A Tribute to Jeanne Chall

History of Reading News. Vol.XXIII No.2 (2000:Spring)
by Gail Kearns

Editors' Note: *By now most of you know that Jeanne Chall died on November 27, 1999, at her home in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She was 78. Chall's obituary appeared in a number of national publications including* The New York Times *(12/12/99);* The Boston Globe *(12/2/99; and IRA's* Reading Today *(Feb/Mar 2000). Chall wrote about her life's work in reading in a two part series in* History of Reading News *(See Volume XVII, Numbers 1 and 2, Fall 1993 and Spring 1994). Gail Kearns is a former doctoral student and was a close friend of Dr. Chall's.*

Jeanne Chall became friend and mentor to many of her students (including myself) as well as teacher over the years. And when things were bad in reading (as they have been often in this field over the past 20 years!) she hired some of us to work for her when there were no jobs around.

I wrote and gave a presentation speech last May to the Greater Boston IRA. The occasion was to recognize Dr. Chall's lifetime of service to this profession, and the speech and bibliography was supposed to introduce younger members to her work. This was probably the last occasion Dr. Chall ever got to. She died on Thanksgiving weekend.

Dr. Chall loved the old readers. She gave her collection to Harvard some years ago. I, too, have a collection which has been accumulating in plastic storage buckets in my cellar for almost twenty years. When Jeanne was at my house, I would wrestle one of my buckets up the stairs from the cellar and we would "play" with them while dinner cooked!

I discussed Nila Banton Smith with Jeanne about a year ago. She told me that the only thing she didn't like about that book was that it made everything that was new sound so much better than the older things, and that she had not found that to be universally true.

A couple of years ago, I was in North Carolina and discovered the wonderful used bookstores around UNC. I brought back a copy of Noah Webster's *Elementary Speller* and loaned it to Jeanne for a good while. I think she must have had one at one time, but she had given hers ages back to Harvard. She just *loved* poring through this little book and talking about it. In fact, the last thing she wanted me to do for her was find that book for her when she was home from the hospital shortly before she passed away. The last time that I saw her alive was when I put that book into her hands for the last time the week before she died. I do miss her. She was the only person I knew who really *talked* about reading and reading education. I learned a lot from her over the years.

Before Dr. Chall passed away she finished her last book, a major work on achievement, to be published soon by Guilford Press. It is titled *The Academic Achievement Challenge: What* Really *Works in the Classroom*. She completed the book with the help of Mary E. Curtis less than two weeks before her death. Anyone who would like copies of the Tribute and Bibliography I wrote, may contact me at dankear@aol.com.

©2002 History of Reading Special Interest Group. All rights reserved.
www.historyliteracy.org