

"A Love of Young Adult Literature"

ALAN 2003 Ted Hipple Service Award Winner M. Jerry Weiss

In honor of Ted Hipple's many years of service as ALAN Executive Secretary, The Ted Hipple Service Award is given each year to recognize remarkable service to the ALAN community. Since its inception in 2000 the award has gone to Ted Hipple, Don Gallo (2001), Terry Borzumato (2002) and in 2003, to M. Jerry Weiss. Regarding this year's recipient, Ted Hipple modestly observed, "The Ted Hipple Service Award honored me in ways I neither expected nor deserved, and it is an even greater honor when people like Jerry Weiss get it. Jerry's service to ALAN and to the whole field—as author, as editor, as critic, as professor, as friend—is inestimable."

Jerry's experiences with adolescent literature over the years are exciting, humorous and poignant, as a visit with him illustrates:

TAR: You have worked with a multitude of young people and famous authors, as you collected information, stories and poems for such works as *Books I Read When I Was Young: The Favorite Books of Famous People*, *Lost and Found* and *Big City Cool: Short Stories about Urban Youth*, among others. What were some of the most memorable moments, and what were some of the most surprising?

Jerry: *Books I Read When I Was Young* was a great project that originated with the Commission on Literature. It was published by Avon Books and



donated to NCTE for its members. I was impressed that my letters to performers, politicians, sports figures, authors, etc., could generate such an avalanche of good stories and suggestions. An interesting answer came from Mrs. Kennedy Onassis, who indicated she was too busy to respond. So I wrote her another letter, pointing out that since at that time she was working as an editor at a publishing house, didn't she think it was important to take just a few minutes to respond to students' requests to know what books

had made an impression on her when she was young? She then wrote a lovely note by hand, and it was published in this book.

Recently, Caroline Kennedy, in *The Best Loved Poems of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis*, Hyperion, 2001, has as a final section of the book, "In Her Own Words.," in which Caroline refers to *Books I Read* and includes the text of the letter her mother sent to me. It's nice that this happened.

In developing our anthologies, *From One Experience to Another* and *Lost and Found*, Helen, my wife and coauthor, and I had often heard teachers report that when they asked students to write personal essays, the students would complain, "We don't have anything to write about." Well, we contacted award-winning authors representing a wide range of literary genres and asked each author to write a brief essay describing a true personal experience and then to write a short story

based on that experience. We wanted to show students that there can be a story in even the simplest experience.

We thought a writer well-known for fantasy would write us a fantasy story, a mystery writer, etc, but it didn't turn out that way. We received wonderful stories, with some authors exploring new fields for them. This confirmed our belief that we have to let each writer find the genre which is best for him/her rather than say everyone has to write a story or a poem or whatever.

Big City Cool came about through a friend who told us of an editor who wanted a collection of stories about growing up in urban America. This was an interesting project. We did many searches for stories that take place in different cities. However, it was important that the city be identified by its name or the mention of a prominent landmark. Of course, the characters must appeal to contemporary young adult readers. We needed stories from a good variety of urban settings. While New York and California were no problem, the rest of the country was not as easy. After extensive research, we concluded there just weren't any contemporary tales about growing up in America that identified the location.

Up to now, we had been using stories already published, but at this point, our gracious and intelligent editor worked with us in contacting authors to develop original stories. We were thrilled with the result and are very grateful to those authors who developed new stories for us as well as those who gave us permission to use previously published materials.

TAR: You and Helen have worked on so many big projects together. Does the conversation in the Weiss household often turn to young adult books and their authors?

Jerry: Fairly often. Of course, when we are putting together an anthology, there is a great deal of conversation about young adult literature and authors. Also, when we are preparing our talks, there is much discussion about authors. We always attend sessions at NCTE and IRA to hear authors, new and old, and it's always exciting to see our old friends and meet new friends.

TAR: What was your reaction upon hearing that you had been chosen to receive the Ted Hipple Service Award?

Jerry: When Bill called to say I was to receive the Ted Hipple Award, I was totally surprised and humbled. How can one express gratitude to those colleagues who made such a serious decision? I tried to think of what I might have done to be worthy of this honor? ALAN has been a dream fulfilled. As a charter member, I always hoped that young adult authors would become more and more a part of the annual convention. We needed to show that there were good writers for young people who should be included in the school curriculum. While I have always supported the ALAN Workshop, I was anxious to get authors on the regular program, especially for those teachers who could not attend the Workshop. Finally, Bob Harvey gave his approval for developing the Featured Author Strand. I feel very blessed to be a part of ALAN in promoting and developing a love of young adult literature. I thank ALAN for its many kindnesses.