

# ChLA: 1973-1983

by Carol Gay, ChLA Historian

In a 1973 *New York Times* article, Francelia Butler said, "To many humanists . . . in languages, philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology, or history, the most embarrassing literature to study is not about autoeroticism or cunnilingus. On such works scholars pride themselves on their broadmindedness. What truly embarrasses them is literature for their own children—'kiddy lit,' they call it." Dr. Butler, impatient that there was no scholarly journal in the field of children's literature, had started *Children's Literature: The Great Excluded* in 1972, after opposition and ridicule from many quarters.

Though many felt the need for some organization to help raise the status of children's literature and promote scholarship in the field, Anne Devereaux Jordan got it started. Jon Stott tells it this way. Anne Jordan conceived the project while teaching at Western Michigan University, where both she and Stott "often lamented the fact that we had trouble finding serious criticism of children's literature. 'I'm tired of reading this junk from the cuddly bunny school of criticism,' I complained. 'Somebody should do something about it.' Then I went home, graded papers, drank a beer, smoked a cigar, and watched a hockey game. But Anne Jordan didn't follow the same course. She may have graded papers or sipped a beer . . . she didn't watch the hockey game or smoke a cigar. She dedicated vast quantities of time, energy, and money to creating an association which made it possible for people like yourself to read intelligent criticism and discuss children's literature intelligently."

This is the account Jon Stott gave in his presidential address on the fifth anniversary of ChLA. It's oversimplified, of course, and couched in Jon's own delightful style, but it captures the essentials. Anne Jordan herself said in an early letter to ChLA Board members: "When first I thought of founding the ChLA, the idea was prompted by the fact that there was no *one* place to which a person could go to discuss children's literature or to seek information on all areas of children's literature. One had to join a number of organizations to obtain a comprehensive coverage of what was happening in the area. I wished to provide a central source of information, eliminating these problems in the teaching of children's literature. . . . Children's literature is a new field, and it is a fine field. It needs an organization in which those who deal with the literature can exchange ideas and sharpen their critical skills. . . ."



Photo courtesy of Abey Studio, Youngstown, Ohio

## The First Executive Board Meeting August, 1973

(From left to right) Francelia Butler, Dr. John Graham, Anne Devereaux Jordan, Bennett Brockman, Jon Stott (absent: Glenn Sadler, Rodney Morrisset).

Anne Jordan wrote a letter to Francelia Butler at the University of Connecticut, who had already evidenced her strong commitment to the field of children's literature as a scholarly endeavor. Dr. Butler, aware of the need for such a group and impressed with Anne Jordan's initiative, invited her to meet with her and a few others who were interested in helping to form an association. On Monday, August 20, 1973, Anne Devereaux Jordan and Jon Stott met with Francelia Butler, Bennett Brockman of the University of Connecticut, and John Graham of the University of Virginia, again in Stott's words, "in a reputedly haunted, but definitely hospitable colonial house in Mansfield Hollow, Connecticut. . . to give actuality to a dream: specifically, Anne Jordan's dream of creating an organization dedicated to the serious study of children's literature."

If later members ever wondered why so much of the camaraderie of the ChLA centers around the banquet at the annual convention, perhaps we need look no further than a reminiscent note from Dr. Butler to Marilyn Apseloff, found in the archives, which describes the "initial picnic in the side yard—at which we all came together." "It was catered by a beautiful girl who had lived most of her life in India. It was an Eastern dinner and she wore a sari. The plates were the square wooden ones I had brought from Thailand as well as the bronze silver. The Chinese pepper pot was from Viet Nam, where I had purchased it shortly before the end of the War in the Chinese sector. I remembered we had an exotic milk punch with cardamom seed and a delicious curry with nuts in it and some kind of dessert with mangoes. Anyway, we're off to a great international start!" The strong personalities, intellects, and

characters of the founders of the ChLA have stamped themselves indelibly on the nature of the group in small ways and large!

The direct result of this August 1973 gathering was the first annual conference of the Children's Literature Association the following March 15th-17th, 1974, in Storrs at the University of Connecticut. Spring comes late to Connecticut; those who flew into the Hartford Airport to discover that the only means of transportation to Storrs was rent-a-car must have felt like pioneers as they wended their way through a bleak countryside and arrived at a small cement-block motel, miles from the campus.

Under the leadership of Anne Jordan, Executive Secretary, and John Graham, Assistant Executive Secretary, the Board of Directors—Francelia Butler, Jon Stott, Bennett Brockman, Glen Sadler (Point Loma College, San Diego), Rodney Morisset (University of London), Charity Chang (University of Connecticut), K. Narayan Kutty, (Eastern Connecticut State College)—and a conference committee put together a conference whose broad general outlines are still being followed ten years later. There was a general theme—"Cultural and Critical Values in Children's Literature." There were papers, workshops, discussion groups which included authors, editors and publishers, a banquet with a keynote speaker, a cocktail party and a general membership meeting, all starting on Friday afternoon and extending through Sunday morning. If the weather outside was bleak, inside Bishop Center there was a feeling of exhilaration and a sense of accomplishment, as participants listened to papers by Professor R. Gordon Kelly from the University of Pennsylvania; Professor Fred Erisman, Texas Christian University; Professor Virginia L. Wolf, University of Kansas; Professor Alethea K. Helbig, Eastern Michigan University; Professor Lori Clarke, University of Utah; Professor Carol Gay, Youngstown State University; Professor Jerome Griswold, University of Connecticut; and Professor Anne S. MacLeod, University of Maryland. At the banquet they heard a master storyteller, Princess Redwing, a member of the Narraganset Tribe of Rhode Island, and watched a Punch and Judy Puppet Show with Michael Michanczyk. Authors Jean Fritz, Feenie Ziner, John Langstaff, Antonio Frasconi, and James Haskins participated in this conference, along with editors George A. Woods from the *New York Times*, Robert G. Miner from *Newsweek*, Barbara Bates from Westminster Press, George Nicholson from Viking Press, Patricia Connolly from Doubleday, and Donald Reynolds, a member of the Newbery-Caldecott Committee. Unfortunately, registration lists from this

first conference are not in the archives, so there is no record of those who attended beyond the conference program; but those who attended the General Membership Meeting discussed the Constitution that had been hammered out by the Board of Directors, and the Children's Literature Association was well under way.

During the year that followed, Anne Jordan kept the membership (approximately two hundred) informed of the activities of the Association through a Newsletter as the Board continued to try to cope with such problems as membership fees, and by-laws, and attempted to open the Association to the membership at large by providing elected positions on the Executive Board. Membership fees were set at \$7.50 for students and \$14.50 for regular membership. The next conference was scheduled for Williamsburg, Virginia, at the College of William and Mary.

Spring comes early to Virginia, and those who attended the conference on March 7th-9th, wandered around colonial Williamsburg in the cheerful spring sunlight and saw crocus and hyacinth pushing up in colonial gardens. P. L. Travers was the keynote speaker at the banquet. Her acerbic, sophisticated wit delighted those who attended, though the conference was marred by Anne Jordan's severe injury in a car accident just before the conference, and by the death of Rodney Morisset, a charter Board member and former Executive Secretary of the NCTE, during the year. The strains of organizing and expanding were severe, and differences of opinion, present even in initial board meetings in Connecticut, surfaced in Williamsburg as the General Membership Meeting and the Executive Board struggled to forge a workable constitution.

During the year following the Williamsburg Conference, the membership elected five new Board members, Marilyn Apseoff, Kent State University; Margaret Esmonde, Villanova University; Alethea Helbig, Eastern Michigan University; Frances McIson, Central Michigan University; and Taimi Ranta, University of Illinois. It was a year of growth. Membership grew to 415; Temple Press took over the printing of *Children's Literature: The Great Excluded*, giving it a new, more professional look; an awards committee was formed, chaired by David L. Greene, Piedmont College, "to encourage serious scholarship and research in children's literature" and to give an award "in recognition of outstanding work in the field of children's literature scholarship." The third annual conference was held at Temple University with a bi-centennial theme, "America in Children's Books; Children's Books in America." The keynote speaker

was Caldecott Winner Uri Schulevitz, and discussion groups heatedly tackled a project that became a priority of the ChLA for a number of years, trying to put together a list of "best" children's books. Anne Jordon resigned as Executive Secretary and Jon Stott became Acting Executive Secretary. At the conference, Miss Jordan told members, "I think it is time to turn the Association over to the members. Organization was fun, but the Association needs more involvement than I have time to give it at present. The talent of the members should be tapped. Much of the committee structure set up by the Board at its meeting at Temple is still intact. Margaret Esmonde was appointed editor of the *Newsletter*, and Volume I, No. 1 of a newly expanded *ChLA Newsletter* came out in the spring.

The position of Executive Secretary was filled by Rachel Fordyce, Virginia Polytechnic, and she ably performed the myriad tasks that went with it. But a new organizational set-up was evolving. New officers were elected, to take office the following year: Jon Stott was elected President; Margaret P. Esmonde, Vice-President/President-Elect; and Jane Bingham, Oakland University, was elected secretary to the Board. New members of the Board were author Jane Yolen; Rebecca Lukens, Miami University; Stephen Roxburgh, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Inc.; Dorrel T. Hanks, Baylor University; and Ruth MacDonald, Rutgers University, and a revised constitution was approved by the membership, which continued at over four hundred. In March, approximately two hundred participants gathered at Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti, coming from 26 states and Canada and Puerto Rico to hear keynote speaker, author Alfred Slote maintain that "Good fiction doesn't teach." The *Newsletter* expanded, and reviews of critical and scholarly works began to appear on its pages.

On March 31st through April 2nd, 1978, over 300 people from 34 states and five Canadian provinces gathered at Harvard University for the fifth annual ChLA conference. For the first time, the Board authorized *The Proceedings*, a complete transcript of the entire conference. Susan Cooper, keynote speaker, gave a lively and provocative speech in which she warned listeners: "Children's literature is a newly independent field of study in colleges and universities—don't let it lose sight, early on, of what it is supposed to be about. Don't, I beg you, let it get bogged down in the search for ever more recondite subjects for theses and publications. . . . Keep your perspective, keep your sense of humor. . . . Those of us who write books published for children are not

producing teaching aids, or tools for bibliotherapy. We're telling stories. Don't forget that."

Also appearing at the conference were Canadian author, Ruth Nichols, illustrator Maurice Sendak and *Horn Book* editor, Ethel Heins. Jon Stott, serving as President during this fifth anniversary year, cited the achievements of the Association during the past five years: an efficient constitution; a working relationship with a vehicle for publishing serious scholarly and critical work, *Children's Literature*; the establishment of an annual conference and of a regular newsletter; and the establishment of criteria for offering an award for significant criticism in the field of children's literature, an award given for the first time to critic Aidan Chambers for his article, "The Reader in the Book," which appeared in the *Signal* in 1977. Stott pointed to the conferences held each year as a significant achievement, indicating the general approval of the participants and the feeling of fellowship they promote, and cited the *Newsletter* as a major publication in the field. He also noted some new goals that the Association had before it: the establishment of a canon; the need to expand the *Newsletter* even more to provide a larger outlet for criticism and research; the desire to become more international in outlook and to become more involved with other associations in the field; and the hope of providing grants for scholarly projects in the field. Five years later, all of these goals have been met.

The leaders elected to guide the Association through 1978-79 were Margaret Esmonde, President; Marilyn Apseloff, Vice-President/President-Elect; and Dorothy Z. Mills of East Carolina University, who became secretary of the Board. New Board members were Charity Chang, and Peter Neumeyer, West Virginia University; Ruth MacDonald was re-elected for another term. Virginia Wolf filled the one-year unexpired term of Vice-President, Marilyn Apseloff. Yale University was chosen to publish the Association journal, which the year before had been re-named *Children's Literature: An International Journal*, to reflect the cosmopolitan nature of its articles more accurately. The sixth annual conference was held at Toronto to affirm the close relationship the Association had always felt with Canadian members, and Mollie Hunter, Carnegie Medal Winner, gave the keynote address, "A Need for Heroes." Other speakers included British critic Aidan Chambers; author-illustrator Gerald McDermott; author Dennis Lee; Anne Pellowski, Director of the Information Center of Children's Cultures of the U.S. Committee for

UNICEF; Irene Aubrey of the National Library of Canada; Virginia Haviland of the Library of Congress; and editors Jean Karl, George Nicholson, and Elizabeth Billington. This conference underscored the reality of ChLA as an international force in the field of children's literature. The second annual award for excellence in children's literature criticism went to Leonard Clark for his essay, "Poetry and Children," originally published in *Children's Literature in Education* in its Autumn 1978 issue. And with the spring issue, the *Newsletter* became the *ChLA Quarterly*.

For its 1980 Conference, the Association moved from Canada to Baylor University in Waco, Texas. The theme of the conference was "Realism and Fantasy in Children's Literature" and events were keynoted by master fantasist, Elaine L. Konigsburg. Also on hand as featured speakers were illustrator Peter Spiers, author and critic Eleanor Cameron, and author Myra Cohn Livingston. The board was guided by President Marilyn Apseoff, Vice-President/ President-Elect Taimi Ranta, Secretary John Cech, Treasurer Alethea Helbig, and Board members Lois Kuznets, Lehman College; Jill May, Purdue University; Priscilla Ord, Iona College; Stephen Roxburgh, Jane Yolen, Charity Chang, Ruth MacDonald, and Peter Neumeyer, now of San Diego State University. A new logo—a slim pile of books—now appeared on ChLA stationery, brochures, and the *Quarterly*. According to the Board, the logo was expressive of the "organization's maturity and development. It represents the Association's concern with scholarship and its abiding interest in literature for children." Because of the continued growth and maturity of the Association—it reached six hundred members in 1979-80—the Association appointed an Historian for the first time and established its archives at Youngstown State University. The first ChLA Research Award was given to Rosa Ann Moore, University of Tennessee, for her proposal to deal with the publication history of the works of Laura Ingalls Wilder and give a critical assessment of her works, and to M. Sarah Smedman, University of North Carolina, for her proposal, "Images and Archetypes of the Young Woman in Girls' Series Books." Patricia Docley assumed the editorship of the *Quarterly* with the Spring 1980 issue, with Perry Nodelman as Associate Editor. Margaret P. Esmonde, who had guided the publication so skillfully for several years in its transition from *Newsletter* to *Quarterly*, became Managing Editor. Work on a Canon continued, and a tentative list for consideration appeared in the Summer *Quarterly*. The ChLA

Award for excellence in literary criticism was presented to Phyllis Bixler, Bates College, for her "Tradition and the Individual Talent of Frances Hodgson Burnett," which appeared in Volume VII of *Children's Literature*.

1980-81 saw Taimi Ranta assume the presidency and John Cech continue one more year as secretary. Treasurer was Alethea Helbig and Rebecca Lukens was elected Vice-President/President-Elect. Patricia Dooley, D. Thomas Hanks, and Patricia McMahon joined the Board as new members. The spring conference was held at Minneapolis, Minnesota on March 27th-29th; participants heard Newbery Award-winning novelist Betsy Byars give the keynote address. One of the high points of the program was the opening of the Kerlan Collection of the University of Minnesota Library to the three hundred people who participated in the conference. The annual Award for Distinguished Literary Criticism went to Lynn Rosenthal, Mercy College, for her "The Development of Consciousness in Lucy Boston's *The Children of Green Knowe*," which appeared in *Children's Literature*, and Karen Nelson Hoyle of the University of Minnesota, won a Research Scholarship Award of \$1000 to pursue her studies on Wanda Gag. Also, in this year, ChLA pioneers Francelia Butler and Glenn Sadler succeeded in winning Division status in the Modern Language Association for children's literature, a long-hoped-for goal to raise the status of the field and promote scholarly and critical interest. ChLA members have from the beginning been active in MLA programs, as well as in the regional gatherings such as the MMLA and SAMLA.

In 1981-82, in keeping with its policy of holding its conferences in a variety of representative geographical areas, the ChLA made a giant leap from Minneapolis, Minnesota to Gainesville, Florida, where the University of Florida played host to the group. Amidst greenery and sunshine, participants listened to author Natalie Babbitt make the keynote speech, and guest authors Gail Haley and Gillian Avery help explore the theme "The Child and the Story: An Exploration of Narrative Forms." Three Research Scholarship Awards were given. C. W. Sullivan III, East Carolina University, received a grant to pursue his study of "Celtic Mythology in Modern Literature;" Margaret Esmonde was given help toward continuing her study, "From Dale Arden to Princess Leia Organa: The Development of the Female Role in Children's Science Fiction;" and Warren Wooden, Marshall University, received a grant toward completing his "A History of Children's

Literature from the Introduction of Printing in England through the Conclusion of the Seventeenth Century." Rebecca Lukens as President guided the Board, helped by Ruth MacDonald, Vice-President/President-Elect, Virginia Wolf, Secretary, and Treasurer Alethea K. Helbig. New Board members were Mary Ake, Wilder School; David L. Greene, and Anita Moss, University of North Carolina. The Spring issue of the *Quarterly* came out in an impressive new format, developed in part through a grant from The Growing Child, a publishing organization interested in children.

This year, the ChLA under the direction of Ruth MacDonald, President, Alethea Helbig, Vice-President/President-Elect; Virginia Wolf, Treasurer,

and Norma Bagnall (Texas A & M University), Secretary, and new Board members Karen Hoyle, Douglas Street (Texas A & M University), Carol Billman (University of Pittsburgh), and Sylvia Patterson (University of Southwestern Louisiana), holds its tenth anniversary conference in Edmonton, Canada. The *Quarterly*, now edited by Perry Nodelman with Jill May as Associate Editor, is in the process of becoming a refereed journal. The Association continues its tradition of promoting scholarship, rewarding significant criticism, and increasing awareness of the importance of children's literature. And is still having a good time doing it.



Photo by Jan Bakker

Carol Gay, PhD, is Coordinator of English Graduate Studies and a recipient of the Distinguished Professor Award at Youngstown State University in Ohio. A specialist in Children's Literature and nineteenth century American Literature, she has published in such journals as *American Literature*, *Essays in Literature*, *English Journal*, *Language Arts*, and *ADE*. She has published a monograph on Zane Grey and is currently completing a biography of the nineteenth century biographer, Franklin B. Sanborn. A member of the ChLA since its founding, she serves as Historian of the Association and is the current Chair of the Scholarship Awards Committee.