



Photo by Barbara Bordnick

Remembering Paula Danziger

I was one of the scores of Paula's best friends. No one had a gift for making best friends and writing about deep friendship than Paula Danziger. We both started publishing in the 1970s. I, like so many in our children's book world, loved it when Paula would show up at conventions, laughing, connecting, and making sure that everyone felt included. Then we'd go our separate ways. About ten years ago, she called, and said, "We've got to put up or shut up. We're either good friends or not." That's Paula at her core. A deep honesty that grounded the love she gave to all of us and that she poured into her fiction. Just as happened with her readers, I don't remember any transition. We were intimates, friends who could share our deepest fears, loves and hopes.

Paula was one of the great teachers. She pushed me to dig deeper in my writing, the same challenge that she gave herself. She kept urging me to use the humor in my writing the way we did in our friendship, to get to the underlying truth of our feelings.

She knew the difference between humor that hurts and humor that heals.

Paula and I once did an interview for *Booktalk* on writing humor. . . . Paula wrote, "Humor is touching . . . Because it gets close to feelings . . . Because it can make us feel better—almost like a caress of under-



Photo by Sigrid Estrada, courtesy of Penguin Young Readers Group

standing or it can really hurt—like a stiletto in your heart." She continued, "This is really important to me as a writer, and in my personal life. I'm so psychologically adept and so funny, I can cut somebody off at the knee-caps. I learned to do it in self-defense because of a father who was very cruel and always said he was being very funny. But it was not a good defense, and it's not a good device to use in writing. There was a time that I do that in personal situations, but it didn't make me feel good, and certainly, it didn't make for lasting friendships. It was anger

. . . In my writing that kind of humor creates a distance."

So often she quoted John Ciardi, the poet, who taught her that if you took a poem and put a red line through the funny lines and a blue line through the sad lines—you would have a page full of purple. Paula left us all draped in purple, the color she so often draped herself in.

John Ciardi hired Paula as a babysitter for his children and took her up to the Breadloaf

Paula would show up at conventions, laughing, connecting, and making sure that everyone felt included.

Writers Conference—and from that moment gave her the courage to be a writer. Paula believed in giving back, in trying to give to others the unexpected chances that had been given to her. If there was an artist in any one of us that needed nourishing, Paula would do it or get everyone else to do it. No one took such delight in a young author getting good reviews—or calling her editors and telling them, “You must publish so and so.”

Having started out as a teacher, Paula had her teacher’s voice—mostly used on adults, hardly ever on children. Just dare a teacher to rustle papers and correct them while Paula was speaking, or to be cruel to child, Paula would be on them like a tiger.

She was so funny, smart and quick that it’s hard to pick out the moments to remember. There was the moment at a large conference (it might have been NCTE) when she had to go the bathroom before she spoke. There was a huge line, so she promised all the librarians and teachers that if they let her go first, she’d give them a piece of toilet paper that would mean that they could cut the line for the autographing. She kept her word. Penguin Putnam let anyone through waving a piece of toilet paper.

Even in the bleakest times, Paula could find the humor. After she was physically attacked in Reno, in the emergency room when they went to wrap her wounds in gauze, she held out her hand and said “Is this gauze for alarm?” When I was told to help her put ice on her bruises, I chased her around the hotel room

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with packages of frozen peas. She turned to me and said, “You want me to give peas a chance. . . .”

Paula wrote, “I never thought of myself as a clown—although I was upset when someone got voted class clown instead of me. Instead of a clown, I was a commentator. The only time I was class clown was then the teacher told me to put my gum in the garbage can and I begged to be able to stand in the garbage can so I could still chew it.”

Well, Paula left us lots to chew on.

And in fact to gum on, to use one of Paula’s puns. One of her favorite characters was Great Uncle Mort, or GUM for short. In writing *The United TATES of America* she had planned on starting with Gum’s death, but she realized for the reader to feel what it was like to love GUM, she had to write about him when he was alive, and so it is not until page 80 that GUM dies.

Then Paula wrote
“Gum is dead.
I am so sad.
I am so angry.
I am so upset.
I love him so much.”

We all in the children’s book world loved her so much.

Elizabeth Levy is an award winning author of many books for young people, including Paula Danziger’s own favorite My Life as A Fifth Grade Comedian. More about Elizabeth is available at <http://elizabethlevy.com/index.html>