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Charlotte Huck—Children's Literature in the Classroom

Author(s): MARILYN CARPENTER and BARBARA PETERSON

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# Charlotte Huck—Children's Literature in the Classroom

MARILYN CARPENTER

BARBARA PETERSON<sup>1</sup>

546

What motivates someone to set about helping to create the field of children's literature? How might that person think about children's books? How might that love of children's literature become so compelling that the person becomes an author of children's books herself? Marilyn Carpenter and Barbara Peterson develop these and other insights into one such person, Charlotte Huck, recipient of the NCTE Award for Outstanding Educator in the Language Arts. This award, proposed by the Elementary Section Steering Committee of NCTE, recognizes a distinguished educator who has made major contributions to the field of language arts in elementary education. In order to win the award, one must have (a) dramatically influenced classroom practice, (b) made ongoing contributions to the field of language arts, (c) obtained national and/or international influence, and (d) contributed a body of work that is compatible with the mission of NCTE.



Charlotte Huck will receive the third NCTE Award for Outstanding Educator in Language Arts for her many contributions to the field of language arts. Our personal stories exemplify the contributions she has made to individual lives. Barbara first knew Charlotte through her children's teachers, many of whom had been Charlotte's students at Ohio State. Barbara, a children's librarian,

was so impressed with these teachers' knowledge of children's literature and with her own children's enthusiasm for school that she began her doctoral studies with Charlotte.

Marilyn, an education consultant, first met Charlotte when she came to California to speak at the Claremont Reading Conference. After implementing ideas from various editions of the textbook, *Children's Literature in the Elementary School*, Marilyn was eager to ask all of the questions that had arisen while working with teachers and children. Later, when Charlotte moved to California, it was Marilyn's joy to meet her at conferences where the two were able to deepen their friendship. At a time in California when there was a great zeal for moving to literature-based instruction, Charlotte offered wise advice and a wealth of ideas that supported Marilyn in her work. When Marilyn decided to begin her Ph.D. studies at the University of Arizona, it was Charlotte who again offered support.

When we learned that Charlotte had received the award for Outstanding Educator in the Language Arts, we were thrilled to have the opportunity to go to California to interview her for this article. With her permission, we have woven some of her comments from past articles into the interview.<sup>2</sup>

Some of the facts about Charlotte's life will provide an illuminating background for readers. She is a professor emerita in the College of Education at Ohio State University, where she joined the faculty in 1955. She specialized in elementary education with particular emphasis on the teaching of children's literature and the development of early literacy.

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Charlotte was born in Evanston, Illinois. She and her twin sister were the youngest of five girls. She graduated from New Trier High School in Winnetka, Illinois. She received her B.S., M.A., and Ph.D. degrees from Northwestern University. She taught for seven years in the elementary schools of Missouri and Illinois, and then joined the faculty of Northwestern, serving as an instructor in education while working on her advanced degree.

From the single course in children's literature that existed at Ohio State when she started teaching there, she built a nationally known program that offers specialization in children's literature at the M.A. and Ph.D. levels. Charlotte has played a key role in other programs and research efforts over three decades, including the OSU Critical Reading Project of the 1960s and the development of EPIC, a teacher preparation plan emphasizing an integrated curriculum that began in the 1970s. More recently, she was instrumental in establishing the Ohio Reading Recovery project and the Ohio Early Literacy Project.

Many presentations and publications have helped to take Charlotte's influence beyond the Ohio State community, particularly her college text, *Children's Literature in the Elementary School* and *The WEB (Wonderfully Exciting Books)*, a review quarterly that she founded at Ohio State in 1976. She has served NCTE in many capacities, including Chair of the Elementary Education Section and national president. She also served the American Library Association as Chair of the Caldecott Committee and has contributed her time to many other professional organizations, boards, and commissions.

Among the many honors Charlotte has received are the Ohio State University Distinguished Teaching Award (1972), the Landau Award for Distinguished Service in Teaching Children's Literature (1979), and the 1987 NCTE Distinguished Service Award. In 1988, the International Reading Association honored her with the Arbuthnot Award, which recognizes an outstanding university teacher of children's literature. She was also elected to the Reading Hall of Fame in that same year. She has been honored by the Ohio Department of Education for her efforts with Reading Recovery and by the faculty of the College of Education at Indiana University for her "Outstanding Contributions to the Development of Literacy." In 1996, the Ohio State University established the Charlotte S. Huck Children's Literature Professorship, the first endowed children's literature professorship in the United States.

MARILYN: Tell us about your personal reading history. What books did you enjoy as a child? Did anyone read to you or tell you stories? Did you share books with your sisters?

CHARLOTTE: Both my father and my mother read to me, but they read different things. My father used to read us something called *Fifty Famous Stories*

by Baldwin. I can still hear his voice reading about William Tell and "Androcles and the Lion." Mother also read to us. One of the first books that she read was Dorothy Aldis's *Jane's Father*. It was in chapters and was a very funny story. Dorothy Aldis lived not too far from us and had five children, including twins. I just thought she was writing for me because they were poems about twins and I was a twin! There was another book, *The Black-eyed Puppy*, by Katherine Pyle that I loved that one to hear over and over again. There was lots and lots of reading aloud. I can't remember a Christmas or a birthday when my sisters and I didn't each receive a book. Upstairs, we had a very large hall with two five foot bookcases that were filled with children's books. Almost all of them had my sisters' names on them, but I really didn't care because I got to read all those books.

I remember learning to read with folktales. (Luckily, I missed learning to read with Dick and Jane!) Our primer was filled with stories like "Little Red Riding Hood" and "Cinderella." I did read the twins series by Lucy Fitch Perkins. The one I particularly loved was *The Scotch Twins* because we had ancestors from Scotland. Then I graduated to reading *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett and all of Louisa May Alcott's books. My twin sister and I used to argue over which books we loved the most. We always read books and we always talked about them.

Every summer we went to northern Wisconsin where Mother would read aloud to us. I remember she read us *Smoky the Cow Horse*, and *Beautiful Joe*, a book from her childhood. I read all the books about collies by Albert Payson Terhune. Maybe that's why I have a sheltie today. When we bought our summer cabin, we found all the Zane Grey and *Tarzan* books there. I devoured these, too. I can't remember a time when I wasn't involved in reading a book.

BARBARA: How did your reading history influence your teaching? Describe the role of literature in your classroom when you were an elementary teacher. How did you share your love of books with your students?

CHARLOTTE: Reading was a part of my life that I so thoroughly enjoyed that I wanted children to have the same opportunities. This became my main goal for teaching children and later, college students. For example, my first classroom had an

extra little cloakroom which we turned into a reading room with a rocking chair and books.

At another school where I taught, we had a library with a full-time librarian who made books available for classroom. I encouraged children to check out books and take them home to read. I always had what we now call an SSR time every afternoon. I also bought books for my class like *Horton Hatches the Egg* by Dr. Seuss and *Make Way for Ducklings* by Robert McCloskey. Students in my elementary classes never did worksheets or book reports for every book, but we did discuss books and we shared favorite ones. Books were a major part of my teaching.

BARBARA: What led you to develop the children's literature program at Ohio State?

CHARLOTTE: I created the program that I wished I'd had! I was a student at Northwestern University during World War II. At the beginning of the children's literature class, Dr. Paul Witty walked in wearing his colonel's uniform and announced that the class was canceled. Since there were no graduate courses in children's literature at Northwestern, I never had a course in children's literature. When I was supervising student teachers, I tried to generate excitement about the books. Later, I was invited to teach a primary reading course, in which I incorporated a lot of children's literature.

When I was interviewed at Ohio State, I was asked what I would like to teach. I said I'd like to teach children's literature. However, that course already had an instructor. I thought that's all right, I've brought books into everything else I've done. Then Ohio State grew quickly from 20,000 to 50,000. We had so many students we had to have two sections, so I was finally able to teach children's literature.

Later, when Janet Hickman was a doctoral student, we developed the concept of mini-courses. They were for one-hour credit and over a short period of time. The topics included fantasy, poetry, and historical fiction. These were later accepted as full-time courses. We also taught Ph.D. seminars in alternate years on the history of children's literature and trends and issues in children's literature. These courses were then accepted as one strand of a three-part major for Ph.D. students. While at Ohio State, I advised over 30 Ph.D. students,

who are now teaching throughout the United States, Canada, and Australia. I also had a large number of master's students.

BARBARA: What theorists have helped shape your thinking about the teaching of literature at the college level? How and why?

CHARLOTTE: I'm smiling about this question because the theorists weren't out there when I started teaching children's literature. Louise Rosenblatt was, but she had very little influence on me because we had no literature in the elementary schools at the time. Louise Rosenblatt spoke to the high school teachers who were requiring a "correct" interpretation of a literary text. My job was just to get the literature into the elementary schools. I paid more attention to people in reading like David Russell, Jeanette Veatch, Russell Stauffer, and the child development researchers like Piaget and Willard Olsen. Then Frank Smith affirmed what I believed, namely that one learns to read by reading.

BARBARA: Did these theorists help you to reshape or simply confirm what you had been believing and practicing your whole career?

CHARLOTTE: I think usually they confirmed. One of the intriguing things about this field is you can still grow. Literature-based teaching is not really a brand-new thing. We have had movements in this country that have emphasized using "real books" prior to the whole language programs. At about the time I was working on my Ph.D.,

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there was a great deal of emphasis on individualized reading from Jeanette Veach. I think, with all the current criticism of whole language, we may see the demise of its name but not its philosophy. It will come back again in another form. We've had progressive education, we've had informal education. They all shared a common focus—what does a child

know and how can we build on that knowledge? That's what you can't test. How do you test a love of reading?

MARILYN: Why do you think the movement toward a literature-based curriculum gained so much momentum in the late 1980s?

CHARLOTTE: You have to credit the grassroots movement of whole language—teachers teaching teachers through the TAWL groups, for example. I think they did a great deal to generate interest in topics that some of us were speaking about much earlier. When teachers send out a message, it is more effective. The TAWLs and other support groups were local and so they were even more important because you could call friends and ask questions. That's what didn't happen in California. Whole language was instigated by a top-down decree. Many teachers knew little about it and there were very few inservice courses and few school libraries. Of course, it failed.

When you're my age, you've lived through the history of reading and you can see the cycles. It does happen in cycles and, while it seems that we're returning to a very skills oriented approach, I have great faith that we will eventually be going back to developing readers through real experiences with literature. At this point, our biggest challenge is to help teachers know why they are teaching the way they are. We have increased our knowledge of the language and cognitive development of children. At the same time, we are cutting back on courses in education. It doesn't make sense. Teachers need to stand up and say, "This is why I'm teaching the way I'm teaching." However, they first need to be educated about the research and theories behind their practice. I always go back to the training that medical doctors receive. The public wants them to keep up with all the research, they just insist on it. It's equally true in education. We haven't been standing still, we've been learning, gaining new knowledge and developing new theories. Teachers need to have more than just refresher courses, they need periodically to take a year to renew their understandings.

I can remember a graduate student who was teaching third grade. She said, "Every time I read aloud, my principal walks by and I know he's going to ask me why I'm reading aloud." I asked, "What are you going to tell

him?" She said "Well, I just don't know what he'll say." I asked, "What does the research show on reading aloud?" She replied, "Oh, you mean I should tell him that?" I said, "Absolutely, quote it!" She did! And he was very interested. At the next faculty meeting, he turned to her and said, "Sally I want you to tell the group what you told me about the research on reading aloud." Then he suggested that all of the teachers take 20 minutes to read aloud each day. If she hadn't pointed out to her principal why she was reading aloud, the rest of the teachers wouldn't have begun the practice.

MARILYN: Who are some of your favorite authors and illustrators? You told me this morning that Madeleine L'Engle had slept in the bed I did last night!

CHARLOTTE: Well, I love Madeleine L'Engle's books, but not all of them are for children. I think *A Ring of Endless Light* and *A Wrinkle in Time* are her best children's books. Katherine Paterson's writing is simply superb. In fact, I think she should have gotten a third Newbery for *Jip: His Story*. I love

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picture books and appreciate their writing. I think picture books are almost like poetry—difficult to write and do it well. *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse*, by Kevin Henkes, is a wonderful example, humorous, yet reflective of children's real concerns. He also writes for middle grade children, including *Words in Stone* and *Protecting Marie*. He's a fine writer, besides being an outstanding illustrator who has a delightful sense of humor. I love Mollie Hunter's books from Scotland. Her fantasy, such as *A Stranger Came Ashore* and *The Mermaid Summer*, intrigue children with their mystery. Ursula Le Guin's *Earth Sea* quartet is outstanding. Lois Lowry's *The Giver* is a genius of a book. I have never got more discussion from children about a book. Patricia Polacco has also been a favorite

of mine. Now I am a character in one of her picture books—*Aunt Chip & the Great Triple Creek Dam Affair!* Aunt Chip is the nickname my nieces have given me.

I feel very fortunate to have had Anita Lobel illustrate two of my books. I'm fascinated with what she says about her art and the thinking process that goes into her illustrations. Being interested in drama, she frequently conceives of a story as taking place on a stage. If you think about it, many of her illustrations begin with the curtains drawn back as if to begin a play. I also love Jean George's books. She's a naturalist who writes wonderful survival stories, such as *Julie of the Wolves*. *My Side of the Mountain* still fascinates children, even after 25 years.

BARBARA: What are your views about the changes in recent years in trade book publishing for children?

CHARLOTTE: We are seeing a trend in the publication of "safe" books and less variety in trade books for children. I think this is because of the consolidation of publishers with large conglomerates that emphasize profit only. At one time, libraries purchased 80% of newly published books. Now it's less than 50%. Consequently, parents who don't know very much about children's literature select books by covers or by the accompanying gimmicks. I'm delighted parents are buying books, but it does mean a difference in the kinds of books published. It also means that children whose parents can't afford books are being denied the opportunity. Also, because of the elimination of inventory tax breaks on warehoused books, children's books go out of print almost as quickly as adult books. This is serious, because it takes a children's book longer to find its audience.

MARILYN: I've noticed lately that many of the review copies I receive are poorly edited. Some time ago, when I had lunch with Maurice Sendak, he commented that the nurturing and schooling he had received from his first editor, Ursula Nordstrom, is sadly lacking for many of today's new authors.

CHARLOTTE: Yes, we do not have as good editing as we used to have. Some books are being written with the idea that television will pick them up. I'm so lucky, because the few books I've written have been published by Greenwillow. My editor, Susan Hirschman, has so much integrity. She

never changes a word without a discussion with the author. And she rejects a great number of books simply because she knows what she and Greenwillow do best.

MARILYN: What is it that you think makes a book memorable? And what are some children's books you think are memorable?

CHARLOTTE: It is always a book you want to read again. I think plotting and character development are very important. I've reflected on why I liked rereading *The Secret Garden* so many times. I think it was that I wanted to experience the feeling that book gave me again and again. I wanted to be frightened, then reassured. I think *The Giver* is a memorable book that readers are going to reread. Other books I consider memorable are: *Sarah, Plain and Tall*, *A Ring of Endless Light*, *Bridge to Terabithia*, *Tuck Everlasting*, and *A Wizard of Earthsea*. There are so many that it is hard to name them all.

A memorable book has a plot that keeps you turning the pages, characters that you admire or feel you could crawl in to their skin, it has feelings and emotions that echo again and again. There's so much a well-written book can do, but it's got to tap the emotions of the child.

BARBARA: What have you learned from your students, and how have your students continued your legacy?

CHARLOTTE: I have learned a terrific amount from my students, but it's hard to say specifically. I learned what their responses to books are. I learned

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how to help students who'd never read a book become interested in reading. I even had one Ph.D. student who had not read any children's literature until she had a course with me. I had other students who came with a wide reading background, so one of the things I had to learn was how to adapt my teaching to the individual needs of my students. I also had the greatest

admiration for those students who were working their way through college, which I didn't have to do, and were carrying heavy loads of teaching coupled with their actual work. I learned to respect my students tremendously and respect their desire to learn. It was my joy to teach and introduce them to new books and ways of sharing books with children.

MARILYN: In your writings, you often use the phrase "bring children and books together," instead of saying, share or use books with children. It would be interesting to know how that came about.

CHARLOTTE: It's an umbrella term to talk about all the different ways you would use books. I want teachers to think about using books in all their teaching. I believe that if you present the right books to children, they will read and enjoy them. So, bringing children and books together really means getting them excited about reading, and there are many ways of doing that. However, some teachers get off track by asking too many questions and having a set group of activities that, in many ways, destroys the uniqueness of the book, instead of having trust in the book and in the children's responses. Never would I say that you had to do a project with every book.

MARILYN: There's something you've said—if you haven't acted on a book, you can't—what's the rest of that?

CHARLOTTE: That is a quote from Piaget who said, "To know an object is to act upon it and transform it." To make a book memorable to yourself, you do need to act upon it, to take it into yourself, revisit it, discuss it, reflect upon it. I think a wide variety of extensions will help a child to find more in a book. It is popular to say that, as an adult, I don't want to make a diorama of a book. But, if you have enjoyed it, you do talk about it. And, if you are ten years old, you may enjoy creating a model or a diorama of the story—something to take you more deeply into the book.

BARBARA: What was the genesis of your textbook, *Children's Literature in the Elementary School*? How has the field responded to the various editions?

CHARLOTTE: The genesis was fun. I had started teaching children's literature and loved it. I had had an office with Doris Young at Northwestern and we'd shared many ideas about books. We de-

cided to write a textbook about children's literature emphasizing the ways literature can enrich teaching and the curriculum. We met at a place called The Huddle, which was where everyone went at Northwestern, and we talked about what we could do in such a book. We outlined the whole book on a napkin, but we lost the napkin! I've always wanted that napkin back. In the summer of 1958, before I went to Europe for the first time, we wrote the first chapter of the last section, which was about using children's literature in the classroom. In fact, we wrote two chapters, and we wrote them word by word together in my backyard. The only book out at the time was May Hill Arbuthnot's *Children and Books*, which was used as a bible in children's literature classes. No one could fault her critical reviews of books, they were superb, but she never described how to work with literature in the classroom. That's what we thought was missing.

There were some principles we laid down with the first edition, which we have carried on. One of them was that we wanted to show children and books from various ethnic backgrounds. At that time, which seems hard to believe now, no texts in reading or children's literature pictured African American or Hispanic children. The second principle was that we wanted to include children's work and give them and their teachers credit.

After Doris died, I wrote the third edition by myself. Janet Hickman and Susan Hepler worked with me on the fourth and fifth editions, and Barbara Kiefer recently completed the sixth edition. Each had been a Ph.D. student of mine. Each edition reflected what was going on at the time in education. People responded very well, for it was a book that was really needed. It continues to be used widely, although there are many more texts to choose from today.

MARILYN: When we bring children and books together, what are the ways in which we can encourage lifelong practices with reading?

CHARLOTTE: The best thing you can do is to read aloud to children. There's a study reported in *Becoming a Nation of Readers* which concludes that the single most important activity for building a child's eventual success in reading is reading aloud. Start as early as possible.

The second best thing to do as a teacher is to give your students time to read. When

Daniel Fader wrote *Hooked on Books*, he worked with boys in a training school for delinquents in Michigan. For a whole year he just let them read anything they wanted, but they had to read. They could read magazines, comic books, series books. Most were non-readers, but they gained three grade levels in reading without formal instruction by reading what they wanted to read.

There was a recent article by Vartan Gregorian in *Parade Magazine*. He has just been made head of the Carnegie Corporation. He wrote that we should recognize that too much television has a terrible effect on children's reading. He suggested that we consider making television a chore rather than an amusement by requiring students to write papers about the programs. All I could think of was, that's what many teachers have done. They've required kids to write a book report on every book they've read, thus penalizing them for reading books. It's so simple. You've got to read books in order to become a fluent reader. Frequently, you have to have somebody who brings the book and the child together, and that person can be a teacher, a parent, a wonderful librarian, someone to get them going. Reading is a passion, and it's sharing your passion.

BARBARA: Would you tell us something about your various roles when you were involved in NCTE?

CHARLOTTE: I was chair of the Elementary Section and, later, president. I did many things that I enjoyed. We brought some authors and illustrators to sessions at the annual conference. That was the first time, other than the Children's Literature Luncheon, that we'd ever had children's authors at the conference. I suggested, and we passed the idea of having a Spring Conference. At first, it was only for the Elementary Section; later it was opened up to all sections. I also convinced the board that we needed a poetry award, because there wasn't an award for the poets of childhood at that time. It's gone to such fine poets who wouldn't be recognized otherwise, and I really feel good about it. The award also brought poetry to the attention of teachers, which I think was important.

BARBARA: Tell us about the beginnings of *The WEB*.

CHARLOTTE: Again, *The WEB* started because I wanted to get teachers involved in bringing children and books together. The idea of a web came out of

a social studies text that I had seen in England. I thought it was a wonderful way to explore a whole realm of possibilities with a book, with a genre, or with an author, so I started teaching webbing in my classes. Then it occurred to me that we needed a publication that stressed what could be done with literature in the classroom. Who could tell us better than teachers who were actually involved? We asked teachers to review books and write descriptions of the many wonderful things their students had done with books in their classrooms. And there was a web in each edition. At one time, we had over 3000 subscriptions to *The WEB*. We started in 1979, but they're about to discontinue it now. I'm sad about it, but I realize a publication demands hours of time.

BARBARA: Could you tell us more about the development of the Children's Literature Conference at Ohio State?

CHARLOTTE: My colleague, Martha King, and I had always put on a reading conference, but we only would have one children's book author. I always thought that was an unfair distribution! I don't know how I got brave enough, but one year I just decided that we were going to have a Children's Literature Conference. What I tried to do was to bring forward-looking people together from different fields. We connected professors of reading, children's literature, and language arts with editors and literary critics, authors and illustrators of children's books, classroom teachers, and librarians. We started with about 500 participants. It has since become an annual event and now registration has to be cut off at about 2000. We've had perfectly wonderful authors and illustrators talking about their work. Also, classroom teachers and librarians always present small sessions about how they bring books and children together. Children's work is always displayed. I think it's about the only conference I know where children's interpretations of literature are shown. It's a very exciting conference!

BARBARA: Tell us about your new career as a children's author.

CHARLOTTE: Oh, that's such fun. I never knew how much fun it would be. I've always wanted to write my favorite fairy tale because it never had been published as a picture book. It was a story of a gutsy Cinderella, who didn't rely on a fairy

godmother, but on her own resources. I thought children should know about it. I went to the Loughborough Children's Literature Conference in Tennessee, which was an international conference. Susan Hirschman, senior editor of *Greenwillow*, was there and I told her my favorite fairy tale, "Furball." She said, "You're going to write this!" However, I was so busy at the time that it was put off until two years after I retired. Then I did some research on "Furball" and went to my cabin in the mountains and wrote and rewrote it. Finally, I sent it off to *Greenwillow*. Susan accepted it and asked Anita Lobel to do the illustrations. When I got the galley of the book with the colored pictures, I was thrilled with them. Anita renamed the book. I'd sent it in as "Furball," but somebody asked Anita what she was working on. She answered that she was working on this wonderful story with the dreadful name of "Furball." Anita had cats so she knew about furballs, but I knew nothing about them. Susan called me to ask how I felt about changing the title to *Princess Furball*. I replied that it will always be "Furball" to me, but if she wanted to name it *Princess Furball*, that would be all right. Since then, I've become very attached to *Princess Furball*, and now I think of the story as *Princess Furball*.

The original Grimm version included the princess' demand for a coat of a thousand furs, so I kept it in also. Surprisingly, we were deluged with letters for about two months from animal rights groups. They all went on and on about how this wasn't a book for children. They said it was an advertisement for the fur industry. I couldn't believe some of the letters or the anger in them, saying the book should be banned and withdrawn immediately. What interested me was that I'd always talked about censorship, and now I was part of it. *Greenwillow* wrote a very nice reply saying that this was, after all, a fairy tale that took place in the 15th century when people had to kill animals for food and for clothing. It was an unsettling experience, but despite it, *Princess Furball* has been very popular. I've gotten wonderful letters from children, a hand-made Furball Christmas ornament, and a photograph of a little girl dressed up as Furball for Halloween. It seems to be a book that pleases six, seven, and eight year olds as much as it delighted me as a child.

*Toads and Diamonds* also illustrated by Anita Lobel hasn't been out long enough to get feed-

back other than good reviews. When I've shared it with kids, they've loved it. I also selected poems for a poetry collection called *Secret Places*, illustrated by Lindsay Barrett George. In my course in poetry, I asked my students to create poetry cycles. I gave them poems I had collected about secret places as a sample. Many of them shared these poems with children, and reported how much they liked them because they all had secret places. So I knew these poems really tapped children's interests.

MARILYN: Tell us about your new book.

CHARLOTTE: It's a Halloween countdown book written in verse. It's completely different from anything that I've done. It starts with one lone scarecrow standing all alone on a hill and it builds up to ten little mice feeling brave enough to say "boo!" Then the laughing mice scamper to their nest and the rest of the Halloween characters go back to their lairs. Joseph Smith is doing the illustrations. The plan is for it to be published in the Fall of 1998.

BARBARA: Tell us about what else you've been doing in your retirement, in addition to your writing.

CHARLOTTE: Friends have said they hoped I would start my retirement soon! But first I had to work on the fifth edition of the textbook for two years, writing every single day. When I finished that project, I brought together a group of teachers who still meet once a month to share children's books. It is really fun and keeps me up on new books. I also have a writing group that meets once a month. There are only four of us. We have dinner together, and then we critique each other's writing.

The Redlands Public library keeps me very busy. I'm chair of the Friends of the Children's Library Committee. I suggested that we start a story hour on Tuesday evening to attract working parents and their children. Between 16 and 24 little children regularly come. I read aloud about once a month and other volunteers also participate. It's exactly what I hoped it would be, a chance for working parents to bring their children to a special story time.

We also wanted to promote the importance of reading aloud to babies. Working with the local hospital, the library donates two books to every Redlands newborn, one for the children, *Goodnight Moon* by Margaret Wise Brown and one for the parents, *Reading and Writing: Where*

*It All Begins, Helping Your Children at Home* (prepared by the Literacy Connection, Columbus Ohio). The Friends also brought Jim Trelease to speak and we had 300 people attend.

Then, we've just finished a wonderful first Children's Literature Festival at the University of Redlands. We had Jean Craighead George, Kevin Henkes, Anita Lobel, Susan Hirschman, Eve Bunting, and Gary Soto as the speakers. This conference was modeled after the Ohio State conference, but much smaller. We got rave reviews about the conference and how much everyone enjoyed it, so we're already planning for next year.

MARILYN: What is your response to the current crisis in California and other parts of the country?

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**The whole crisis in California is,  
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CHARLOTTE: Let me take that part about California first. The whole crisis in California is, as far as I'm concerned, political. It's based on legislators who refuse to face up to the fact that our schools need a great deal more money. It's so much easier to point the finger at a method, and blame that method for our children's poor test scores. California test scores are down at the bottom, 50th in the states, for fourth-grade reading. The politicians are blaming this decline on whole language and the use of trade books instead of instruction in phonics. Well, that is the most simplistic explanation that I've ever heard! There are other explanations for what's wrong with the California schools. Until recently, the state had the largest classes in the union. We have the largest number non-English speaking students of any state in the union. Over 50% of the student population come from single parent homes. And, most importantly, we have very few school libraries or librarians. Additionally, some communities have no public libraries. Where there are libraries, the collections are usually outdated. Most teachers have not taken courses in children's literature and adequate staff development is lacking. Many schools are crumbling,

in a terrible physical state. Teacher preparation is very poor. I think we have to recognize that teaching is a profession and that we must offer professional courses that have substance. We have solid knowledge about how children learn, and we should be teaching it.

MARILYN: Do you have any recommendations for how your colleagues in the teaching profession can respond to attacks by politicians?

CHARLOTTE: I think we have to become much more political than we've ever been. Having legislators determine curriculum is the wrong direction for education. The only way to combat this trend is to unite as teachers, either through our large associations like NCTE or IRA, or our local groups. We must be willing to testify at legislative hearings, otherwise legislators will be acting on false information. The voice of teachers should be heard more frequently than that of politicians! We have to be much more savvy and intelligent about what we're doing, and speak up for our rights. This is a political world.

MARILYN: What are your predictions for the future of children's literature?

CHARLOTTE: A major concern is about the role of computers. Again, legislators may think that a computer in every classroom will avoid the necessity of providing books and libraries. I believe that we have to give children books before bytes! Many of the lessons I see designed for the computer are simply interactive workbooks.

My next concern is about politics invading education. It is a real threat that teachers' input may be lost, while principals, superintendents, legislators, and publishers tell us how to teach. That will be a very sad day for the United States, for children are our future.

BARBARA: What advice do you have for those of us who are convinced that literature-based curriculum is powerful?

CHARLOTTE: Teachers need to be strong advocates of what they know is best for kids. They also need to be demanding. What would happen if, when teachers were hired, they said, "I won't teach here if you don't have a library"? I think we've got to have some standards and say what makes teaching effective. We could lay down some minimal standards about what we need. Certainly, they would include small classes, well-trained teachers, and an abundance of teaching materials.

The time has come to stand together. Otherwise, we're going to lose out in the current political atmosphere. There are certain things we know that we can agree on in the teaching of reading and language arts. For example, we know reading aloud and having a rich environment of books makes a major difference. We know giving children time to read helps them become fluent readers. We know about the rich relationship between reading and writing. These are a few of the things we can agree upon. We must have adequate pre-service and inservice courses in reading, language arts, and children's literature. Currently, one semester course that includes all three of these subjects is acceptable for a teaching credential in California. I would hope NCTE and IRA would provide leadership that can unite the different factions in our field. It goes back to being firmly grounded in education and research, then getting together as a group and saying, "This is what we want and no less."

**I think we have to become much more political . . . Having legislators determine curriculum is the wrong direction for education. The only way to combat this trend is to unite as teachers, either through our large associations like NCTE or IRA or our local groups.**

MARILYN: What are your hopes for how teachers can continue to bring children and books together?

CHARLOTTE: I would hope the profession would alert whole communities to the importance of books so they would stand behind public libraries and school libraries. As far as teachers are concerned, I would hope that they would have a minimum of one course in children's literature. I would like teachers to be able to explain to parents how they are teaching and why. I would hope that would bring respect back to the teachers. I want to really raise the quality of teacher preparation.

Now, for bringing children and books together, if we give children opportunities to discover how wonderful the books are, the books will speak for themselves as children respond

to them. But, if we want children to become avid readers, we must have teachers who love reading.

I think one tremendously hopeful sign is the increase of children's bookstores. I can remember when there were about three in the country. Now, we have over 700. That tells me that one group of parents is buying books for their children. However, these are the ones that can afford them. We need to have somebody to give us money, like Andrew Carnegie, for the ones that don't have money for books. That was the intention of Mrs. McNamara when she started Reading Is Fundamental, that if a child owned a book it would make a difference. I think children need to be fed, but right along with that, is the fact that they've got to have food for their souls. That's the role of books.

In conclusion, we need to have a vision of what we can become. We have the knowledge to teach every child to read, and teachers want every child to learn to read and to love reading. We must not allow the politicians and publishers to take over our schools. Teachers today are strong enough to fight for what they know is best for children. Teachers have made a difference. They can continue to make a difference in the future.



### Notes

1. The authors would like to thank Martha Ehrsam at NCTE for transcribing the tapes of this interview.
2. We spent two days with Charlotte in her lovely home in Redlands. We found new insights and inspiration as we listened to her eloquent language and focused on the themes of her career and life. We were surrounded by her books, original art from children's books, and colorful quilts. Filled with Charlotte's delicious home-cooked food, especially her famous brownies, we had a delightful conversation.

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- Barbara Peterson was a Ph.D. student studying under Charlotte Huck. Currently, she is the librarian at Tully Elementary Accelerated Magnet School in Tucson, Arizona. Marilyn Carpenter recently completed her Ph.D. at the University of Arizona and is an Education Consultant in Children's Literature and Reading.