

PROFILE: Aileen Fisher

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Since the early 1930s, Aileen Fisher, recipient of the 1978 N.C.T.E. Excellence in Poetry for Children Award, has reached and touched thousands upon thousands of children with her warm, wise and wonderful writing.

Ms. Fisher was born and grew up in and around the little town of Iron River, on the Upper Peninsula of Michigan near the Wisconsin border.

"I was a lucky child," she remarked. When I was four years old my father had a serious bout with pneumonia. This made him decide to give up his business in Iron River and more or less retire to the country. He bought forty acres near Iron River and built the big, square white house where I grew up. We called the place High Banks because it was on a high bank above the river, which was always red with water pumped from the iron mines. Still, the river was good to wade in, swim in, fish in, and skate on in winter. When I was young there was still quite a bit of logging nearby, and my brother and I used to follow the iced logging roads. There was a big landing for the logs on the railroad about a mile from our house. We had all kinds of pets—cows, horses, and chickens. And we had a big garden in summer. I loved it. I have always loved the country.

"On my eighth birthday a sister was born. I took immediate charge of her because she was, after all, my birthday present. Six years later another sister came along, but by that time my brother and I were almost ready to go to college.

"I went to the University of Chicago for two years, then transferred to the School of Journalism at the University of Missouri. After receiving my degree in 1927, I worked in a little theatre during the summer, then went back to Chicago to look for a job. I found one—as an assistant in a placement bureau for women journalists! That fall I sold my first poem to *Child Life* magazine, a nine-lined verse entitled 'Otherwise.'"

Ms. Fisher commented on the development of the poem, one that remains among her most frequently reprinted works.

"My aim in Chicago was to save every single cent I was able to so that I could escape back to the country life I loved and missed. I had to be economic so I took a cheap, dark, first floor room in a third-rate hotel on Chicago's south side. It had only one window and that opened onto a cement area that led to an alley. Across the panes were bars to keep prowlers away!

"The room was furnished with a steel cot, a wardrobe badly in need of varnish, two chairs and a kitchen table I used for a desk.

"Coming in from work one evening I jotted down some lines I had thought about on the walk from the station. I then went out to dinner at a small, nearby restaurant where I could get a meal for sixty cents. When I got back to my room I liked the nine lines I hurriedly wrote and sent them off, along with several other verses, to Marjorie Barrows, then editor of *Child Life*.

"I always liked to write verse. My mother had quite a flair for versifying, and I was sort of brought up on it. Mother was an ex-kindergarten teacher, which was fortunate for her offspring."

She continued writing poems for children, and for five years continued working in Chicago, wondering every day how she might get back to the country. In 1932, she adamantly decided to get out of the city and settled in Colorado. The following year her first book was published, *The Coffee-Pot Face* (McBride Company, 1933), a collection of verses, about half of which had previously been published in *Child Life*. The book was a Junior Literary Guild Selection.

Today, some forty-five years later, Ms. Fisher describes her work habits as being quite methodical. (They must have been then, too!)

"I try to be at my desk four hours a day, from 8:00 a.m. to noon. Ideas come to me out of experience and from reading and remembering. I usually do a first draft by hand. I can't imagine writing verse on a typewriter, and for years I wrote nothing but verse so I formed the habit of thinking with a pencil or pen in hand. I usually rework my material, sometimes more, sometimes less. *I never* try out my ideas on children, except on the child I used to know—me! Fortunately I remember pretty well what I used to like to read, think about, and do. I find, even today, that if I write something I like, children are pretty apt to like it too. I guess what it amounts to is that I never grew up."

Ms. Fisher is tall, solidly built, and "decidedly a country person, addicted to blue jeans and slacks." The evening I phoned her to tell her about winning the 1978 award, she remarked, "I'll come to the Books for Children Luncheon in Kansas City, Missouri, *only* if I can wear blue jeans." I assured her she could!

Ms. Fisher lives in Boulder, Colorado, at the foot of Flagstaff Mountain. "My house is well back from the street; skunks and raccoons live nearby, and last year I even found a baby porcupine in my yard. In the winter, deer come right down into this end of town, and I often see groups of them on the side of Flagstaff. I must say city living could be a lot worse! But, of course, I can never forget those wonderful years on the ranch when we lived without electricity, central heating and automatic water: The wood I chopped, the coal I carried, the ashes I took out! I am afraid I am becoming a city-soffie, but those are all pleasant memories, and I'd do it again."

The ranch she refers to is two-hundred acres about a twenty minute drive from Boulder. She designed and built a comfortable cabin on it with the help of a dear friend. "When we moved to the ranch in 1937, no electricity was available, so we organized our lives very happily without it. When we could finally have it, we didn't want it!

"I'm not or ever was a bit gadget-minded. My favorite possessions are books, and interesting pieces of Colorado wood from the timberline, which have been enhanced by wood-rasp, chisel, and some sandpaper. Oh, and a 1947 Chevy convertible very much on the jalopy side, except that it works fine and the top goes up and down with a vacuum button. Everyone wants to buy it. No chance! A few years ago I gave in and sold my 1941 car which was a jalopy. A car buff bought it, restored it, and it looks like a million dollars all shined up and fancy.

"My pleasures in life are found through animals (especially dogs), mountain climbing, hiking, working with wood, unorthodox gardening, a few people in small doses, and *reading*. I like centrality in my life and peace and quiet, which means that I avoid commercialized excitement, cities, traffic, polluted air, noise, confusion, travel, crowds, and airports. For me early morning on a mountain trail is the height of bliss."

Recently, with a partner, she ventured into real estate, buying a few old houses and restoring them. "It's been fun," she states. "I am sure I was a carpenter in my last incarnation."

I asked Ms. Fisher if she had a favorite book among the bounty she has written, titles of which would easily fill several pages. She replied, "What a terrible question! Which do you like best, peaches or apples? I mean, can one compare verse and biography or natural history? Maybe I can sort it out this way. Of the verse collections I have had published, I like best *Up the Windy Hill* (Abelard, 1953) for it touches more children's interests and is, for me, a sort of record of the things I used to think. Of the nature verse picture books I like *Listen, Rabbit* (T. Y. Crowell, 1964) best. It was one of those books that wrote itself. Of the collections of plays and programs I like best *Holiday Programs for Boys and Girls* (Plays, Inc., 1953). It contains some of my best plays. I rarely write plays anymore. Of the natural history-ecology books, I like best *Valley of the Smallest* (T. Y. Crowell, 1966) because in it I figured out a few things I wanted to know and wanted other people to know. Of the books of fiction and fictionalized biography I guess I'd say *Skip* (Thomas Nelson, 1958; Scholastic paperback) because it meant a great deal to me, too, at the time I wrote it. We had gone through the experience of having a much-loved dog become blind."

Of her recent works, she speaks fondly of two multi-media programs she created for Bowmar, Inc.—*The Ways of Plants* and *The Ways of Animals*, each containing ten books and book cassette readings of her story poems along with corresponding sound filmstrips. The handsomely designed books are illustrated by many leading artists in the country including Barbara Cooney, Ati Forberg, Symeon Shimin and Trina Schart Hyman.

Like many authors, Ms. Fisher receives much fan mail revealing that boys and girls want to know details about everything, "especially pets, jalopies, weather, electricity, mountains and cabins."

Regarding poetry, her first love, she stated, "Poetry is a rhythmical piece of writing that leaves the reader feeling that life is a little richer than before, a little more full of wonder, beauty, or just plain delight."

Children of all ages can delight in the work of this mighty poet. Whether they are *Going Barefoot* (T. Y. Crowell, 1960), are spending time going *In One Door and Out the Other* (T. Y. Crowell, 1969), or taking a *Skip Around the Year* (T. Y. Crowell, 1967), they take to Ms. Fisher like a *Cricket in a Thicket* (Scribner, 1963; paperback).

And the children are wealthier for her works.

And so are we!

Other Books by Aileen Fisher

(All published by T. Y. Crowell)

Best Little House, 1966.

Clean as a Whistle, 1969.

Feathered Ones and Furry, 1971.

I Like Weather, 1963.

My Cat Has Eyes of Sapphire Blue, 1973.

My Mother and I, 1967.

We Went Looking, 1968.