

ChLA Presidential Address 2014

President Claudia Mills

Let me begin by once again giving the heartiest of thanks to our hosts, Sara Schwebel and Michelle Martin and their terrific South Carolina team, for this fabulous hum-digger of a party that is ChLA.

Children love parties, and children's literature is replete with them. Sendak's wild rumpus. Mary Poppins's tea party on the ceiling with Uncle Albert. The Halloween feast at Hogwarts. So in preparing this address I set myself the task of thinking of the myriad ways in which literary parties mirror ChLA.

Party planning begins with drawing up the guest list and sending out invitations. As fairy tale scholars, we know too well the dangers of leaving any fairies uninvited to the christening. In this year's Phoenix winner Gary Soto's picture book *Chato and the Party Animals*, Chato decides to throw a surprise party for his best friend who has never had a birthday party – and then finds that in all the party planning excitement, the one person he's forgotten to invite is the guest of honor himself. So at ChLA we skip any element of surprise and invite everybody: professors, librarians, K-12 teachers, graduate students, award-winning undergraduates, those with degrees in English, French, library science, education, American studies, scholars from all over the world, even someone like me, with a degree in philosophy who attended my first ChLA conference with only a handful of undergraduate literature courses to my name. Our invitations come in the form of tantalizingly worded “calls for papers.” What fun we had with “risk and play” last year in Biloxi; how our horizons expanded this year with “diverging diversities”; what possibilities we'll explore next year in Richmond with “Give me liberty, or give me death.”

Party hosts need to come up with ideas for food and fun. Children's book authors get deliciously carried away with their descriptions of party refreshments. Rat knows what to pack for a picnic in *The Wind in the Willows*: “‘There's cold chicken inside it’ replied the Rat briefly, ‘coldtongue coldhamcold beefpickledherringsaladfrenchrollscresssandwichespottedmeatgingerbeerlemonadesodawater--‘Oh stop, stop,’ cried the Mole in ecstasies. ‘This is too much!’ ‘Do you really think so?’ inquired the Rat seriously.

‘It’s only what I always take on these little excursions and the other animals are always telling me that I’m a mean beast and cut it *very* fine.’” I don’t think any of us end up going hungry at ChLA, thanks to Carly’s sumptuous ordering of breakout treats, and, unlike Marilla in *Anne of Green Gables*, we don’t mind if the raspberry cordial we serve turns out to be currant wine instead.

Memorable party activities in children’s literature include Ramona’s par-tee where the children dash around trying to vacuum each other up, a broomstick race in Eleanor Estes’s *The Witch Family*, and countless others that you can draw up on your own personal list of favorites. At ChLA we have papers, papers, papers, the best party activity of all. Though we aren’t averse to outings and have even been known to dance, as we did at the “prom” at our school-themed ChLA in Scranton, and at the hoe-down at Calgary, where the band leader remarked that he had never seen a dance floor fill up so fast.

Party guests often worry about what to wear. Anne Shirley agonizes over having to go the church social wearing a dress without puffed sleeves. Sorrel in Noel Streafeild’s *Theater Shoes* wonders what she can wear to attend Grandmother’s opening night gala. “How does my frock look?” she asks her sister. “Pretty awful. It doesn’t look as if could possibly button. It’s surprising that it does. And where it buttons, it kind of pleats, and that makes your vest show. The velvet looks as if it had been left outside all night in the rain. Otherwise, it’s all right.” And after Jo spoils her only pair of gloves, she and Meg have to share a single pair of gloves between them at Mrs. Gardiner’s New Year’s Eve “little dance: “I can hold them crumpled up in my hand, so no one will know how stained they are; that’s all I can do. No! I’ll tell you how we can manage – each wear one good one and carry a bad one; don’t you see?” Luckily, at ChLA we don’t stress much about what we wear. We gussy ourselves up a bit for the banquet, but otherwise it’s come-as-you-are (though I do remember that last year an entire delegation from Florida came attired in T-shirts that read IN KENNETH WE TRUST).

How to behave at a party is always a topic for fretting. Meg instructs Jo: “Don’t put your hands behind you, or stare, or say ‘Christopher Columbus,’ will you?” Pippi Longstocking worries that she’ll end up misbehaving at a coffee party which she’s been allowed to attend: “I have noticed several times that people don’t think I know how to behave even when I’m trying as hard as I can.” Sure enough, she

raises eyebrows as she places her plate of cakes between her toes, crams all the cakes into her mouth at once, then strikes her now-empty plate as a tambourine. When her antics end up ruining a large cream pie, she consoles her hosts, “Now, you mustn’t feel bad about such a little accident. The main thing is that we have our health.” Laura Ingalls is panicked over a birthday party invitation: “Oh, Ma, what will I do? I never went to a party. How must I behave at a party?” Ma tells her: “You have been taught to behave wherever you are, Laura. You need only behave properly, as you know how to do.” Wilder comments tartly: “No doubt this was true, but it was no comfort to Laura.” How do people even talk at a party? At a tenth birthday party, Betsy, Tacy, and Tib decide to start calling each other by their fancy given names, Elizabeth, Anastacia, and Thelma, and use fancy grownup words like “indeed” and “prefer.”

When I walked in the door for my first ChLA over twenty years ago, here are some fancy, grownup words I had never heard before: *focalized*, *carnavalesque*, *implied reader*, *liminal space*, *orientalism*, *unheimlich*. Over the next twenty years I proceeded to get an entire graduate education in children’s literature by attending ChLA, reading its journals, writing papers to submit to them, going through the increasingly rigorous review process, revising, revising, revising. I still remember the first time I timidly tried out some of my new vocabulary and made reference to a narrative being *focalized* on a certain character. “*Through*, not *on*!” my wonderful conference roommate Leona Fisher whispered to me. I also had to learn new professional etiquette, party faux pas to avoid. As a philosophy professor I was used to a professional setting where the highest tribute you can pay to a paper delivered at a conference is to rip it to shreds with enormous relish. I had to learn a whole new professional culture of mutual support, encouragement, and kindness. Which isn’t to say that the blind reviewers of every single paper I’ve ever submitted to a children’s lit journal didn’t rip my first version to shreds, if not with enormous relish, at least with embarrassing thoroughness. But when one editor, whom I had met at many ChLA conferences, sent the blind reviewer’s scathing comments to me for a special issue she edited for the Annual, she still addressed me as “Claudia, my dearest dear” and brainstormed with me about how to create an ultimately publishable paper.

Hosts give their guests party favors; guests often come bearing presents. Remember the gifts Pooh and Piglet bring to Eeyore's birthday? The jar that once held honey, eaten up by Pooh on route to Eeyore's house, and Piglet's balloon that popped on the way as well? Eeyore asks mournfully: "What color was this balloon when it *was* a balloon?" "Red." "Red. . . .My favorite color. . . . How big was it?" "About as big as me." "About as big as Piglet. My favorite size. Well, well." Ramona Quimby gives young Willa Jean her very own box of Kleenex so she can have the fun of pulling them out one at a time, something Ramona has always wanted to do herself. At ChLA we do give and get some official wrapped presents, as we've done just now. I think our hosts have outdone themselves with party favors: when before did we ever get a chance to make our own owl-themed luggage tags?! But our very best presents and party favors are names of new books to read, ideas for new projects to pursue, contact information for new colleagues, the wonderful gift of new and often lifelong friends.

But this leads me to my closing comments. Readers know that sometimes parties are not fun for those who attend, and some guests are made to feel less than welcome. This, from *Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle*: "Cornelia, Mama says I *have* to invite you to my birthday party. . . . Try and wear a clean dress if you have one." This, from *Heaven to Betsy* by Maud Hart Lovelace: "Tony and Bonnie sat side by side, his arm draped along the back of her seat. It was a horrible party for Betsy who remarked at frequent intervals that she had never had so much fun in her life." As I remember, neither Alice nor the Dormouse had a particularly good time at the Mad Hatter's tea party. On a more heartbreaking and horrific note, Cynthia Kadhota opens *Weedflower* with Sumiko so excited that she has finally been invited to a classmate's party only to find herself sent away by the girl's *mother* when she arrives – in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor.

We want to continue to make sure that ChLA is an ever more open and welcoming party. For the first time this year we selected recipients for our brand new diversity research grant and of course the theme of the conference itself has fostered a three-day long celebration of the diversity of children's literature. We created a brand new award for outstanding mentorship within our organization and selected its inaugural winner. We had a terrific panel on children's literature from Poland, put together through the

tireless efforts of the International Committee. You even elected this philosophy professor as your president. We want to continue to make personal efforts to welcome new members and first-time attendees, rather than simply bustling off with our own best buddies, so that no one has to experience the fate of so many 1950s teen novel heroines, standing alone, a wallflower at the sockhop.

So I've chosen to close these remarks with the refrain of Lewis Carroll's Lobster Quadrille: "Will you, won't you, will you, won't you, will you join the dance? Will you, won't you, will you, won't you, won't you join the dance?" Come join the dance that is our wonderful time together in the Children's Literature Association, and invite as many others as you can to join in, too.