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**LEADERS IN READING RESEARCH
AND INSTRUCTION**

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AN INTERVIEW WITH NANCY LARRICK

By Bob W. Jerrolds

April 15, 1987

Nancy Larrick (A.B., Goucher College; M.A., Columbia University; Ed.D., New York University; L.L.D., Goucher College; Litt.D., Lehigh University) is a towering figure of our time in Reading Education and Children's Literature. Larrick was Adjunct Professor of Education at Lehigh University for 12 years. She has been Visiting Professor at a great many colleges and universities, including New York University, Bank Street College of Education, Indiana University, Butler University, University of Arizona, Western Washington State University, and Ohio State University. She has lectured at dozens of universities, including University of Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania State University, University of Chicago, University of Georgia, Temple University, Harvard University, Southern Methodist University, and Boston University.

Larrick's influence has reached around the world. She has taught at the University of Nigeria. She has conducted workshops and institutes for teachers in Puerto Rico, Bermuda, Malaysia, and Thailand. She has made presentations at conferences in Tokyo, Hong Kong, Singapore, New Delhi, Calcutta, Bombay, Oxford, and Toronto. Among her many other international activities, she was one of the founders and the second president of the International Reading Association. As president of that organization she initiated the Book and Author Luncheon, and part of the IRA's continuing interest in children's literature and in the people who produce materials for children can be traced to her influence.

Larrick has made enduring contributions to the scholarly literature in reading education. When she became the editor of the Bulletin of the International Council for the Improvement of Reading Instruction, it was part journal and part newsletter, and was produced by multilith and stapled by hand. Under her editorship it became a first-rate professional journal called The Reading Journal. Larrick has written many articles for teachers in that journal and in others including Language Arts, Learning, and School Library Journal.

She has helped to educate the public about reading and reading instruction through articles in Publishers Weekly, Family Circle, Saturday Review, and The New York Times Book Review, and Education Supplement. Her Saturday Review (September 11, 1965) article was a powerful condemnation of "The All-White World of Children's Books", and the title has become a part of the language of protest. She pointed out that, "Across the country, 6,340,000 nonwhite children are learning to read and understand the American way of life in books which either omit them entirely or scarcely mention them."

She has helped educate parents on the subject of their children's reading through her books including: Somebody Turned On a Tap in These Kids: A Parent's Guide to Children's Reading, 5th Edition, total sales now over 1,250,000; Encourage Your Child to Read; and Children's Reading Begins at Home. These latter two books were first published for mass market distribution in the summer of 1980 and have reached total sales of over 500,000.

Larrick has enriched the lives of millions with the materials she has written and edited for children and young people. Among her many contributions are fifteen anthologies of poetry. The most recent is the wonderful When the Dark Comes Dancing.

Q. Who were the influential people in your life as a reader and in your professional life? What do you consider the milestones of your professional life?

A. Your questions are hard to answer! Maybe it is because I find it difficult to separate influence from people and those from experiences and situations. In the field of reading both areas are very extensive for me because I can't remember when I wasn't reading. I have no recollection of being taught to read, no recollection of a time when reading aloud (or being read to) was not part of life, or when ideas were not being tossed around, even torn to shreds. I was brought up in a questioning atmosphere. All of this contributed to and continues to influence my way of life and my way of teaching.

My undergraduate study and work on my Master's degree in English Literature were completed without benefit of courses in Education. Some would say without professional training. Yet these courses and these professors were the foundation and the continuing influence in my work in the field of Reading. This may explain why I have never separated "Reading" from "Literature".

Let me go back to my childhood. My mother had been a Latin teacher, also without benefit of courses in Education. My father was a lawyer whose greatest pleasure was raising questions, punching loopholes in the other fellow's arguments, playing the devil's advocate, even switching sides to get a good argument going. Generalizations were quickly knocked down. The answer to almost any question was debated. I learned that there are few questions with only one right answer.

Both parents read extensively. My father was especially interested in current affairs, scorning such magazines as Reader's Digest ("too immature") and the old Literary Digest ("too superficial"). He devoured The Nation, World's Work and the Sunday New York Times Magazine, as periodicals that had strong original articles with which he might agree or disagree, but which he could get his teeth into.

We lived just two and a half blocks from the public library--a remarkable situation in a Southern town of only 5,000 in the period following World War I--and I visited the library several times a week. I read constantly as did all of my friends. We had no lists to guide us. I recall no advice from adults but lots from my peers. We raced through what I seem to recall as dozens of the "Oz Books", the "Twin Books" by Lucy Fitch Perkins, and animal stories galore. The goal seemed to

be quantity...more, more, more. It was like swimming, the more you did it, the faster you could go and the more fun you had!

My mother's two brothers were world travelers so postcards would arrive, addressed to me, from Hawaii, China, Brazil, Egypt, and out would come the home atlas so we could trace their journeys, check on the general route, and get my father's report on the current political or economic situation in those locations.

When I finished college, I got a job as an eighth grade English teacher in my home town--still no courses in Education and almost no supervision from the school administration. That was during the Great Depression when we had 40 to 45 pupils in each class and taught five classes a day. A provisional certificate enabled me to teach three years without Education credits. To get a real certificate, I had to acquire 30 course credits, three in School Hygiene. With a little luck I was able to take more literature courses, one in Children's Literature (by correspondence). One was Modern American Poetry--one of the greatest, most inspiring courses I ever had...the one that brought me beyond the Elizabethan and Romantic poets I had known so well in undergraduate study to the realism of Carl Sandburg, Robert Frost, Edwin Arlington Robinson and Langston Hughes.

I was lucky to have some remarkable teachers, chiefly in undergraduate and graduate courses in Literature and History. The ones I remember most warmly are those who cast aside the lecture-listen pattern and drew us into discussion, oral reports, and individual projects that sent us to such great libraries as the Peabody Library of Baltimore, the New York Public Library Theatre Section, and the Columbia University Library.

In 1942 I left classroom teaching and went into editing children's magazines and, later, children's books. Then I began to take courses to try to find out more about how children learn, what they like to read and can read, what inspires them to read, and so on. I was living in New York by that time and came to know some of the great leaders in the field of Education: Roma Gans, Leland Jacobs, and Irving Lorge at Teachers College; Alice Keliher, Bob Spier, Rose Lammel, Lou LaBrant, Frances Mayfarth, Jan Veatch, and Alvina Burrows at NYU; Claudia Lewis and Barbara Biber at Bank Street. Through professional organizations, my circle widened to include such greats as Virginia Reid in California, Paul Witty at Northwestern, Charlotte Huck at Ohio State, and Bill Martin, Jr. of everywhere. At the same time I was meeting school librarians from across the country and watching them at work, successfully bringing children and reading into a happy alliance.

In the book publishing world, I met and worked with leading editors of children's books, worked with authors and illustrators, got feedback from children and adults about books being published, tried to bring teachers and publishers together through joint meetings of professional organizations. Such collaboration was unknown in the forties and early fifties.

So the people who have influenced me have been many and varied. Among the most important have been the in-service teachers and librarians in my university classes in Children's Literature and Poetry for Children, chiefly at Lehigh University where I taught for ten years plus several summers. Those were years of experimentation--trying innovative ways of reaching teachers and encouraging them to try

innovative ways of involving children in reading and the other language arts. Each in-service teacher or librarian was asked to find a "junior reading partner"--a child from whom to learn what children can read and like to read, how they respond to various books, and how to get them happily involved in reading.

Teaching techniques we tried out as adults in university classes were replicated or adapted for classes of children under the direction of students in my university classes. Classroom projects with children were often taped for reports to university classes, for discussion, suggestions, and often for later adaptation in other classes.

We found that in-service teachers and librarians read more children's books when the books were transported in bulk to the university classroom for instant borrowing instead of being checked out one by one through the university's main library across campus where reshelving often took a week to ten days. Summer school classes were held in a school library where books were within reach for classroom discussion, comparison, and borrowing. Having stacks of poetry paperbacks on sale in the Poetry Workshop made many teachers into poetry lovers.

Poems and stories were remembered with deeper feeling and greater understanding when these adults became physically involved through dramatization, choral reading, chanting, debating, taping, etc. Shared projects and activities brought even the most reticent and retiring into enthusiastic participation.

I think I can easily say that my students have had the greatest influence on my way of teaching. Surely my eighth graders from the decade of

the thirties taught me more than I taught them. Now after 38 years I am back in my home town, scene of my "student teaching" on the payroll as an eighth-grade teacher (annual pay: \$1,094). Today many of those former eighth graders are leading citizens in our town--the mayor, the first woman president of the school board, a bank president, leading doctors and businessmen. They have given me a marvelous welcome, often refer to the time "when we were in school together", and include me in all sorts of social and civic events. A nice homecoming!

Q. You have an incredible record of achievements and awards in our field, but what contributions are you most proud of?

A. You and your readers must decide whether they are worthy of being called "contributions", but I can think of four at the moment.

1. Directing attention to the urgency of including parents and the home in the whole field of children's reading. I have written several widely distributed publications in this field: A Parent's Guide to Children's Reading and Encourage Your Child to Read. When my Parent's Guide was first published, there was nothing of this sort in the field--down-to-earth, simple enough for the low-income parent to read, full of practical suggestions.

2. Focusing on the deplorable lack of ethnic diversity in children's books through a widely discussed article in Saturday Review, "The All-White World of Children's Books".

3. Increasing interest in poetry for children through editing numerous and widely varied anthologies of poetry for young readers (15 have been published, three others are under contract) and demonstrating ways to draw children into active involvement in poetry through spontaneous choral reading, body movement, chanting, etc.

4. Learning about and advising on publication, distribution, and use of children's books in other countries. (I have taught in Nigeria, Puerto Rico, and Bermuda; I have lectured in England, New Zealand, Japan, Southeast Asia, India). Twice I have been sent overseas to represent the U.S. Information Agency (part of the State Department): at the Singapore International Book Fair and the New Delhi International Book Fair; in both assignments I have given lectures, taken part in seminars, met with authors, illustrators, librarians, teachers, publishers, booksellers and book distributors. Similar work was done in Malaysia and Thailand. In India, the New Delhi assignment was expanded to include similar work in Calcutta and Bombay.

Q. What are your present and future projects?

A. Two additional anthologies of poetry for young readers are now with publishers for their consideration. A major work for adults (parents, teachers, librarians) will suggest ways to get young people involved in poetry through singing, impromptu choral reading, body movement, and dramatization with 100 to 150 poems included as examples of those which can be used effectively.