A Writer Talks About Writing

An address to the College of Education, University of Minnesota (October, 1969)

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Like all childrens book writers, I wonder from time to time where I would be without librarians and teachers. . . so let me begin with my thanks for your invitation. It is a privilege, a pleasure, to be with you.

Josephine W. Johnson, in her glorious book, The Inland Island, says: "Prayed to God for that desire which will never come again. The desire to be a great writer at all costs. It will not come again. I am too old and the price is too high. I can't give up all the rest of myself -- my crowded self. All the undisciplined, poorly organized pack of women and children who live inside me. Self-indulgent, easily tired, short of intra-span; longing to clean house, read books, paint pictures, walk in the field, walk in the fileds, eat in the fields. . . die in the fields. And some of them want to save the world; clean up the cities and rivers, tear down the Pentagon."

When I first read it, I thought, but that's about me. Reflection informed me, of course, that it's about many writers. There are few great ones, but most of us must think that if -- just if -- why then -- But in me, as in Mrs. Johnson, there are too many other women with too many other concerns and interests, and I can always tell myself that but for this, I might have made it onto the lists of greatness. This is comforting, and a way never to know. To this day, I am not sure whether I'd rather write than read, read than write, walk in the woods than do either. And to tear down the Pentagon, I'd give up all the rest.

This is preamble, to explain why although I am a childrens book writer and here to talk about children's books, I never am able to talk just about children's books.

As an old-style liberal integrationist, there are times now when I feel a little out of step. When I talk with young Negroes, most of whom, but not all, prefer to be called Blacks, I often feel a little out of line. Because I have written books with Negroes in them, and as most of my books are written not with an overall outside view but from within the characters, I

necessarily have undertaken to know -- not The Black Experience -- but, in each instance, a black experience. But because I am an integrationist, irreversibly dedicated to the philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr., I must think of all of it as human experience.

Let me say that I do not come freshly to this human concern -- that I did not in 1954 suddenly realize that some inequity existed here. When I was in school, we wrote a great deal of verse that we called poetry, and much of mine was even then preoccupied with what I termed, and I guess it was a good enough word, the "awfulness" of responding to people because of the color of their skin, the tilt of their eyes, the sound of their names. That was in the sixth and seventh grades, which was long and long ago.

I felt it then, I feel it now, and I feel, further, that unless everyone begins not just to think about but really to know and reject the awfulness of this kind of attitude, it is simply going to be a question of by what instrument we ultimately destroy ourselves. Through racism, overpopulation, war, or our apparent determination to pollute this world beyond the point of cleansing. The human species seems to have some inherent self-eliminating drive, and with so many ways to bring the thing off, I suppose we shall end by destroying the planet, and not only ourselves, but all the other, innocent, lives on it, from algae to mountain lions.

Still, we haven't done it, so we have yet to deal with what is here, and as the total picture is too vastly bewildering for any one mind to wrestle with, we must each concentrate on a detail of the whole. My detail in this enormous, ugly, beautiful, terrifying tapestry is childrens books.

I am deeply deeply exercised about many other matters and fire off letters weekly to the TIMES, to the President, to my congressmen, about the war, the reckless building and testing of thermonuclear weapons, the mindless destruction of wildlife and wildlands. Like many others, I contemplate the disastrous lack of insight, hindsight, foresight, common sense or honor in the alloting of public funds, and wonder why we don't rise up, all of us, and demand a halt to the lying and evading and cheating and rationalizing that confront us in nearly every area of public and private life. For example -- Federal Aid to Education was cut by over 80%. The Model Cities program died. Head Start, the Job Corps, Welfare, the School Lunch, Day Care Center and medical research programs are moribund. In other words, most programs that could help and dignify the lives of the young, the aged, the poor, the culturally and socially despoiled.

The Administration and the Secretary of the Treasury tell

us we are "fighting inflation" by this type of retrenchment. They ask us to curtail personal spending, even running newspaper and television advertisements to the effect that consumer "greed" is causing the inflation that all of us know is the direct result of monstrous government spending on arms and space.

Yet the Western White House and the house in Key Biscayne are built and maintained, mostly on public funds, and no shout of rage goes up in the country. George Washington laid it down as a dictum that American presidents were not to live like royalty, but those of our ancestors who wanted a king are clearly not without descendants. Because who springs for this regal style of living? The people, the public whose opinion the President says he will in no way be affected by, and whose cities, homes, schools, highways, hospitals, savings, are crumbling away.

And the war goes on. Young men die, old men talk and some of them profit. But the war goes on.

Yes, Mr. Nixon says he will not be affected by public opinion, will in no way listen to those of us who use our constitutional right to protest this war. Insofar as he is able, he threatens and harasses the growing Peace Movement, and it all sounds more like, "l'etat, c'est moi," than, "Liberty and justice for all."

If I seem not to be speaking yet of childrens books, I am speaking of the children's world, and, more for the children than for myself or people my age, I march in peace parades, stand in peace vigils, support the Sierra Club, write to my congressmen and the NEW YORK TIMES.

But that inescapable voice we all have within us keeps repeating. . . useless, useless.

Where I am not plagued by this voice is in the area of my books for children. I've been writing them for twenty years and I've never written a word to the children that I felt was dishonest. Which brings me back to one of my initial points. Frequently, over the years, I have written of Negro characters, with the conviction that I was presenting them as fully as I could any white character. That conviction remains unchanged, for me, but lately it's been challenged. I do not mean only in the widespread manner in which we're all being told by young black men and women that no one can understand them except one of their own. I've been challenged personally as to my right to put Negroes in my books.

Once by a young artist, who was amiable in a professional way but told my husband and me that he could never be friends with any white person, and that he felt my using Blacks in my

books was opportunism. Once by John Steptoe, who is a marvelously gifted artist and writer. He is nineteen years old. His first book, Stevie, is one any child of the ghetto would take into his heart. But so would any white child. Or an adult of any color. Because it is a beautiful story, classically simple, dealing with deep human emotions -- jealousy, rue, loneliness. When LIFE reprinted the book, they said that Stevie was a book of another culture -- the black culture -- with no balance intended. "The story," said John Steptoe, "is not directed at white children." Maybe not. But white children will read it and respond to it, because jealousy and rue and loneliness are not emotions experienced only in the ghetto or only by the Blacks. They are human emotions, and whether or not he'll admit it -- he won't -- John Steptoe has written a book for all people.

My third critic was even younger. She is, she told me, ten years old, and while it was not an entirely angry letter, what she was saying was that I'm on her turf and I'd better get off.

The book she was speaking of, A Wonderful, Terrible Time, concerns itself with two colored girls, about the age of my correspondent, during one summer, and in particular their experiences at an integrated camp in the country.

This is her letter:

"Mrs. Stolz -- I liked your book to page 158-59. No colored person in their right mind would ask another if she or he would like to be white. If they did the other would surely say they wouldn't. I don't think anyone who isn't colored should write about colored because they don't know a thing about them. Carolyn Flint, 10 years old."

She did not give me a return address. But as I always reply to children's letters, I replied to hers, all in my head until now:

"Dear Carolyn: Obviously you are a reader. You take time to write to writers, and you yourself write well indeed. I am sorry you did not give me an opportunity to answer you, because I should have liked to.

Your first point. In the section of the book that you refer to, one girl asks the other, rather idly, whether she ever wonders if she'd like to be white, and later ponders the question herself. In both cases the answer is "no," for the good reason that neither would want to be anyone other than herself.

But you say that no colored person would ask such a question. And I say, are you sure?

If you are poor, have you never wondered what it would be like to be rich? If you're well-to-do, haven't you speculated about being poor? Have you never asked yourself whether you wouldn't rather have been a boy than a girl?

Most children, and a lot of grown-ups, ask themselves questions like this. It is in the nature of human beings to wonder what it would feel like, being someone, or something, else.

As a child, I often watched my cat and tried to be the cat. To feel fur, and whiskers, and claws that could take me up a tree. I looked at birds and dreamed of what it would be like to fly, so free, so full of grace, so unafraid of falling off a limb. I was a terribly thin girl, and I can still remember wishing I were like other girls in my class, who had bosoms and beaux while I still looked like a pencil. Moreover, it often seemed to me, at that age, that boys had the best of things.

My wondering and dreaming were not limited to those who seemed more fortunate. I remember walking to school one morning when I was about your age, Carolyn, and seeing an old man picking over refuse in a garbage pail. It was very cold, and the man's hands were shaky, and he didn't have sufficient clothes on. I almost stopped walking, the feeling was so strong of pity and horror that an old old man should have to be looking this way -- for what? I didn't know, of course. But I was not too young, or too self-involved (though I was both young and self-involved) not to wonder as I continued on to school what it would be like to be that old and poor that I'd be looking for whatever I needed in a garbage pail.

Haven't you ever looked at your grandmother, say, and asked yourself what it would be like, to be sixty rather than ten, knowing of course that it can never happen to you? This sort of questioning and wondering is part of being human. It is what, in the end, makes a human being, the capacity -- not to be someone else, but to put oneself, however inadequately and briefly, into someone else's situation. It is what makes literature and drama and dreams.

I never wanted so much to fly, or to have bosoms and beaux when I had neither, that I would have traded places with a bird or a buxom girl. And much as I envied boys certain freedoms and abilities, often as I asked myself what life would have been like if I'd been born a boy instead of a girl, I never actually would have agreed to be a boy.

Because, like everyone else, I felt the tremendous importance of being, of my own self. My young niece said to me not long ago, throwing her arms wide and almost caroling, "I am the most important person in the world!" "Did you work that out for

yourself?" I asked her. "No," she said, "my science teacher told me." And I thought, good for the science teacher. He's helping them to put first things first.

I have never met a person who would, really given the chance, agree to give up being himself in order to be anyone else. Which is as it should be.

But I think there are very few children who haven't wondered, What if my mother had married a different man? Who would I be then? Myself? Half of myself? Then which half? None of myself? Then who'd have it?

Human beings, of any age, never entirely give up theorizing about the possibility of things, of themselves, being different. "If I were older," the children say to themselves, and "If I were young," the grown-ups, the old people, speculate.

If I were young today, I would go in the Peace Corps, I would join Vista, I would wander the world before I settled down. I know that I would be on the barricades with the student dissenters, though I am not sure to which splinter I'd be offering my loyalties.

And I know that if I were young I would often wonder what it would be like to be black, with the sense of goals and destiny that a young black person must have today. I would choose, in the end, to be myself, because I am myself and the answer is always that simple. But it wouldn't prevent me from envying sometimes the purpose and the pride that being young and black in our time can give.

And now, your second point. You say, "No one who isn't colored should write about colored because they don't know a thing about them."

Don't you see that, followed logically, this would result in no one's ever writing at all? A writer is one single human being, of one sex, one color, one shape, one heart and one mind. You'll see that this is limiting. And if he were to try to write only about what he knows -- or hopes he knows -- namely, himself, it simply would not work. Even an autobiography of the narrowest, most concentrated order cannot contain just the one being. He's in the world, and he thinks and feels and acts and is reacted to and all of that involves other human beings, none of whom he is.

To take just childrens books:

Charles Dodgson called himself Lewis Carroll, but by either name he was a mathematician and a writer. He was not an eight-

year-old girl named Alice who fell down a rabbit hole. Nor was he a walrus, a red queen, a caterpillar or a white knight.

Antoine St. Exupery was a mail pilot in Africa and South America. He was not a little prince who reeled among the stars enlarging his acquaintance.

E. B. White was never a mouse named Stuart, nor a spider named Charlotte. And Hans Christian Anderson was not a little mermaid who melted into foam.

And if in this great company I may immodestly name myself, I have never been a fat twelve-year-old boy bully, an eighty-year-old blind man, a seventeen-year-old blonde sexpot, nor two little girls from Harlem.

And yet -- what is a writer? Logically, anatomically, he can only be himself. But he denies this and proceeds to be anyone or anything he has the desire, the capability, the understanding, the determination, the temerity, or the brass to be.

Therefore the mail pilot was a little prince who encountered such wonders and recounted them in such a way that children, and grown-ups, read his adventures with wistfulness and laughter and even tears. When we read of Alice's adventures in Wonderland and behind the Looking Glass, we don't doubt for a moment who she is. She's that girl who fell down the rabbit hole and shoved through the mirror and met all those peculiar characters. What does a forty-year-old bachelor mathematician have to do with that? Charlotte is a spider with a great heart and a friend who happens to be a pig. She is not a farmer up in Maine who writes for the NEW YORKER. Hans Christian Anderson? Well, I'm not sure about him. He must, at least, have known a mermaid. But Sue Ellen and Mady, the two little girls from Harlem, are not this housewife at this typewriter. They are themselves, which is why so many children, including you write to me about them. Not because I am myself, but because I know them.

Writers and readers are the most fortunate people in the world, because they don't have to be just themselves. They can be anyone they write or read about, and the field is unconfined.

The thought cannot help but occur to me that in the direction of the readers and writers lies the whole hope of the world. If each of us was not just himself or herself, which is, of course, the first thing to be, but was, beyond that, everyone else in the world, of every age and sex and color and mentality and nationality, why then we could arrive at the place of understanding. I'll go further. I think we should be every plant and lizard and lion and river on earth, because then we might get a sense of how valuable is the world that cannot speak to us.

The world is sick, but it's worth saving. And if we could read one another the way we read books, with the same willingness to be and to feel, for a time, someone or something other than ourselves, it is my belief, and not mine alone, that we could save it."

That was the end of my letter to Carolyn that I will never get to send to her, but am grateful to have been able to say to you.

I believe what I've been saying. I think that if there is one thing we can learn from this indefensibly expensive moon venturing we're doing, it's that this is a very small planet we're on. So small that we'd better stop thinking in terms of black and white, and start thinking about how to keep the thing habitable.

And now, the coda:

The letter from Carolyn arrived months ago. A couple of weeks ago I received a letter from Karen Welch, of Brooklyn. I shall read it to you.

> "Dear Mrs. Stolz -- I am a student at Stephen Decatur Junior High School 35, and I have read your book, A Wonderful, Terrible Time. I thought I would write you a letter and tell you what I think of your book.
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> I think that the two black girls were very realistic. Most of the things they do I've done, when I was about seven or eight years old. Like going on a Freedom March. But I didn't go on a Freedom March, I went on an Orange March because I wanted an orange.
>
> I really enjoyed this story because it was really together. It was everything that a little black girl would say and do.
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> I think there are no two girls in the world who were closer related than your characters Mady Guthrie and Sue Ellen Forrest.
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> This was the first time I've seen a white writer express the true feelings of a black person. This is what I found most interesting about this book.
>
> The way you wrote this book seems as if you lived with black people all your life.
>
> I really enjoyed this book and hope in the future you can write even better.
>
> Very truly yours,
> Karen Welch."

What I want to say is, I think I've been writing all these years just to get that letter.