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An Interview with Gloria Whelan

Dwight Blubaugh with
Jonna Leyrer, Kayla Paul, and MacKenzie Spillner

It was a once-in-a-lifetime event for three fourth graders, a face-to-face interview with children's author Gloria Whelan at her home near Mancelona, Michigan. Jonna Leyrer, Kayla Paul, and MacKenzie Spillner beat out their classmates by reading the most Whelan books in their North-western Elementary School classroom, earning them the opportunity to travel with their teacher and two chaperones to Ms. Whelan's home.

Gloria Whelan is the author of 23 children's books and three books for adults. Her most recent novel, *Homeless Bird*, won the National Book Award / Children's Division this past fall. This prestigious award carries a \$10,000 prize. The novel also made the *New York Times* bestseller list. *Homeless Bird*, set in India, tells the story of Koly, a 13-year-old bride who soon becomes a widow and must live with her late husband's family. She is treated as an outcast by her mother-in-law, who eventually takes her to a city for widows and abandons her there. She must learn to survive and find her way through life in a city of strangers.

Ms. Whelan's rustic log home sits at the end of a half-mile long, twisting driveway. It is surrounded by forest, and on three sides by Oxbow Lake. The Whelans had the home built in the early 1960s and used it as a cottage until 1973, when they moved there because they loved the north woods. They own all the land surrounding the lake other than 500 feet owned by the State of Michigan.

To make the trip to Whelan's, the North-western group braved a five-hour drive with traffic jams on treacherous, icy freeways to reach their overnight rooms in Gaylord. The next morning's drive to Mancelona and Twin Lakes was filled with beautiful, rugged scenery, and as the miles ticked away, the students' anticipation built.

Upon arrival, the school group was welcomed by Ms. Whelan, who invited them to look around and make themselves at home. After introductions, brief talk, and a quick exploration of the spacious home, the group sat down to lunch with Ms. Whelan and her husband, Dr. Joseph Whelan. Ms. Whelan served her grandchildren's favorite meal: taco fixings on Tostito chips. Several people went back for seconds and thirds—writing is obviously not Ms. Whelan's only talent.

Throughout lunch, Ms. Whelan kept the students engaged in conversation which covered many topics. She inquired which books the girls had read or heard, and what their reactions to them were.

With several windows looking out over the woods and the lake, conversation soon turned to the abundant wildlife surrounding the house. The Whelans related stories of eagles, playful otters that climbed the lake bank and slid back down into the water, many loons, and a pet goose left behind when a company finished setting up an oil drilling rig (given away when the winter weather got too bad). As a lover of all this nature, Gloria sometimes hikes

through the woods in warmer weather, which often brings ideas for her books.

The Eaton Rapids group also learned about the Whelan family. Dr. Whelan practiced neurology in several Detroit hospitals until the move north. He then continued his practice in Petoskey for several more years before retiring. The Whelans' two grown children still reside in Detroit, where Joe and Gloria spend a lot of their time. The children and grandchildren, in turn, spend the holidays with them each year in Mancelona. The Whelans' daughter shares her mother's interest in literature, working as a librarian in Detroit. Their son works with computers as a business development manager in Detroit. When he got his mother her first computer, she was intimidated for the first six months, but now she loves writing with it. Though their "family" has included several German shepherds, the Whelans are currently between dogs.

The Whelans' warmth and generosity showed clearly throughout the visit.

After lunch, Ms. Whelan showed the students her office and talked about her writing routine—she writes at her i-Mac computer for about four hours each morning, ending around noon. With yet another view of Oxbow Lake, the office is adorned with signs of Whelan's accomplishments and things dear to her. These include a toy stuffed moose head hanging on the wall with the National Book Award medal hanging from its antlers, a poster of the nearby AuSable River, which has found its way into many of Whelan's books, and covers from some upcoming Gloria Whelan books. Another poster for a celebration of Ernest Hemingway's hundredth birthday illustrates her admiration for an author she wrote about in her novel, *The Pathless Woods*.

Dr. Whelan's large office contains two full walls of bookshelves, including his collection of first edition copies of John O'Hara's books. Gloria had completed a collection of first editions by British author, Henry James, but when she visited his home in England, she learned that it did not con-

tain a collection of his works, so she donated her collection to the British National Trust for Henry James's home.

Next came a mass book signing session, and looking at a shelf of books written by Gloria Whelan, including some translated into foreign language editions. She gave each student an autographed copy of her recent book *Miranda's Last Stand* and completed the teacher's Whelan collection with the last four needed books. The Whelans' warmth and generosity showed clearly throughout the visit.

Finally, the time came for the most important part of the visit, the students' interview with Ms. Whelan. The teacher got the video camera rolling, and the conversation began. (Some of the dialogue has been slightly changed for purposes of clarity or correction.)

NW (Northwestern students): Are there any sequels coming to any of your books, especially the Libby Mitchell books and the Island series?

GW (Gloria Whelan): No, I don't plan any sequels. I think that Mary O'Shea is pretty happy, and I don't think I'm going to write any sequels to the Mackinac Island books unless I write a sequel called, maybe, *The Children of the Island* because Mary and White Hawk will probably have children. And we know that Jacques and his wife have a baby, and her sister, Angelique, so it might be interesting to see what they're going to do, maybe in fifteen years from where the last book stopped, twelve years, something like that. So that might be a possibility, but I don't plan to do that, at least for a little while.

NW: What's your favorite book that you've written so far?

GW: Well, I think *Homeless Bird* because that seemed to be so interesting for me to write. It was different from anything I've written, and I had to do a lot of learning when I was writing about it. I had to learn a lot about India before I could

write it, and that was such an interesting country. So right now I'd say maybe *Homeless Bird*.

NW: What are you working on now? And what books are waiting to be published?

GW: The next will be coming out next fall, and that is *Angel on the Square*, about Russia, and about a girl whose mother is lady in waiting to Empress Alexandra, when everything sort of gets turned upside down in Russia, and what happens to her. I've also finished the sequel to that book, which is called *A Thousand Miles to Dudinka* (a city in Siberia) because at the end of the first book, the two main characters eventually get married and they have children. The second book starts in 1934, and the parents are exiled to Siberia, and the two children have to find them. So that's the next book that's coming out, but that won't be out for a little while. And I also have a book coming out next spring called *Fruitlands*, which is a story about Louisa May Alcott, who was my favorite writer when I was growing up. This is the story about eight months that her family spent in a sort of a strange community, a Utopian community. Utopian means that you want everything to be perfect, and they went off to a farm, and they lived a very strange life for eight months, and this is sort of what I imagine Louisa May Alcott's journal would have been like, had she kept a journal at that time. She did keep a journal, but most of it is lost, so I sort of filled in.

I don't think I ever really sat down and thought, "I want to be an author." I just kept writing and then pretty soon I was an author.

NW: Who are your favorite children's authors?

GW: I have so many of them - I love Joan Blos's *A Gathering of Days*, I like Gary Paulsen's books, I just finished listening to *Our Only May Amelia*, which I thought was a wonderful book. I love the Harry Potter books—I've read every one of those. *The Midwife's Apprentice* by Karen Cushman was

a wonderful book. There are just a lot of really good writers out there. A friend of mine, Ann Tompert, who does marvelous picture books, is one of my favorites. And Sarah Stewart and David Small, I think, do wonderful books, and he just got the Caldecott Award.

NW: What inspired you to start writing?

GW: I've been writing as long as I can remember. When I was in elementary school, I wrote poetry, and so I just kept writing. I wrote short stories for adults, and when we moved up here, I wrote a novel for young people. I don't think I ever really sat down and thought, "I want to be an author." I just kept writing and then pretty soon I was an author.

NW: Why do you write so many books about Native Americans?

GW: I didn't know that I was going to write about Native Americans, but I wanted to write a story about what Michigan was like when Michigan was celebrating its sesquicentennial, which means its 150th birthday, and you can't write about Michigan without writing about Native Americans because they were a very important part of Michigan at that time. So I started reading about Native Americans to learn for this book that I was writing, which was *Next Spring an Oriole*, and I became so fascinated with the story about Native Americans that I just—(called away to telephone)

NW: How accurate is the history in your books?

GW: I try to make it absolutely as accurate as I can because I know that a lot of my books, particularly the *Next Spring an Oriole* series, are used in classrooms. Like in *Miranda's Last Stand*, I'm making up some things about the characters. Sitting Bull was actually a part of that Wild West Show, so the basic facts are true, but some of the conversation, the dialogue, and so forth, I'm making up.

NW: What kind of research do you do in writing

your books?

GW: I go to the libraries. We have two good libraries up here, one in Traverse City and one in Petoskey, and I do a lot of my research there. I do some research on the Internet. Sometimes we travel. Dr. Whelan and I took a trip when I was writing *Miranda's Last Stand*. We went to all the places that I write about. We went to Fort Lincoln where Custer rode out. Then we went to the battleground for the Battle of Little Bighorn and saw that. We went to Cody, Wyoming, where they have that carriage that she rode in the Wild West show. That carriage is still there—you can go and see it. And then we went to the Indian reservation where Chief Sitting Bull spent his last days and saw his burial place.

NW: How have you gotten the ideas for some of your different books, and have you done other travel at all to research them?

GW: The only place that I have traveled to, apart from the one that I told you about for *Miranda's Last Stand*, was St. Petersburg, Russia, but we didn't go there to do research for the book. We were there about four or five years ago and we had just gone because we wanted to see St. Petersburg, so the idea for the story didn't come until a couple of years later. Most of the research I do is not so much from traveling, but just in my head.

NW: So you didn't go to India (to research *Homeless Bird*)?

GW: I didn't go to India. I have a lot of books on India, and just had to do research.

NW: Did *The Miracle of Saint Nicholas* spring from the St. Petersburg trip too?

GW: That sprang from the fact that I've been a longtime admirer of Alexander Solzhenitzen, and he wrote about how he was traveling across Russia, and as he traveled across Russia, he saw all of

these churches that had been closed by the Communists. They refused to allow people to have churches. And it was a very sad sight. And this was before the fall of Communism in Russia. So then I began to think what it was like after the Communists were gone and people could go to church again. So that really inspired me to write that book.

NW: About how long does it usually take for you to write a book?

GW: It depends on the book. A chapter book about the size of *Next Spring an Oriole* might take me, maybe, three or four months. Longer books that take research, like the Mackinac Island books or *Homeless Bird* might take me a year to write.

NW: What have been the quickest and the slowest?

GW: The quickest book was probably *A Week of Raccoons*, and the longest book was probably *Once on This Island* because there was quite a bit of research to do about that.

NW: How old were you when your first book was published?

GW: About 55.

NW: What writing did you do before your first book?

GW: I wrote short stories and poetry for adults.

NW: How did you finally become a published author?

GW: I wrote a story about their drilling for oil on our property right across that lake. You could look out that window and you saw this big oil rig. And we got sort of interested in that whole process. So I wrote a story about a boy that worked on that oil rig and I sent it to an agent, and he

sent it to a publisher, and I was very lucky. It was accepted and published. That was *A Clearing in the Forest*.

NW: Which of your books are the biggest and smallest sellers?

GW: I think that the book that has sold the most copies is *Silver*. Probably the book that sold the fewest copies was *Bringing the Farmhouse Home* because they didn't reprint that.

NW: What books of yours are out of print currently, and are there any plans to re-release any of them?

GW: As far as I know, *Bringing the Farmhouse Home* and *The Secret Keeper* might be reprinted because Random House just bought a book that I wrote, which is still untitled. Anyhow, that book will be coming out, probably in another year or so, and I think they may go back and re-publish *The Secret Keeper*, which was one of my favorite books. I'm sorry that went out of print. (*A Clearing in the Forest* is also out of print.)

I get letters from kids all over the country who've read my books. It's a lot of fun to be able to talk with those kids and know that they're reading your stories and to share your stories with them.

NW: What do you like most about writing?

GW: It's a way of finding out what you're thinking, and it tends to surprise you. You don't know when you sit down what you're going to be writing about, and so you're sort of surprised at what's in your head. But then I also like the idea of being able to share stories with people all over. I get letters from kids all over the country who've read my books. It's a lot of fun to be able to talk with those kids and know that they're reading your stories and to share your stories with them.

NW: Are there any books that you've written that did not get published?

GW: Yes, I've had a couple of books I've written that have never been published. After you finish writing a book you send it to a publisher, and maybe that publisher doesn't like it. So then you send it to another publisher, and after you send it to a couple of publishers and they all don't like it, then you sort of get the idea that maybe you need to rewrite that book or maybe there's something wrong with that book, so I've written a couple of books that haven't been published.

NW: Do you feel bad sometimes when you don't get a book published and you feel that you've done a good job on it?

GW: You do because you've put a lot of work into it. You might work a whole year on a book, and then nobody wants it, so you do feel badly. But by the time you find that out, by then you're right in the middle of working on another book, so you're sort of interested in that book that you're working on, and so you don't feel as badly about it as you might otherwise if you were just sitting there, waiting to hear what happened to that book. The important thing is to start the next book.

NW: What are the books that haven't gotten published?

GW: I wrote a book that takes place in the future and it was sort of a strange book. I sort of know why it didn't get published. And I wrote a chapter book about the Upper Peninsula that was never published—those are the two that I can think of offhand.

NW: Are they books that you're still thinking of revising and trying again to get published?

GW: Not the one on the Upper Peninsula. The one that takes place in the future, I might go back and work on.

NW: Since you won the National Book Award for *Homeless Bird*, how has it changed your life?

GW: It was such an exciting time. I got to go to New York a couple of times and there was just so much excitement about it. That was a lot of fun. But I think the other thing it made me feel was that, having gotten that award, I wanted to write just as well as I could. So I think it's made me try harder, to write well, and to work hard to live up to that award.

NW: Why have you used different publishers for so many of your books?

GW: I started out writing for Putnam's, which was a publisher in New York, and then my editor left there. Eventually I went to Random House. Once a publisher decides to publish your book, they assign you an editor, and an editor is pretty much like a teacher is in school. Let me show you because I can show you better than I can describe it. (Ms. Whelan went to get a manuscript from her office.) This is what *Night of the Full Moon* looked like when I printed it out on my computer and I sent it in. You can just see, all the way through here, almost every page, all the red marks. So if you were getting an assignment back, and your teacher made all these marks, you think, "Wow, I've got a lot of work to do." So the same thing happens—all these marks were made by my editor. So they're all suggestions for me to think about to see if I want to make any changes. The editor is really important, so when my editor at Random House went to Harper Collins, then I went with her, so I've sort of followed my editors around, but that's why I've got so many different publishers. The publisher decides whether or not they want to publish a book. If they do, they will assign me an editor, and then that editor is the one who works closely with me on the book, all the way through the publishing of the book. And there are other people involved. There is an art department. For example, for *Homeless Bird* the art department is

the one who put the cover together and decided what it was going to look like inside, with the little birds there, but my editor asked for a special meeting with the art department and said, "Couldn't we spend the extra money to make this kind of silvery tone," so she had to talk them into doing that. She had to say, "You're going to sell enough of those books to do that," so they went ahead and did that. So your editor is helping you all the way along. She is really a very important part of the book.

NW: How are the titles selected for your books?

GW: *Homeless Bird* was easy—it came from a poem by Tagore in here. And the Island titles, *Once on This Island*, *Farewell to the Island*, and *Return to the Island*, those were pretty easy. *Indian School* was easy. *Miranda's Last Stand*, I hated that title. It wasn't my idea. I had called it *The Knot* because I thought about her relationship with Sitting Bull, that they're trying to figure all that out. And then she kind of learned embroidery from Annie Oakley. I thought that *The Knot* was a better title, but the publisher and the editor didn't like that title. *Miranda's Last Stand* refers to the Battle of the Little Bighorn, which was Custer's Last Stand, but 99 percent of the people wouldn't think of that. I didn't think about it when I first saw it myself. I like this (paperback) cover better, but when the hardcover came out, look how unhappy she looks. She looks like she's going to break into tears, don't you think? See how sad she looks. So they made her smile in the softcover. I just really wasn't very happy with the way they presented the book. But that's how I get the titles. The titles are chosen in lots of different ways.

NW: Do you base any of your characters on actual people? Some of them seem so real, like Koly in *Homeless Bird* or Mary O'Shea in the *Island* trilogy.

GW: No, those are all just made up out of my imagination. In *Miranda's Last Stand*, for example,

there are some real people in there, Annie Oakley and Sitting Bull and Custer and so forth, but in most of my books, the characters are just made up and they're not based on anyone.

NW: Besides writing, what other jobs have you had?

GW: I was a social worker when I first got out of college. That's where I met Dr. Whelan, in a hospital, the psychopathic ward*

JW (Joseph Whelan): (correcting her) Psychiatric ward. I was a patient. She came to check on me. (yes, he's joking)

GW: I watched him, he was doing an exam for the social workers' benefit to see what a neurologist did. And so I was a social worker for some years.

NW: Who are your favorite characters you've created, and are there any that you have a special attachment to?

GW: I like Dorrie Norcher in *A Time to Keep Silent*. I like Koly a lot. I like Mary O'Shea. Lily, maybe, in *Forgive the River, Forgive the Sky*. Those are probably my favorite characters.

NW: What interests and hobbies do you have?

GW: I love to walk, I like to cook, and I like to fly fish when I have time, and I guess that's pretty much it. Most of the time I'm just writing.

NW: What are some of the awards you've won?

GW: I was the Michigan Author of the Year, Educational Press of America gave me an award, the Friends of American Literature gave me their award one year. The Midland Authors gave me an award. My books have been used by the Texas schools and the Florida schools. The Library Association gave me an award. And the National Book Award.

NW: Can you tell us about your family?

GW: I have a husband, Joseph Whelan. We have two children, Joseph Whelan and Jennifer Nolan. And my two grandchildren are Jacqueline and Patrick.

NW: Any other historical Michigan events we can look forward to reading about?

GW: I don't know of any at the moment, but I never know what I'm going to read and get interested in, but I don't have any right at the moment that are historical Michigan events that I'm going to write about.

NW: Are you friends with any other authors?

GW: Yes, I am. Ann Tompert, Joan Bloss, Carol Fenner, Ellen Howard, before she left Kalamazoo (for the Northwest), Sarah Stewart and David Small are good friends. Those are Michigan authors that I'm good friends with, and I have author friends in other places as well.

What I see out of the window and what I see when I go walking in the woods find their way into my books, and even in *Homeless Bird*, when I was writing about India, I was writing about a kingfisher and I was writing about a heron, and I was writing about ducks.

NW: Are there other authors that try to outdo your books?

GW: In anything that you do there's a certain amount of competition. You try to do the best you can, so I suppose maybe you're feeling a little competitive. But we really try to encourage each other and help each other along in our writing. We know that it's hard work sometimes, and it's hard sometimes to get books published, so we try to encourage each other the most that we can. We try to tell each other when we like their work, and what we like about it. We give them tips if we know ways to

get books sold, so basically our relationship is not a competitive one, but one of trying to support each other.

NW: Any parting thoughts?

GW: I can't really think of anything really, excepting that, just as you can see from my office, I look out at the lake, I look out at the woods, and I spend a lot of time walking through the woods, and nature is very important to me. What I see out of the window and what I see when I go walking in the woods find their way into my books, and even in *Homeless Bird*, when I was writing about India, I was writing about a kingfisher and I was writing about a heron, and I was writing about ducks. All those things are in India, but they're also here, so that was kind of a connection for me between here and India. So nature is very important to me. We like this lake so much just as it is, we want it to stay just like this. We don't want any houses on it. We want it to remain just like it is forever. So we've put something called a conservation easement on the property. We gave away the development rights to an agency of conservation, the Grand Traverse Land Conservancy, and that means that nobody will ever be able to build on the lake, and Oxbow Lake will always stay just exactly like it is.

JW: You can't even cut a tree.

About the Author

Dwight Blubaugh teaches fourth grade at Northwestern Elementary in Eaton Rapids. This is the first of what will hopefully be an occasional, ongoing series of author interviews by his students.

Jonna Leyrer enjoys wrestling and math; Kayla Paul likes to read and play softball; and "Kenzie" Spillner enjoys soccer and softball. All are fourth graders at Northwestern Elementary School in Eaton Rapids.