

## A Talk with Janet McDonald

**J**anet McDonald told me I would be the last person to interview her. I was. In March 2007, I traveled to a Paris hospital, and through a maze of buildings and hallways in search of her room, I got lost. Each time I stopped a hospital worker to ask if I was moving in the direction of Janet McDonald's room, I heard, "Madame McDonald? Are you the person who is writing the book about her?" When I finally arrived, Janet hurriedly ended a telephone call: "I have to go. There is a lady here and she is writing a book all about *me*."

In November 2006, I attended the ALAN Workshop where Janet spoke about the conference theme, "Young Adult Literature: Key to Open Minds." Once on stage, McDonald took a picture of the audience. She explained that the picture was being taken so that "I can go back to Paris and pretend to all my friends that you came just to see me." She was just getting started. McDonald went on to explain in a self-effacing manner that she was not a good public speaker and would probably get everything wrong. Those of us in the audience who knew her chuckled; we already knew the game. She went on to say that, "You can't give a Brooklyn girl a mike and a captive audience [without expecting a performance], so here is my tribute to the man in black," after which she began her rendition of "Ring of Fire" by Johnny Cash. The audience roared.

Behind the confident, self-possessed persona that we have come to know are memories of pain and struggle that McDonald suffered throughout her young adulthood.

In her work, McDonald takes readers back to her adolescence, when she felt confusion and fear. While she was a skilled storyteller, McDonald's goal for writing for young adults was to provide readers with the information she wished was available when she was a teenager. Growing up in a poor neighborhood where survival, rather than hope, was a way of life is difficult for a young black girl who has big dreams but no way of knowing how to make those dreams come true. At sixteen, McDonald was a high school graduate with a lot of potential, but who lived under constant fear that there was no place for her in the world to become somebody.

Like so many teenagers, McDonald got lost in the crowd and overlooked by the teachers at her school. Moreover, she felt like an outsider in her community because there were no role models who could provide her with motivation and direction. As a result, McDonald assumed her option was to work at the phone company. The thought of living a life spent without inspiration and joy depressed McDonald. With nowhere to go and no one to turn to, she spent the summer following high school graduation cloistered in her Brooklyn apartment reading books and listening to music.

---

**Like so many teenagers, McDonald got lost in the crowd and overlooked by the teachers at her school.**

---

McDonald's life changed when her attention was drawn to a recruitment advertisement for an organization called Harlem Prep. "You pass the test, we'll do the rest," proclaimed the announcer as he described a college preparatory program designed to provide disadvantaged students academic and

financial support to attend prestigious colleges. McDonald was energized by the prospect of being able to attend college. Earlier that afternoon, while watching a beauty pageant on television, she recognized one of her classmates, a runner-up in the contest. McDonald explained that at that moment, she had felt complete envy and total failure. The Harlem Prep program was just what she needed. She scurried around her apartment in search of coins for the subway. She found none. However, fueled by the belief that the commercial for the Harlem Prep Program was meant just for her, she did not let her lack of subway fare stop her from getting to Harlem. She burst out of her apartment and dashed up a hill, past an expressway and on to the High Street Station. Feelings of anger, jealousy, and fear catapulted her over the station turnstile and sent her bolting down a dark tunnel of stairs, where she thrust herself on to the “A” train. McDonald entered a world of the unknown.

While her leap over the turnstile changed her life forever, McDonald never forgot where she came from and whom she left behind. Those memories of feeling lost and alone speak volumes in her work. In our conversation, McDonald remarked that her stories are the ones that she wished were available when she was growing up . . . “the stories that remind teenagers to look for possibilities no matter what their situations may be.”

McDonald shares stories about how the characters in three of her novels—*Spellbound* (2001), *Chill Wind* (2003), and *Harlem Hustle* (2006)—travel through the world of the unknown, developing confidence and courage along the way. And through her characters, readers witness McDonald’s journey from a once fearful and hopeless teenager to the vivacious woman we have all come to know.

### **Through McDonald’s Eyes: Three Novels A Not-So-Gentle Nudge**

In McDonald’s first young adult novel, *Spellbound* (2001), sixteen-year-old Raven is a high school dropout and single mother living in the Projects. Her life seems hopeless, and she is engulfed in fear. On her own, Raven feels weak. She spends her days watching daytime television and thinking about ways to escape her circumstances. Pressure is brewing for Raven because her welfare benefits are about to end. Searching for a job is futile; most positions require a high school

diploma, which Raven does not have. She receives no financial support from her son’s father, either. The final blow, however, comes when Dell, Raven’s older sister, tells her that she has a “project girl’s booty.” By this point, Raven becomes frantic. Dell’s words are painful to hear, but Raven understands the implications of her sister’s message. Having moved from the Projects, Dell is able to look at the environment from an outsider’s perspective and worries that Raven is on her way to getting stuck in a dead-end lifestyle.

When Dell helps her enroll in a spelling contest in order to win a scholarship for college, Raven is

forced to move beyond her mistakes and focus on possibilities. She is pushed even further by her friends and family to let go of negative thinking that will only keep her trapped in her current circumstances. Her winning the spelling contest and receiving a full scholarship leads critics to assert that Raven’s story ends unrealistically. McDonald explains that while growing up, her father constantly referred to her as “college material.” While the words resonated with her and led her to recognize her academic abilities, she did

not fully internalize the power of what her father’s words could do. As an author, she wanted to communicate to readers that even though mistakes happen, there are second chances. Raven and McDonald are similar in that they both recognize the encouragement they receive, but readers also come to understand that words are just not enough, so according to McDonald, “Sometimes we need a not-so-gentle nudge to set things in motion.”

### **A Look at Personal Failure**

Aisha, the protagonist in McDonald’s second young adult novel, *Chill Wind* (2003), appears to be apathetic about her family’s future. She is a high school dropout, a project girl, who does not seem to mind

---

**In our conversation, McDonald remarked that her stories are the ones that she wished were available when she was growing up . . . “the stories that remind teenagers to look for possibilities no matter what their situations may be.”**

---

living the lifestyle of a so-called “welfare queen.” Like Raven, she will lose her welfare benefits soon. Aisha, however, searches for solutions to her impending financial problems much differently than Raven. For instance, Aisha visits a social service agency where she tries to convince them that she suffers from psychological problems that will prevent her from entering the workforce. After a series of failed attempts at avoiding the workfare program, Aisha hits bottom. Her benefits expire, and she is assigned the job of

---

## McDonald’s leap over the subway turnstile sends a powerful message to those who encounter roadblocks.

---

cleaning subway stations. The dark, smelly, rodent-infested tunnels become Aisha’s tangible reminder of her personal failures. Motivated by anger at the system and anger towards herself, Aisha vows to change her circumstances. With no high school diploma or work experience, however, her options are

limited. This is the turning point of the novel.

McDonald came of age hearing her father’s disdain for people like Aisha. As a founding family of Brooklyn’s Farragut Homes, the McDonalds witnessed the shifts in thinking about being a contributing citizen of society; Mr. McDonald, believed this shift caused people to become “recipients instead of workers.” The image of the welfare mother persists today. In *Chill Wind*, McDonald challenges the dominant narrative of the young, uneducated, single parent on welfare by complicating the narrative in order to remind readers that poor people are not a monolithic group. Instead, characters such as Raven and Aisha differ greatly in terms of their personal strengths and goals, but their desire to rise above challenging circumstances is what connects them to each other and to readers.

### Power of the Spirit

For most of his adolescence, Eric “Hustle” Samson learns to survive on his own. As the protagonist in McDonald’s fifth novel, *Harlem Hustle* (2005), Hustle’s search for self concludes with a transformation of identity brought on by the help of various mentors. McDonald’s implicit message of the importance of

relying on personal strength and the support of others is the focus of Hustle’s story. McDonald believed that family is what you make it. Though Hustle does not have the support of his biological family, his girlfriend’s grandmother and best friend’s parents form a sort of extended family. With their encouragement, Hustle discovers his personal strength even as his lack of parental boundaries provides an opportunity for him to try out several identities.

Hustle learns several lessons the hard way: he learns he is not cut out for the life of a petty thief when, during one of his episodes of stealing, he is outsmarted by a group of girls; he finds danger and learns that naiveté and business do not mix when, at what is supposed to be a meeting where he hopes to procure a lucrative contract as a rap star, his music is stolen and his life is threatened; having lost his parents to drug addiction, Hustle rejects an offer to sell drugs. Although he is intelligent, traditional school does not hold his attention. Eventually, Hustle is able to examine his failures and successes and thus discovers that he cannot do everything on his own.

With the help of the Whitelys, the parents of his best friend, Nate, Hustle receives emotional support. Nanna, his girlfriend Jeanette’s grandmother, provides spiritual guidance as she helps Hustle realize that he does not have to use bad language, objectify women in his songs, or avoid education. Instead, there are alternative means to achieving success. While there are challenges awaiting Hustle on the road ahead, he is armed with a support network and a strong belief in himself.

Like Hustle, McDonald needed the space to figure out where she belonged in the world. For the first time, she felt like a member of a supportive environment when she was a student at Harlem Prep; however, her graduation from the program brought back the feelings of isolation and alienation that she experienced in high school. Not having the advantage of trying out different identities in various settings, as Hustle does, McDonald felt guilty about her ability to leave her familiar life and become something else. Unfortunately, while she physically traveled to unknown places, her mind and heart were split between past and future. Hustle’s character, then, is her anecdote for the residual pain that living in a state of double consciousness evokes.

## Conclusion

McDonald's leap over the subway turnstile sends a powerful message to those who encounter roadblocks. A sense of personal worth and strength are the elements needed to overpower borders and survive the unknown. Her characters—Raven, Aisha, and Hustle—each possess qualities that help them to change their lives. A not-so-gentle nudge in the right direction, an exposure to what personal failure looks like, and emotional and spiritual guidance are just a few of the ways in which McDonald learned to go on, despite adversity in her own life.

*Catherine Ross-Stroud* is an assistant professor of Literature and Language Arts at Cleveland State University. A former secondary school English teacher, she teaches language arts methods to preservice and graduate-level students. She is the author of *Janet McDonald: The Original Project Girl* (Scarecrow 2008).

### Works Cited

- McDonald, Janet. *Chill Wind*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002. Print.
- . *Harlem Hustle*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006. Print.
- . *Spellbound*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001. Print.

---

## Carolyn Phipps – 2009 CEL Exemplary Leader Award Recipient

The 2009 CEL Exemplary Leader Award Recipient is Carolyn Phipps. Phipps, a member of NCTE since 1972, is the Director of Studies at St. Mary's Episcopal School in Memphis, Tennessee. She started work there after teaching English in the Memphis City Schools for 34 years, including time at Southside High School, Oakhaven High School, and as English supervisor for the district. In 1995, she decided to return to the classroom at Wooddale High School. There she was Instructional Facilitator, AP English teacher, and coordinator of the Optional Aviation Program. Mrs. Phipps attended Union University in Jackson, Tennessee, and holds a Bachelor of Science and Masters of Education from the University of Memphis. She is a Career Ladder III teacher. In 1996, she was selected as a Rotary Teacher of Excellence. In addition, she was selected as Tennessee English Teacher of Excellence by TCTE.

Believing that professional affiliation improves teaching, Mrs. Phipps has served educational organizations in various capacities on the local, state, and national levels. She recently retired as Executive Director of the Tennessee Council of Teachers of English. She has been a member of the Secondary Section of the National Council of Teachers of English Steering Committee and served on NCTE's Editorial Board. Knowing that affiliates are the life blood of NCTE, she was Region 3 director and then SCOA chairperson. Because she knows that new teachers need support, she began the Mentoring program for the Shelby-Memphis Council of Teachers of English and was instrumental in the revision of the Tennessee Literary Map. She also served on the Language Arts Advisory Council for Tennessee. Mrs. Phipps has been a member of the Association of Secondary School Curriculum Development, Tennessee Middle School Association, Adolescent Literature Association, American Literature Association, Conference on English Leadership, Delta Kappa Gamma, and International Reading Association. Mrs. Phipps also has served on the state committee for the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (SACS CASI).

Carolyn Phipps embodies all the values and ideals of leadership that qualify her to receive this year's CEL Exemplary Leader Award.

---