

A Conversation with Diana Mitchell: 2003 Rewey Belle Inglis Award Winner

by Gina DeBlase

Rewey Bette Inglis, who, in 1929, became the first woman president of the National Council of Teachers of English, was a visionary teacher, writer, and observer, and her extraordinary contributions continue to influence our profession. Each year WILLA presents the Rewey Belle Inglis Award to an outstanding woman in English and/or English education. Since its inception, recipients of the award have been women whose scholarship on literacy teaching and learning and service related to English language arts have made outstanding contributions to the role and image of women in the profession and in NCTE.

Diana Mitchell has served as an inspirational mentor and role model for many of us in the field of English and English Education. At the 2003 NCTE national convention in San Francisco, the Rewey Belle Inglis Award was presented to Diana for her exemplary service and commitment to our profession. Diana, a secondary school teacher for thirty years, is a past president of ALAN (The Assembly on Literature for Adolescents), served from 1998-2002 as a member of the NCTE Secondary Section Steering Committee, and was a member of the Conference on English Education Executive Board from 1996-1998. She has also held several leadership roles in WILLA, including the role of Chair. In addition, she is widely published and is the author of several books, including

Children's Literature: An Invitation to the World (with Pamela Waterbury and Rose Casement, 2003); *Both Art and Craft: Teaching Ideas that Spark Learning* (2000); and *Exploring and Teaching the English Language Arts* (with Steve Tchudi, 1999).

In September, I asked Diana if she would agree to an interview to talk about her career and her impressions of teaching and learning in the language arts.

Gina: Your contributions to English Education have included consulting, writing books for teachers, NWP (National Writing Project) co-director, and various NCTE leadership roles. When did your passion for this profession begin?

Diana: I have been an avid reader who checked out four books a week from the library since my early elementary school days. I approached school writing assignments with energy and thought the whole process was fun. It took me awhile to link this love of literature and writing with my professional career since my first eight years in secondary education were spent teaching social studies. Through a series of serendipitous events, I ended up going back to school in the evenings and summer to get certified in English.

Once I started teaching English, I knew I was in the right place. I absolutely loved matching students with books they could read with zest and loved the challenge of helping students discover their writing voices. My passion for teaching the English

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language arts seemed to spill out as I talked to teachers and I soon found myself deeply involved in English education, although I remained a high school teacher.

Gina: Was there a particular experience or person that contributed to your passion for teaching, your interest in children's and young adult literature, and gender issues in education?

Diana: Just before I went back to school to get certified in English, I teamed in a social studies/language arts class with a magnificent language arts teacher, Pamela Dail Waterbury, who was a young teacher at the time. She had sensitivity to and a love of the English language arts and I saw, through working with her, how expansive English could be and how it provided a wonderful forum through which I could reach my students. When I returned to Michigan State University, I had excellent teachers in English Education, including Susan Tchudi (Koch, then), Marilyn Wilson, and Steven Tchudi. They opened up a new world of possibilities for me and I began to get a glimmer of what was possible to accomplish in the classroom.

I have always loved children's literature and every Christmas my daughters and I exchanged picture books, no matter how old they were. I began to read young adult literature avidly at the nudging of twin girls I had for ninth grade English in 1980. When they found out how little I had read beyond Paul Zindel and Paula Danzinger, they began bringing me four to six books a week. By the end of the school year, my education had begun and I just gobbled up the literature after that. The bonus for me was that I could talk to my students about it and help them find books they could read enthusiastically.

I did not get very involved in gender issues until I began my dissertation under the direction of Dr. Diane Brunner. I had always considered myself a strong woman and didn't really see what all the fuss was about! I knew I wanted to address values in young adult literature, but as I read books to analyze I found many of the values revolved around gender bias. I read everything I

could get my hands on and soon understood what all the fuss was about and what gender issues were. I didn't realize until I read Jean Baker Miller's *Toward a New Psychology of Women*, how subtle but pervasive gender biases were and how much responsibility women were assigned throughout our culture for the happiness of men and children. Once I understood the psychological effects of gender assumptions throughout my socialization, I became very passionate about helping my students learn to uncover societal gender expectations that they had been taught to believe were natural.

Gina: Your book, *Children's Literature: An Invitation to the World*, is your most recent contribution to the field of children's and young adult literature. To some extent, this genre continues to be undervalued by teachers and parents alike. In your opinion, what makes these genres such powerful tools for reaching out to young readers?

Diana: In my thirty years of experience in secondary schools, I found that students want to read and write and talk about issues and ideas that are relevant and accessible to them. These issues do not have to be personal, teenage issues, such as how to keep friends, but they do have to be presented in such a way that students can understand and grapple with the issues. Young adult literature provides such a venue. Contemporary language makes the books immediately accessible since students don't have to leap across language barriers to get at the heart of the book. Action begins immediately and teens don't have to wait around until the book gets interesting. Because so many young adult books have diverse characters and social classes in them, students can readily identify with the characters. Books with characters that make visible the racial or economic or familial aspects of who students are, affirm and validate that aspect of students' lives. Young adult novels don't try to work against the nature of their readers or tell readers what is good for them; they work with the reader by using their skills to pique and keep students' interest. The literary quality and depth of so much in this field makes the

literature usable and appropriate for students throughout middle and high school.

Gina: Who in the field inspires you?

Diana: People who love what they are doing and impart their passion to others inspire me. Authors I particularly love are Madeleine L'Engle, Tom Barron, Chris Comer, Gary Paulsen, Jacqueline Woodson, Han Nolan, and Virginia Hamilton. I love educators who remain immersed in the field and don't simply "tell" about it. Some of these educators include Janet Allen, Tom Romano, Leila Christenbury, Teri Lesesne, and Pat Kelly. I like researchers who also help teachers see how they can use the new findings in their classrooms. Among those I admire are Judith Langer, Arthur Applebee, Jeff Wilhelm, and Kylee Beers.

Gina: What are some of your favorite professional books?

Diana: Two books that helped me understand what it really meant to teach English were *How Porcupines Make Love*, by Alan Purves, and *Explorations in the Teaching of English*, by Steven Tchudi. Tom Romano's *Clearing the Way* demonstrated how I could integrate meaningful writing opportunities in the literature classroom. Parker Palmer's *The Courage to Teach* affirmed what I had come to believe about the importance of the heart in teaching. Janet Allen's *It's Never Too Late* helped me reach more students and involve them in reading. This brief list only scratches the surface of the wonderful advice and support I have gotten through reading extensively.

Gina: In your opinion, how has the field of English Education changed in the last ten years?

Diana: Wonderful work has been done in this field and its value can be seen in how teacher-educators are helping their students engage in the classroom community. There is much deeper understanding of the complexity of the classroom and that different strategies and materials must be used to reach as many students as possible.

The only change that I find a bit worrisome is the extreme emphasis on research and the way that research has been elevated as the be all and end all. Being "cutting edge" seems to have become the most important value, especially in what is recognized in the field as worthy of winning a publishing award. I worry that our professional journals and even our teaching sometimes may get too far ahead of our audience. What seems like "old hat" to us is, after all, new information to our students.

Gina: What are your current projects?

Diana: Because I am retired, I travel for fun about half of the time and also spend time visiting our three grandchildren. I am currently writing an article on spirituality and young adult literature for a column in *English Journal*. Because I love the field and also because I will have to revise my children's literature book periodically, I keep up on the literature in the field and read widely in children's and young adult literature. I also volunteer monthly in the classroom of my daughter who teaches fourth grade. It is stimulating to read to the class and listen to their responses and to find out what they are reading.

Gina: What are some of the things you enjoy most about working in this field?

Diana: This is a field full of generous people who will help you in any way they can. They don't forget that their purpose is to help teachers reach as many students as possible and they know that the sharing of ideas and information is essential to reaching this goal. I also love the subject matter and never tire of reading about the teaching of literature and writing, and of reading the literature itself. This is a field with a heart. Most of us love literature and writing because it touches the core of our humanity. I loved teaching teachers and those studying to be teachers because they responded so positively when they found they could transfer successfully what they were learning and experiencing in their classrooms.