

## The Nature of Tributes

I thought the critical date for this issue would be 1967. Those of you who know the historical roots of young adult literature immediately recognize the importance of that date: That's the year that S.E. Hinton published *The Outsiders* and Robert Lipsyte published *The Considerers* and young adult literature was born. The focus on that date makes sense when you know that originally, this issue was to be a look at young adult literature.

Then we had September 11. Suddenly, that date became *the* critical date and it seemed the focus for the December issue should be something more than a close-up look at young adult literature. I was uncertain as to what that something more should be, but then, that week, I was uncertain about a great many things. A hint of an idea came on Thursday when my ten-year-old son told me that I had to stop watching the news long enough to help him with his spelling words because, as he explained, "Mrs. Smith told us spelling still counts."

As I listened to him, I realized that as many of us throughout the nation sat stunned that week, teachers across this land did what they always do—they did their jobs and then they did more. They listened to children's fears, heard their doubts and concerns, allowed conversations that explored the whys and what ifs, and, simultaneously, somehow convinced them that in the midst of the moment's uncertainty, math homework is still due, it's still safe to play outside, and spelling still counts.

As a parent, I wanted Baker's teacher, Mrs. Smith, to know how much I appreciated her being with him that week, for providing the stability that seemed to be disappearing elsewhere, for helping us keep him steady in an unsteady time. Actually, I wanted all the teachers to know how much they were appreciated and I wanted that appreciation to come from someone teachers have long valued, long appreciated themselves—the authors of the books they read for their own professional development and the authors of young adult books they encourage their students to read. So, on September 15, I wrote a letter to authors of professional texts and trade books asking them to write a thank-you letter to teachers and hoped I'd get a few responses. You'll find my letter on page 6. Fifty-four letters later they stopped coming. Authors from A to Z (Alma Flor Ada to Paul Zindel) responded. Think of a name and that person probably wrote a letter—even if that meant calling it in from a boat and dictating it long-hand (Gary Paulsen) or contacting a friend to make sure she knew about the project (Paula Danziger to Ann Martin) or trying to write a letter but instead writing a poem (Jon Scieszka) or having your wife find you at the library where you write to tell you about this project (Christopher Paul Curtis) or walking through New York City streets still filled with the smell of smoke and wondering just what you could ever say that would express the respect you hold for teachers (Joan Bauer). Each letter unique, and all letters incredible.

They are joyful and hopeful, somber and poignant. Sometimes they offer us insight into an author's past; other times they offer us a glimpse into the author's hopes for tomorrow; always they offer a tribute to you, the people who do help shape

America—our nation's teachers. These letters now make up the first part of this special issue in a section titled *Dear Teachers: Letters to Another Hero*. You are that hero and these letters are for you.

As wonderful as the letters are, though, that's not where the issue ends. The first section is followed by poems that middle schoolers from across the nation wrote in response to the attacks. Chosen very carefully, these poems reveal not only the passion many of our youth feel for this nation, but represent some fine talent that certainly deserves national recognition.

Finally, the third section of the journal—the planned section prior to the attacks—is that close-up look at young adult literature. This section offers over 250 annotated titles of current young adult literature arranged by topic and genre. These lists were compiled by librarians and teachers across the nation. Along with the lists are articles written by respected scholars: Richard Abrahamson, Robert Probst, and Michael Cart to name a few. The entire issue is now called “Tributes: By Authors, From Students, To Books.”

As you read through these pages, you'll perhaps find the one letter that you like most, the poem a child wrote that you'll never forget, a particular booklist that is most helpful, that one paragraph in that one certain article that is most inspirational. I suspect that you'll know soon which section of this tribute means the most to you and be able to articulate it to all who ask. What's most meaningful to me is the message about the power of literature, of the written word, of *literacy*, that emerges time and time again throughout this issue. Two years ago, I wrote the following for an article that appeared in this journal. I meant the words then; I mean them more now:

Indeed, if we let literacy be that capacity to deal with the conception of human possibilities formulated in language then literacy is more about the person than the page, more about using written and spoken language to help us understand who we are, who we aren't, where we fit, how we work together. When that's the case, then we have the opportunity to use

literature not for learning *about* but rather for learning *through*. Literature becomes a vehicle for exploring our thoughts and connections to ideas rather than learning about facts or history or themes. It provides us our chance to stand next to characters, to vicariously feel their emotions and experience their tragedies. Literature offers us a way to contribute to students' emotional growth; it offers us a way in. (September 1999 *VM*, p. 13)

Now, more than ever, your work with students is critical. Their ability to sift through the language they hear and read and to learn to respond and react with intelligence, patience, and thoughtfulness is essential. Now, more than ever, acting as a literate person, a literate society makes a difference. This tribute, while certainly a tribute to you, is also a tribute to the power of literature, the value of literacy. You are the ones who connect our children to literacy daily. As a teacher, I can stand beside you in all that you do; but as a parent, I stand in awe of all that you do. Thank you for being our nation's teachers.

## A Special Note

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