

A Friendship by the Book: Joan Lowery Nixon

When I was asked to introduce Joan Lowery Nixon at a local conference, I began by noting that I had met Joan years earlier. We became fast friends immediately and spent many hours together. Joan, understandably, looked puzzled as she listened to my introduction. No surprise there: Joan was not present at our first meeting. I initially came to know Joan through her book *Whispers from the Dead*, a book required for Dick Abrahamson's class in YA literature that semester. Our friendship did begin with that first novel. It deepened as I continued to read Joan's work over the years and came to know her personally.

The Joan Lowery Nixon I came to know through books was a talented writer who knew how to keep readers engaged. Whether we were trying to figure out "whodunit" in her mystery novels or worrying about the fate of one of the Kelly children in the Orphan Train books, we read Nixon's books because they touched a responsive chord in us all. The fact that Joan was able to reach readers at such a personal level reveals quite a bit about the person behind the more than 100 books she wrote in the course of her career. Joan was a warm and welcoming individual who sought to put all she met at ease. She had a quick and lilting laugh and appreciated a good joke, even at her own expense. She was deeply touched when a reader of any age waxed enthusiastic about her writing. Joan took the time to get to know her readers. That knowledge is reflected in the fact that children, teens, and adults enjoyed her mysteries, her histories, her nonfiction, and her picture books.

A four-time winner of the Poe Award for her mysteries for adolescents, Joan not only set standards for the genre, she helped redefine it. Her careful plotting

and elaborate character development were hallmarks of her mysteries. What made her books work, though, was the fact that each of her main characters faced two problems: the mystery, certainly, was one of them; however, each character also faced a personal problem that had to be resolved. Thus, readers could connect with her characters on a very personal level.

Additionally, Joan was a champion of the writing of others in her field. She never failed to note new books and authors whose work she admired. This generosity of spirit was evident in other areas as well. In fact, my favorite memory of Joan goes back about 10 years ago. I was working with a class of at-risk readers in a local junior high school. Their librarian, Lois Buckman, and I had spent weeks talking about Joan's books and encouraging kids to select a title of hers to read independently. Their "reward" for reading would be the chance to participate in a telephone conference with Joan who had graciously donated her time to talk to the students. I wish we had thought to videotape the conference. Kids stared at the speaker-phone enraptured as Joan answered every single one of their questions (and this despite the fact that some of the questions were repeated more than once). Even a couple of maintenance people working in the library that day paused to listen to Joan as her voice echoed in the quiet room.

I miss my friend Joan. I'll miss seeing her at conferences, but I will also miss meeting her again and again in the pages of her books.

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