

Lessons From a Literary Legend: Recalling the Work and Influence of Margaret K. McElderry

Memorial service at the New York Public Library

April 29, 2011

Authors, librarians, colleagues, and friends shared highlights of the great American children's book editor and publisher's career.

Featured speakers were:

- Jeanne Lamb, The New York Public Library
- Karen Wojtyla, Editorial Director, Margaret K. McElderry Books
- Amy Kellman, librarian
- Tracey Adams, agent, Adams Literary
- Edward Sorel, artist
- Michelle Fadlalla, Education & Library Marketing, Simon & Schuster, Inc
- John Burnham Schwartz, author
- Emma D. Dryden, editor & consultant, drydenbks llc
- Susan Cooper, author

The following is the speech given by Susan Cooper.

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I'm Susan Cooper, one of Margaret's authors.

We laughed a lot. She did that, as you've heard. We laughed together like idiots, it seems to me, for half a century, starting when we first met for a business lunch in New York one day in 1964. You fall into friendship just as you fall in love, and often it lasts longer. She became not just my editor but my closest friend in America, this lady of many friends and many stories, and we probably knew more deplorable stories *about* each other than we ever shared with anybody else.

But I was her author before we ever met – she'd already bought my first book from its English publisher. And she always remained, unshakably, my editor. Honesty never gave way to sentiment. She did let me get away with murder when I had battles with her copy editors, specially over commas and the more ridiculous fiats of the Chicago Manual of Style - but it wasn't because I was her friend. It was because deep

down, her respect for the writer, the artist passionate about the rhythm of words, overcame her belief in rules.

She was a wonderful editor: intuitive, encouraging, tough when necessary. All of us trusted her judgement of story absolutely. If she didn't like something I'd written, I didn't take it to another publisher; I threw it out. (Well, I put it away. Actually destroying a story is infanticide.) Margaret's standards were always uncompromising. They could even be painful.

There was one day half way through my writing life when she nearly made me commit suicide. We'd done five or six books together, and I was having a really bad time finding an idea for the next one. I was miserable. I called Margaret, I was like a child wailing to Mom; I wanted to be hugged and stroked and reassured that everything was

going to be all right. I told her about the problems I was having, and I said desperately, "I feel as if my talent had just – died!"

And there was a short pause, and Margaret said thoughtfully, "Yes, well, that can happen."

She went on to add, of course, that she was sure it couldn't have happened to me, but by that time the damage was done. Just for once she'd shared the gift made famous by the late John Gielgud, for opening the mouth and putting in the foot. But she was performing her job as an editor. She was telling the truth.

Here's a little recap of the way she began.

Margaret started young. She graduated from high school just before her 16th birthday. She spent a year at the University of Pittsburgh before her four years at Mount Holyoke, and then another at the Carnegie Library School. The associate Dean at Carnegie, Elizabeth Nesbitt, who taught her storytelling, reported that she was "Out of the ordinary in background, culture and manner...and should make an excellent assistant in a children's room."

Margaret didn't want just any old children's room. She went off to New York with an introduction to Anne Carroll Moore, the pioneering head of children's work here at the New York Public, and she worked for her with increasing distinction for nine years.

Anne Carroll Moore was a remarkable person, but everyone was terrified of her. She was a fearsome dragon lady, and Margaret and her office-mate tiptoed round her. They let off steam in private by playing tricks on each other. The two of them always arrived at the office long before Miss Moore, so one day Margaret arrived even earlier than usual and hid in the coat closet to startle her friend. When the closet door opened, she jumped happily out, shouting BOO! And facing her, of course, was not the friend, but Anne Carroll Moore.

Margaret survived the dragon. In the last year of World War Two she was sent to London to set up a library for the American Broadcasting Service in Europe, and on the freighter that took her across the Atlantic, she told children's stories to her fellow-passengers to take their minds off submarines and torpedoes. Her 18 months abroad, in Europe as well as London, probably founded her later passion for publishing translations, and for the work of IBBY.

When she came home, postwar publishing had discovered children's books. Now she was no longer a librarian, she was running the children's book department at Harcourt, Brace and World, and within a decade her authors won both the Newbery and Caldecott Medals in the same year. Then the misguided new owner of Harcourt Brace sacked her, because "the wave of the future had passed her by". She was in her fifties at the time, and had just gotten married. She was *riding* the wave. Off she went to her own imprint, created for her at Atheneum by Pat Knopf and Mike Bessie, taking in her pocket from Harcourt not only the lifelong devotion of its senior vice-president, Julian Muller, but also most of her authors and illustrators, because we broke our contracts and went with her.

And so there was born Margaret K. McElderry Books, and the rest of that long life that you've been hearing about today. Once upon a time I thought I'd found an image for what she did.

We were together at a children's book conference in Hawaii, on the big island, and on our day off Margaret discovered it was possible to take a helicopter ride over the active volcano Kilauea. Her eyes lit up.

"We're going!" she said.

Kilauea is the home of Pele, the goddess of fire. I am a fantasy writer, and I thought some very superstitious thoughts about the goddess Pele. I said, "I can't afford it."

"I didn't give you a birthday present this year," Margaret said. "This is it. We're going."

So up we went, in a tiny helicopter that seemed to be made entirely of glass, and we swooped to and fro over all that red lava in the volcano crater. It was very unnerving. Margaret loved it. She was glowing, like the lava.

And I thought: Dear Editor. When an idea excites you, you won't be deterred – you make it happen. It's just the way you behave with stories. And as if on cue, Margaret started chatting to the helicopter pilot, and in two minutes flat she had him telling her his life story.

Maybe he went home and wrote a children's book.

When she died, Margaret left behind a characteristic little note written 35 years earlier. Here's what it said:

"When the time comes, it is my wish to be cremated, without any church service. If a memorial gathering for friends should seem desirable (only if anyone wants it and in no way to be construed as a wish on my part), let it be simple and celebratory, not sad."

This occasion today is not a memorial, because the Library doesn't do memorials, but it *is* simple and it *is* a celebration, of a great editor and a wonderful lady. A few days before the end of her life Margaret looked up at me and her devoted companion Arlene, and she said, "Am I dying with dignity?"

I said, "Margaret my darling, you have always done everything with dignity."

She said, "Well, I've had a good long life." Then she gave a little grin, with that hint of mischief we all remember, and she said, "Well, I don't know about good, but certainly very long."

A great many children, and writers and artists and book people, are very lucky that it was so long.

Thank you for coming today. Let's cherish the legacy of Margaret K. McElderry, librarian, editor, publisher, friend. And in this changing world of the beleaguered, battling book, may we all show as much vigour as she did to keep it alive.