

Colorado Celebrates Young Adult Literature

Marge Erickson Freeburn

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REVIEW

Colorado celebrates young adult literature, its authors, readers, and advocates, with an annual conference held in Denver each April. Key sponsors are the University of Colorado-Denver School of Education and the Metropolitan State College at Denver English Department. Additional sponsors include the Colorado YA Advocates in Libraries (C'YAAL), the Boulder Public Library, and the Central Colorado Library System.

The conference site is unique: the historic Tivoli Brewery Building. Authors, book sales, and a variety of workshops draw public and school librarians, college students, university faculty, young adults, and teachers from throughout the state. High school and middle school participants are welcomed, especially to "YAs ONLY" sessions with the authors. A highlight of the conference is the "YA Connection" discussion between the featured author and a panel of young adults.

For UCD and MSCD students, the conference provides real world support for the transition from young adult to

"teacher of young adults". The YA Connection student panelists are mentored by UCD interns; MSCD's English Honor Club students introduce speakers and workshop presenters. This opportunity to meet authors, attend workshops, and build classroom libraries introduces these new teachers to advocacy for young adults and young adult literature early in their professional development.

In past years, the YALC has featured YA authors Chris Crutcher, Walter Dean Myers, Gloria Miklowitz, S. L. Rottman, Avi, Joan Lowery Nixon, Lois Duncan, Mel Glenn, Rita Williams-Garcia, Norma Fox Mazer, Will Hobbs, Carolyn Meyer, and T.A. Barron. The 14th Annual Young Adult Literature Conference was fortunate to introduce Victoria Hanley, author of *The Seer and the Sword*, and a second book to be published in October, *The Healer's Keep*. Her work will please historical fantasy readers, and all of us who appreciate a well-told story. Her article, below, is based on her keynote address, "Creativity."

Saying Yes to Creativity

Victoria Hanley

As a writer of young adult literature, I'm sometimes asked to define the term "young adult." The publishing industry says, with cavalier fortitude, that young adults are readers ages twelve and up. What a range! Personally, I think of YAs as people ages twelve, twenty, or seventy-one, who want to do, and *will* do, new things. (By contrast, a number of adults, ages one hundred and down, do not want to do new things; they prefer to know beforehand what is likely to happen before doing anything.) It's natural for young people to want to do, and to do, new things; things with unknown outcomes. And as they do new things, YAs do not want to behave in tried and true ways—they want to be creative.

Imagination and Knowledge

You've probably seen the poster of Albert Einstein, printed with his famous quotation: "Imagination is more important than knowledge." But what did Einstein mean by that? Interpreting Einstein may be a bit presumptuous, but it's a new experience and I'm ready to try.

Imagination is "the act or power of forming mental images of what is not present; the act or power of creating new ideas" (Webster). Imagination essentially asks: "What if?" All the stories in our favorite books came from someone's imagination: "What if a creature known as a hobbit went on a journey with a wizard and a bunch of dwarves?" (*The Hobbit*,

by J.R.R. Tolkien) or, "What wild adventures might occur for intergalactic hitchhikers?" (*The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*, by Douglas Adams). Likewise, the fabulous inventions that have become part of our lives, from word processors to email, are the result of someone asking "What if?" Imagination takes us into the unknown, and we bring back stories, inventions, art, and other gifts. One of those gifts can be more knowledge.

Knowledge asserts "what's so." It is defined as "the fact or state of knowing; the body of facts accumulated by humankind" (Webster).

Each of us dances between what we know and what we don't know. If I were to paraphrase Einstein's statement that "Imagination is more important than knowledge," I'd say "What we don't know is more important than what we know."

Creative Heights

When I was seventeen, I went to college in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The small student body came from all different parts of the United States. I had lived the previous six years in humid Wisconsin, at sea level. Santa Fe sits at seven thousand feet, and the desert dust in the air produces sunset colors that fill the sky, not only in the west, but all around the compass. Behind the college was a little mountain, a foothill of the Sangre de Cristos, named Monte Sol. It had no buildings on



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it. A makeshift trail led up it from the college grounds.

I wasn't the only one to be dazzled by the New Mexico sunsets. A group of us decided it would be a great experience to see the sunset from the top of Monte Sol. One bright evening, several classmates and I set out, climbing the steep path to the top.

The sunset was breathtaking, even more resplendent than we had imagined it would be. As the last red rays began to fade, it suddenly occurred to us that a consequence of sunset is night! We still needed to get back down. And there wasn't a flashlight among us.

With fading twilight to guide us, we found the trail and began to scramble along the pebble-strewn dirt. This was not Wisconsin dirt, which holds together quite well. This was dry, sandy dirt, which slips away, particularly when the path is steep. We stumbled along, clutching at pinon trees, while night thickened around us. Soon we couldn't see the trail at all, couldn't even see our own feet in the darkness.

Well, we made it down Monte Sol, and there were no injuries that day.

So what does that story have to do with creativity? To me, that trek up and down the mountain is analogous to what often happens when undertaking something new. Imagination inspires us, and we act on that inspiration. It's easy, when embarking on a new adventure, to be so struck by a glowing vision that darkness is forgotten. We begin boldly, climbing high on the strength of the vision. Then we encounter the darkness, and stumble through it.

The Need to Create Lives On

The world now is shaped by forces that weren't around when I was a young adult: AIDS, street-corner crack, school shootings, terrorists using satellite communications. The world has changed, but the spirit of youth lives on. The desire to explore, the need to create new things and new experiences, the urge to express, to discover, to venture into the unknown, are all still there.

Einstein also said that it's not possible to solve a problem using the same state of mind that created the problem. And he said "Anyone who has never made a mistake has never tried anything new."

Trying new things and being creative is part of what makes life worth living for many young people—the fact that there are so many dangers in the world doesn't change that. And creativity has the power to redeem those risk-takers. It can overcome circumstances, change lives, enliven

minds and hearts. Being creative uplifts and fulfills the spirit as nothing else does.

Perceptions of Creativity

Although creativity is so fulfilling, there's another side to it. Creativity has long been associated not only with joy, inspiration, and fulfillment, but also with darkness, pain and sorrow. The record of people following the creative life is filled with examples of drug and alcohol problems, and other hardships. Isolation and doubt seem to dog the lives of many of the artists and inventors among us. There has even come to be a sort of mystique surrounding the angst that artists feel; a deadly glamour that can be seductive. High school students who are drawn to something deeper than the normal round of homework, sports, and dating, can be vulnerable to

the attitude that being creative automatically calls for disintegration of the self. These young people need matter-of-fact mentors who are willing to address the real pitfalls of the creative path without plunging into those pitfalls headlong.

A separate notion about the creative life is the over-glorification of artistry. For example, the idea that a creative writer need only sit in a beautiful spot

and take notes for a Muse, then watch the money roll in, is a laughable distortion. False pictures such as that one only let young people in for personal renditions of the "rude awakening." Creative work is among the hardest work there is, requiring not only patience for developing the skills that will allow for successful creative expression, but also a willingness to keep going through the stark uncertainties the unknown can reveal.

Conversely, some youngsters have been told that to pursue creativity is utterly impractical, the mark of an irresponsible dreamer. They are supposed to "get real," which too often means "Do exactly as you're told." In such cases, the human need to explore or express new things is pronounced to be immature, or even punished.

Telling the Truth About Creativity

How do we tell the truth about creativity, without either over-glorifying it or denying its delights? To begin with, it may be useful to take an honest look at what people are likely to experience when they actively invite the unknown into their lives. And the following list of troublesome emotions is often par for the creative course:

- 1) Number one is *doubt*. It can take a thousand forms, but the usual is some variation of "I really can't do this," or "There's no point in trying." Feeling doubt while creating makes a peculiar kind of sense. After all, knowledge is what usually gives confidence, and creativity is all about touching the *unknown*. It may help young people to hear that while in the midst of creating, they can expect bouts of doubt, when they will be likely to question the worth of everything they are doing.
- 2) Then there's *frustration*. Many creative endeavors fall short of the vision that inspired them. Who among us hasn't looked at something we've made and thought, "This isn't what I had in mind." Also, creativity doesn't usually start flowing and keep flowing without any stops.

The Seer and the Sword

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For example, “writer’s block” has been talked over so often, it’s become a cliché. When it happens to me, I feel like *I’m* a cliché. But when the block descends, continuing to create seems impossible. And then, there are the frustrations of that ruthlessly persistent domain known as reality. Reality demands things from us—things like deadlines, jobs, school assignments, and other inconveniences.

- 3) Next on this list is *fear*. Fear attacks us unreasonably, sometimes when we least expect it. Is fear different than doubt? Yes, I think so. Fear declares that what I have written is just no good and will make other people decide to reject me.
- 4) Which brings us to number four: *rejection*. Rejection is universally recognized to be unpleasant. Tough though it is, rejection isn’t indicative of whether an individual will be successful. For example, many beloved authors had their works rejected multiple times before being accepted for publication. The first time I sent out *The Seer and the Sword*, the agent who rejected it wrote a note saying it just didn’t stand out. *The Seer and the Sword* is now in its third printing, and I’ve heard from readers as far away as Belgium, telling me how much they love the story.

This is quite a list: doubt, frustration, fear, and rejection. But knowing in advance that such emotions are not only likely, but also natural, will make them easier to get through when they arise.

Getting Through the Darkness

By learning how to support and encourage their own creativity, young people can do themselves a lasting favor. How can this be done?

Imagination, like knowledge, increases its power when given an honored place in a person’s relationship with himself or herself.

This honored place can be consciously developed and nurtured—if it isn’t, the creative self may crawl underground to get away from the buffeting criticism of the outer world.

Creative efforts by beginners can be raw and graceless, seeming to invite criticism. However, the imagination needs a place where it can be honored one hundred percent. That means dropping all criticism for a while, even the sort that is “well-deserved.” Remember what Einstein said: “Anyone who’s never made a mistake has never tried anything new.”

Using Writing to Foster Creativity

The act of writing can easily lend itself to honoring the imagination. A notebook, or a password-protected file can be set aside, just for the purpose of letting the imagination run free. We can encourage young people to make an agreement with themselves that anything they write in that notebook or that file will not be shot down; will be treated like important communication coming from a friend. Developing a strong friendship with the unknown takes time, but it’s worth every second devoted to it. Once that friendship is there, it’s there for life. That way, when young adults encounter their own darkness, they’ll make it through, even when they can’t see the path.

The Magic of the Unknown and the Place of Knowledge

The unknown is mysterious. It resists control, cannot be

contained by formulae, refuses to be ruled. But it also bestows the sort of magic that can guide footsteps when knowledge cannot help.

Imagination isn’t limited by what is present, leading the way instead to what is not. When I’m confronted by a plot problem, I no longer try to figure it out according to what I know. What’s missing is what I *don’t* know. When I surrender to that, my imagination goes walking through unknown lands, and provides me with a new take on the story. The unknown is generous that way—generous and unlimited.

And knowledge? Well, Einstein said imagination is *more* important than knowledge—not that knowledge is unimportant. Knowledge can be very helpful. Landmarks and trails can keep us from getting hopelessly lost. Bringing a flashlight along doesn’t hurt, nor does having the skill to use one. It’s only when knowledge insists on a lion’s share of the mind that it becomes stifling. When we allow ourselves to be guided only by what we already know, we run the risk of staying locked on the same problems, because we can’t get beyond them to a different state of mind. We run the risk of freezing in our tracks. The risk of having no more new stories—of never wanting to do new things.

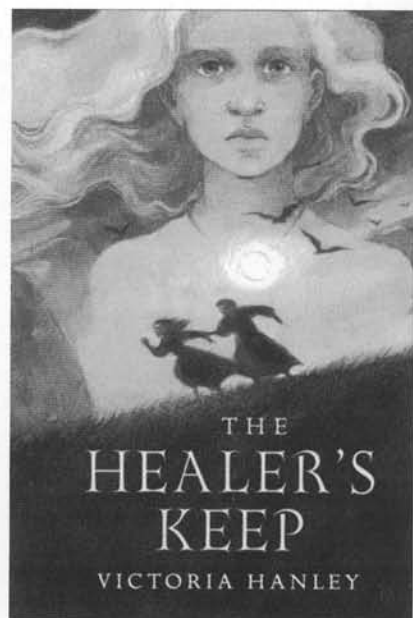
When stumbling through darkness, unable to see, it’s often tempting to try to use knowledge when imagination is what’s called for. It’s particularly tempting when the darkness is deep. At that point it’s hard to believe that what we don’t know yet will help us the most.

A Good View

The dance between imagination and knowledge continues. My daughter is seventeen now. On the spur of the moment, she and some friends decided to watch the fireworks on the fourth of July from a hilltop beside Horsetooth Dam high above Fort Collins, Colorado. They climbed up in the early evening to get a good view. They watched the fireworks with delight. When she came home she said, “Mom, on the way down we couldn’t see anything. You wouldn’t believe how dark it got.”

“Oh yes,” I answered. “I would.”


Victoria Hanley is a writer, a certified Montessori teacher, and a massage therapist who grew up without a television, and learned to love books at an early age. “Writing for young adults is a joy and an honor,” she says. Her first book, The Seer and the Sword, a fantasy novel for young adults,



won the 2001 Colorado Book Award in the YA category. It was also nominated for the Carnegie Medal in the United Kingdom, and is on the 2002/2003 master lists for the Texas Lone Star award and the Oklahoma Sequoyah Young Adult Book Award, as well as being named a New York Public Library Best Book for the Teen Age. It is published in the US by Holiday House, and is translated into eight other languages, including Spanish and Japanese. Her second book, *The Healer's Keep*, will be published in October, 2002. Hanley's adventurous spirit has led her to travel throughout the continental US by car, train, plane, bus, and bicycle. She has two young adult children—a son, Emrys, and a daughter, Rose—

and is married to a young-at-heart husband, Tim. Her website is located at www.victoriahanley.com.

Marge Erickson Freeburn is a recently retired adjunct professor at the University of Colorado-Denver School of Education, where she taught Adolescent Literature for the past 15 years. A former classroom teacher, she is currently a member of the Young Adult Literature Conference Planning Committee. For information about the 15th Annual Colorado Young Adult Literature Conference, April 5, 2003, please contact her at margaret_erickson@ceo.cudenver.edu or mpfreeburn@mho.net.



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Varieties of
Gazelle

POEMS OF THE MIDDLE EAST

by Naomi Shihab Nye

*There is a language
between two languages
called Mean but who will admit
they are speaking it?*


*"Let's change places," the teenagers said.
"For a week, I'll be you and you be me."
Knowing if they did, they could never fight again.*

Listen to them.

—From "Trenches and Moats and Mounds of Dirt"

This volume collects for the first time in one place all of Naomi Shihab Nye's poems about the Middle East, about peace, about being an Arab-American in the United States. There are familiar poems, poems that Nye's readers have cherished for years, as well as new poems being published for the first time. Nourishing, haunting, and hopeful—here is a timeless and necessary book.

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