sneed's circuits blew." Numbers meant nothing to him, and his feel for club selection deserted him. The Polynesians who crossed thousands of miles of open ocean to populate the Pacific Islands, and the Native Americans who navigated the trackless Great Plains in search of game, likewise had no need of maps

# THE WORLD IN 1815



*In 1947, India was partitioned into two states, India and Pakistan, thus giving Indian Muslims their own state. Despite two wars, Kashmir remains contested.*

and instruments. But that only meant that they were natural, intuitive geographers all the more keenly alive to the sun and stars, winds and currents, landscapes and weather about them. So whether we steer our way through the world by feel and folklore or by maps and instruments, geography is the context in which “we live and move and have our being” (to paraphrase the apostle Paul). You cannot argue with geography, as Ambassador Robert Strausz-Hupe liked to say, and geography in turn “does not argue, it simply is,” as Hans Weigert put it. Geography concerns the way things are, not the way we imagine or wish them to be, and thus it is as fundamental to a child’s maturation as arithmetic, which teaches that 2 + 2 are 4, not 3 or 22.

Second, geography is fundamental to the process of true education in that it serves as a springboard to virtually every other subject in the sciences and humanities. Children, as a British government study observed, are like the mongoose in the Rudyard Kipling tale: “The motto of the mongoose family is ‘run and find out’ and Rikki-Tikki-Tavi was a true mongoose.” Children’s minds are much the same. They

will enjoy merely discovering what is just “round the corner” or finding out from pictures, and most will need no encouragement to explore the banks of the river or visit a farm or even to investigate the well-known streets of their own town.... So, too, when faced with glimpses of Everest, the Victoria Falls, the lonely deserts of Arabia, Tibet and Antarctica, they often find food for their sense of wonder and feeling for beauty.

What happens next, usually in secondary school, is that the student who was originally enthralled just by

the sheer variety of the world and its people, begins to ask, not only "what?" and "where?" but "why?" and "how?" Why are deserts or rain forests here and not there? Why do Asians eat rice and Mexicans tortillas, instead of bread? Why did the Europeans discover routes to China instead of the Chinese discovering routes to Europe? Why did democracy emerge in Greece and not Egypt? How did the colonial powers manage to conquer the world, and how did today's 200-odd countries emerge? What is a "country," for that matter, and why are some big, rich, populous, and mighty, while others are small, poor, or weak? Asking such questions inspired by geography opens up a universe of intellectual inquiry, because to answer them the student must turn to geology, oceanography, meteorology, and astronomy, anthropology, economics, comparative religion, sociology, and history. Geography is the window on the world of the mind as well as the senses, and can be dispensed with no more than reading, writing, and arithmetic. To educate, after all, means to "lead out" (*educio*, in Latin), and no subject leads the student out of the narrow, familiar, and "taken for granted" better than geography. That is the second reason why it is indispensable in a sound curriculum.

Yet a third reason why geography is fundamental to true education is that students without geographic knowledge are helpless when confronted by adult issues, whether in school or outside of it. Geography is vital to the examination of economic competition, poverty, environmental degradation, ethnic conflict, health care, global warming, literature and culture, and, of course, international relations. But the universality of geography's relevance has perversely contributed to its demise as a subject in its own right. As Malcolm Douglass observes,

The strange fact of the matter is that the role of geography in the school curriculum is at once anomalous and ubiquitous. Geography lacks a clear identity.... Nonetheless, by its very nature, geography is integral to all human inquiry. It is difficult, or even impossible, to separate what is geographic from what is not. In this sense, then, geography is everywhere in the school curriculum. The major problem, both for geographers and geographic educators, and for all curriculum planners and teachers, is to find ways to acknowledge and act on this reality.

The ways have always existed. They need only to be rediscovered.

**A**SSUMING A given state or school board is persuaded of the need to reintroduce geography into the K-12 curriculum, what principles should guide its planning?

First, teachers, textbook authors, and curriculum designers must restore an "old-fashioned" emphasis on basic topography, place names, and map reading. For whatever your ideological preferences, the grammar of geography is conventional and grounded in reality. The Earth, as Galileo insisted under his breath, does revolve around the sun and rotate on its axis, and that was not just his "point of view." The motions of the Earth and heat of the sun are what create climate, vulcanism, erosion, and all the features of lands and waters. On some points we may argue, for instance whether Europe ought to have been considered a continent separate from Asia, or whether the term Middle East is a Euro-

centric conceit. But the geographical and cultural distinctions that first inspired people to invent those terms were real and are also worth understanding. Likewise, the Mississippi River exists. Its name, like all names, is a social convention, but the river is real, and no student can claim to "know" American history without understanding the river's importance. How much factual knowledge is "enough"? One useful exercise that teachers, textbook authors, and curriculum designers might try is to recall the history surveys they took in college, or study some syllabi from current surveys, and ask themselves what geographical knowledge is needed to master that material. Conversely, they might ask themselves what knowledge they would wish to assume their students possessed if they were teaching the course. Thus, in my modern history survey I do not expect students to know anything about the political map of Central Europe during the Renaissance, but I am crippled if they do not even know that Venice is an Italian port city, that the Alps divide Italy from the rest of Europe, that Germany lies north of the Alps, that the Austrians speak German, that the Turks were Muslim and militant, that all Europeans were still Catholic, and that Rome was the historic seat of the papacy. If I must "go back to square one" to lay out such basics, then the best students will be bored and the poor will be paying Ivy League tuition for high school instruction. It is all very well to say that education should teach youngsters to think rather than to memorize. But unless their "memory banks" are filled with facts and categories in which to deposit new facts, then their "RAM" will have no "data to process."

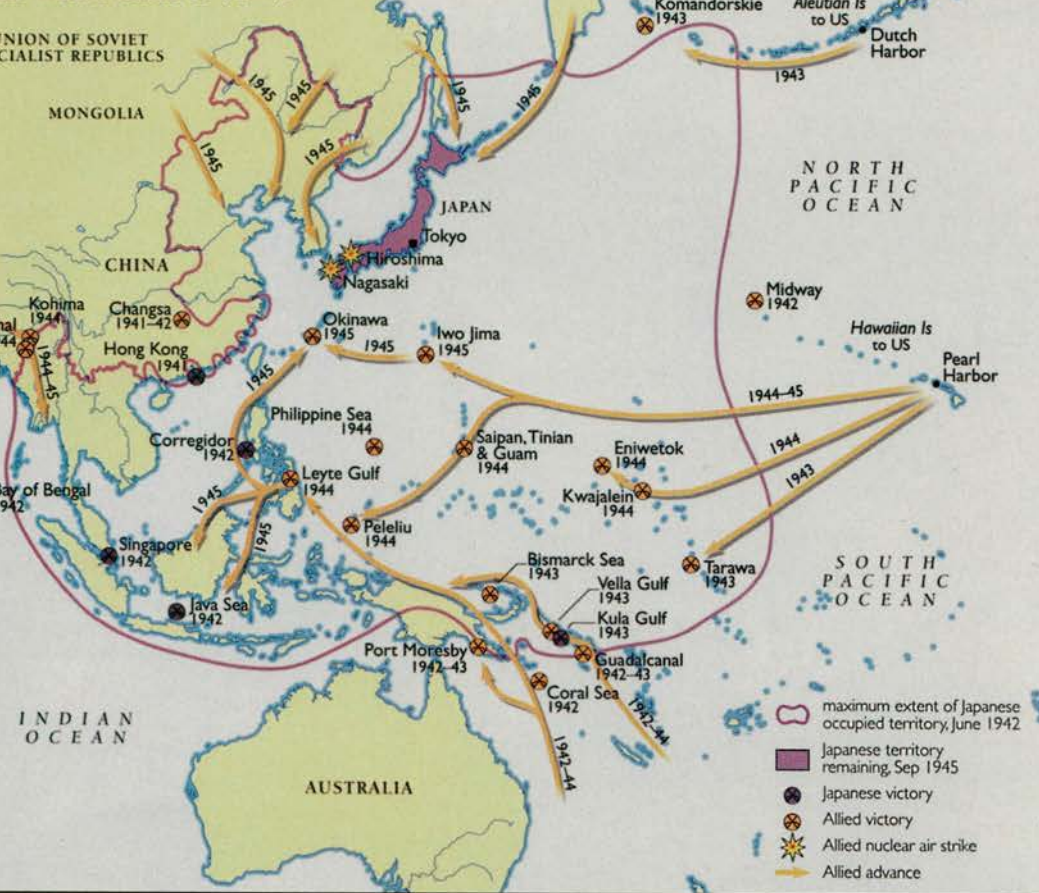
Second, history and geography should be kept as close as possible to each other, perhaps even merged, because so much of history is best approached through geography, and so much geography is taught best through an historical approach. The former point is obvious: The human stage is the world, and the plot of the play is the activity of human beings in relation to their environment and each other. The latter point may be less obvious. What I mean can best be expressed by a comparison to courses in physics and astronomy that begin with the knowledge and theories prevalent in the ancient world and then march forward in time, teaching students their science in the same progression as Europeans (and others) learned it. Thus, one studies Galileo's experiments to learn the laws of mechanics; Kepler, Tycho, and Newton to learn orbital mechanics and the laws of gravitation; the experiments of Faraday, Ampere, Ohm, and Marconi to learn the formulas of electricity, and so forth through atomic physics. Geography ought to be taught the same way, however much that may seem to "privilege" Europeans who explored and mapped the world with their galleons and brigs and geodetic satellites. For in learning the progress of geographic knowledge from

JEWISH SETTLEMENT





## THE WAR IN ASIA 1941-45



Ptolemy to the present the students will not just be memorizing names and concepts but witnessing an adventure story without parallel. They will discover America, penetrate the interior of Australia and Africa, and race to the South Pole along with the historical figures; and the geographical knowledge they acquire will be linked to causes and effects rather than stand alone as trivia.

Third, history and geography teachers ought to convey to students how the realities of space and time have indeed changed over the millennia, centuries, and sometimes mere decades as a function of human technology, which is the nexus between mankind and its environment. From the first irrigation systems to the Space Age, the evolution of civilizations and their relationship to nature has been a function of tools. The history of technology might even be called the "third dimension" that rounds out our picture

of the past. Geography, the first dimension, describes terrestrial space. History, the second, describes change over time. Technology, the third, describes how human conceptions of space and time have evolved. But just as students of math cannot handle solid geometry until they have mastered plane geometry, so students of history are not ready to question human conventions of space and time until they know the "lay of the land" and how to "tell time" historically.

I HAVE THE pleasure of lunching one day a week with Harvey Sicherman, the president of the Foreign Policy Research Institute, and catching up on world affairs. As an experienced expert and former speechwriter for three secretaries of state, he is a ready source of inside information and insights that only later, or never, appear in the newspapers. Above all, Sicherman is a master of the geographical factors in war and diplomacy, and he amazed me several years ago by predicting exactly, and weeks before time, the internal boundaries that would define the settlement in Bosnia. "I've done the map," he announced, and proceeded to trace it out on a napkin. Since then I make it a habit when we are discussing the latest crisis to ask if he's "done the map."

My dream is that every teacher and student of history and geography, at the end of every block of instruction, can say proudly and knowledgeably, "I've done the map." Because that means they know who they are, where they are, and how to get where they want to go. That means they have had true education. □



*Forced over many centuries into repeated exile from their homeland, by AD 300 most Jews were scattered across the Middle East and all around the Mediterranean.*

# A TRIBUTE TO JEANNE CHALL

**I**N ONE of the tributes that follows, a longtime friend and associate recalls how Jeanne Chall believed being a teacher was the most important job: “She delighted in telling how, when she became a professor of education and director of the Reading Laboratory at Harvard University, her mother asked if she could still tell her friends that her daughter was a teacher.”

Indeed, her mother could. And surely the most important lesson Jeanne Chall taught—both directly in her classes and seminars and, more tellingly, in how she conducted herself as a scholar—was, as E.D. Hirsch, Jr. has described the spirit that animated her work, “to follow the evidence fearlessly wherever it might lead.” Jeanne Chall did that, and it got her into a lot of trouble with people who didn’t like where the evidence led. But she stood her ground and inspired others to do likewise. In recent years, that ground has shifted. The evidence supporting Jeanne Chall’s original findings about teaching beginning reading has become crushing in its abundance and conclusiveness. And countless children who otherwise would be hopelessly struggling are now on a secure path to reading.

Jeanne Chall died Thanksgiving weekend, 1999. She was 78 years old. Last fall, The International Dyslexia Association (IDA), an organization with which Jeanne Chall had long been associated, devoted a special issue of its newsletter *Perspectives* (Volume 26, No. 4) to her memory. The guest editors, Marilyn Jager Adams and Linda K. Rath, gathered tributes from many of Jeanne’s colleagues, students, and friends. With IDA’s permission, we have chosen five of those tributes to reprint here, and we have added a review of the book Chall finished shortly before her death. “No single person has contributed more to the substance, dialogue, or advancement of the field of reading education,” the editors of *Perspectives* wrote. To that we can only say, with gratitude, Amen.

—Editor

*Photo: Jeanne Chall in the Harvard Reading Lab, 1984. In her honor, the lab was renamed the Jeanne S. Chall Reading Laboratory in April 2000.*



PHOTO BY MARTHA STEWART, PROVIDED COURTESY OF ANDREA W. KOTILA





# Jeanne Chall's Historic Contribution

BY DIANE RAVITCH

As a historian of education, I have studied the history and politics of reading research. Based on my research, I can say without qualification that Jeanne Chall's significant contribution to this field changed the course of the debate about reading in the last third of the 20th century. Chall will long be remembered for both the quality of her research and for her matchless integrity, which inspired her students and admirers in many other fields.

Here is the context that brought Jeanne Chall to the forefront of the reading debate. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the public schools were roundly criticized for intellectual flabbiness. Then, in 1955, Rudolf Flesch's sensational book, *Why Johnny Can't Read*, charged that there was a national reading crisis caused by the widespread use of textbooks and reading programs that rejected phonics. Flesch insisted that the popular "look-say" method, found in books like the *Dick and Jane* reading series, had no support in research. His book topped the bestseller list and was serialized in many newspapers.

In 1961, as the debate about how to teach reading continued, the Carnegie Corporation of New York commissioned Jeanne Chall, who was well established as a careful reading researcher, to review the controversy. Chall spent three years visiting hundreds of classrooms, analyzing research studies, and examining textbooks; she interviewed textbook authors, reading specialists, and teachers. In her landmark book *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*, published in 1967, she did not agree with Flesch that there was one and only one successful method for teaching beginning readers. She concluded that no single method had completely solved the problems of teaching reading; some methods were better than others, but none was a panacea.

Chall was not an ideologue; she was a careful researcher who understood teaching. She knew that it was extraordinarily tricky to compare the effectiveness of different teaching methods because each approach contained elements of the other. She pointed out that schools that had recently adopted phonics programs still used the look-say readers, and teachers tended to

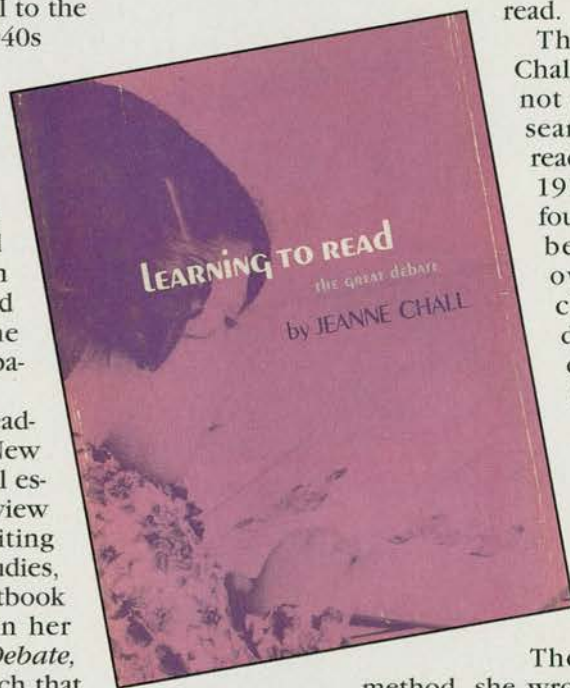
rely on the methods with which they were most familiar. In the 1930s, she observed, phonics survived in a hostile environment because some teachers clung to their old phonics charts, closed the classroom door, and hoped that their supervisor did not come in unannounced. However, she discovered that teachers who had been trained since the 1930s had never learned to teach phonics and were likely to fall back on what they knew best, which was the look-say method.

Chall found that from 1930 until the early 1960s, there was a pervasive professional consensus on the one best way to teach reading. This consensus de-emphasized the use of phonics and concentrated on teaching children to recognize whole words and sentences. It stressed silent reading, rather than oral reading (oral reading was associated with phonics because it demonstrated the child's knowledge of the sounds of letters and syllables). Children were encouraged to identify words "at sight" by referring to pictures and context clues; the sight vocabulary was carefully controlled and repeated often in the primers. While phonics was not necessarily banned, it was relegated to a minor role in learning to read.

This orthodoxy, Chall discovered, was not supported by research. In reviewing reading research from 1912 to 1965, Chall found that studies of beginning readers over the decades clearly supported decoding. Early decoding, she found, not only produced better word recognition and spelling, but also made it easier for the child eventually to read with understanding.

The code emphasis method, she wrote, was especially effective for children of lower socioeconomic status, who were not likely to live in homes surrounded with books or with adults who could help them learn to read. For a beginning reader, she found, knowledge of letters and sounds had more influence on reading achievement than the child's tested mental ability or IQ.

Instinctively wary of any extremism, Chall warned teachers, schools, and textbook publishers not to go overboard in teaching phonics, not to jettison comprehension and good stories. She had recommended phonics only as a beginning reading method, a method to start the child reading in the first two grades, followed by a quick transition to reading good stories. She had predicted that if schools made a fetish of phonics, there would be a counter-reaction, and a movement would rise up against the overemphasis on



*Diane Ravitch is a historian of education and Research Professor of Education at New York University. Her latest book is Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).*

systematic phonics. She expected that this counter-reaction would demand a “natural” approach, a renewed attention to recognizing whole words and reading for meaning and appreciation. Of course, she was describing, with uncanny accuracy—back in 1967—the rise of the whole language movement.

When the whole language movement became a major factor in American education in the 1980s, as Chall had predicted, she was often targeted as one of its “enemies.” In publications and debates, she was sometimes accused by whole language partisans of being a tool of the “far right.” This, of course, was absurd. Jeanne Chall never let herself be used by anyone. She was a woman of remarkable candor, clarity, and personal integrity. She reported what she found, and she did not seek favor from anyone nor serve as a foot-soldier in anyone’s political campaigns.

Even as the attacks on her continued, she stressed that both decoding and comprehension were critical for young readers. Her critics twisted her words, but they never managed to tarnish her scholarly reputation, and she never descended to trading insults with those who insulted her.

Her message over the decades was clear and consistent. Teaching children to read is difficult, not easy; it requires consistency, skill, and open-mindedness. Research can point us to better methods, but only well-prepared teachers can make good methods effective in their classrooms.

She will be remembered in the history of American education as a teacher, a scholar, and a person of the highest character who cared deeply about children. Having just completed a history of American education in the 20th century, which documents Jeanne Chall’s important role in clarifying “the great debate,” I can assure her many friends that her work will not be forgotten.



# The Great Debate

BY MARILYN JAGER ADAMS

When we sat down for lunch, I saw that Jeanne had brought a copy of my book. “Listen,” she said, “I want to read you something.” She opened the book and read from my summary remarks about *The Great Debate*.

Chall’s book is a classic because it is thorough, disciplined, and readable....The observations and data she amassed seemed inescapably to suggest that—as a complement to connected and meaningful reading—systematic phonic instruction is a valuable component of beginning reading instruction. Its positive effects appeared both strong and extensive. Yet the reader is left with the impression that these findings took Chall by surprise.<sup>1</sup>

She closed the book, sat back, and peered at me

*Marilyn Jager Adams, currently a consultant with BBN Technologies, Cambridge, Mass., is the author of Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print.*

long and hard. “Have I said this to you?” she finally asked. No, she had not. “Then what makes you think it is so?”

I felt at least uncomfortable. In giving oneself license to write from the soul, one necessarily gives others license to see, rightly or wrongly, more than one has written. Had I overstepped in this reflection? Had I misread? Had I trespassed on her person?

That evening she called on the phone. “I’ve been thinking,” she began. Then with a great swell of pride in her voice, she announced, “*The Great Debate* was my first feminist book! Do you know?” We both laughed, for both of us did.

Not that Chall was surprised that phonics is useful for young readers. English, after all, is an alphabetic script. Yet, few who delve into the primary research are prepared for the strength or the scope of the phonics effect. A working knowledge of spellings and spelling-sound correspondences is fundamental for young readers. It is essential. Furthermore, whether children gain that understanding is very, very strongly influenced by instruction. That is what Chall figured out as she wrote *The Great Debate*. Moreover, she figured it out despite the fact that, by today’s standards, the research base from which she worked was both crude and spotty. Had she been anyone else, she might well have understood and written about these findings only as they fit her prior beliefs. But she did not. Both-ering instead to push and ponder their collective meaning and credibility, she caused herself to question and, ultimately, revise her own beliefs, even knowing the social and professional risks of so doing.

Still today, after many hundreds more pages, many thousands more experimental hours and subjects, and many millions more dollars worth of work, we have certified much but learned little more. The conclusions of our scientific efforts to understand beginning reading remain “point for point, virtually identical to those at which Jeanne Chall had arrived [in *The Great Debate*] on the basis of her classroom observations and interpretive reviews of the literature.”<sup>2</sup>

If Chall’s conclusions defied her expectations, if they have been proven only through subsequent decades of hard empirical effort, then one cannot help but wonder. How did she manage to figure them out? The answer, I am convinced, derives no more from Chall’s exceptional intelligence and discipline than from her uncontainable intellectual honesty. In the last chapter of *The Great Debate*, Chall wrote:

In presenting the conclusions of this study, and especially the recommendations growing out of these conclusions, I am keenly aware that I can never hope to escape from the influence of my time.... It would be foolish to think that I do not share in this human condition.... I hope I have adequately stressed that the conclusions and recommendations I present here hold for *now*—for the present available evidence, for existing school conditions (as I see them), and for the goals we seek now.<sup>3</sup>

Compare this voice to those who have so loudly and brutally maligned her for her work. Then reconsider the strength of this woman. How much easier her life would have been had she given up or given in.

Now, more than 30 years later, our country is again recognizing that its future depends on the education

of its children. At the same time, for reasons of informational advances and demographic shifts, the educational disparities and inequities of our public school system are more clearly quantified and more starkly ghettoized than ever before. In her preface to *The Reading Crisis*, Chall reflected:

It is common today, as in the past, to look elsewhere than to educational research for an understanding of the literacy problems of low-income children and for ways of solving these problems. Currently, cultural and political theories are offered as reasons for the low achievement of poor children and for the lag between mainstream and at-risk children. Although cultural and political explanations may help us understand the broader picture, in the end they must be translated, in practical terms, into what can be done in schools and in homes. Such translations ought to consider the historical findings of educational research—that good teaching improves achievement and thereby can empower all children and especially those at risk.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, thanks largely to Jeanne Chall, we now possess an overabundance of hard data that only strengthen her conclusion: Provided that we apply the lessons we have learned, there is no reason for any healthy child in any classroom in our country to be left behind in reading.

<sup>1</sup> Adams, M. J. (1990). *Beginning to read: Thinking and learning about print*, p. 39. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.

<sup>2</sup> Adams, 1990, p. 49.

<sup>3</sup> Chall, J. S. (1967). *Learning to read: The great debate*, pp. 305-306. New York: McGraw-Hill.

<sup>4</sup> Chall, J. S., Jacobs, V. A., & Baldwin, L. E. (1990). *The reading crisis: Why poor children fall behind*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.



## Tribute to Dr. Chall— A Teacher

BY NANCY RAE NEILL

Once, I explained to Dr. Chall that while I wrote thousands of memos, letters, curriculum guides, and

## Jeanne Chall's Last Book

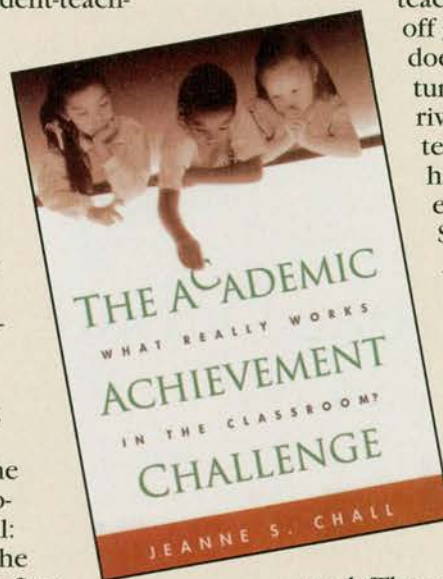
BY E. D. HIRSCH, JR.

*The Academic Achievement Challenge* is 185 pages long. Written in a clear, even-tempered style, it can be read in one or two sittings. It deserves to become as important to teachers as the best-selling anxiety-soother by Harry K. Wong, *The First Days of School*. Chall's book is even more valuable to teachers, because it tells us what to do on the days that follow.

Chall's book puts to rest—or should—some age-old debates. Is direct teaching more effective on balance than indirect teaching? Is small-group instruction better on balance than whole-class instruction? Is there a difference between what works for disadvantaged and for advantaged children? Among historians, who is right, those who say that “progressive” child-centered education has taken over our elementary schools or those who deny that it ever really displaced “traditional” teacher-centered education? And no matter which school of historical thought has that answer right, which modes of teaching are in fact best for reaching all children?

In answering each of these

questions, Jeanne Chall preserves what one of my student-teachers calls a “cool head.” She does not assume that the researchers on either side of these heated controversies are fools or knaves. But she does recognize the role that ideology has played and continues to play in these debates, and she quotes a telling passage from John Dewey's teacher, the child-centered advocate, G. Stanley Hall: “The guardians of the young should strive first of all to keep out of nature's way.... They should feel profoundly that childhood as it comes fresh from the hands of God, is not corrupt, but illustrates the survival of the most consummate thing in the world” (1901). This idea of education as promoting natural growth, never pressing the children before they are “ready,” took various forms through the century, ending in the stage the-



ory of Piaget. The teacher is a hands-off gardener who does not get in nature's way. The rival tradition sees teachers as more hands-on gardeners, like those in Shakespeare's *Richard II* who “give support-ance to the bending twigs,” and “root away/The noisome weeds which with-

out profit suck/The soil's fertility from wholesome flowers.” It's an old debate, which Chall labels “student-centered” versus “teacher-centered” education, and the weight of evidence, Chall shows, favors the more active, Shakespearian sort of gardener—if our aim is to educate all children.

That democratic aim lies at the heart of Chall's review of research into methods of teaching. During her lifetime of scholarship, she

so on as a part of my job, I was not "a writer." She listened carefully, as she always did to everyone, and then related that once she had said something similar to Dr. Edgar Dale. He asked her if she could sit for long periods of uninterrupted time and hold a pencil. To her affirmative replies, he said, "Then you can write—and I will help you." Because she helped me, I am writing this tribute.

I never told Dr. Chall that she was the greatest teacher I ever had, and I don't know that I could. I believe she knew at some level but would not have felt it was a valuable allocation of time to talk about it. I do know she believed being a teacher was the most important job. She delighted in telling how, when she became a professor of education and director of the Reading Laboratory at Harvard University, her mother asked if she could still tell her friends that her daughter was a teacher. I remember, too, while visiting a school during the height of the whole language movement, how stunned and saddened Dr. Chall was when

---

*Nancy Rae Neill is supervisor of curriculum and instruction for the Racine Unified School District, Racine, Wis.*

corrected by a teacher who preferred to be called a "facilitator."

In 1966, I read a draft copy of Dr. Chall's *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*. I was a graduate student of the senior author of the major "look-say" basal of the day. While he appeared ashen after reading her book, it made sense to me. Many of the children who came to the clinic at his university required systematic phonic instruction in order to advance in learning to read. Yet, even as she wrote about the importance of phonics, Dr. Chall cautioned people not to overdo it, or "we will be confronted in 10 or 20 years with another bestseller: 'Why Robert Can't Read.'" This is exactly what happened!

Dr. Chall's capacity for looking at all facets of a problem was remarkable. She tirelessly asked questions of everything and everyone, including herself. By questioning her students, she forced us to focus, to analyze, to synthesize, and to think for ourselves. She was so great at enabling others that we frequently believed we had done it all on our own.

Dr. Chall's power as a teacher drew not only from her scholarship and experience, but from her rare ability to empathize with students, young and old. I recall a

produced a number of books and reports focused on the problem of reaching all children, including those from educationally deprived backgrounds. One of the hidden passions behind all of her dispassionate scholarship, including her great book of 1967, *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*, is her earnest concern that while the more romantic traditions of student-centered teaching, such as the "whole word" or "whole language" approach, can succeed with many middle-class students, they do not succeed with those who need instruction the most.

The reason for this disparity is fundamental. Middle-class students often have support systems outside of school that enable them to progress even when instructional time is not used effectively in school. Disadvantaged students, by contrast, need direct and effective teacher-centered methods, because they lack that outside support system, and cannot afford the time-inefficiencies of "discovery" modes of teaching. Discovery methods do work with some students, Chall concedes, even if not efficiently. But she cites overwhelming research that shows

that implicit, student-centered methods do not reach all students. With some poignancy, she reports that this fact has been known, and widely ignored, for over a hundred years.

In making a distinction between student-centered and teacher-centered education, and in showing that an ocean of research favors teacher-centered methods, Chall might seem to polarize the issue. But that would be to read this powerful little book with insufficient care. Research does support some advantages in discovery, student-centered methods of teaching, when they are used judiciously, and when all children in a class have been primed to make the desired discovery. In general, explicit teacher-centered instruction needs to precede implicit discovery instruction. The teacher who asks students to discover "Which time of year is hotter at the equator, fall or summer?" is well advised not to raise that interesting question out of nowhere, without having directly provided to all the children enough relevant knowledge to think productively about the question.

That is just common sense, and

common sense has been Chall's hallmark. But common sense and punctilious scholarship did not always shield Jeanne Chall against ideological fervor. It did not prevent her from being vilified as a "phonicator" during the long-lasting reading wars, which have only recently concluded with a vindication of her careful scholarship in *The Great Debate*. Chall lived to see that vindication, but died just before this new book was published. I hope that other teachers will respond to it as my student-teachers did. One of them said that the story of the research into student-centered teaching at the Gary, Ind., public schools in the early 1900s "blew her away." I asked her why. "Well it seems like we still keep doing and saying the same things even after we find out they don't work."

My student had understood. Chall would have been pleased.

---

*E.D. Hirsch, Jr. is University Professor of Education and Humanities at the University of Virginia, author of The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them, and chairman of the Core Knowledge Foundation.*

day when we were observing reading lessons from behind large one-way mirrors in the Harvard Reading Lab. One young adult student had advanced from a virtual non-reader to the intermediate level. However, his halting “collaborative” reading with his tutor was almost painful to observe, and his reading growth seemed to have reached a plateau. The young man was slouched down in his chair and struggling over the book that was lying on the desk. The tutor sympathetically waited for him to puzzle over every difficult word. Jeanne shortly zipped out and asked if she could work with him. She had him sit up straight and hold his own book. Then she asked him to start reading with her help, and she instantaneously provided any word he missed. The student began to read faster and faster and, soon, without Jeanne’s assistance. When Dr. Chall told him that was fine and he could stop, he kept right on reading to the end of the chapter. The student’s body language was totally altered in a 10-minute period and, from the smile on his face, it was clear that he now knew he could read. Jeanne reinforced this with a few positive comments and encouragement to take risks and continue working to meet his goal. It was not long before the young man reached his goal: to read and comprehend a book that his father had written.

I also recall walking through the exhibit hall with Dr. Chall at one of the International Reading Association Conventions. At a booth selling a high-interest, low-vocabulary series of textbooks, she noticed that the series started out a few months below grade level but, by sixth grade, began with stories that were listed as two years below grade level. Dr. Chall asked the representative why this was so. If children used the series, and if it was successful, then why wouldn’t they progress in achievement instead of losing ground? The representative treated Dr. Chall as someone not too bright and carefully explained that this was the correct way for “slow” children to learn to read. (This disregarded all research evidence to the contrary as well as Dr. Chall’s work on the importance of using challenging reading material in instruction.) The representative compounded his errors by stating that the readabilities were correct because the company used the Dale-Chall Readability Formula to determine all the levels. When Dr. Chall asked if this was true even at the first- and second-grade level, he assured her that it was. (Note: The Dale-Chall Readability Formula was developed for assessing materials at grades 4 and above.) Dr. Chall asked a few more questions but never told the representative her name. I love this story and would have used it for many a laugh. However, I noticed that Dr. Chall never told it to anyone nor used it in any presentation. In fact, in the volumes of writing that she produced, and in the many presentations I listened to, I never heard her make one comment that would personally hurt another individual. She wrote and spoke as a professional, basing her comments on evidence, observations, and personal experiences working directly with children and teachers.

Dr. Chall was my teacher, my mentor, and my friend—as she was to each of us involved in learning about reading. Even now when I read an interesting article in *Education Week*, the *New York Times*, or wherever, my hand automatically reaches for the

phone to call Jeanne for her insight and comments. So many of us will always miss her charismatic smile and the ever-present twinkle in her eyes.



## Jeanne Chall: A Memory

BY WILEY BLEVINS

### A Beginning

I was 24, a new Harvard Graduate School of Education student, and fortunate enough to be in Dr. Chall’s class during her final year of full-time teaching. I’ll never forget that first day of her Reading, Schools, and Social Policy class. She began the class by listing the topics we would discuss throughout the semester. After a few topics, a young woman sitting next to me nodded her head knowingly in response to one of the topics. “What do you think about this?” Dr. Chall inquired, pointing to the now stunned redhead. The student squirmed slightly as she muttered her feelings about the topic and what she thought should be done in schools based on these feelings. Annoyed or amused, I’m not sure which, Dr. Chall quickly interrupted her. “What research do you have to base that on?” she firmly asked. “None,” the girl answered slightly embarrassed. The girl began to backpedal like a tourist in a rowboat approaching the Niagara Falls. Dr. Chall’s message was received. Whatever we said in (or out of) class had to be supported by solid research. We were never to make statements or decisions based on feelings, unsubstantiated beliefs, or gut reactions to situations. It was a lesson I never forgot.

### An Ending

A year prior to Dr. Chall’s death, I returned to the picturesque streets of Cambridge with a colleague of mine to speak to a publishing class at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. I was now an executive editor at a large publishing house working on reading textbooks for the primary grades. Before the publishing class, a lunch was arranged with Dr. Chall. Throughout the lunch, Dr. Chall spoke about her work schedule (writing to noon each day), a book she was sending to a publisher (her last), and several future projects she was planning. I discussed with Dr. Chall current issues in basal reading publishing, such as the push to have controlled text in first grade with a much higher decodability count. Dr. Chall’s research greatly supports this notion as does my work. My concern was over “how” controlled and/or decodable the text should be. I couldn’t locate any research that provided an optimum decodability number. I explained to Dr. Chall that various educators and state policymakers were beginning to set decodability minimums for this

---

*Wiley Blevins is director of Primary at Scholastic.*



text. "On what research do they base that?" Dr. Chall firmly inquired. "I haven't seen this research!" The tone and message were familiar. "What would you suggest?" I cautiously queried. "I would have to conduct research to find out," she replied. Our conversation led me to conduct the most important research of my career—an attempt to answer this question. I owe much of what I know and have done to Dr. Chall's expertise and guidance. The field of education is certainly lacking without her brilliance. I thank her and will miss her.



## Teacher and Mentor

BY LINDA K. RATH

At a celebration marking the 30th anniversary of *Sesame Street*, Jeanne Chall sat in the front row. I accompanied her to this event, and she nudged and whispered to me throughout. When Gerry Lesser saluted her from the stage, thanking her for "insisting that the alphabet have a starring role in the show," she leaned over and hissed, "What a battle that was. Self-esteem, that's all they wanted. I had to fight to make them give kids knowledge and skills!" Elmo himself came over to thank Jeanne at the dinner that followed. "You helped me learn my ABCs," he crooned.

Though Professor Jeanne Chall was a world-class scholar, she was also a maven of TV. She watched talk shows, documentaries, music specials, and educational programs for children. She believed that television could help accomplish her life's mission: teaching people, especially at-risk children, to read. She made a point of watching every new kids' show on the PBS lineup, and she had strong—and sometimes surprising—opinions of them (e.g., *Barney* and *Teletubbies* got a thumbs up).

Dr. Chall was on board to advise writers during the *Electric Company* era, and she was eager to contribute to the newest pro-literacy PBS series, *Between the Lions*.<sup>1</sup> She was one of the first to hear of the new show, in fact, due to her long-time friendship with Phyllis Cerf, former head of Beginner Books at Random House. *Between the Lions* is the brainchild of Phyllis's son, Christopher, and several New York colleagues, and they turned to Dr. Chall early on for ideas about the curriculum content.

Ever the tough critic and teacher, Jeanne was also a diligent and thorough advisor. Each script was read with the same care she always gave to the papers and dissertations of her students. She'd mark her script copies with "No!" and "Why here?" and sprays of suggestions. She argued that children *want* to learn, so

*Linda K. Rath is curriculum director for Between the Lions. She was a research assistant and teaching fellow for Dr. Chall in the late 1980s.*

there's no need to jazz things up to the level of parody or burlesque. She would persistently prod and cajole the writers to promote cultural literacy and deliver systematic phonics instruction. But she was always supportive and had a good-humored touch at these important advisory meetings.

Jeanne saved her heavier-handed approach for our private talks, when she would urge me to be forceful and clear-sighted in my role as curriculum director. I was nervous on the day I brought her to WGBH for a screening of our first pilot episode, "The Fox and the Crow." I knew she'd notice every mistake, missed opportunity, and over-the-top enactment. But her eyes lit up as she watched the opening story unfold. She did let out a "tsk, tsk" every now and then, and she swatted me playfully when she felt something was distracting or unnecessary. We stopped the tape about 50 times, so she could explain her objections. Then, at the end, she proclaimed, "I like it. It's much better than *Sesame Street*! The family is really very charming. They read books and play with words—it's so upbeat and literary! Now, here's what you have to do to make it better..." Two days later, she called to say that she was very excited about the show and that we'd better start thinking about a classroom curriculum to supplement it. "When you start writing the materials and teacher's manual," she said, "I'll be happy to help you with it." Regrettably, that was not to be.

The episode Jeanne critiqued that day is dedicated to her, and her name appears on a logo at the end of each show, along with the names of several departed *Sesame Street* writers and Ted Geisel (Dr. Seuss). I think she would have loved to know that she is to be forever in the company of those smart, talented men who shared her mission and looked to her for guidance.

Jeanne would also have been happy to know that when I read a script, I hear her voice questioning every word and lesson. Is the vocabulary rich enough here; is it too sophisticated there? I pull out *Readability Revisited*<sup>2</sup> and check the word list. I use her arguments in prodding writers to teach important skills and promote cultural literacy. Wouldn't she have loved to see this notice in the paper the day after *Between the Lions* premiered:

Which brings up the great reading debate—phonics or whole word, you ask? No question, *Between the Lions* is foursquare behind phonics. Just listen to The Vowelles tell about the short E sound (eh, eh, eh).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Between the Lions* is a co-production of WGBH and Sirius Thinking, Ltd. It is funded in part by a Read to Learn grant from the United States Department of Education through the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Major support is also provided by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Park Foundation, The Arthur Vining Davis Foundations, the Charles H. Revson Foundation, and the Institute for Civil Society. National corporate sponsorship is provided by Cheerios® and e-Toys®.

<sup>2</sup> Chall, J.S. & Dale E. (1995). Cambridge, Mass.: Brookline Books.

<sup>3</sup> Jeanne Spreier, *TV Week*, *The Dallas Morning News*, April 2, 2000. □

# TEACHING VOCABULARY

*Early, direct, and sequential*

BY ANDREW BIEMILLER

**D**URING THE past 10 years, Jeanne Chall [see tribute, pages 16-23] encouraged me to focus on the study of vocabulary and how vocabulary growth might be encouraged. Both of us had come to the conclusion that vocabulary growth was inadequately addressed in current educational curricula, especially in the elementary and preschool years and that more teacher-centered and planned curricula were needed, just as had been the case with phonics. Jeanne had come to this conclusion through her work on the stages of reading development (Chall, 1983/1996), her work on textbook difficulty (Chall and Conard, 1991), and especially through the findings of her joint research project with Catherine Snow on families and literacy (Chall, Snow, et al., 1982), as summarized in *The Reading Crisis* (Chall, Jacobs, and Baldwin, 1990). In this book, Chall and her colleagues traced the relative decline in reading achievements experienced by working-class children who had become competent readers by third grade but whose vocabulary limitations increasingly had a negative effect on their reading comprehension as they advanced to seventh grade. (Jeanne mentioned to me several times her disappointment that *The Reading Crisis* was not more widely discussed.)

I had been particularly influenced by Wesley Becker's famous *Harvard Educational Review* article (1977) noting that the impact of early DISTAR success with decoding was muted for reading comprehension in later elementary grades by vocabulary limitations. Becker argued that this was a matter of experience rather than general intelligence by observing that while his DISTAR students' reading comprehension fell relative to more advantaged students by grade 4, their

mathematics performance remained high. He suggested that the difference was that all the knowledge that is needed for math achievement is taught in school, whereas the vocabulary growth needed for successful reading comprehension is essentially left to the home. Disadvantaged homes provide little support for vocabulary growth, as recently documented by Hart and Risley (1995). I was further influenced by the finding of my doctoral student, Maria Cantalini (1987), that school instruction in kindergarten and grade 1 apparently had *no* impact on vocabulary development as assessed by the Peabody vocabulary test. Morrison, Williams, and Massetti (1998) have since replicated this finding. This finding is particularly significant in view of Cunningham and Stanovich's (1997) recently reported finding that vocabulary as assessed in grade 1 predicts more than 30 percent of grade 11 reading comprehension, much more than reading mechanics as assessed in grade 1 do. Finally, I have been influenced by the consistent finding in the oral reading miscue literature that when overall error rates reach 5 percent of running words (tokens), that "contextual" errors (those that make sense in context) virtually disappear. I infer from this that when readers (or listeners?) understand less than 95 percent of the words in a text, they are likely to lose the meaning of that text (and be especially unlikely to infer meanings of unfamiliar words).

In short, as Gough and Tunmer (1986) have pointed out, vocabulary development is both important and ignored. Can we—educators—do better, or are we simply bumping into constitutional limitations that are beyond the power of schools to affect? In the remainder of this article, I am going to summarize a few points that support the argument for an increased emphasis on vocabulary and suggest the need for a more teacher-centered and curriculum-structured approach to ensure adequate vocabulary development.

**The consequences of an increased emphasis on phonics.** In recent years, we have seen a tremendous emphasis on the importance of phonics instruction to ensure educational progress. We also have seen

---

*Andrew Biemiller is professor, Institute of Child Study, Department of Human Development and Applied Psychology, University of Toronto, Ontario. His latest book is Language and Reading Success (Brookline Books, Cambridge, Mass.) This article is reprinted with permission from the International Dyslexia Association quarterly newsletter, Perspectives, Fall 2000, Vol. 26, No. 4.*



ILLUSTRATED BY ROBERT BAROUN

that while more children learn to “read” with increased phonics instruction, there have not been commensurate gains in *reading comprehension* (e.g., Gregory, Earl, and O’Donoghue, 1993; Madden et al., 1993; Pinnell et al., 1994). What is missing for many children who master phonics but don’t comprehend well is *vocabulary*, the words they need to know in order to understand what they’re reading. Thus vocabulary is the “missing link” in reading/language instruction in our school system. Because vocabulary deficits particularly affect less advantaged and second-language children, I will be arguing that such “deficits” are fundamentally more remediable than many other school learning problems.

**Schools now do little to promote vocabulary development, particularly in the critical years before grade 3.** The role of schooling in vocabulary acquisition has been the subject of much debate. Early (pre-literacy) differences in vocabulary growth are associated with social class (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, and Klebanov, 1994; Hart and Risley, 1995; McLloyd, 1998). Nagy and Herman (1987) and Sternberg (1987) argue that much vocabulary acquisition results from literacy and wide reading rather than from direct instruction. However, it is obvious that a great deal of vocabulary acquisition occurs *before* children become literate, and before they are reading books that introduce unfamiliar vocabulary (Becker, 1977). Cantalini (1987) and Morrison, Williams, and Massetti (1998) both report that vocabulary acquisition in kindergarten and grade 1 is little influenced by school experience, based on finding that young first-graders have about the same vocabulary (Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test) as older kindergarten children. Cantalini reported the same result for second grade.

**The relatively small number of words that need to be learned.** It is sometimes argued that the number of words children need to learn is so great that this can only happen incidentally through wide reading (Anderson, 1996; Nagy and Herman, 1987; Sternberg, 1987). This argument is quite reminiscent of the argument that the spelling-to-sound structure of

English is so difficult that it can't be taught but only learned through experience. In both cases, the complexity of what needs to be learned has been somewhat exaggerated. Many years ago, Lorge and Chall (1963) argued that traditional dictionary sampling methods for assessing vocabulary had greatly overestimated the volume of vocabulary children needed to acquire. As Lorge and Chall, Beck and McKeown (1990), and others have noted, we need to focus on root word growth rather than the acquisition of all inflected and derived forms of words. Jeremy Anglin's (1993) monograph suggests that children acquire about 1,200 root words a year during the elementary years with perhaps half that many root words learned per year prior to grade 1. (He also argues that perhaps twice that many words need to be learned, particularly including idiomatic forms.) My own research (Biemiller and Slonim, in press) suggests that the average number of root word meanings acquired per year may be somewhat smaller, more like 600 root word meanings a year from infancy to the end of elementary school. This conclusion, based on root word meanings sampled from Dale and O'Rourke's *Living Word Vocabulary* (1981), is partly based on the observation that many similar meanings are acquired at about the same age and probably do not require separate instruction.

**Evidence that vocabulary differences present by grade 2 may account for most vocabulary differences in elementary school.** There has been relatively little discussion or examination of individual differences in vocabulary growth. Hart and Risley (1995) observed large differences associated with word learning opportunities in the preschool years. In our current research, Naomi Slonim and I are finding that large vocabulary differences are present by the end of grade 2—amounting to more than 3,000 root words between high and low quartiles in a normative population (Biemiller and Slonim, in press). After grade 2, cross-sectional data indicate that the lowest-quartile children may actually add root word vocabulary faster than the higher-quartile children. However, by grade 5, they have only reached the median for grade 2 children. Thus, if we could find ways of supporting more rapid vocabulary growth in the early years, more children would be able to comprehend “grade level” texts in the upper elementary grades. (Note that the “reading grade level” of texts is in fact almost entirely determined by the vocabulary load of those texts (Chall and Conard, 1991; Chall and Dale, 1995). Thus early vocabulary limitations make “catching up” difficult even though once in school, children appear to acquire new vocabulary at similar rates. To “catch up,” vocabulary-disadvantaged children have to acquire vocabulary at above-average rates.

**The sequential nature of vocabulary acquisition.** Much evidence clearly indicates that vocabulary is acquired in largely the same order by most children. The existence of empirical vocabulary norms (as in the Peabody and *Living Word Vocabulary*) indicate that some words are acquired later than others. Slonim and I have found very high correlations (mostly over .90) between mean scores for words obtained from different grades (Biemiller and Slonim, in press). We also

found that when data is ordered by children's vocabulary levels rather than their grade level, we can clearly identify a range of words *known well* (above 75 percent), words *being acquired* (74 percent-25 percent) and those little known. Furthermore, these ranges are sequential. At any given point in vocabulary acquisition, a preliminary conclusion from this work is that there are about 2,000-3,000 root words that a child is likely to be learning. This makes the construction of a “vocabulary curriculum” plausible.

**Defining an essential vocabulary for high school graduates.** A corollary of the sequential nature of vocabulary acquisition is the possibility of defining a common vocabulary needed by most high school graduates. Several studies have shown that college entrants need 11,000 to 14,000 root words, while college graduates typically have about 17,000 root words (D'Anna, Zechmeister, and Hall 1991; Goulden, Nation, and Read, 1990; Hazenberg and Hulstijn, 1996). We need further research on the degree to which we can identify these words. (It is clear that all do not know the same exact words. It is equally clear that there is a substantial common vocabulary plus a further more discipline-specific vocabulary.)

**The hypothesis that most root word and idiomatic vocabulary learned before and during elementary school results from direct explanation of words.** We know relatively little about the processes by which children add words to their vocabularies. Some of the data are negative—evidence that children do *not* easily acquire words by inference, especially children younger than age 10 (Robbins and Ehri, 1994; Werner and Kaplan, 1952). In Bus, Van Ijzendoorn, and Pellegrini's (1995) summary of the effects of reading to children, there is evidence that younger children profit less from simply being “read to.” There is also positive evidence that children do readily acquire vocabulary when provided with a little explanation as novel words are encountered in context (Beck, Perfetti, and McKeown, 1982; Elley, 1989; Feitelson et al., 1986; Feitelson et al., 1991; Whitehurst et al., 1998). Preliminary evidence from directly interviewing children about word acquisition suggests that as late as grade 5, about 80 percent of words are learned as a result of direct explanation, either as a result of the child's request or instruction, usually by a teacher (Biemiller, 1999b). Overall, I believe that before age 10, the evidence supports the conclusion that a substantial majority of new root words are acquired through explanation by others (including explanations in texts) rather than by inference while reading, as has often been argued by Anderson, Nagy and Herman, and by Sternberg. For practical purposes, we should be prepared to ensure the availability and use of explanations of word meanings throughout at least the elementary school years.

**Although children differ in their opportunities to learn words and the ease with which they learn words, evidence suggests that most can learn vocabulary at normal rates.** There is clear evidence that vocabulary is associated with socioeconomic status—presumably reflecting differences in opportunity (as documented by Hart and Risley, 1995; and Snow, Burns, and Griffin, 1998). There is also clear evidence relating



vocabulary development to various phonological skills or capacities (e.g., Gathercole et al., 1997). It is likely that environment and “capacity” interact—that constitutionally more-advantaged children also may be environmentally more advantaged. However, a number of studies summarized in Biemiller (1999a), Stahl (1999), and elsewhere clearly indicate that children can acquire and retain two or three words a day through instruction involving contextualized introduction and explanation of new words. Furthermore, while less verbally fluent or lower vocabulary children and adolescents have been found to benefit little from inferring word meanings (Cain and Oakhill, in preparation; Elshout-Mohr and van Daalen-Kaptein, 1987), more-direct approaches have been reported to work well with these children (see Elley, Feitelson, and Whitehurst references cited previously). Overall, I hypothesize that most children (90 percent plus) can acquire new vocabulary at rates necessary to reach “grade level” or near grade level vocabulary in middle elementary school, *if given adequate opportunity to use new words and adequate instruction in word meanings.*

**The need for planned introduction and explanation of vocabulary plus various tools to help children become more independent in dealing with new vocabulary.** I have suggested above the hypothesis that 80 percent or more of the root words learned by grade 6 are learned as a result of direct *explanation* by parents, peers, teachers, and texts. Those who learn more words almost undoubtedly encounter more words *and receive more explanations* of word meanings. This suggests that we could do considerably more than we now do to ensure the development of adequate vocabulary through systematic exposure to two to three *new* words a day combined with adequate explanation of these words and opportunities to use them. (I am referring to *new meanings* not simply words that are unfamiliar in print.) Present

school practices fall far short of this objective in the primary grades. (Schools may do better in the upper elementary grades.) Other types of vocabulary instruction (e.g., using affixes, word family approaches, and direct instruction in inferencing) will also be useful, especially in grades 3 and above.

This particular objective raises the possibility of returning to a more basal approach, at least as one *component* of classroom language and reading instruction. If vocabulary acquisition is largely sequential in nature, it would appear possible to identify that sequence and to ensure that children at a given vocabulary level have an opportunity to encounter words they are likely to be learning next, within a context that uses the majority of the words that they have already learned. Some researchers are already beginning to work on this objective (e.g., David Francis and Barbara Foorman in Texas, Jan Hulstijn in the Netherlands, Margaret McKeown and Isabel Beck in Pittsburgh, William Nagy in Seattle, and John Morgan and myself in Toronto). Many problems need to be solved. Existing lists of words (e.g., *Living Word Vocabulary*) do not correspond closely enough to observed sequences of word acquisition to be great guides (although they are better than nothing). Word frequency in print data (e.g., Carroll, Davies, and Richmond, 1971) bears relatively little relationship to observed word knowledge. (In my studies, Carroll’s SFI index accounted for 7 percent of observed root word knowledge. In contrast, *Living Word Vocabulary* levels accounted for more than 50 percent of our data.) William Nagy (personal communication) has proposed combining Dale and O’Rourke’s data with expert ratings—a very plausible suggestion.

Given the establishment of plausible vocabulary lists, teachers could relate these lists to vocabulary being introduced in books (short stories, novels, texts) being studied, be aware of words to introduce or explain (or to query children about if they don’t *ask!*), and be aware of some important words that *aren’t* going to be covered in the established curriculum. These words could be taught directly, or other materials (e.g., stories to be read to class) could be introduced that include them.

**Conclusion: A substantially greater teacher-centered effort is needed to promote vocabulary development, especially in the kindergarten and early primary years.** In her last book, *The Academic Achievement Challenge*, Jeanne Chall (2000) presented a summary of research supporting the effectiveness of “teacher centered” approaches to education. The information reviewed here similarly points to the need for more planned (but contextualized) introduction of vocabulary. This is especially true in the pre-reading years (before grades 3 or 4 when children begin to read books that are likely to introduce new vocabulary). Specifically, increased teacher-centered vocabulary work should include the deliberate introduction of a wider range of vocabulary in the early primary years through *oral sources* (most children are limited in what they can read at this age level), ensuring coverage of about 4,000 root words by the end of grade 2. In the later elementary years, continued development will include adding another 500 to 750 root words per year, additional idioms, and increased flu-

ency in using derived words. In addition, in the upper elementary grades, instruction is needed in deriving word meanings from affixes, word families, etc., as well as in ways of inferring word meanings. If we are serious about "increasing standards" and bringing a greater proportion of schoolchildren to high levels of academic accomplishment, we cannot continue to leave vocabulary development to parents, chance, and highly motivated reading.

Thus, I strongly recommend a more teacher-directed and curriculum-directed approach to fostering vocabulary and language growth. *If education is going to have a serious "compensatory" function, we must do more to promote vocabulary.* Our current data show large "environmental" effects in kindergarten to grade 2. Large differences remain by grade 5 (e.g., children in the lowest grade 5 quartile have vocabularies similar to median second-grade children). Is this simply the product of "intelligence"? I believe it is in considerable part the result of different learning opportunities. After grade 2, vocabulary growth rates look similar or faster for "low quartile" children. *If we could keep them from being so far behind by grade 2, they apparently wouldn't be so far behind in grade 5!*

I don't believe we can make all kids alike. But I think we could do more to give them similar tools to start with. Some kids may have to work harder to add vocabulary. Educators may have to work harder with some kids. So what's new? But now, educators do virtually nothing before grade 3 or 4 to facilitate real vocabulary growth. *By then, it's too late for many children.* □

## REFERENCES

- Anderson, R. C. (1996). Research foundations to support wide reading. In V. Greaney (Ed.), *Promoting reading in developing countries*. New York, N.Y.: International Reading Association.
- Anglin, J. M. (1993). Vocabulary development: A morphological analysis. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, Serial No. 238, 58.
- Beck, I., and McKeown, M. (1990). Conditions of vocabulary acquisition. In R. Barr, M. L. Kamil, P. B. Mosenthal, and P. D. Pearson, (Eds.) *Handbook of Reading Research*, Vol. 2, (789-814). New York, N.Y.: Longman.
- Beck, I. L., Perfetti, C., and McKeown, M. G. (1982). Effects of long-term vocabulary instruction on lexical access and reading comprehension. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 74, 506-521.
- Becker, W. C. (1977). Teaching reading and language to the disadvantaged: What we have learned from field research. *Harvard Educational Review*, 47, 518-543.
- Biemiller, A. (1998, April). Oral vocabulary, word identification, and reading comprehension in English second language and English first language elementary school children. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Reading, San Diego.
- Biemiller, A. (1999a). *Language and reading success*. Cambridge, Mass.: Brookline Books.
- Biemiller, A. (1999b). *Estimating vocabulary growth for ESL children with and without listening comprehension instruction*. Paper presented at the annual conference of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, Quebec.
- Biemiller, A., and Slonim, N. (in press). Estimating root word vocabulary growth in normative and advantaged populations: Evidence for a common sequence of vocabulary acquisition. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, Fall 2001.
- Cain, K., and Oakhill, J. (In preparation). *Reading comprehension and the ability to learn new vocabulary items from context*.
- Cantalini, M. (1987). *The effects of age and gender on school readiness and school success*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. Toronto, Ontario.
- Carroll, J. B., Davies, P., and Richmond, B. (1971). *The American Heritage word frequency book*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Chall, J. S. (1983/1996). *Stages of reading development*. (2nd edition). New York, N.Y.: Harcourt Brace.
- Chall, J. S. (2000). *The academic achievement challenge: What really works in the classroom?* New York, N.Y.: Guilford.
- Chall, J. S., and Conard, S. S. (1991). *Should textbooks challenge students?* New York, N.Y.: Teachers College Press.
- Chall, J. S., and Dale, E. (1995). *Readability revisited: The new Dale-Chall readability formula*. Cambridge, Mass.: Brookline Books.
- Chall, J. S., Jacobs, V. A., and Baldwin, L. E. (1990). *The reading crisis: Why poor children fall behind*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Chall, J. S., Snow, C., Barnes, W. S., Chandler, J., Goodman, I. E., Hemphill, L. and Jacobs, V. (1982). *Families and literacy: The contribution of out-of-school experiences to children's acquisition of literacy*. Final report to the National Institute of Education, Dec. 22, 1982. ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. Ed 234 345.
- Cunningham, A. E., and Stanovich, K. E. (1997). Early reading acquisition and its relation to reading experience and ability 10 years later. *Developmental Psychology*, 33, 934-945.
- D'Anna, C. A., Zechmeister, E. B., and Hall, J. W. (1991). Toward a meaningful definition of vocabulary size. *Journal of Reading Behavior*, 23(1), 109-122.
- Dale, E., and O'Rourke, J. (1981). *The living word vocabulary*. Chicago: World Book/Childcraft International.
- Duncan, G., Brooks-Gunn, J., and Klebanov, P. (1994). Economic deprivation and early childhood development. *Child Development*, 65, 296-318.
- Elley, W. B. (1989). Vocabulary acquisition from listening to stories. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 24, 174-186.
- Elshout-Mohr, M., and van Daalen-Kapteijns, M. M. (1987). Cognitive processes in learning word meanings. In M. G. McKeown and M. E. Curtis (Eds.), *The nature of vocabulary acquisition* (53-72). Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum.
- Feitelson, D., Goldstein, Z., Iraqi, J., and Share, D. I. (1991). Effects of listening to story reading on aspects of literacy acquisition in a diglossic situation. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 28, 70-79.
- Feitelson, D., Kita, B., and Goldstein, Z. (1986). Effects of listening to series stories on first-graders' comprehension and use of language. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 20, 339-356.
- Gathercole, S. E., Hitch, G. J., Service, E., and Martin, A. J.

(Continued on page 47)

# REAL HEROES



*Editors Note: Beginning on page 32 are three hero stories taken from the just-released book, 50 American Heroes Every Kid Should Meet, by Dennis Denenberg and Lorraine Roscoe. We hope this book—which includes the other 47 heroes we didn't have room for—will soon find its way into every classroom library and family bookshelf.*

BY DENNIS DENENBERG

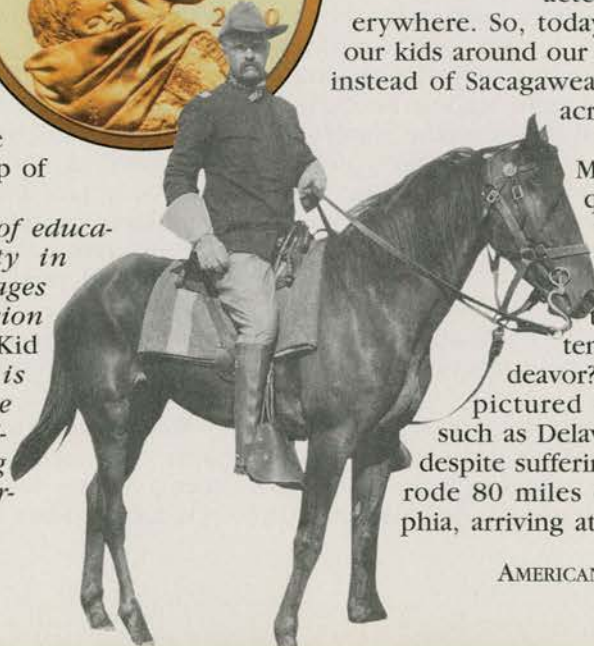
WILLIAM PENN was an obsession for Elaine Peden, the *Philadelphia Inquirer Magazine* reported in 1991. Peden had devoted enormous time and energy to promoting recognition of Pennsylvania's founder. In 1984, she had persuaded Congress to extend honorary United States citizenship to both Penn and his wife, Hannah. But Peden's successes in bringing Penn into the consciousness of Americans had been soured for her by disappointments. When she visited the restored William Penn statue on top of



Philadelphia's City Hall, she expected to see again in the waiting area the 75 paintings of events in the life of the Penns done by high school students. Instead she found a blowup of the Phillie Phanatic, the cartoonish mascot of the city's professional baseball team. The city's founder was out; the city's newest fantasy figure was in.

The situation is not much better at our country's official museum. A few years ago, the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History published a new brochure to guide kids through the museum. It is written around the Charles Schulz "Peanuts" characters, with their pictures everywhere. So, today we have Snoopy leading our kids around our national history museum—instead of Sacagawea who led Lewis and Clark across our nation!

*Dennis Denenberg is a professor of education at Millersville University in Millersville, Pa. The stories on pages 32-37 are reprinted with permission from 50 American Heroes Every Kid Should Meet, ©2001 by Dennis Denenberg and Lorraine Roscoe (The Millbrook Press). Library edition copies are available by calling 800/462-4703. For additional information visit [www.heroes4us.com](http://www.heroes4us.com).*



Two years ago, the U.S. Mint began issuing special quarters (five a year for 10 years) to honor all of our 50 states. Guess who the Mint is using in its advertising campaign to call attention to this worthwhile endeavor? Perhaps one of the heroes pictured on some of the quarters, such as Delaware's Caesar Rodney who, despite suffering from asthma and cancer, rode 80 miles on horseback to Philadelphia, arriving at Independence Hall just in

time to cast the deciding vote in favor of our nation's independence. Or perhaps the famous Minutemen—a statue of one graces the Massachusetts quarter—those always-at-the-ready farmers and colonists who rallied together to help defeat the British during the Revolutionary War. Or perhaps those who risked their lives to settle the West, build the railroads, or design our great bridges. No, none of these. The U.S. Mint chose instead, as the icon for its honor-the-states educational initiative—are you ready—Kermit the Frog, decked out as what appears to be (although no one seems to know for sure) George Washington—or one of those guys in the funny colonial hats and cape.

Classrooms and homes around the United States duplicate this pattern. Pictures of great people have given way to fantasy creatures. At one time many—if not most—public school classrooms in America displayed portraits of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. Today, if such portraits appear at all, it is usually for a two-week period in February, during Presidents' Day commemorations.

I have visited hundreds of classrooms over the past 20 years. I have talked with teachers, observed displays, and examined curriculum materials; and I have become aware of how fantasy figures compete with real-life heroes for students' attention. Often, the fantasy ones are winning.

Cartoon and other fantasy characters pervade children's lives. Little Mermaids and Elmo adorn the clothing kids wear and the lunch pails they carry. A little girl gets up in the morning. Her head probably rested on a Powerpuff Girls pillowcase. She goes down to breakfast and eats cereal from a box with a cartoon character on it, then gets dressed in a T-shirt with Rugrats on it, picks up her Pokemon lunch pail, and heads off to school where there is a bulletin board with more cartoon figures on it.

Teachers and parents choose such materials so frequently, they tell me, because they believe these figures have motivational value. Cartoon mice and ducks are familiar. "They can be comforting to kids," parents and teachers say.

Perhaps fantasy characters motivate and comfort. But junk food motivates and comforts, too. Like junk food, popular fantasy and cartoon characters are sweet, enticing to the eye—and empty of real value. Like junk food, they displace what is more important. They fill kids up. The kids no longer hunger for the nourishment they need to become healthy, fully mature adults.

Is it any wonder that teenagers become hooked on the next level of fad fantasy figures—the super-rich athletes and popular culture rock and entertainment stars. Their presence in the media is everywhere, with entire cable channels devoted to the icons of music and athletics. So the Rugrats T-shirts eventually become Aerosmith shirts, Powerpuff Girls backpacks become WWF (World Wrestling Federation) duffel bags, and the very innocent Little Mermaid poster in a child's bedroom is replaced by a nearly life-sized one of Britney Spears.

The over-presence of fantasy characters in our culture and in our schools and homes contributes, I am convinced, to a confusion for our children and adolescents about the value of real-life human accomplishments. It

is not surprising that in 1991, when a Harrisburg, Pa.-area school district asked its fifth- to 12th-graders to name people they most admired, the teenagers chose rock stars, athletes, and television personalities—people who often seem to be larger than life. Other than Nelson Mandela, no famous people from any other field of endeavor were mentioned. No great artists, inventors, humanitarians, political leaders, composers, scientists, doctors—none were mentioned by the 1,150 students.

Likewise, when the Scripps-Howard newspaper chain asked a representative sample of 25- to 45-year-olds to write a two-page essay about their favorite hero, there were a lot of blank pages; 60 percent of the group said they have no personal heroes.

**I**FREQUENTLY am asked to give presentations on why heroes are important for children. I sometimes begin by putting on the familiar Mickey Mouse ears, and I lead my adult audience in a rousing rendition of the "Mickey Mouse Club" song. Almost everyone knows the words. Then I switch to a colonial hat and recite a portion of Thomas Jefferson's immortal words, "We hold these truths to be self-evident...." I ask the audience to join me as soon as they know the words of our birth certificate, the Declaration of Independence. While most adults can, I ask them, "How many of our young people could repeat those words?" The comparison with the Mickey Mouse song leads to a spirited discussion of what has happened to real heroes in our culture.

"Look around," I say to my audiences. "You're surrounded by people. Count 30 people, yourself among them. One of that 30 would probably have polio if it weren't for Jonas Salk. That's how prevalent polio was. But when Salk died a few years ago, we as a nation hardly took notice. Certainly, few young people have any sense of how that great doctor saved their generation from a crippling disease."

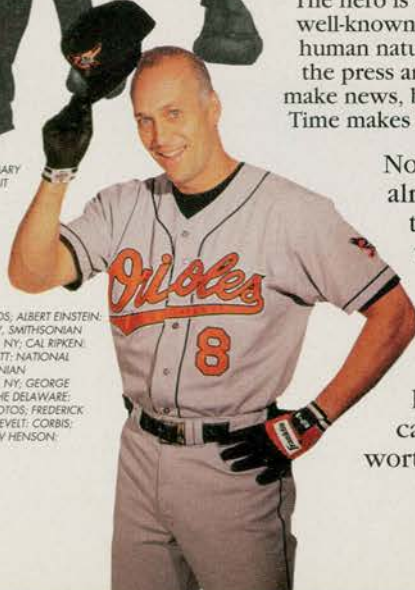
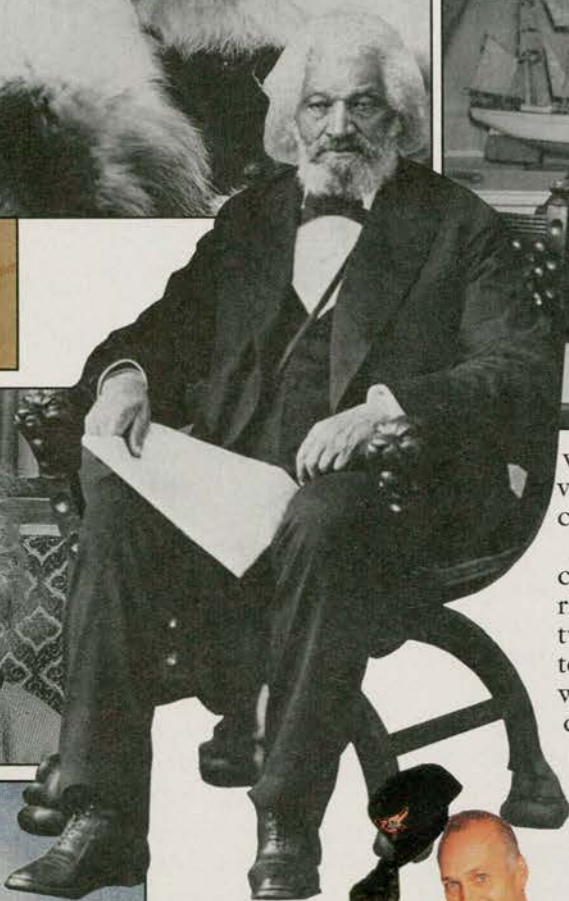
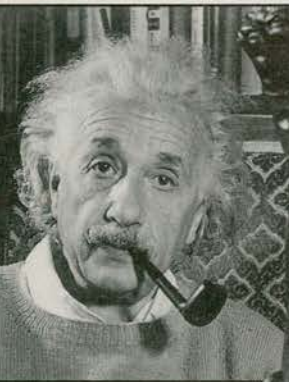
Have we lost a generation of people who don't have heroes, who don't know what a hero is or don't understand what a positive influence a hero can be in a person's life?

A hero is an individual who can serve as an example. He or she has the ability to persevere, to overcome the hurdles that impede others' lives. While this intangible quality of greatness appears almost magical, it is indeed most human. And it is precisely because of that humanness that some individuals attain heroic stature. They are of us, but are clearly different.

We look to heroes for inspiration. Through their achievements, we see humankind more positively. They make us feel







PHOTOS ON PAGE 29:  
 YO-YO MA: GETTYSOURCE; MARY BETHUNE: NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION/ART RESOURCE, NY; SACAGAWEA: AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS; THEODORE ROOSEVELT: NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION/ART RESOURCE, NY; PHOTOS ON PAGES 30-31: JONAS SALK: ARCHIVE PHOTOS; ALBERT EINSTEIN: NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION/ART RESOURCE, NY; CAL RIPKEN: GETTYSOURCE; MARY CASSATT: NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION/ART RESOURCE, NY; GEORGE WASHINGTON CROSSING THE DELAWARE: HILTON GETTY/ARCHIVE PHOTOS; FREDERICK DOUGLASS, FRANKLIN ROOSEVELT: CORBIS; MARTHA GRAHAM, MATTHEW HENSON: BETTMANN/CORBIS

good. They make us feel proud. Their successes and failures lead us to ponder our own actions and inactions. By learning about *their* lives, *our* lives become enriched.

We have to stop hiding real heroes from students. In our classrooms and homes, we must help the next generation discover the excitement of meeting great men and women.

There are literally hundreds of exciting ways to bring real heroes to life. First and foremost, read about them. So many quality biographies are now available by superb children's authors (Hakim, Freedman, Meltzer, Fritz, Adler, and others)—yet teachers and parents rarely choose a biography when they read aloud to their kids. Make it part of your adult responsibility to transmit heroes to the next generation.

Once kids have met these extraordinary heroes, engage them in meaningful projects to make the hero a real presence in your classroom and home. Cele-

brate Teddy Roosevelt's birthday. Put a picture of Wilma Rudolph or Daniel Hale Williams or Elie Wiesel or John Muir on the refrigerator and engage the kids in a mystery hero hunt. Every semester my college "soon-to-be-teachers" students hold a heroes' fair. Hundreds of local fifth- through seventh-graders come to campus to see and meet hundreds of heroes. The most thrilling aspect of this

whole event is that now schools are doing their own versions of heroes' fairs and a wide assortment of special events. And, guess what? The kids love it!

In a wonderful Aug. 6, 1995, *Parade Magazine* article entitled, "Who Are Our Heroes?" the noted historian Dr. Daniel Boorstin explained the difference between heroes and celebrities in a brilliant few sentences. I hope intermediate grade and higher teachers will consider making this quotation a poster for their classrooms—what a dialogue it could spark.

The hero is known for achievements, the celebrity for well-knownness. The hero reveals the possibilities of human nature. The celebrity reveals the possibilities of the press and the media. Celebrities are people who make news, but heroes are people who make history. Time makes heroes but dissolves celebrities.

No doubt many parents and teachers have already taken up the cause. It is time for the rest of us to return great individuals to the pedestals they deserve. Young people need to see that humans can and do make a difference. Children can learn that they too are capable of reshaping life in a positive way. By reintroducing heroes to children, parents and teachers can show them that there are *real* people worthy of recognition and emulation. □

# ELIZABETH BLACKWELL

February 3, 1821–May 31, 1910

## FIRST AMERICAN WOMAN DOCTOR

- Physician
- Humanitarian
- Trailblazer

**T**here's nothing unusual about a female doctor. But not so long ago, a lot of people thought the idea was ridiculous.

Even when she was young, Elizabeth Blackwell was strong-willed and stubborn, not reserved and submissive like girls were expected to be.

But not even young Elizabeth considered studying medicine. Not until a dying friend planted the seed. Her sick neighbor appreciated the hours that Elizabeth spent taking care of her. "If I could have been treated by a lady doctor, my worst sufferings would have been spared me," she said. "If only *you* were a doctor."

Elizabeth a doctor? Well, why not? It was a path no woman had ever attempted to follow. Medical schools were for men only, so Elizabeth Blackwell spent years preparing with the help of some friendly doctors before she even applied. She wanted to be ready to succeed.

She was twenty-five when she began to apply to medical schools. She collected rejection after rejection—from all of them.

### DIVE IN!

*Elizabeth Blackwell: A Doctor's Triumph*  
by Nancy Kline and Nancy Neveloff Dubler  
(Conari Press, 1997), 208 pages.  
*Barnard Biography, Vol. 2*



Although her fellow medical students voted her into the school as a joke, Blackwell earned their respect. Her only real problem was being the only female in the class on human reproduction. She later recalled: "Some of the students blushed, some were hysterical . . . I had to pinch my hand till the blood nearly came . . . to keep me from smiling."

More rejection letters came, bringing the total to twenty-eight. How would you feel? Would you give up?

Then, the letter from Geneva Medical College in New York arrived. *Acceptance!* She was finally on the road to earning her medical degree. Only upon arriving at the college did she learn why she was accepted. It was a joke! The school's faculty had not wanted her, but in order to avoid making that decision, they asked the all-male stu-

dent body to vote. The men voted unanimously for her entry. They figured some other medical school was playing a practical joke. But the joke was on them. The Geneva faculty had to honor the vote, and Elizabeth Blackwell was in.

And she had the last laugh. After the two-year program was over, Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell graduated number one in her class. The struggle had been long and lonely, but she made it. She was a doctor.

However, Dr. Blackwell did not then coast on to fame and fortune. After all, she had to convince patients to allow themselves to be *examined* by a female doctor! What followed was a roller-coaster life of accomplishment and disappointment. She would need every ounce of her intelligence, determination, and independent spirit to make it work. Do you think she did it? Do you think we would have included her in this book if she didn't?



## EXPLORE!

Dr. Blackwell dedicated her life to curing people. How much do you know about first aid? Could you help a friend who suddenly was injured? Would you know what simple things to do and not to do? You can be ready to help a family member or friend by learning CPR, mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, the Heimlich maneuver, and other first-aid techniques. By staying calm and acting responsibly, you might be able to save a life until the 911 emergency squad arrives.

How do you get this information? First, check with your school nurse, who can probably give you a pamphlet on first aid. The American Red Cross, scouting groups, and youth organizations all provide training. The Web site for the American Red Cross is: [www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org). This informative site will pinpoint the Red Cross instruction location closest to your home.

Hobart and William Smith Colleges now consider Blackwell among their most distinguished alumnae, evidenced by this 800-pound, larger-than-life bronze sculpture that sits near one of the colleges' most traveled walkways. Sculptor Professor A. E. Ted Aub worked from the few available photographs of Blackwell as well as her diaries in order to render her as she might have looked in her student days.

## POWER WORDS

*"For what is done or learned by one class of women becomes, by virtue of their common womanhood, the property of all women."*

—Elizabeth Blackwell



# GEORGE C. MARSHALL

December 31, 1880–October 16, 1959

## ARCHITECT OF PEACE

- Army Chief of Staff
- Secretary of State
- Recipient, Nobel Peace Prize

**P**resident Harry S Truman called General George C. Marshall “the greatest of the great of our time.” High praise, but do you even know who George C. Marshall was?

In 1953, for the first time ever, the Nobel Peace Prize was given to a professional soldier. Why? Because General George C. Marshall came up with a plan that saved war-torn Europe from starvation and despair after World War II. Whole cities and towns had been destroyed. Bridges, roads, homes, and schools were gone. Two years after the war, Europe was still having trouble getting back on its feet. The Marshall Plan would offer U.S. aid for recovery, but not only to our World War II allies. We would help our former enemies, too, if they let us.

*Don't miss this point:* For the first time ever in the history of the world, the victors offered to help the vanquished! In a speech at Harvard University on June 6, 1947, Marshall said: “[Without] the return of normal economic health in the world . . . there can be no political stability and no assured peace.” He continued: “Our policy is directed not against any country or doctrine, but against hunger, poverty, desperation, and chaos.” Marshall knew that if things went on as they were, hungry Europeans would look for help elsewhere, even if their helper gave food with one hand and took freedom and justice away with the



President Harry S Truman (right) awards an Oak Leaf Cluster to the Distinguished Service Cross to General Marshall upon his retirement as chief of staff.

other. If they had to turn to Eastern Europe's Communist dictators for aid, that's exactly what would have happened.

Well, the Marshall Plan worked. Our enemies refused help (they didn't want to play by our rules), but the rest of Europe recovered and peace prevailed. Years later, when he accepted his Nobel Prize, the frail, seventy-three-year-old general spoke of democracy's greatness, but warned that these democratic principles “do not flourish on empty stomachs.”

## POWER WORDS

*"There must be an effort of the spirit—to be magnanimous, to act in friendship, to strive to help rather than to hinder."*

—General George C. Marshall  
(in a lecture given on the day after he accepted the Nobel Peace Prize in 1953)



## EXPLORE!

One of the world's greatest honors is to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace. To date, sixteen Americans have been so honored; five of them are found in this book: Marshall, Jane Addams, The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Theodore Roosevelt, and Elie Wiesel. Use the Internet or library reference section to find the names of the other winners.

Did you know that Nobel Prize winners receive a cash award? Jane Addams gave hers to the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. Dr. King donated his \$54,600 prize to the civil-rights movement. Roosevelt distributed his prize to various charities, and Elie Wiesel founded The Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity with the \$290,000 he received from the Nobel Committee. No one is quite sure what George Marshall did with his prize money

## DIVE IN!

*George C. Marshall: A General for Peace* by Alan Saunders and John A. Scott (Facts On File, 1995), Photographs. *Makers of America*

of \$33,840, not even the researchers at the **George C. Marshall Foundation**, an organization dedicated to "preserving and promoting . . . the ideals and values of disciplined selfless service, hard work, integrity and compassion of George Catlin Marshall." Check out the George C. Marshall Foundation at: [www.gcmarshallfdn.org](http://www.gcmarshallfdn.org) or contact them at PO Box 1600, VMI Parade, Lexington, VA 24450. Phone: (540) 463-7103.

What would *you* do with the money if you won the Peace Prize? Would you use it to promote peace? How? Write or E-mail us with your ideas.



This mural depicting the spectrum of Marshall's achievements hangs in the auditorium of the George C. Marshall Museum in Lexington, Virginia.

# MATTHEW HENSON

August 8, 1866–March 9, 1955

## THE MAN “ON TOP OF THE WORLD”

- Explorer
- Adventurer

**B**y 1900 humans had been almost everywhere on this planet’s land surface—everywhere, that is, except the North and South Poles.

Adventure: It was in his blood. Risk taking: It was part of his way of life. To escape from a difficult childhood, Matthew Henson set out to sea when only twelve years old. Through “on-the-job” training he learned math, reading, and navigation skills. By the age of twenty-one, he was an experienced world traveler. Then fate stepped in. Henson was working in a fur and supplies store when an explorer named Robert Peary came in to buy some items. He mentioned that he needed a servant to accompany him on an expedition to Nicaragua. Guess whom he chose?

On that trip young Henson so impressed Commander Peary that he made him his trusted assistant. Together, they would try to make Peary’s dream come true—to be the first humans to reach the North Pole.

If you like adventure and mystery, there are few stories to match this genuine drama. Constant danger, subfreezing temperatures, wild animals—it was all there. Only after three failed attempts did Robert Peary, four native Inuit (Eskimo) guides, and Matthew Henson finally reach the North Pole. It was April 6, 1909, the end of a torturous thirty-six-day journey. They probably wouldn’t have made it at all without Henson. He knew how to drive the dog team and hunt polar bear and musk oxen



Henson looks a bit haggard in this photo, which was taken after his 2,000-mile trek across polar sea ice, returning from the North Pole. The Inuit who met Henson along his journey called him *Miy Paak*—Kind Matthew.

for food. He realized that the Inuits knew what they were doing in that harsh environment. He learned to speak their language, so he could ask for their help.

The years of hard work and risk taking had paid off. One of the last unreachable points on the globe had been reached. After Henson and Peary’s remarkable trek, no one went back to the Pole until seventeen years later, when an airplane flew over it. And no one has ever repeated the trip to and from the North Pole by dogsled.

### DIVE IN!

*Matthew Henson: Explorer* by Michael Gilman (Chelsea House, 1988), 110 pages.

## POWER WORDS

"History will take care of that. God will see to it, and God has plenty of helpers."

—Matthew Henson (reflecting on the fact that he had received so little recognition for his role in the successful trek to the North Pole)



## EXPLORE!

For many years, Matthew Henson's achievement was ignored in history books because of his race.

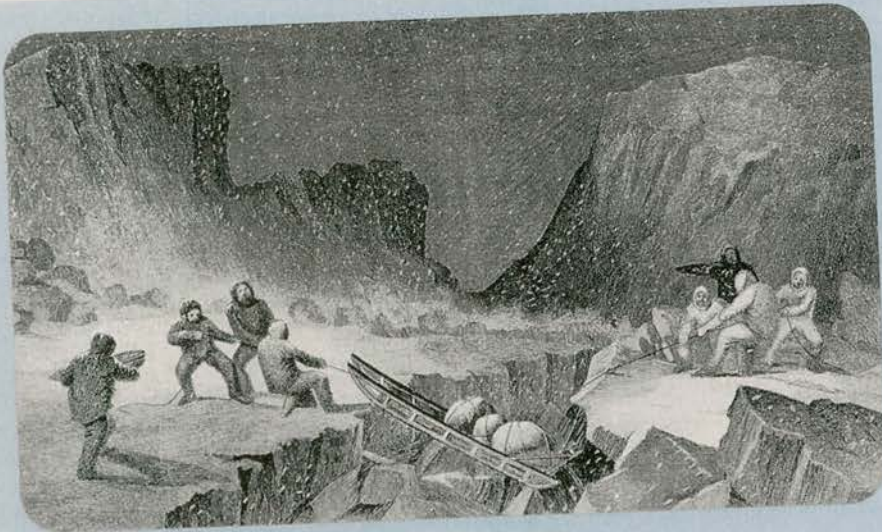
Although some people appreciated the key role he played in the North Pole expedition, Robert Peary got most of the glory. People in the early 1900s just weren't ready to cheer for a black man, no matter how big a hero he was.

Some say that Peary turned his back on Henson after they returned from the Pole. When Peary died, he was buried in Arlington National Cemetery and a big monument was placed on his grave. Henson's final resting place was a shared grave in the Bronx, New York.

But America has finally begun to appreciate Matthew Henson. In 1988 he received

a hero's burial in Arlington, right next to his old friend, Peary. In 1997 a book called *Dark Companion* was finally brought back into print fifty years after it was written. It's the only biography of Henson written with Henson himself. See if you can find a copy at your local library. Bradley Robinson was the author, and his son, Verne, has now created a Matthew Henson Web site that is packed with stories, pictures, and tributes to the legendary explorer. Click on: [www.matthewhenson.com](http://www.matthewhenson.com) and take a look. Don't miss

the controversy over whether Henson and Peary actually *were* the first to reach the Pole! There's a movie about Peary you can watch, too. It's called *Glory and Honor*, and it came out in 1998. Be sure to watch for it on television or video.



An etching showing that the ice cap over which the expedition traveled was not a smooth snow-covered surface but rather a rugged landscape, fraught with danger.

# E. B. WHITE AND *CHARLOTTE'S WEB*

*Editors note: Fifty years ago, on January 19, 1951, E.B. White finished the first draft of Charlotte's Web. The following year, Charlotte was published, and quickly became one of the most beloved children's books of all time.*

BY SCOTT ELLEDGE

WHILE WE do not know exactly when E.B. White began to write *Charlotte's Web*, or when the outlines of its story started to take shape in his mind, we do know the particular circumstances that led him to its theme. White once described them as follows:

I like animals, and it would be odd if I failed to write about them. Animals are a weakness with me, and when I got a place in the country I was quite sure animals would appear, and they did.

A farm is a peculiar problem for a man who likes animals, because the fate of most livestock is that they are murdered by their benefactors. The creatures may live serenely but they end violently, and the odor of doom hangs about them always. I have kept several pigs, starting them in spring as weanlings and carrying trays to them all through the summer and fall. The relationship bothered me. Day by day I became better acquainted with my pig, and he with me, and the fact that the whole adventure pointed toward an eventual piece of double-dealing on my part lent an eerie quality to the thing. I do not like to betray a person or a creature, and I tend to agree with Mr. E. M. Forster that in these times the duty of a man, above all else, is to be reliable. It used to be clear to me, slopping a pig, that as far as the pig was concerned I could not be counted on, and this, as I say, troubled me. Anyway, the theme of *Charlotte's Web* is that a pig shall be saved, and I have an idea that somewhere deep inside me there was a wish to that effect.<sup>1</sup>

As it turned out, White's wish came true in the story of a pig named Wilbur who is saved by a spider named Charlotte. They live in the same barn and first become

*This article is excerpted from E.B. White: A Biography by Scott Elledge. Copyright © 1984 by Scott Elledge. Reprinted with permission of the publisher, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. Mr. Elledge's book is still in print and is available through bookstores.*

*Photos and illustrations courtesy of the E.B. White Collection at Cornell University.*

acquainted when Charlotte overhears Wilbur lamenting his loneliness and offers to be his friend. Wilbur thinks she is beautiful and, as he gets to know her, finds her fascinating. When he hears that his owner, Mr. Zuckerman, plans to butcher him at Christmastime, Charlotte calms his fears by promising to save him. A loyal (and talented) friend, she is as good as her word. She makes Mr. Zuckerman believe that Wilbur is an exceptional pig by writing words into the webs she weaves in the corner of the doorway to Wilbur's home in the cellar of the barn. The Zuckerman family and all their neighbors are amazed when they read Charlotte's legend *SOME PIG*, and take it for a miracle—a mysterious sign. And the wonder grows (as does Wilbur's reputation) when she extends her campaign with other legends: *TERRIFIC* and, later, *RADIANT*.

When Mr. Zuckerman takes Wilbur to the County Fair, Charlotte goes along in Wilbur's crate, hoping to help him win a prize and believing that if he does Mr. Zuckerman will not kill him. During the night before the prizes are awarded she weaves one more word—this time above Wilbur's exhibition pen, where all can see it. She chooses *HUMBLE* for her ultimate praise, a word she thinks appropriate because its dictionary definitions, "not proud" and "near the ground,"<sup>2</sup> fit Wilbur, who has remained modest in spite of his fame. The board of governors of the Fair give Wilbur a special award at a ceremony in front of the grandstand, and Mr. Zuckerman's delight assures Wilbur of a long life.

At the Fair, as soon as she has finished writing *HUMBLE*, Charlotte turns all her energies to making an egg sac and laying 514 eggs, after which achievement, she knows, she will languish and die. The news of her impending death crushes Wilbur, but when Charlotte says she doesn't even have the strength to get to the crate in which he will be returned to Zuckerman's barn, Wilbur has the wit to persuade his friend Templeton, the rat, to detach Charlotte's egg sac carefully from its place high up on the wall of his pen and bring it to him. Wilbur then carries it safely back home, where, in a scooped-out place in his warm manure pile, the eggs will be safe during the long winter.

When Charlotte's children begin to hatch on a warm spring day, Wilbur's heart pounds and he trembles





E.B. White at age 62.



with joy. When they are all hatched, his heart brims with happiness. The story ends:

Wilbur never forgot Charlotte. Although he loved her children and grandchildren dearly, none of the new spiders ever quite took her place in his heart. She was in a class by herself. It is not often that someone comes along who is a true friend and a good writer. Charlotte was both.

A biographer could cite many events in White's life that found their way into *Charlotte's Web*, but none would add so much to its significance as an event that occurred in 1949, just about the time he began to write the book. In August of that year, in a letter to his friend John McNulty, White reported that the only writing he had done that summer was an introduction to a new edition of the late Don Marquis's masterpiece *archy and mehitabel*. He had, he said, "lost the knack of earning money by putting one word after another." The introduction would "just about put a new sole" on his sneakers.<sup>3</sup> It is hard to believe he was seriously worried about income. He had his small salary from *The New Yorker* for doing newsbreaks; he had income from investments; he had royalties from *Stuart Little*; and "Here Is New York," for which *Holiday* had paid him \$3,000, was such a success that Harper had decided to republish it as a little book in time for the Christmas trade. (By the end of the year, 28,000 copies had been printed, and the Book-of-the-Month Club had selected it as part of a dual selection for January.) Moreover, White could scarcely have felt financially pressed at the same time he and [his wife] Katharine were planning to go to Europe on the *Queen Elizabeth* and he was planning to have a sloop built in a Danish boatyard. In any case, the \$500 he was paid for his introduction to *archy and mehitabel* would have been inconsequential in comparison with the value of certain ideas he may have been reminded of as he read and wrote about Marquis's book—ideas that are important to the story and to the meaning of *Charlotte's Web*.

White had admired Marquis since youth, and now, as he was about to pay tribute to him, he was aware that he resembled Marquis in some ways:

[Marquis] was the sort of poet who does not create easily; he was left unsatisfied and gloomy by what he had produced; day and night he felt the juices squeezed out

of him by the merciless demands of daily newspaper work; he was never quite certified by intellectuals and serious critics of belles lettres.<sup>4</sup>

White had not suffered that much, but he knew something about journalism's "merciless demands," and now, in 1949, he felt, in spite of honorary degrees and other recognition, that "serious critics" had never quite certified him. When White described Marquis as "a parodist, historian, poet, clown, fable writer, satirist, reporter and teller of tales," he also described himself.<sup>5</sup> He also shared Marquis's views of human glory and human folly.

What White wrote about two of the fictional characters in *Archy and Mehitabel* has an especially interesting bearing on *Charlotte's Web*. Mehitabel, he reminded his readers, was "always the lady, toujours gai." Some years later, describing Charlotte to someone who wanted to make a movie of the book, White said, "She is, if anything, more the Mehitabel type—*toujours gai*." Charlotte is like Mehitabel in other significant ways—in her independence and self-confidence, in her wit and competence, in her tough-minded generosity, and especially in her loyalty to herself.

About Warty Bliggens, the toad, White said: "[Marquis] was at his best in a piece like 'warty bliggens,' which has the jewel-like perfection of poetry and contains cosmic reverberations along with high comedy. Beautiful to read, beautiful to think about." The cosmic reverberations are produced by Archy, the cockroach, who describes Warty Bliggens as a toad who "considers himself to be the center of the universe":

the earth exists  
to grow toadstools for him  
to sit under  
the sun to give him light  
by day and the moon  
and wheeling constellations  
to make beautiful  
the night for the sake of  
warty bliggens....  
if i were a  
human being i would  
not laugh  
too complacently  
at poor warty bliggens  
for similar  
absurdities  
have only too often  
lodged in the crinkles  
of the human cerebrum<sup>6</sup>

White was tuned to the cosmic reverberations of that comment on man's disposition to assume that the whole universe was created to serve him, and *Charlotte's Web* would suggest the absurdity of that assumption. Once, in discussing *Charlotte's Web*, White was more explicit; he distinguished a spider from a human being by saying: "One has eight legs and has been around for an unbelievably long time on this earth; the other has two legs and has been around just long enough to raise a lot of hell, drain the swamps, and bring the planet to the verge of extinction."<sup>7</sup> There is no misanthropy in *Charlotte's Web*, but the heroic spider is both more noble and more adorable than any other creature in the story; and though White's purpose was not to preach a sermon, his fable about a heroic spider did contain cosmic reverberations of the same kind as those contained in Archy's wry comment about human beings who resemble the foolish toad.

The manuscript and notes of *Charlotte's Web* do not reveal much about the stages of its composition. The earliest extant draft is written in pencil on yellow sheets, some of them apparently substituted for earlier, discarded sheets, and a few of them apparently added as afterthoughts. All contain stylistic revisions made at the time of first writing as well as later. What White has labeled "First Draft," at any rate, is substantially the story as it finally appeared, except for the four chapters added in the final draft. There is no evidence that White made any essential changes in the original conception of the plot or its characters.

Apparently, most of the first draft was written in 1950, much of it between April 1 and October 15, in Maine. During this period he contributed nothing to "Notes and Comment" [a regular feature in *The New Yorker*], and he cancelled his reservations for the trip to England shortly after having made them. He wrote his editor at Harper that "maybe in the fall," instead of a collection of *New Yorker* pieces, he would "have another sort of book ready." "I guess it depends," he added, "on how many rainy mornings we get between now and fall, rain being about the only thing that brings me and a typewriter together."<sup>8</sup>

When White first met Charlotte A. Cavatica in person, he had called her Charlotte Epeira, because he thought she was a Grey Cross spider, the *Aranea sericata*, which in old books on spiders was called *Epeira sclopetaria*. She looked very much like one of the species of "House Araneas," described as "exceedingly abundant on buildings that are near the water."<sup>9</sup> Shortly after he met her White thought of making her the hero of his story:

The idea...came to me one day when I was on my way down through the orchard carrying a pail of slops to my pig. I had made up my mind to write a children's book about animals, and I needed a way to save a pig's life, and I had been watching a large spider in the backhouse, and what with one thing and another, the idea came to me.<sup>10</sup>

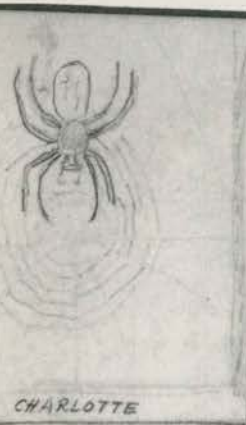
A month later he made an observation that led him to the discovery that she came from a different family than he had first thought. At the same time he discovered how to end her story:

One cold October evening I was lucky enough to see Aranea Cavatica spin her egg sac and deposit her eggs. (I did not know her name at the time, but I admired her, and later Mr. Willis J. Gertsch of the American Museum of Natural History told me her name.) When I saw that she was fixing to become a mother, I got a stepladder and an extension light and had an excellent view of the whole business. A few days later, when it was time to return to New York, not wishing to part with my spider, I took a razor blade, cut the sac adrift from the underside of the shed roof, put spider and sac in a candy box, and carried them to town. I tossed the box on my dresser. Some weeks later I was surprised and pleased to find that Charlotte's daughters were emerging from the air holes in the cover of the box. They strung tiny lines from my comb to my brush, from my brush to my mirror, and from my mirror to my nail scissors. They were very busy and almost invisible, they were so small. We all lived together happily for a couple of weeks, and then somebody whose duty it was to dust my dresser balked, and I broke up the show.<sup>11</sup>

Before he consulted Gertsch, he had discovered in John Henry Comstock's *Spider Book* a spider called *Aranea cavatica*, which "lives in great numbers about houses and barns in northern New England" and some-



times builds very large webs. From Comstock he learned that the genus *Aranea* was for some time known by the name *Epeira*, that spiders had been known to destroy "small vertebrate animals, including...a fish" (a fact upon which White based one of the stories Charlotte tells Wilbur), and that the "males, of some species at least, dance before the females"<sup>12</sup> (a fact upon which White based Charlotte's Mehitabel-like boast, in a passage later deleted, that her husband was "some dancer").<sup>13</sup> And he could have discovered, if he did not already know it, that if Charlotte's children had not been confined to his bedroom in Turtle Bay Gardens, they would not have covered his comb and brush with their gossamer, for "very young spiders...in warm and comparatively still autumn days...climb to the top of some object...lift up their abdomens, and spin out threads, and if there is a mild upward current of air, are carried away by them."<sup>14</sup> When he went to see Gertsch, he carried a list of carefully prepared questions, the answers to some of which he used in the final chapter of the book. Later, when Garth Williams agreed to illustrate *Charlotte's Web*, White sent him a copy of Gertsch's *American Spiders*. White was proud of the scholarly accuracy of his text and Williams's drawings.



Chapter I. The Barn

A barn can have a horse in it, and a barn can have a cow in it, and a barn can have hens scratching in the chaff and swallows flying in and out through the door — but if a barn hasn't got a pig in it, it is hardly worth

talking about. I am very glad to say that Mr. Zuckerman's barn had a pig in it, and therefore I feel free to talk about <sup>it as much as</sup> ~~it~~ I want to. The pig's

~~The thing to remember about~~

~~Zuckerman's barn is that it was built on the~~

~~side of a hill.~~

~~and possible~~  
name was Wilbur. He was small and white, except when he was dirty ~~when he was~~ <sup>then</sup> he was small and brown. Wilbur did not get dirty on purpose, but he lived in <sup>the</sup> ~~an~~ part of the barn ~~underneath the where the cows were~~ <sup>where</sup>

One of the earliest versions of the first page of Charlotte's Web.

the book. Later, when Garth Williams agreed to illustrate *Charlotte's Web*, White sent him a copy of Gertsch's *American Spiders*. White was proud of the scholarly accuracy of his text and Williams's drawings.

Near the end of October, White wrote the editor of *Holiday* that he was "engaged in finishing a work of fiction. (I guess that's what it is.)" He finished the first draft on January 19, 1951, and on March 1 he wrote Ursula Nordstrom at Harper that he had finished another children's book but had "put it away for awhile to ripen (let the body heat out of it)."<sup>15</sup>

Before he completed his first draft, White had begun to think about a better way to open the story. He had opened it with a description of Wilbur and the barn he lived in (which later became Chapter III). He had not introduced the story's principal human characters, Fern Arable, her brother, Avery, and their parents, until considerably later, at a point after which they played increasingly significant parts in the story. By the time White neared the end of the first draft, Fern's interest in Henry Fussy had become an important element in a complex theme. Though the story ended in the animal world of Wilbur, and with our attention on Charlotte, White decided it would be better to introduce the story from the point of view of a human being, rather than from Wilbur's, and that that human being should be the little girl whose character he had already created. The *Charlotte's Web* manuscripts suggest that he made a good many attempts at a new opening before he found the right one. For some time he tried to let the story begin at midnight, when Fern's fa-

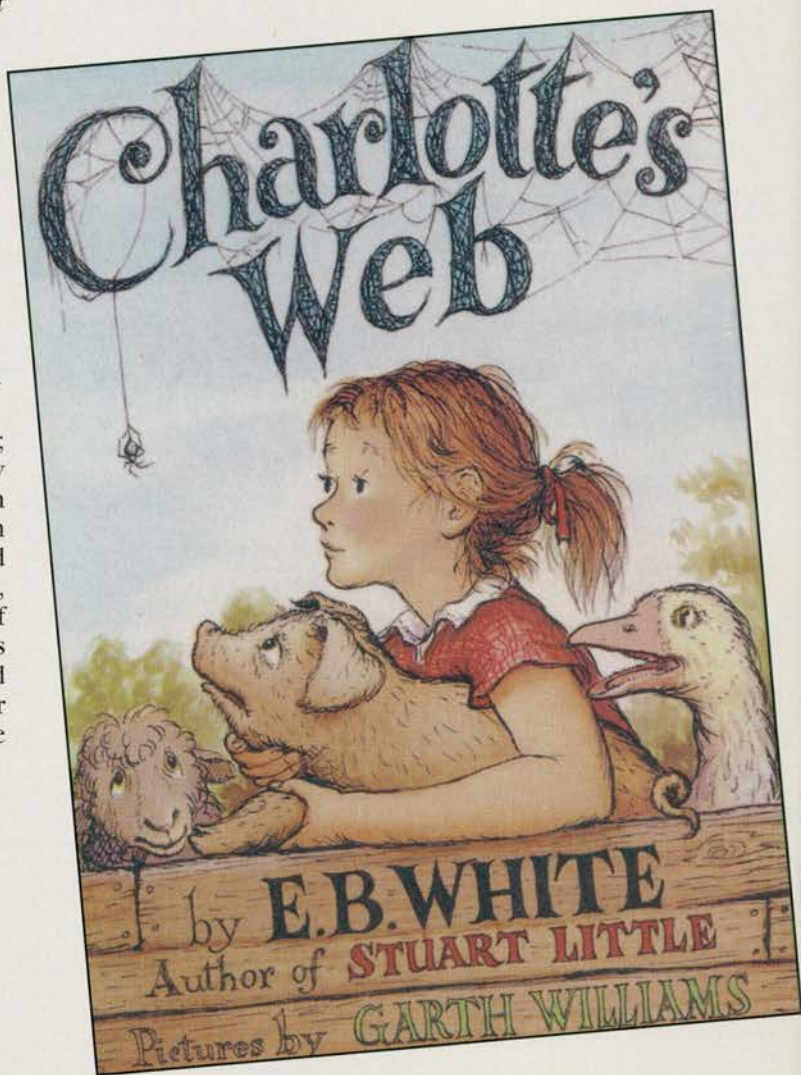
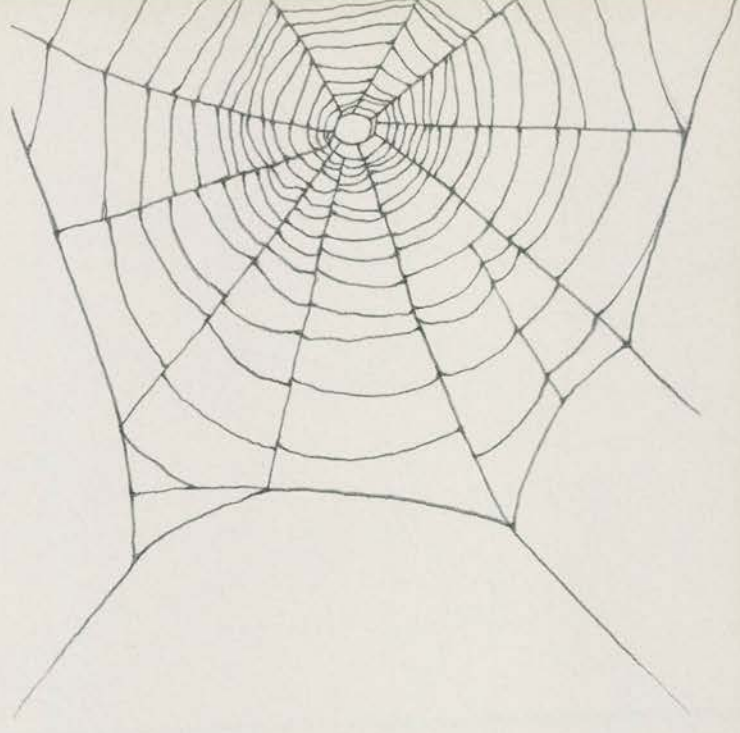
ther goes out to the hoghouse and by lantern-light finds that his sow has littered 11 pigs, one more than she has teats to feed them with. The trouble with all the variations on that opening was that they lacked dramatic action and failed to introduce the girl whose perception and sensibility would gradually lead the reader into the world of the barn. White did not succeed in shifting the emphasis until he hit upon the lead of the final version: "Where's Papa going with that ax?" said Fern to her mother as they were setting the table for breakfast."

In the opening chapters of the revised version, White tells how Fern saves Wilbur, the runt, from her father's ax, and delights in feeding and caring for him till he is 5 weeks old, at which time he has become too big for her to handle and she lets herself be persuaded to sell him to her uncle for \$6. Chapter I of the first draft became Chapter III, and the rest of the text required only a few revisions to accommodate Fern's presence up to the point where she had originally made her first appearance. As he increased her presence in the story White saw in her some of the characteristics he remembered in himself as a boy. In his notes, White wrote: "She loved being out of bed before the others. She loved early morning because it was quiet and fresh and smelled good and she loved animals.... She was small for her age.... She was thoughtful, and a great many things bothered her"<sup>16</sup>—in short, she is a lot like Sam, the boy in *The Trumpet of the Swan*, and she is a lot like White.

**I**N MARCH 1952 the contract for *Charlotte's Web* was signed. In it Harper agreed to pay White no more than \$7,500 in any one year of the royalties earned by the book. In those days the Internal Revenue Service permitted authors to spread out their earnings in this way over the years following the publication of a book. *Charlotte's Web*, however, turned out to be a better trapper than anyone had foreseen: In 1979, when White finally was able, with the permission of the I.R.S., to withdraw the balance of royalties due him, the sum was over half a million dollars—of which, of course, a large part went to pay taxes.

In May the Whites moved to Maine for the summer; in June Andy [White's nickname] had the worst hay fever he'd had in many years; and in July Katharine, in the early stages of hepatitis, had to go to the hospital in Bangor. In August, after some effort, Andy located and purchased two Suffolk ewes for \$125 each. In short, during the waiting period between the completion of the manuscript and its publication the life of the Whites was normal: They wrote, they edited, they were ill, and they farmed. In "Notes and Comment" for September 13 (a month before *Charlotte's Web* appeared), White described a recurrence of his "head" trouble:

Mid-September, the cricket's festival, is the hardest time of the year for a friend of ours who suffers from a ringing in the ears. He tells us that at this season it is almost impossible, walking or riding in the country, to distinguish between the poetry of earth and the racket inside his own head. The sound of insects has become, for him, completely identified with personal deterioration. He doesn't know, and hasn't been able to learn from his doctor, what cricket-in-the-ear signifies, if anything, but he recalls that the Hemingway hero in "Across the River and into the Trees" was afflicted the same way and only lasted two days—died in the back seat of an automobile after closing



the door carefully and well. Our friend can't disabuse himself of the fear that he is just a day or two from dead, and it is really pitiful to see him shut a door, the care he takes.<sup>17</sup>

If the ringing in his ears came from anxiety about Charlotte's debut, White could soon slam doors carelessly. From the first, everyone at Harper was sure the book would be a hit. His editor, Ursula Nordstrom, did not let her admiration impede her usefulness. She persuaded White to change the title of the last chapter from "Death of Charlotte" to "Last Day," and she worked well with Garth Williams, whose pictures had truly, and charmingly, illustrated *Stuart Little*. Through her, Andy had tactfully communicated his notions and his concern about the drawings: Charlotte must be "beguiling," and she must be represented as accurately as possible; in *American Spiders* there was no illustration of *Aranea cavatica*, but there was one of *Neoscona* "that looks like Charlotte, pretty much"; "Smooth legs and smooth abdomen are correct. (Actually, Charlotte's legs are equipped with fine hairs, and these are mentioned in the book, but the overall effect is of smooth, silk-stockings legs.)"<sup>18</sup> It was going to be a good-looking book. It was also going out into a world where only seven years ago *Stuart Little* had sold a hundred thousand copies in its first year. Harper ordered a first printing of 50,000 copies of *Charlotte's Web* and started an intensive advertising campaign a month before the publication date, October 15.

In the pre-Christmas season the book outsold every other title on the Harper list and had to be reprinted. The reviews were good, and the response from friends and acquaintances was reassuring. David McCord said that he had seen the Grand Canyon once and had never been able to talk about it—"It is the same with *Charlotte's Web*." Bennett Cerf guessed that "if there's only one book of the current season still in circulation 50 years hence, it will be *Charlotte's Web*." And Jean Stafford, recovering from a nervous breakdown, wrote:

Dear Andy,

*Charlotte's Web* is the most beautiful and strengthening book I have read in I don't know when, and I think I will commit the entire of it to memory. I give you fully as much credit as I do my good doctors for relieving my terrors. Thank you for this and for everything else you have written and will write.

Yours, Jean<sup>19</sup>

Orville Prescott, in the *Times*, and Lewis Gannett, in the *Herald Tribune*, reviewed the book briefly but favorably. In the *Los Angeles Sunday News* Richard Armour said, "If the story doesn't quite come up to that of *Stuart Little*, it is still better than most children's books." August Derleth, in the Madison, Wis., *Capital Times*, called it "one of those rare stories for young people which bid fair to last longer than their author—a minor classic beyond question."<sup>20</sup>

It did not make the front page of the *Sunday New York Times Book Review*, as most of White's other books have done, but Eudora Welty's review in the special children's-book supplement was an excellent piece of criticism. "The book has," she said, "grace and humor and praise of life, and the good backbone of succinctness that only the most highly imaginative stories seem to grow." Her conclusion that it is "an adorable book," was preceded by a summary, an inter-

pretation (it is "about life and death, trust and treachery, pleasure and pain, and the passing of time"), and a judgment ("As a piece of work it is just about perfect"). On the front page of the *Sunday Herald Tribune Book Review*, Pamela Travers, author of the Mary Poppins books, said that the "tangible magic" of *Charlotte's Web* is "the proper element of childhood, and any grown-up who can still dip into it—even with only so much as a toe—is certain at last of dying young even if he lives to 90." Pamela Travers also reviewed the book in London (where it had been simultaneously published, by Hamish Hamilton) in *The New Statesman and Nation*. The *London Times Literary Supplement* praised the book, noting that "Mr. White's language is fresh and exciting."<sup>21</sup>

Since that first printing of 50,000 copies there have been (nearly) innumerable printings, in several editions. By now over 6 million copies have been sold.\* In its more than 20 translations there is no telling how many copies have been printed. In 1960 *Charlotte's Web* was the "overwhelming" winner in an informal poll conducted by *Publishers Weekly* to discover "the best children's book written between 1930 and 1960." During the 11 years between 1963 and 1973, when *The New York Times* compiled an annual bestseller list for children's books based on bookstore sales, *Charlotte's Web* was always among the top 10; and from 1967 to 1972, it was always first or second. In 1971 it was second only to *The Trumpet of the Swan*. In 1976, when *Publishers Weekly* polled "teachers, librarians, authors, and publishers," asking them to name the 10 best children's books written in America since 1776, *Charlotte's Web* was number one, followed by *Where the Wild Things Are*, *Tom Sawyer*, *Little Women*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Little House in the Big Woods*, *Johnny Tremain*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Little House on the Prairie*, and *The Island of the Blue Dolphins*. For the past 20 years in America, *Charlotte's Web* has outsold *Winnie the Pooh*, any single Mary Poppins book, *The Wind in the Willows*, *The Little Prince*, and *Alice in Wonderland*.<sup>22</sup>

**C**HARLOTTE'S WEB is a fabric of memories, many reaching back much further in time than White's life on his farm. It is a pastoral fiction written when, more than ever before, White's vision was retrospective and his sense of life was sharpened by his having seen many things come to an end. *The New Yorker* of Harold Ross, Katharine White, E. B. White, James Thurber, and Wolcott Gibbs had become middle-aged—was no longer so carefree as it had been 25 years before. New York itself was not the same city that had drawn the young *New Yorker* writers to it. Joel, White's only son, was no longer a child. White was 50, slightly beyond middle age. And in the 1950s the civilized world itself seemed to be past middle age and failing fast. But for White, the most important things that had passed were the sensations and images of infancy, childhood, and youth; and if he could remember them

\*Today, 17 years after Scott Elledge's biography of E.B. White was published, it is estimated that 1.5 million hardback copies and 9.5 million paperback copies of *Charlotte's Web* have been sold.

clearly, he could remember the self that had experienced them. If he could evoke that self and keep in touch with it, he could imagine a fiction, write a story, create a world that children would believe in and love.

White was especially pleased with Pamela Travers's review of *Charlotte's Web* in *The New Statesman and Nation* because in it she had confirmed White's own theory of communication. She had said that anyone who writes for children successfully is probably writing for one child—namely, “the child that is himself.”<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps White was especially able to write for the child that was himself because he had never stopped communicating with it. He had, in fact, never stopped trying to win the approval of the self he once referred to as “a boy I knew.” The integrity of White's view of the world owed much to the boy he kept in touch with despite his own loss of innocence. And the clarity and grace of his writing derived in part from the clarity of his vision of that ideal young self:

I think there is only one frequency and that the whole problem is to establish communication with one's self, and, that being done, everyone else is tuned in. In other words, if a writer succeeds in communicating with a reader, I think it is simply because he has been trying (with some success) to get in touch with himself—to clarify the reception....<sup>24</sup>

About what he discovered when he got in touch with himself, we should take White at his word. To a reader of *Charlotte's Web* he wrote: “All that I hope to say in books, all that I ever hope to say, is that I love the world. I guess you can find that in there, if you dig around.” And though White does not think much of “diggers,” admirers of *Charlotte's Web* need not feel guilty about discussing what and how the story means.

Most of what White loved in the world is represented in *Charlotte's Web*. Essentially it consists of the natural world of creatures living in a habitat filled with objects, animate and inanimate, that White enjoyed seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling, and tasting. The most lyrical passages in the story are celebrations of what's out there—things and actions. Remember, for example, the opening of Chapter III:

The barn was very large. It was very old. It smelled of hay and it smelled of manure. It smelled of the perspiration of tired horses and the wonderful sweet breath of patient cows. It often had a sort of peaceful smell—as though nothing bad could happen ever again in the world. It smelled of grain and of harness dressing and of axle grease and of rubber boots and of new rope.

The strong organic smells of manure, perspiration of horses, and the breath of patient cows are as reassuring as the smell of hay. Process and plenitude are at the heart of the satisfactory world of the barn, which is a kind of paradise regained where it seems “as though nothing bad could happen ever again in the world.” But, better than any ideal world, the real world of the barn was so full of such a variety of things that no one living there should ever be bored:

It was full of all sorts of things that you find in barns: ladders, grindstones, pitch forks, monkey wrenches, scythes, lawn mowers, snow shovels, ax handles, milk pails, water buckets, empty grain sacks, and rusty rat traps.

Outside the barn there were other accumulations of things, such as the dump, where even refuse was inter-

esting:

Here, in a small clearing hidden by young alders and wild raspberry bushes, was an astonishing pile of old bottles and empty tin cans and dirty rags and bits of metal and broken bottles and broken hinges and broken springs and dead batteries and last month's magazines and old discarded dishmops and tattered overalls and rusty spikes and leaky pails and forgotten stoppers and useless junk of all kinds, including a wrong-size crank for a broken ice-cream freezer.

Wilbur's slops were plentiful and various. For breakfast he might have:

Skim milk, crusts, middlings, bits of doughnuts, wheat cakes with drops of maple syrup sticking to them, potato skins, leftover custard pudding with raisins, and bits of Shredded Wheat.

Even in the rain that Wilbur (like his creator) hated, there were variety and plenitude:

Rain fell on the roof of the barn and dripped steadily from the eaves. Rain fell in the barnyard and ran in crooked courses down into the lane where thistles and pigweed grew. Rain spattered against Mrs. Zuckerman's kitchen windows and came gushing out of the downspouts. Rain fell on the backs of the sheep as they grazed in the meadow.

There were the variety of seasons and the new and plentiful phenomena characteristic of each season:

The early summer days on a farm are the happiest and fairest days of the year. Lilacs bloom and make the air sweet, and then fade. Apple blossoms come with the lilacs, and the bees visit around among the apple trees....

Early summer days are a jubilee time for birds. In the fields, around the house, in the barn, in the woods, in the swamp—everywhere love and songs and nests and eggs....The song sparrow, who knows how brief and lovely life is, says, “Sweet, sweet, sweet interlude; sweet, sweet, sweet interlude.” If you enter the barn, the swallows swoop down from their nests and scold. “Cheeky, cheeky!” they say....

Everywhere you look is life; even the little ball of spit on the weed stalk, if you poke it apart, has a green worm inside it.

After Charlotte dies, Wilbur understands that life is a sweet interlude, and the knowledge that he cannot live forever only intensifies his love for life in his world:

Life in the barn was very good—night and day, winter and summer, spring and fall, dull days and bright days. It was the best place to be, thought Wilbur, this warm delicious cellar, with the garrulous geese, the changing seasons, the heat of the sun, the passage of swallows, the nearness of rats, the sameness of sheep, the love of spiders, the smell of manure, and the glory of everything.<sup>25</sup>

But that is how he felt after Charlotte had taught him that the smell of manure, the love of spiders, and the glory of everything were three parts of a kind of natural divinity.

In all White's writings the smell of manure (or of such other rich organic matter as leaf mold) is always exciting, promising, or reassuring; It “always suggests that life can be cyclic and chemically perfect and aromatic and continuous.”<sup>26</sup> In *Charlotte's Web* it is a part of the glory of everything, and in the lullaby that Charlotte sings to Wilbur it is part of the comforting mystery of life:

“Sleep, sleep, my love, my only,  
Deep, deep, in the dung and the dark;  
Be not afraid and be not lonely!  
This is the hour when frogs and thrushes



Praise the world from the woods and the rushes.  
Rest from care, my one and only,  
Deep in the dung and the dark!"

But the book makes clear that the world White loves is more than a collection of things, natural and man-made, or a fascinating organization of reassuring cyclical, ongoing processes: It is a world in which the motive for creating, nurturing, teaching, encouraging, singing, and celebrating is love. Charlotte sang away Wilbur's loneliness and his fear of death by persuading him that his world was cuddling him in the warmth and protection of its dung and its darkness. But her power to convince him of this benevolence came from her love for him, whom she called her "one and only." It was the love implied in "Sleep, my love" that cured Wilbur's depression and anxiety, that saved his life, and that taught him how to live out the rest of his life.

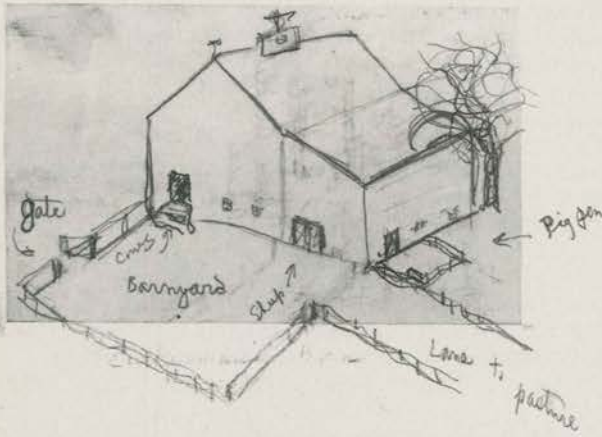
White discovered Charlotte, to be sure, when he was looking for a way to save Wilbur, but in making her the savior he served more than the needs of his plot. By making her an admirable creature, he helped readers free themselves from prejudices against spiders. He wanted to write a children's story that was true to the facts of nature and that, by reflecting his own love and understanding of the natural world, might help others to lift up their lives a little. His story turned out to be more than an idyll. It is a fable that subtly questions the assumption that homo sapiens was created to have dominion over every other living thing upon the earth. It also affirms that heroism is not a sexually determined characteristic, nor is it identical with self-sacrifice. Charlotte does not save Wilbur by dying; she saves him by following her instincts, by using her intelligence, and by being true to her individual self without being false to her general nature. Heroes, Charlotte reminds us, have from ancient times been people in a class by themselves because they used their unusual gifts to protect others.

Wilbur's education in the grim facts of life, including fear and death, begins with learning how to accept such facts as Charlotte's nature, her "miserable inheritance," which includes the instinct to live by killing other creatures. She says it's "the way she's made"; she "just naturally" builds webs and traps flies. "Way back for thousands and thousands of years," Charlotte explains, "we spiders have been laying for flies and bugs." But that fact does not explain what caused such behavior in the first place. She doesn't know

how the first spider in the early days of the world happened to think up this fancy idea of spinning a web, but she did, and it was clever of her, too. And since then, all of us spiders have had to work the same trick. It's not a bad pitch, on the whole.

Charlotte does not know the origin of evil, though perhaps she recognizes its existence when she calls her instinct to kill a "miserable inheritance" and when she says, "A spider's life can't help being something of a mess." Her ethical views resemble those of White's father, who used the word *mistake* for what others called "sins," and those of White himself, who prefers the nonjudgmental word *mess* for what others describe in moral terms.

When Charlotte explains to Wilbur why she saved his life, she gives two reasons: she likes him, and "per-



Zuckerman's Barn

A drawing of Zuckerman's barn that White made to guide him as he wrote *Charlotte's Web*.

haps [she] was trying to lift up [her] life a little." Here, as the skeptical White comes close to the problem of moral imperatives, he is cautious. *Perhaps*, he says, she was trying to lift up her life a little—to transcend her genetic inheritance, or be a little better than she had to be; and when she adds, "Heaven knows anyone's life can stand a little of that," she carefully, as well as humorously, warns that a little concern for moral improvement goes a long way. Unlike Justa the female canary, wife of Baby, Charlotte does *not* "enjoy the nobility of self-sacrifice."

Charlotte's charity has its limits. When Wilbur asks her what she's doing as she begins to weave her egg sac, she answers, "Oh, making something, making something as usual." Wilbur asks, "Is it for me?" "No," says Charlotte. "It's something for *me*, for a change." She pretends, perhaps, to be harder-headed than she is, but she is nonetheless governed by splendid self-interest and self-respect (or perhaps, of course, by selfish genes).

Charlotte lives and dies a free creature, intellectually as well as instinctively accepting her biologically determined fate. In laying her 514 eggs in her beautifully made sac she is not carrying out the wishes of spider society any more than she is doing it to please her mate. She's pretty sure why she creates her *magnum opus*, in the full knowledge that when it is finished she will die.

Earlier, when she tells Wilbur that she thinks she will not go with him to the Fair because she will have to stay home and lay eggs, and Wilbur suggests that she can lay her eggs at the Fair, Charlotte says: "You don't know the first thing about egg laying, Wilbur. I can't arrange my family duties to suit the management of the County Fair. When I get ready to lay eggs, I have to lay eggs, Fair or no Fair." White does not make Charlotte a victim of anything—even fate. She obeys sensibly the imperatives of being a female spider, knowing that she "has to," and she sounds, in fact, as if she were proud of her part in the great natural scheme, proud of the "versatility" of someone who can write and can also produce 514 eggs—save a friend's life as well as create new lives.

Children's books in the past had seldom faced up so squarely as did *Charlotte's Web* to such truths of the human condition as fear of death, and death itself; and they had not implied the courageous agnosticism that disclaimed any understanding of why life and the world are the way they are. In 1952 few children's books had made so clear as *Charlotte's Web* that the natural world of the barn does not exist to serve the world of the farmers who think they own it. And few children's books have so clearly embodied a love that can cure fear, make death seem a part of life, and be strong without being possessive. Charlotte was "in a class by herself." She was braver and more capable of friendship than Wilbur because she was older and more experienced, and probably because she was a superior individual—that is, a hero. Among heroes, of course, she was *sui generis*.

All of which is to suggest that *Charlotte's Web* was and probably will continue to be a modern book based on the integrity of a humble and skeptical view of the

natural world and of the human beings in it. It gives no support to prejudice in favor of the superiority of human beings, or of one sex over another. It does celebrate a child's generous view of the world and a child's love of that world.

*Charlotte's Web* is a kind of fable, of course; but it is also a pastoral—an eclogue that takes its readers back to an early vision of an arcadia. It is itself a pastoral game, a form of play, and its effects are partly, perhaps heavily, nostalgic. If adults still possessed the world of the barn, they would not be so moved by a description of it. They love its memory because they have lost the original. They also love it because in loving it they are persuaded of its truth and perhaps of its perpetuity. *Charlotte's Web* can be "explained" in Wordsworthian, Blakean, or Proustian ways. As we grow older we lose the vision, but not beyond recall; in the vision of innocence is contained the wisdom of experience; the act of remembrance of things past affirms their value, affirms our value, and creates a sense of man freed from the clutches of time. Readers of *Charlotte's Web* momentarily enjoy this freedom because White succeeded in getting in touch with himself, with "the child that is himself." □

## REFERENCES

- "Pigs, and Spiders," *McClurg's Book News*, January 1953, p. 49.
- Charlotte's Web*, Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1952, p. 140.
- Letters of E.B. White*, collected and edited by Dorothy Lobrano Guth, 1976, p. 312.
- The Second Tree From the Corner*, 1935-54, p. 182. (and *Essays of E.B. White*, 1977, p. 250).
- The Second Tree From the Corner*, 1935-54, p. 188 (and *Essays of E.B. White*, 1977, p. 254).
- The Second Tree From the Corner*, 1935-54, pp. 187-188 (and *Essays of E.B. White*, 1977, p. 254); *Letters of E.B. White*, p. 613; Don Marquis, *archy & mebitabel: With an Introduction by E.B. White*, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1950, pp. 47-48.
- Letters of E.B. White*, 1976, p. 615.
- EBW to Cass Canfield, 19 May 1950.
- John Henry Comstock, *Spider Book*, revised and edited by W.J. Gertsch, Ithaca, N.Y.: Comstock, 1948.
- Letters of E.B. White*, 1976, p. 375.
- "Pigs and Spiders," *McClurg's*, p. 49.
- Comstock, *Spider Book*, p. 208.
- First draft of *Charlotte's Web*, White Collection.
- Comstock, *Spider Book*, p. 215.
- EBW to Ted Patrick, 27 October 1950; *Letters of E.B. White*, 1976, p. 331.
- Notes for *Charlotte's Web*, White Collection.
- Notes and Comment, *The New Yorker*, 13 September 1952.
- Letters of E.B. White*, 1976, pp. 361, 354, 362.
- McCord to EBW, 1 November 1955; *The Saturday Review*, vol. 36, no. 1 (3 January 1953) p. 6; Stafford to EBW, Fall 1952.
- Los Angeles News*, 16 November 1952; *Madison Capital Times*, 20 December 1952.
- Sunday New York Times Book Review*, 19 October 1952; *Sunday Herald Tribune Book Review*, 16 November 1952; *New Statesman and Nation*, 29 November 1952, p. 60; *Times Literary Supplement*, 28 November 1952, p. 200.
- Publishers Weekly*, 14 November 1960 and 23 February 1976.
- Letters of E.B. White*, 1976, p. 368.
- Letters of E.B. White*, 1976, p. 417.
- Charlotte's Web*, 1952, pp. 13-14, 25, 42-43, 183.
- One Man's Meat: A New and Enlarged Edition*, 1938-1944, p. 212.



## VOCABULARY

(Continued from page 28)

- (1997). Phonological short-term memory and new word learning in children. *Developmental Psychology*, 33, 966-979.
- Gough, P. B., and Tunmer, W. E. (1986). Decoding, reading and reading disability. *Remedial and Special Education*, 7, 6-10.
- Goulden, R., Nation, P., and Read, J. (1990). How large can a receptive vocabulary be? *Applied Linguistics*, 11(4), 341-363.
- Graves, M. F., Juel, C., and Graves, B. (1998). *Teaching reading in the 21st century*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Gregory, D., Earl, L., and O'Donoghue, B. (1993). *A study of reading recovery in Scarborough: 1990-1992*. Publication #92/93-15. Scarborough, Ontario: Scarborough Board of Education.
- Hart, B., and Risley, T. R. (1995). *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children*. Baltimore, Md.: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.
- Hazenberg, S., and Hulstijn, J. H. (1996). Defining a minimal receptive second-language vocabulary for non-native university students: An empirical investigation. *Applied Linguistics*, 17(2), 145-163.
- Lorge, I., and Chall, J. S. (1963). Estimating the size of vocabularies of children and adults: An analysis of methodological issues. *Journal of Experimental Education*, 32, 147-157.
- Madden, N. A., Slavin, R. E., Karweit, J. L., Dolan L. J., and Wasik, B. A. (1993). Success for all: Longitudinal effects of a restructuring program for inner-city schools. *American Educational Research Journal*, 30, 123-148.
- McLloyd, V. C. (1998). Socioeconomic disadvantage and child development. *American Psychologist*, 53, 185-204.
- Morrison, F. J., Williams, M. A., and Massetti, G. M. (1998, April). *The contributions of IQ and schooling to academic achievement*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Reading, San Diego.
- Nagy, W. E., and Herman, P. A. (1987). Breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge: Implications for acquisition and instruction. In M. G. McKeown and M. E. Curtis (Eds.), *The nature of vocabulary acquisition*, (19-36). Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum.
- Pinnell, G. S., Lyons, C. A., Deford, D. E., Bryk, A. S., and Seltzer, M. (1994). Comparing instructional models for the literacy education of high-risk first-graders. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 29, 9-38.
- Robbins, C., and Ehri, L. C. (1994). Reading storybooks to kindergartners helps them learn new vocabulary words. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 86, 54-64.
- Snow, C., Burns, M. S., and Griffin, P. (Eds.), (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.
- Stahl, S.A. (1999). *Vocabulary Development*. Cambridge, Mass.: Brookline Press.
- Sternberg, R. J. (1987). Most vocabulary is learned from context. In M. G. McKeown, and M. E. Curtis (Eds.), *The nature of vocabulary acquisition*, (89-106). Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum.
- Werner, H., and Kaplan, B. (1952). The acquisition of word meanings: A developmental study. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 15, (Serial No. 51, No. 1).
- Whitehurst, G. J., Falco, F. L., Lonigan, C., Fischel, J. E., DeBaryshe, B. D., Valdez-Menchaca, M. C., and Caulfield, M. (1988). Accelerating language development through picture book reading. *Developmental Psychology*, 24, 552-588.



## Summer Seminars

FOR HIGH SCHOOL AND MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS AND NATIONAL PARK SERVICE RANGERS  
The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History announces twelve seminars in summer 2001.

Stipends, books, room and board are provided. In-service credit available. Public, parochial and independent school teachers are eligible. Limited to thirty participants per seminar by competitive application.

LINCOLN  
Professor Gabor S. Boritt  
at Gettysburg College  
July 1-7

THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE  
GEORGE WASHINGTON  
Professor Gordon S. Wood  
at Brown University  
July 8-14

PASSAGES TO FREEDOM:  
ABOLITION AND THE  
UNDERGROUND RAILROAD  
Professors David W. Blight,  
James Oliver Horton and  
Lois E. Horton  
at Amherst College  
July 8-14

THE GREAT DEPRESSION,  
WORLD WAR II AND THE  
AMERICAN WEST  
Professors David Kennedy  
and Richard White  
at Stanford University  
July 8-14

AMERICA BETWEEN THE  
WARS  
Professor Alan Brinkley  
at Columbia University  
July 15-21

HOLLYWOOD'S AMERICA:  
FILM AND AMERICAN  
HISTORY  
Professor Steven Mintz  
at Columbia University  
July 15-21

THOMAS JEFFERSON AND  
THE FOUNDATIONS OF  
AMERICAN DEMOCRACY  
Professor Daniel P. Jordan  
at Monticello and the  
University of Virginia  
July 22-28

NEW YORK IN THE  
GILDED AGE  
Professors Kenneth T. Jackson  
and Karen Markoe  
at Columbia University  
July 22-28

COMMAND AND LEADER-  
SHIP IN THE CIVIL WAR  
Professor James M. McPherson  
at Princeton University  
July 22-28

LOOKING AT AMERICAN  
HISTORY FROM OUTSIDE:  
THE VIEW FROM BRITAIN  
Professor Daniel W. Howe  
at Oxford University,  
UK  
July 26-August 2

NORTH AMERICAN  
SLAVERY IN COMPARATIVE  
PERSPECTIVE  
Professor Ira Berlin  
at University of  
Maryland  
July 29-August 4

THE CIVIL RIGHTS  
MOVEMENT: CONTEXT  
AND COMPARISON  
Professor Anthony J. Badger  
at Cambridge University, UK  
August 5-August 10

DEADLINE FOR APPLICATION:  
MONDAY, APRIL 5, 2001

Obtain applications on-line  
at [www.gliah.org](http://www.gliah.org) or call us at  
(212) 867-1170.



The GILDER LEHRMAN Institute of  
American History

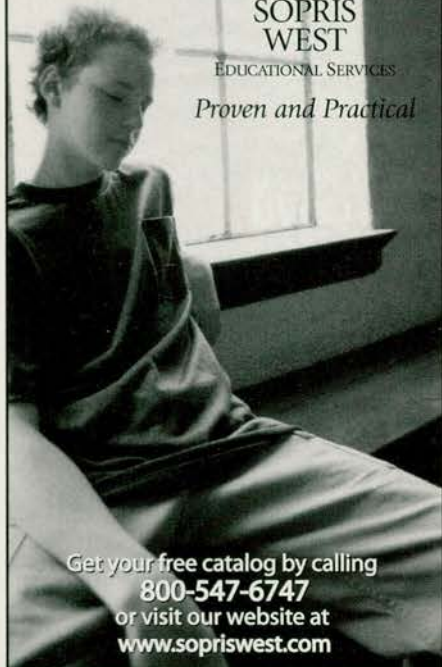
Reaching the  
tough to teach ...



SOPRIS  
WEST

EDUCATIONAL SERVICES

*Proven and Practical*



Get your free catalog by calling  
**800-547-6747**  
or visit our website at  
[www.sopriswest.com](http://www.sopriswest.com)

## EDUCATORS B & B TRAVEL NETWORK

serving educators since 1986

[www.educatorstravel.com](http://www.educatorstravel.com)

Visit our on-line directory & plan  
a trip today!

**\$32 a night for  
two!**

Over 5,000 members  
in 52 countries

"All of the educators we stayed with  
were absolutely delightful. We were  
treated like family & had such a good  
time visiting - what a great way to learn  
about an area!"

Vignia & Larry,  
Santa Rosa,  
California

*exclusive travel  
network for  
educators*

call or write for a free brochure today!

Box 5279 Eugene OR 97405  
800-377-3480

## LETTERS

(Continued from page 2)

widespread that it has become the norm. The most tragic symptom that the bastardization of the English language will continue is the fact that so many teachers, the key persons responsible to teach and model the good use of English, do not possess adequate English skills themselves. Our younger teachers are a product of an educational system that has devalued the rigorous study intrinsic to learning one's native language well. Even the new standards for English Language Arts fail to address teaching the more subtle and sophisticated elements of language. Somehow, students are supposed to gain knowledge of those elements of language that elevate its use beyond a conversational to a scholarly level by some magical process. Perhaps people really believe that the computer can take care of all language errors with such technological crutches as spell-check and grammar-check. Past participles, collective nouns, adverbs, gerunds, concordance of tenses, and any punctuation beyond a period are mysteries to many sporting a framed diploma of higher education in their professional space. Many memos and letters written daily by professional educators reveal an inability to communicate at a level commensurate with the level of education attained. All the reasons to which Mr. Orr alluded in his article are the culprits. I wonder how many readers skipped over this article, not even recognizing the alarm implicit in its title. If our most educated are unaware of the disease, who will recognize the need for a cure?

MARY ANN SEMENTELLI  
WEBSTER, NEW YORK

I am a 15-year-old student, and after reading the article "Verbicide," I found that I was very offended.

Yes, I have watched Jerry Springer and Temptation Island and laughed and thought how screwed up it is, but it's just entertainment. I enjoy and love listening to music with these so-called horrible messages. But all of this is just fun to me. I know in my heart what I want, and I and I alone can and will make the decisions that will affect

my life. I have an excellent school record, straight A's, tons of extracurricular activities, but I do say "like," "really," and "cool" a lot. And you know what? It's not going to ruin my life. I'm glad I do. I feel like I fit in with my friends and the culture of my time, but I still know where I am going in the future.

It is no longer 1950, or whatever period of time that adults of today wish it was. It's 2001, and it's time for adults to wake up and understand what it is that we are feeling.

—EMILY FUSCO

CANANDAIGUA, NEW YORK

It seems ironic to me that David Orr requires several pages for his simple observation that, "...we are losing the capacity to say what we really mean...." If Mr. Orr is so concerned about the English language, he should get an editor whose job it should be to print no more than 10 to 20 percent of Mr. Orr's future ramblings.

Rather than elaborate on this idea, I will try to set an example for conciseness.

—LEMUEL J. CHASTAIN  
ROCKAWAY PARK, NEW YORK

# CHEAP DRUGS

Yes. It's a cheap attention getter. We are so ashamed, but you'll forgive us when you save up to 40% on prescription drugs with AFT PLUS Health Savings.

- \$29.95/year for family membership or free if you use your AFT PLUS MasterCard.
- Free 30-day trial period.
- Even greater savings on mail-order prescription drugs.
- 26,000 participating pharmacies nationwide.
- Quarterly statements identifying your purchases and discounts received.
- All dues-paying members and retired members and their families (including parents) are eligible.

Sign on today!

**AFT PLUS  
HEALTH SAVINGS  
1-800-228-3523**

M-F, 9 A.M. - 6 P.M. (ET)





# QuEST2001 CONFERENCE

**Join the Pursuit.  
Join the Team.  
Join QuEST.**

AFT QuEST Conference  
July 12-15, 2001  
Marriott Wardman  
Park Hotel  
Washington, DC

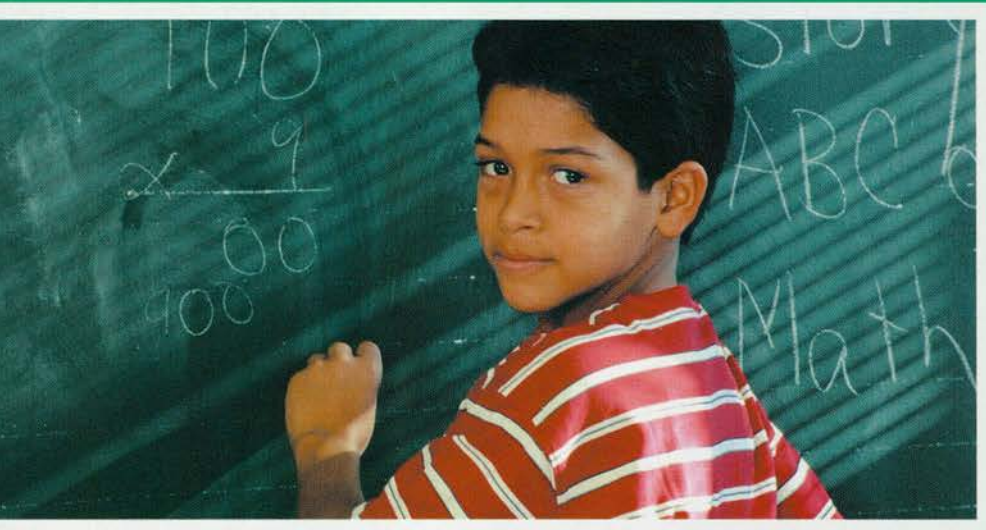
**QuEST**, the premier national professional issues conference for classroom educators, AFT leaders, and education policymakers, is about Pursuing Excellence: excellence in professional development; excellence in learning; and excellence in responding to today's challenges.

**Join the Pursuit.** On July 12 - 15, 2001, in Washington, D.C., thousands of educators from around the country will spend five days Pursuing Excellence as they learn about the latest research, discuss cutting edge issues in education, and share practical strategies for school improvement.

**Join the Team.** Work with other AFT leaders and education policymakers to

address emerging issues in this new political environment. Help continue the fight to redesign low-performing schools. Support teacher quality. Participate in creating and delivering your local and state response to the renewed focus on high-stakes testing and accountability, charter schools, and voucher plans.

**Join QuEST.** QuEST offers more than a hundred action-oriented workshops, provocative plenary sessions, seminars, exhibits, networking opportunities, and a Resource and Technology Center. There is something for every educator, on a variety of issues, and for differing learning styles. For more information or registration materials call us at (800) 238-1133 ext. 5684, or register online at [www.aft.org/QuEST2001](http://www.aft.org/QuEST2001).



**It's QuEST 2001.**

**It's Excellence in  
Education.**

**It's Union Work.**