THE HORN BOOK
MAGAZINE
August, 1957

NEWBERY AWARD ACCEPTANCE*

By VIRGINIA SORENSEN

SINCE the day the sky fell, the 4th of March, everybody has been asking, " How does it feel to receive the Newbery Medal? " At first I took this as rhetorically as " Hello, how are you? " — but then I saw that people were pausing to look at me, expecting an answer. Then the question began to come in the mail, which meant it was serious, and finally I was told that you would like an answer too.

Remember the girl in *Our Town* saying, " Isn't moonlight terrible? " The truth is that I've been wondering in much the same way how joy could be so solemn, how a feeling of new courage could have so much fear in it, how I could feel at the same time so exalted and so humble.

Several years ago I met two of my predecessors in this high place, Miss Yates and Mr. De Jong, and was awed by them and by their possession of what I decided must be a special Newbery vitality. Now in the first volume of *Horn Book Papers* (Newbery Medal Books: 1922-1955), I have had a privilege impossible before " my year " — meeting, through their own words, all the lively, solid thirty-four. I have never found in one volume so much pure gospel about writing and research, or more wisdom

* Given at the meeting of the American Library Association, Kansas City, Missouri, June 25, 1957.

about living. Finding myself fallen by some miracle among these angels, I have been forced to tell myself sturdily, again and again, " I can still *work,* so maybe I can still come to deserve the Newbery."

One of the things I was taught at home and at church when I was growing up in Utah was the virtue of work. I recall making a Victorian-looking poster at school: Faith without Works is Dead. Even then, I'm sure, I knew that growth was a slow and painful process, and that no matter how I wished it might be so, I would never find a little biscuit labeled " Eat me " that would make me instantly big enough to face the next dilemma or to reach the next necessary height. Lately I have not only changed plural to singular in that old saying, but have turned it clear around and have found it as true one way as the other. Surely Work without Faith is Dead. Thanks to the American Library Association, to Mr. Melcher, to Margaret McElderry who seems able to make silk purses out of as odd materials as Shakespeare ever dreamed of, I shall be working with more faith for the rest of my life.

If I may, I would like to thank you not only for this moment for myself, but for the possibility of this moment for all writers for children. It is even more important than you may know for a writer to feel the existence of a great and critical and sensitive group of people whose eyes are steadily upon his work. This Medal seems to me not only a star for all of us to shoot at but a bright light for all of us to work by.

Remember Jean Christophe's thought when at last he found sympathetic listeners? " How fine it would be for an artist if he could know of the unknown friends whom his ideas find in the world — how gladdened his heart would be and how fortified he would be in his strength." [1]

Knowing, as every storyteller knows, that nothing is ever universal without being first intensely personal, I should not have been surprised to find an event as public as the Newbery Award posing questions that turned my eyes deeply inward. How did I happen to be a writer at all? How did it happen that I began to write for children after years of writing for adults? How did I happen, in particular, to write *Miracles on Maple Hill?*

My mother once told me that the first sentence of mine she remembers was, " Tell me a story," and that the second, hard upon, was, " *I* will tell *you* a story," which she insists I proceeded to do.

I'm sure this is as ancient as it is common, and that it was said the first time in the world because there was a mystery. The mystery is still there, and of course will always be, because it is the mystery of life itself. Storytellers are not very often people with answers, but people with questions for which they are seeking answers. I agree with Joyce Carey that every story is " an exploration and a setting forth." [2]

I began telling stories for and about children long before I knew there were such things as " novels." I had a Bosom Friend with whom I exchanged rings and vows and with whom I made a secret alphabet. She was wonderful at sewing, but for me the needle was every bit as alive as Hans Christian Andersen said it was, forever turning on me without warning and giving me a vicious nip. Yet I had to live properly in the world, so my friend clothed my naked dolls while I earned her labor with reading and with my own tall tales.

Much later, when I was married and had a daughter and a son of my own, I began telling tales again for the simple reason that the children were there, and so was I — and so, of course, was the mystery. When the time came that I showed proudly my " first real printed book," they were fascinated, insisting at the very next bedtime reading-hour that I should read a story from it. It was my first novel, about a Mormon family, and I considered it very serious and adult and realistic. At first I felt rather at a loss, but after all there were children in the story and I recalled a scene about two little girls named Betsy and Rebecca who got into trouble going to see a neighbor's kittens while he was away. In this scene, three kittens die and Betsy learns an important lesson about cause and effect, conduct and justice. But when I had finished, my daughter Beth, then nine years old, sat up in bed with streaming eyes. " *You* made that story up! " she cried accusingly. " Why did you have to make the kittens die? "

It is hard to tell a nine-year-old that a story has its own being and that if one tells it true, and to the very end, there is always death in it. Yet I feel sure it is because of her tears (she knew that kittens die; she had lost one not long before), that I have Marly face death something short of the reality in *Miracles*, and that this seemed right for the story.

Almost every one of my novels has had children in it, for I am a family chronicler. Many times people have said to me, " I liked the character of that boy Menzo the best . . . "; and a re-

viewer of *The Evening and the Morning* said, " The child Jean steals the show from her mother and grandmother, especially in the scene in the barn with the owl."

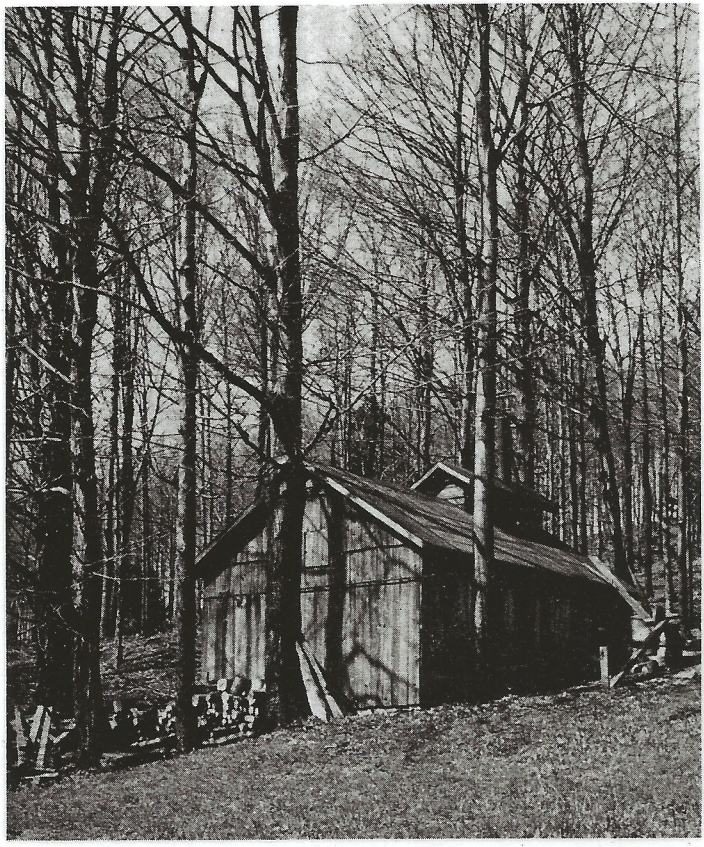
It was eleven years after that night I read about the kittens that Harcourt published my story about a little girl named Missie intended for little girls. My Betsy was by that time twenty years old, preparing to be an art teacher. I was pleased that she could at last read a book of mine with unqualified approval, and that she liked books with pictures as much as she ever did.

When people ask me, " Why didn't you begin writing for your own children? " I confess it is as much a puzzle to me as to anybody. A. A. Milne was sitting right there by the bed every night and I lived on intimate terms with a wise-looking bear my children lovingly christened Pooh. When I am asked, " Why do you write about so many places? " and look at four books and find one about Alabama, one about Utah, and two about Pennsylvania, I do wonder at my own temerity. The only excuse I have is that when I got there the stories seemed to be there waiting.

I am sure, for instance, that it was our five years in the Deep South that caused us to rediscover with such pleasure the seasons of Pennsylvania. We were people reared with seasons, from white to green, from bitter cold to a dry, bright heat. We loved much about the South, especially being able to ride our bicycles all the year around, but we missed the variations just as we missed our Utah mountains when we first moved to the Mid-West.

Being school folks, we arrived in Pennsylvania in September, and enjoyed passionately what happened almost at once to the maple trees. That breathless, unbelievable inner light! But soon they faded, the leaves fell and were burned along the village streets on smoky, chilly evenings. Then, one morning, the piles were white. Winter set in.

. We had almost forgotten about winter, and Edinboro, old-timers told us with an odd, fierce pride, had the worst winters in the world. The name the Indians had left in the valley, Conneatee, meant " Land of Lingering Snow." And it did linger, from late October on, steady and white and deep. The village was isolated by muddy roads and dangerous pavements and sudden blizzards. Then, one unforgettable day in late February, a fine old New Englander known as Pop Bates, head of our little college Art Department, took us out to see what was going on in the sugar bush. We had seen something of this before, in Michigan,



A favorite sugar-camp near Edinboro

but never so intimately, so close to earth. Here spring could actually be seen and smelled and tasted, rising out of the ground.

That was only the beginning. Flowers we had never seen before burst in April magic from the dead leaves on the forest floor. Birds that Pop could talk with came flying home. Wild swans spent a day and a night on our little lake. My husband, who is an explorer by nature and instinct, played Joe to my Marly as he always has, wherever we've been, and began to show me one miracle after another. I shall always remember the time he showed

me a den of little foxes playing in the dusk, and the morning he rushed me out to see the bloodroot opening in the Easter sun.

The natives of Edinboro were pleased with our excitement which seemed to regenerate their own. We became especially fond of the huge Pennsylvania Dutchman and his wife to whose ample farm Pop had first taken us. Mr. Kreitz really looks like a tree. But I couldn't forget something that happened the first day he showed us the sugar-camp and told us about " sugaring off " and did a Magic Trick to keep the boiling down. When we were leaving, enchanted with the life we had seen, I said to Mrs. Kreitz, " How you must love this season! " and she answered, " I hate it! He hasn't enough help and always works too hard. One year he had a heart attack, but he'll never stop while there's work to be done."

Here was the human dilemma laid upon nature, here were the vital relationships upon the earth, the stuff and symbols of a new tale.

The next year the story was ready to begin. I heaved buckets full of sap in the raw cold air and ate such meals in such ardent spring hunger as I shall never forget. The story grew, the people began to move about in its landscape. Some greenhorns came up from the city one day to marvel, and to them I was the knowing native. As we gathered in the bush and sat by the fire in the sugar-camp, I came to know the hired man.

Mr. Kreitz had told me what a fine and intelligent boy he was, and how much to be trusted — except, of course, with the final boiling, a touchy business. " You wouldn't believe it to meet him now, but he came to us from Reform School. He had a poor deal of it at home, and then felt low-down at school, and finally got into real bad trouble with a gang."

So the theme of renewal, of rejuvenation, began to stir in the story, though it was used in an entirely different way.

One day, as we were sitting by the fire drying our pants where the sap had spilled, the boy said to me, " I hear you're writing a story about the sugaring," and I said, " Yes." " How does it go? " he asked. So I told him the plan as I had it up to then, about a girl and boy who come to the farm and when the farmer is taken sick help to save the crop. He nodded at the end, but he was frowning too. " They school kids? " he asked. I said yes, maybe ten and twelve, and he said, from the depths of his own experience, " Sugar season, school's still on. If them kids stay out to

help us, there's sure gonna be trouble, you know that? Truant officer's coming out here."

He had added a whole new chapter to the tale, a marvelous turn of the screw. " I guess that's so; I hadn't thought about it, " I said. " What do you think we'd better do? " And he thought for a while and then said, grinning, " When she gets out here, we better give her some syrup."

I found out that the local truant officer was also the school nurse, a kindly woman who was not at all formidable except in devotion to duty. When I asked what she would do if two kids didn't appear at school, she replied that she'd be out directly to find out what ailed them. " Nobody gets away with anything in my school," she said. " You know what the kids around here call me? Annie Get Your Gun! "

Here fact certainly had the better of fiction, and Miss Annie told me to use it whole.

The last day of boiling, the hired man asked suddenly, " Virginia, what we gonna call our story? " I didn't know yet. Did he have any idea? And this is what he said, this boy who had had so poor a deal, so many troubles: " Well, it ought to have something about the sugar in it. And it ought to have *something about kindness.*"

The wise philosopher, Martin Buber, now writing from one of the oldest cultures in one of the newest nations on earth, has said, " The world . . . has its influence as nature and as society on the child. He is educated by the elements, by air and light and the life of plants and animals, and he is educated by relationships."[3] In widening and deepening what they learn of our complex world, what a vital role the books they read must play! We adults tend to skip along in books, touching what interests us or reiterates our own opinions, but I have been amazed and disconcerted by what children have *not* skipped, such small things that I am forced to conclude they miss nothing at all. Maybe they still believe there might be a secret hidden in even a very small corner of a tale. If this is so, then one has an obligation to get the secrets hidden there, as one gets the eggs hidden about the house for Easter morning and the candy and nuts into the socks on Christmas Eve.

It is hard, as they grow up, to find ourselves unable to make the world conform to some of the most natural, the most simple shapes of their hope.

Virginia Sorensen reads to young people at the Third Annual Cleveland Book Fair for Boys and Girls — November, 1955

In her splendid piece, " The Test of Recollection," at the end of *Horn Book Papers,* Elizabeth Nesbitt finds it significant that many authors turn to writing for children " when they feel impelled to put into expression an idea, a strong conviction, a moral and spiritual solution to the confusion and contradictions of the modern world." [4]

I have no solutions, certainly; when and if they come, they will be a vast, cooperative venture. Yet Miss Nesbitt describes aptly the " impelling need for expression " that came upon me when Lois Green told me about the urgent problems of librarians in Alabama. There were questions and no way to get at the answers; there were books but no way to get them to the people who needed them so much. " Don't think it's just *our* problem," Lois said. " It's everywhere." Seeing Alabama by bookmobile at her invitation, seeing the vast expanses yet to be reached, watching the old people and the young people coming faithfully for their books, rain or shine, was an experience I shall never forget. When the writing began to happen, it felt good. I liked its reality, its solid, useful feel, just as I had always liked making bread, hanging clothes on the line, putting fruit into jars against the winter. More than a story had been waiting for me in Alabama.

I knew I was writing for children. It was only long after *Curious Missie* was written and published that I happened to read again something Hans Christian Andersen said of his tales, and it occurred to me that the grownups might be listening.

The problem of being different in a world more and more determined on conformity had engaged my thoughts for a long time before I went to Pennsylvania, and I had written at least one novel about the common difficult task of reconciling old ways and new. In the West I had found my symbol in Indians and in three generations of Mormons; in Pennsylvania a teacher told me an incident about a little Plain Girl. So it happened again, the " impelling need." The machinery began running and the meaning was clear.

Then came the *Miracles.* I know the peril is, for me, that I try to put upon the shoulders of simple stories more weight than they will carry. Yet when Amy Kreitz spoke so passionately of her husband's danger, when the death of winter became the life of spring, it was all there again as certainly as falling in love. I know as well as anybody that there is nothing new or revolution-

ary in the little story to which you have been so sympathetic. I know in fact that it has the most ancient theme in the world, the recurrent pleasures, the rhythms of existence that we human beings are privileged to observe, if we will.

It could be that when at last it seems futile to criticize the endless ills that we are heir to, some of us turn to writing for children because the value of life becomes more and more apparent and we must turn to celebration. Do we not have every day, from light to dark to light again, in the rich variety of cold and heat, rain and snow and sun? Still nearer to life, do we not have the seasons, those large rhythmic patterns of dark and light that are gradual enough to be observed with savor and awaited with eagerness? Can there be too much celebration of these simple and profound things?

Before saying goodby, there is one more little Edinboro story I should like to tell because it seems to me it is really about you. The Erie County Bookmobile comes to Edinboro every other Tuesday at three o'clock and parks in front of the post office. I like to leave my desk for a visit with Marian Kelly, the red-headed book-lady on page 127 of *Miracles,* and with the children who come in and out. This day there was still a little snow (it could have been early May!) and a very pretty girl in a blue jacket got on the truck. Marian and I enjoyed her while she made her selections. She was about fifteen, with just that edgy touch of knowing her own value, but not quite sure. When she left, Marian watched her and said, " Isn't she beautiful? Do you know what I've seen happen, right here on this old truck? I've seen this —" and she indicated a homely, rumpled little after-school girl kneeling on the floor by the lowest shelf, "— turn into *this!* " and she nodded toward the girl disappearing down the street, touching at the same time the adult reserve shelf at her side. It happened that *A Certain Smile* was there, beside it *Gift from the Sea, War and Peace,* and — very movingly to me — a copy of one of my own books.

We laughed together. I suppose it was laughter, although it seemed much else besides.

I need very deeply, as a writer and a person and a citizen, to feel all of you there, all over the country, watching *this* happen from *this.* The wonderful, unprecedented flooding of life! And all new. Every hour, as our wise man of Tel Aviv has also said, the human race begins. How blessed we are in our responsibility

for that immense potential streaming upward — the children who will be men — each unique, as yet unsquandered, in the full grace of beginning again.

Note: Numbers refer to quoted material in the text.

1. ROLLAND, ROMAIN. *Jean-Christophe.* Translated by Gilbert Cannan. Henry Holt and Company, Inc.

2. From *Harper's Magazine,* February, 1950.

3. BUBER, MARTIN. *Between Man and Man.* Translated by Ronald Gregor Smith. The Macmillan Company. Copyright 1948.

4. MILLER, BERTHA MAHONY, and FIELD, ELINOR WHITNEY, editors. *Newbery Medal Books: 1922-1955. Horn Book Papers. Volume 1.* The Horn Book, Inc.