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...."

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 coonial 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 Er. 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 Vie Nam, where I had purchased it shortly before the end of the War in the Chinese sector. I remember 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 Chi A 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, at 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-box 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 Stot, 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 Jereme Guiswold, 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 Narragansett 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. Mine 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 crocuses and hyacinths 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 Aspoff, Kent State University; Margaret Esmonde, Villanova University; Alethea Helbig, Eastern Michigan University; Frances Nelson, Central Michigan University; and Tami 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 bicentennial theme, "America in Children's Books: Children's Books in America." The keynote speaker
was Caldecott Winner Uri Schulevitz, and discussion

groups heartedly 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, Ms. 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 1, 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 Lucens, Miami

University; Stephen Roxburgh, Farrar, Straus &

Ciroux, 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 Stote 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

t 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 his 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. Scott 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 Apseff, 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 Apseff. 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 in 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
Award for excellence in literary criticism was presented to Phyllis Bikler, 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 Tami 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 David 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 Frances 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."
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), Caro 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.

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.