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A Very San Diego Interview with Jerry Griswold

The Editors

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About the Authors: Jill Coste, Alya Hameed, Alixandria Lombardo, and Kelsey Wadman had the distinct pleasure of sitting down with Dr. Griswold earlier this year for a conversation culminating in this interview. Coste is a recent graduate of San Diego State University, while Hameed, Lombardo, and Wadman are currently all graduate students at San Diego State University and co-founders of *The Unjournal of Children's Literature*.

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Dr. Jerry Griswold may have retired from his position as Director of the [National Center for the Study of Children's Literature](#) at San Diego State University, but he has not retired from the field of children's literature scholarship. Already in 2013, he was the keynote speaker at [the ninth annual The Child and the Book Conference](#), hosted by the University of Padua in March; he delivered the Francelia Butler Lecture at the [Children's Literature Association Conference](#) in June; and his dance card is continually filled with future engagements. Considering Dr. Griswold has resolved not to do anything he does not want to do now that he is retired, those of us at Unjournal were touched that he enthusiastically participated in an interview for our inaugural issue. We appreciated his thoughtful reflections on a long, important, and prestigious career in the academic field of children's literature and we think that, like us, you too will be inspired and enlightened by Dr. Griswold's insight, humor, and sustained passion for children's literature.

Dr. Griswold's has been and continues to be an important voice in the field of children's literature. He has written countless articles and book reviews for The New York Times Book Review, The Nation, The Lion and the Unicorn, and other esteemed publications. Additionally, he is the author of several books, notably [Audacious Kids: Coming of Age in America's Classic Children's Books](#), the Children's Literature Association's 1995 Outstanding Book of the Year. While you can find more comprehensive details of Dr. Griswold's contributions by visiting his [website](#) or typing his name into Google, what we hope to show in our interview is just how personable, charming, and boisterously verbose he is in person. As his long-term colleague and friend, Dr. Alida Allison, declares, "Jerry Griswold has the Irish gifts: humor, smarts, eloquence, literary fluency, good friendships. Good taste in beer, too. Whether in York, Calgary, Biloxi, or San Diego, it's been a pleasure to bond with Jer these many years."

How did you become interested in the academic treatment of children's literature?

My good fortune was to study at the [University of Connecticut](#) under [Francelia Butler](#), who was one of the founders of the study of children's literature in English departments. The field was brand new and she was an exceptionally dynamic woman. Francelia offered this huge children's lit class every semester. It was immensely popular, 300 or more students enrolled, and I was her graduate assistant

one year along with [Elaine Scarry](#), who's now a famous, famous literary critic and has a chair in Aesthetics at Harvard. Through Francelia I was able to meet Margaret Hamilton (who famously portrayed the Wicked Witch of the West), Maurice Sendak, Big Bird, James Marshall, and other notables. Probably the most interesting person I met was Pamela Travers, who wrote the *Mary Poppins* books and whom I later interviewed for [The Paris Review](#). At the time, the academic interest in children's lit was just starting to take off, so just by being in the field, I was a big fish in a small pond.

What have you enjoyed most about your newish positions as professor emeritus and children's literature scholar at-large?

Travel. I've reached this point of my life now where people invite me to speak about what I love. I just got back from two weeks in Italy and in October I was in Florida. I've recently been to Ireland. Upcoming is Biloxi, and then Philadelphia in the Fall.¹ It's exhilarating to go to these different places and to talk with people about children's literature. I met with graduate students at the [University of Florida](#) and at the University of Padua, and they're all really enthusiastic about the field and want to know everything they can. There are not many people out there in the real world that you can sit down with and discuss Peter Rabbit critically. You can't just walk up to strangers and do that—they look at you strangely! When you're in this coterie of people who like and study this kind of literature, it feels very comfortable and kind of exciting... Also through my travels, I discovered this new Italian illustrator. Her name is [Nicoletta Ceccoli](#) and while she is already big in Europe, her work is just starting to make an appearance here. Her style of illustration is provocative and ethereal. So, my position allows me to feel authorized to call her up, or send her an email, make a meeting, and then go interview her, which is an amazing opportunity... I mean, it's a pretty good life. Sometimes, I envy my own life, I feel so lucky.

What did you consider was the best part of your work before you retired?

Of course teaching has always been a favorite aspect of the profession... you know that you're a good teacher when you leave the classroom and you have more energy than when you entered. The connections and the discussions that bring people

together, all that sort of stuff is exhilarating when it occurs in your classroom. As a scholar, when you're doing that kind of thing in your writing, it has that same sort of exhilaration—when things are really going well, things are clicking, and you feel energized by and connected to your work.²

As an early scholar of the genre, did you anticipate that your study of children's lit would lead to such a prolific and satisfying career?

I didn't really have any idea. It also depends on when I would have anticipated this outcome. Would it have been when I just got my PhD and I was unemployed for a year, and I was living with a family on beans and rice and not knowing if I would get a job offer? I certainly didn't expect then that it would end up where the Italians are paying for me to fly over and talk about children's books, of all things. So, no, I did not anticipate this future then.

But the field was really new then. Francelia—who was, God, at that point probably 30 years older than me—was the first generation. I suppose I'm the second generation. Then there is a third generation of scholars like June Cummins and Joseph Thomas Jr., and Philip Serrato would probably be 3.5. In the beginning, things were so new, there were probably only a dozen or so of us graduate students doing this kind of work. There were a lot of battles to fight for the legitimacy of the field and so forth. Anyway, I saw what my professors' lives were like and I thought, "Hmm, that would be pretty good." Walking around with like a sports coat, smoking a pipe, wearing a beret—I thought, "I'd like to do that." Of course, it didn't work out like that; I didn't care for sherry.

As I'm sure you know, E.L. Konigsburg (February 10, 1930 - April 19, 2013) passed away recently. What are your thoughts on her generation of writers and the current trends in children's fiction?

I love her book, *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* (1967). It has inspired so many other books, even contemporary books. And I know people love that book. I remember I was on the radio doing a couple of things on KPBS. People call in and talk about, you know, "Oh, my favorite book was Elmer the Lackadaisical Guy by so and so," and "Do you know that?" and often I'll say that no, I

don't know it, but you can ask, "What did you like about it?" And it's great to hear people's enthusiasm about children's books. I mean there are so many books, and people have no idea how wide this field is.

Another author in the same vein of Konigsburg is Lois Lowry; they're about the same age. Lowry's *The Giver* (1993) seems to me such a fantastic book. When *The Hunger Games* came out, [Maria Tatar](#) was talking about *Hunger Games* because she's keen on that whole sort of feminine archetype thing. She was going to see Lois Lowry later and I said, "You tell Lois Lowry that Collins owes her a million dollars!" because *The Giver* was so groundbreaking and *Hunger Games* just completely lifted it! I'm surprised no one's been like, "Look, it's all been seen before!" This is the thing: if you have a long reading history, you're always surprised why the newest incarnation is getting so much attention. I mean, when Harry Potter came out I thought, "Oh Jesus, I've seen this a million times, I can tell you how it's going to end." I just saw it like that. Maybe there's something to be said about not being well read. That way, you can be blown away by books.

In your [review](#) of the [Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art](#) in Amherst, MA, you said it was "remote" in terms of location but "rightly situated" with regard to the area's contributions to children's literature. Do you think the city of San Diego would be a good location to host a children's literature museum considering the city's abundance of children's authors and thriving academic interest in the field?

Possibly. I think one of the most interesting events I went to in San Diego was a lecture at the [San Diego Museum of Art](#) in the early 80's with Maurice Sendak and Dr. Seuss (Theodore Geisel), a San Diegan. The two of them lectured together and it was absolutely fantastic. The lecture has been transcribed in Glen Sandler's *Teaching Children's Literature* (1992). So, San Diego has Dr. Seuss and San Diego State University which has an extraordinary, important, strong, and prestigious [children's literature program](#). Moreover, the city has had and has plenty of other writers and illustrators too. The author of *Misty of Chincoteague* and many other children's books, Marguerite Henry, lived in Rancho Santa Fe. Currently, there's a very talented author and illustrator who's won a number of awards, Eric Shanower. He's doing an entire comic book series about the Trojan War, and he is a big Oz guy too. He has written, edited, and illustrated a collection of Oz books and comics. Additionally,

Brian Selznick lives in San Diego and is good friends with Pam Muñoz Ryan, another San Diegan and a really great hotshot Latina writer. In fact, Selznick and Ryan did a few books together. Janelle Cannon, who wrote *Stellaluna*, also lives here. There's a whole bunch of people associated with children's literature around this area, so there's a logic to thinking of San Diego as the capitol of children's literature.

You've talked about children's books in the era of the iPad, writing in [Parent's Choice](#) that "[d]igital books will never replace their print versions. They will always be used in addition to print books." How are you so sure?

You know, we've got to quit worrying about the idea of books as a repository of stories. Stories are what are important. They could be oral. They could come on CDs. They could be television programs. It's fascinating that when the iPad first came out, the initial marketing campaign had it linked with *Winnie the Pooh*. It shipped with a free copy of *Winnie the Pooh*. It was a marketing concept—we'll get the "soft and fuzzy" to go with the silver, steel thing. The Android tablet—the Nexus—used *Madeline* and *Curious George* in advertisements last summer. But what they didn't anticipate was that the most resistance to the idea to put children's books and tablets together would come from reactionary parents. Even the most high-tech parents want their offspring to experience stories in the old-fashioned way. My point is that we shouldn't get upset about stories and what they're embedded in. Stories are what are important.

Stories have been embedded in a variety of devices. In the 19th century there was something called toy theaters: these cardboard things you would cut out and glue, with characters and scripts. When I was growing up, there was the "View Finder," a device to put this disc in and you would click it and see fairy tales and so forth in 3D, and we have pop-up books. We've got to get over the idea that stories can only be embedded in books and there's some sort of natural link between them. Stories can be embedded in a lot of different things...

What did you enjoy reading as a child?

Everybody at this moment says, "Oh, well, I read a lot of comic books," and I did. I read a lot of comic books. It's funny that people want to establish their *déclassé*

cred, their street cred, by stating that. But yeah, I read a lot of comics, and... weird stuff.

The earliest books I can remember are two. One was a *Good Housekeeping* book of children's stories my mother would read to us from, and the one story I remember her reading over and over again was *The Little Red Hen*. That's every mother's favorite story! Do you remember *The Little Red Hen*? It's like, "Who's gonna help me bake this cake? Who's gonna help me roll this out?" and then she gets the cake, and [says] "Who's gonna help me eat it? Well, too bad!" It's a sort of mother's revenge story. Then, the other one of my earliest memories is a book by Elmer and Bertha Hader called *Little Appaloosa*, a story about this boy who lived on a ranch and had his own horse. Now, my grandfather had a ranch which we would visit, and I would ride horses when we went up there, but I lived in town and didn't have my own horse.

Then I think around the fourth grade, maybe fifth grade, there was a librarian who started giving me books. It started off as boys' adventure things, you know, like the Piper Cub airplane crashes in Alaska and Bill Jones has to survive and work his way out of the outback—how does he do it? By rubbing sticks together, he took a little piece of the plane off, etc. This is what Kenneth Kidd calls 'boyology.' Isn't it curious that the popular children's books have included *Swiss Family Robinson* and *Robinson Crusoe*? What is it about kids that they want to relive, they want have these survival skills, and they want to understand about how a culture is built from the ground up? Why? They arrive in a world that is already formed. They want to know, how did it get this way? There is the whole notion of independence and so forth, so there was that period of my life, too.

In high school my favorite book was not really a children's book. It was Albert Camus' *The Stranger* because I fancied myself disenchanted, misunderstood, and French. I would smoke Gauloises, wear a beret, and walk around my parents' suburban living room saying, "Oh, it's all meaningless."

Are you working on any new books?

No, I'm working on an old book: *Audacious Kids*. It was due, oh God, a year and a half ago, but it's hard—now that I'm used to just having fun—to be responsible and finish that book. I mean I have five more pages to finish and it has been that way

for over six months. These opportunities come up—like this interview with the Italian illustrator—that are diversions but really, really fun, and these have sort of vectored me off.

Then at some point, I'm also going to collect my work. I've got hundreds of things that I've written. It's embarrassing when I think of what I've done to the forests of North America! It really is! My mother died two Octobers ago, and I went up the following April to clear out the house and she had a complete collection of her son's work. And I'm looking through it and there's this *Nation* magazine from the 70's, all yellowed and so forth but a small part of a larger collection, and I'm thinking, "The poor trees, the poor trees! There were about 10,000 of these published!"

What can we look forward to hearing from you in your Francelia Butler Memorial Lecture this June at the ChLA conference in Biloxi?

I'm going to talk about Francelia. I know at a certain point I'm going to be asked for a title and I've already thought that through... In fall of 1999 I was just beginning to teach for a year at [the National University of Ireland in Galway](#), and Frank McCourt, who was about to publish his next book *'Tis*, came through and gave an evening lecture at the university. He starts reading from his new book and gets through the first paragraph, and then he stops and says, "That reminds me of a funny story..." and starts talking about how people always ask him where he got the title *Angela's Ashes*. Then he goes back and he reads the next sentence and it reminds him of another story, and after about the third story, he remarks, "I'm the devil for digression." And I thought, "Now there's something."

Later, I'm coming to Japan, and a friend of mine says, "We're going to have you lecture and I think we should call the lecture 'Digression,' because, one: you're really good at it, and two: you can never go wrong if you call your lecture 'Digression,' since no matter what you talk about you're on topic!" So I'm waiting for the good folks at the ChLA conference in Biloxi to ask me what I'm going to talk about because I've already rehearsed a title. My lecture will be titled "Children's Literature and Digression!"

But honestly, I'm just going to have fun. At this point in my life where that's all I want to do. I'm going to go to Biloxi and have a good time. Now that has gotten me into trouble before, but I have to say I really don't care. It always seems to work

out. Not that I won't be anxious; I'm already anxious. I'll prepare, and it'll be okay, I think. Tell me, afterwards, if I pulled it off or not.³

Notes

¹ The [calendar](#) on his website indicates an event he will attend held by the [Childhood Studies Program at Rutgers University \(Camden\)](#) in October 2013. Details have not yet been posted.

² Jerry's love of teaching is evidenced by his continued attention to the Children's Literature program at SDSU. Much to students' delight, he continues to make occasional appearances in graduate classes and, on occasion, partake of a dim sum brunch.

³ Dr. Jerry Griswold pulled off his Francelia Butler Memorial Lecture wonderfully. On Saturday, June 15th, hundreds gathered to hear Griswold's speech, "Children's Literature and Digression: A Post-Manifesto." The audience was treated to colorful insight into the life of Francelia Butler, in which Griswold noted the expansion of the field since Butler first brought the study of children's literature into English departments. Appreciating the presence of an academic community in the field, Griswold stated, "The good thing about having children's literature colleagues is that when you spend half of an hour photocopying pictures of rabbits wearing clothes, no one asks you questions." Griswold went on to discuss the future of the field, emphasizing that while it is problematic to make broad statements about the differences between children and adults, we do need to pay attention to childhood and children as they really exist. A controversial manifesto, his sentiments reflect the comments on his kindergarten report card regarding his behavior with crossing guards at school: Griswold "does not obey the patrol boys."