



From Tomie dePaola to Paulo Freire:

2004 Ted Hipple Service Award Winner John Mason

On the occasion of his well-deserved awarding of the Ted Hipple Service Award, John Mason was kind enough to give us a quick autobiography and answer a few questions:

I was born and raised in England and entered the publishing field there. My first job was as an “educational fieldworker” at Penguin Books in the early 1970’s. I traveled the country visiting schools and colleges, setting up exhibits, and writing reports and feedback to our editors and marketing people. After that I became Schools Marketing Manager, responsible for marketing paperbacks to schools. This was when the legendary Kaye Webb was running the “Puffin Club,” which had a huge influence on readership of children’s books.

In the mid ’70s I left my job, traveled to India, then moved to the USA where I lived in Ann Arbor, Michigan, for two years, and worked for an educational magazine publisher as an advertising sales manager.

I returned to England for three years and worked as Publicity and Marketing Manager at Methuen Children’s Books, the original British publisher of *Winnie-the-Pooh*, *The Wind in the Willows*,

and *Babar the Elephant*. The office next to mine had a closet filled with the original artwork by Ernest Shepard and Laurent de Brunhoff. We also published books by Monty Python which, as you can imagine, was a lot of fun.

In the early 1980’s I immigrated permanently to the USA. I worked for over five years as Children’s Books Marketing Manager at Putnam. During that time Putnam hugely expanded its market share in children’s books. We acquired the books of Anno and Eric Carle—notably *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*—and we acquired Grosset & Dunlap (*Nancy Drew*, *Hardy Boys*, etc.)—and after our company was bought by MCI/Universal Studios, we published movie tie-ins, notably *The “E.T.” Storybook* which sold a million copies. Meanwhile, we nurtured the careers of many fine writers like Tomie dePaola and Jean Fritz, and I managed all of our participation in conventions such as TLA, IRA, ALA, and NCTE.

With the knowledge gained at Putnam, I moved to Scholastic in 1986 and have worked in marketing there since then. Here, also, I witnessed an amazing expansion of the company’s publishing of its own list of trade children’s and YA books. We published bestselling

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series such as *The Babysitters Club*, *The Magic School Bus*, and *Goosebumps*. Meanwhile we steadily built up our literary hardcover publishing, and we are now one of the biggest in this field. With its many distribution channels (trade, clubs, fairs, etc) both domestically and internationally, Scholastic is the world's largest publisher and distributor of English-language children's/YA books. In the last few years we have gained fame as the US publisher of *Harry Potter*.

I now live in Connecticut with my wife who is a psychologist, and commute to Scholastic's offices in New York City, where my official title is Director of Library & Educational Marketing, Trade Books Group, Scholastic. My wife and I have three daughters aged 26, 23, and 20. I am now an American citizen—but I retained my British citizenship so I am actually a dual citizen.

TAR: How did you first get into publishing and what were some of your earliest experiences working with authors and books for young adults? Do you have any especially fond memories of those times that you might share?

John: My first real job was at a bookstore in London called The Economists' Bookshop that served the London School of Economics. One of the female staff there had a boyfriend who used to drop into the store occasionally to visit her. We became friendly, and it turned out he worked at Penguin Books, and one day he told me there was a job vacancy there. I applied for the job, which was basically a truck-driver transporting exhibit booth materials. After interviewing me they told me I was "overqualified" to be a truck driver and offered me a job as an "educational fieldworker" and gave me a Ford Escort.

The early 1970s was a time of exciting innovation in education in England, especially in primary (elementary) schools—hordes of Americans used to come over to see the British "open classroom" system where students supposedly engaged in "self-directed learning" in small groups rather than sitting in traditional rows of desks being instructed. It was also a time when audio-visual materials—filmstrips, audiotapes, etc—were being hailed as agents of educational revolution. Penguin had an educational division which published

materials for this market, but it turned out to be before its time, the materials were too innovative for the average teacher. The division also published radical books on education by John Holt, Herbert Kohl, Jonathan Kozol, R.D. Laing, Paulo Freire, and others. So it was an exciting time when many new experimental ideas were being tried out.

Later I worked on two other ideas—one was for selling paperbacks to schools in thematic sets—something which Scholastic's school division now does very well – and the other was the idea of teacher- and student-run bookstores in schools. Penguin built a prototype bookstore in a large comprehensive school in northeast London and we invited educators and press to its opening, then published a guide on how to set up and run a school bookstore, and partnered with a manufacturer to sell shelving fixtures. We started a quarterly newsletter and this eventually led to the establishment of an independent organization called The School Bookshop Association, and the newsletter evolved into the highly respected British educational review journal, *Books for Keeps*, which is still going strong.

TAR: What are some of the milestone books, authors, events or trends that you have seen which have marked the growth of YA lit as a genre?

John: Having worked in children's/YA books from the 1970's 'til today, I've seen the same trends and milestones as everyone else—the tremendous impact of Judy Blume—the growth of "realistic" fiction, the "problem novel," authors tackling almost every conceivable issue that faces young adults. I tip my hat to Virginia Hamilton, Walter Dean Myers (whose *Fallen Angels* is still one of the most riveting YA books ever written), Jacqueline Woodson, Christopher Paul Curtis, and other great writers of color who have opened up the field to diversity. More recently, the enormous popularity of *Harry Potter* has spear-headed a notable growth in sales of children's/YA fiction in hardcover, especially fantasy. Right now we are seeing a "let's lighten up" trend with "chick lit." People always ask, "what is the next trend coming up?"—if we knew that, we'd all be millionaires. Right now I think we are in a golden age of YA lit with more

variety of books being published than ever before.

TAR: How have you managed to find such great authors and books over the years? Do you have any specific qualities that you look for?

John: I am a marketing director, not an editor, and I don't actually acquire the books that we publish, so I will let others answer this.

TAR: How do you believe young readers benefit from reading Walter Dean Myers or Cornelia Funke or Kevin Brooks or any of the popular writers of YA literature?

John: Wow, well, you have mentioned three very different writers there. Think about it—very, very different. I like to market and promote the individual voice of each author. Each writer is a unique and different contributor to the imagination. Each has something new and unique to say, and their own way of saying it. If you want me to generalize about how young readers benefit from reading these authors, I'd talk about how each writer opens up new worlds for young readers—introduces them to memorable characters, situations, and ideas that they might not otherwise encounter. The rich variety of books means that there is always more for young readers to discover and widen their experience of our human condition. Many teens today lead very busy lives with after-school activities, sports, social activities, and many forms of entertainment including TV, movies and DVDs, music, computer games, "IM"-ing, and surfing the web, but nothing engages the imagination with such impact, intimacy, and mind-expanding possibilities as books. Books are still special and will never be supplanted, but our job as publishers, booksellers, parents and teachers is to keep making books an attractive option for kids so they will be drawn to reading.

TAR: What did you read as a boy and young man? Did your own reading influence your life in any way?

John: As a young child, I was steeped in English children's literature by E. Nesbit, A.A. Milne, Arthur Ransome, J.M. Barrie, etc., and *The Wind in*

the Willows by Kenneth Grahame was one of my all-time favorites for its mixture of adventure, humor, and poignancy. In my English "prep" school, the school library had the traditional English classics by writers like Buchan, Arthur Conan Doyle, Rider Haggard, Rudyard Kipling, etc. In my teen years I discovered the Brontes, Dickens, etc, and at college I devoured Jane Austen, Thomas Hardy, Somerset Maugham, John Steinbeck and many others. Probably the only YA book at that time was *The Catcher in the Rye*, which I loved. It wasn't until I worked in publishing that I started to get to know YA literature, and since then I've read many memorable, mind-blowing YA novels including *Tiger Eyes* by Judy Blume, *Fallen Angels* by Walter Dean Myers, *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun* by Jacqueline Woodson, *The Chocolate War* by Robert Cormier, *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeleine L'Engle, *Tuck Everlasting* by Natalie Babbitt, *The Giver* by Lois Lowry, *Holes* by Louis Sachar, *The Thief Lord* and *Inkheart* by Cornelia Funke, *Lucas* by Kevin Brooks, and so many others. Did my own reading influence my life in any way?—what a question! Reading—or rather, specific books—has influenced, and continues to influence, my life all the time. A person whose life is not influenced by books is missing out on a whole dimension of human experience.

TAR: What is a typical day like for you?

John: I dread that question because there is no "typical" day! Every day is different with the many varied aspects of my job that I'm responsible for. I work on lots of different things—mailings of galleys and review copies, advertising plans, author tours and appearances, catalogs, conventions and entertainments, review coverage and publicity, marketing plans, budgets, our web site, and on and on. The variety is almost endless. I also manage those who report to me and sometimes recruit new employees. Scholastic is a very diverse, complex organization, and I do a lot of liaising with other divisions, especially our Library Publishing group, and also the clubs and fairs, and our Internet people. We work collaboratively on initiatives such as a corporate approach to marketing books for "summer reading." I also work with many organi-

zations such as the Children’s Book Council, the ALA, and folks in IRA and NCTE. And there’s always something new happening, such as our launch into graphic novels. And I get involved in things that I never expected, like searching for a way we might collaborate with other publishers (working with our International division and the Children’s Book Council) to contribute books to school libraries in India and Sri Lanka that were destroyed by the tsunami.

TAR: What are your favorite aspects of your job?

John: Although I am good at organization and paperwork, the thing I really love about my job is the people. I love working with my marketing and editorial colleagues, with the authors, and with librarians, educators, booksellers, and reviewers—all of whom are people who really believe in literacy, spreading the word about great children’s/YA books. I like being the person who takes the book that the author has written and the editor has published, and gets that book out to its audience in every way possible by communicating my excitement about it. I like connecting the right book with the right reader, or the right author with the right program. What I also love about my job is the endless variety. Each book is a whole new world to explore. Although books are a “product” like toothpaste or corn flakes in that we can’t stay in business if we don’t sell a certain number of “units” and ship physical books out of our warehouse and get paid, what you are really selling is ideas.

TAR: If you could accomplish one or two things in your life in regard to literature for young people, its authors and readers, what would they be?

John: That’s a challenging question. Although our school book clubs and bookfairs do a fabulous job of getting millions of books into the hands of young readers, I’ve always had this vision of how great it would be if every school operated its own permanent bookstore, run by the teachers, parents, and students. I would still like to see more diversity in the selection of YA books offered in the typical suburban chain bookstore—but that will only change as our culture changes. Another thing I would love to accomplish would be to get the media in general to pay more attention to YA books as a serious genre of literature. My father-in-law who grew up during the Depression read and loved *Out of the Dust* by Karen Hesse when he was in his eighties—he didn’t care that it was a children’s or “YA” book. Many YA books are great books for adult readers and deserve to break out of their YA ghetto and “cross over” to the adult market. And there are still some English teachers who don’t think YA is “serious” literature and don’t use it in their teaching. Thank God for ALAN, and keep spreading the word.

TAR: Are there any thoughts or feelings you would like to share about winning this award?

John: I am just so honored to be recognized by such an inspiring community of colleagues as ALAN.