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From the Stacks

Peter Butts

The "Third Place"

Sometime between ages 9 and 12 most students make the intellectual transition from childhood to adulthood. Reading can become an independent, enjoyable activity at this time if they have the skills to move from decoding words to aesthetic appreciation of the tale. Early adolescents are just beginning to explore their sense of identity, the fifth stage in Eric Erickson's eight stages of becoming, and may have completed the elementary developmental tasks identified by Robert Havighurst in his

book *Developmental Tasks and Education*, including developing a satisfactory self-concept; learning to get along with peers; developing values, attitudes, and conscience; and developing self-direction. Most importantly, early adolescents are able to speculate about life outside their own personal experience. They are developing empathy for others, and they are able to think about the temporal and spatial relationships needed to appreciate historical fiction, stories set in other cultures, and science-fiction and fantasy.

I went back to my beat-up old copy of Charlotte S. Huck's *Children's Literature in the Elementary School* to ponder some of these thoughts on returning from the American Library Association's Annual Conference in San Francisco this summer where Elaine Konigsburg was presented with the 1997 Newbery Medal for *The View From Saturday*. I had never attended the Newbery-Caldecott dinner before (\$75 dollars for bad hotel food—feh!). But this year was different. *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* was a landmark book in my own personal history, and nostalgia guided my hand as I wrote the check for what turned out to be a pretty decent meal. My nostalgia was rewarded by a thought-provoking speech by Konigsburg. And so this column is not about controversial books for older YAs, as I had planned, but about new classics that

will challenge 9, 10, and 11-year-olds to stretch and grow into a love of reading.

In a soft-spoken, scholarly presentation, Konigsburg masterfully wove the traditional threads of the acceptance speech genre—gracious thank-yous to supportive librarians and illustrations of how her career brought her to this particular book—with a compelling exhortation to give every sixth grader the gift of literature. She spoke passionately about the "Third Place,neither work nor home," an intellectual oasis like the Greek Agora or the Roman Forum, the Renaissance Piazza or the 20th Century Algonquin Club. In short, a place that "attaches us to the human tradition." The "Third Place" is where we "learn to listen to different voices and learn to disagree." And "it is in the Third Place that we learn to wear masks or risk taking one off because it is here that we learn to identify or not identify with people whose lives are not our own." Summarizing much of the developmental research already referred to, Konigsburg concludes "children design the masks they will wear by the time they leave sixth grade."

In *The View from Saturday*, Konigsburg offers the vicarious keys to a "Third Place": Saturday afternoon tea at Sillington House where Konigsburg's four sixth graders, the self-proclaimed "Souls" find themselves. Several plots weave effortlessly together: can Noah, Nadia, Ethan, and Julian become the first sixth grade team to win the Academic Bowl? Why did Mrs. Eve

Marie Olinski pick this unusual group of four students? And who are Noah, Nadia, Ethan, and Julian? The contest and Julian's weekly invitation to tea at his father's bed & breakfast frame four engaging tales of "becoming" that coincidentally reveal the connections among the four young people. There is much in *The View from Saturday* that may only appeal to adult readers, yet there is also the thrill of discovery that has appealed to the young readers I've talked to.

Basking in the glow of victory, Mrs. Olinski and Julian's father, Mr. Singh, reflect on the "journey" to this moment, and the sometimes puzzling teacher asks Mr. Singh if he would like the answer to the question everyone asks of her: "How did you choose *The Souls*?" Of course he gives the best answer of all: "they have all returned from a journey." Each of them, Mrs. Olinski included, found kindness in himself or herself, and learned to see it in each other. "Can you know excellence if you've never seen it?" Mr. Singh asks. Now I'm the first person to defend students' right to read whatever they like, even if that means *Goosebumps* and *The Babysitters' Club*, but it seems right to declare sixth grade as a good year to ensure that all young people grow up knowing a few truly excellent books. Here are a few more for the "Third Place."

Great storytelling dominated the Newbery this year with each of the Honor Books in some way extending the "journey" theme found in *The View from Saturday*. For many Newbery followers, the runner-up favorite was Megan Whalen Turner's *The Thief*. Our storyteller is the hero himself, an endearing young scalawag by the name of Gen who has been condemned to a life in prison in this long-ago fantasy kingdom. But Gen is given a chance at freedom: he must snatch a legendary stone hidden in a mysterious temple for the king's magus. Hardly heroic through the long, arduous journey, Gen finally gets a chance to use his true talent and manages to retrieve the stone. Turner delivers a cast of memorable characters and plenty of adventure and magic, and an unexpected mystery is revealed. This is a great tale to introduce readers to fantasy.

On the moors of the Scottish borderlands long ago, two children are exchanged: one is the hu-

man babe of Anwara and Yanno, the village blacksmith, the other is the half-human, half-fairie Saaski. Eloise McGraw's *The Moorchild* tells the tale of Saaski's growing awareness that she is somehow different. With adolescence, the village becomes crueler and she wanders further into the often dangerous moors. She discovers a set of bagpipes that once belonged to her grandfather and miraculously knows how to play instantly. Much to the horror of the villagers, none of her strange repertoire of tunes is familiar. But fairies can't resist her playing, and when she catches one little fellow trying to steal them, the truth about her changeling heritage emerges. *Moorchild* does a marvelous job of combining modern and ancient elements. In many ways, Saaski is a classic "outsider." But when the truth comes out, she is both elated for finally finding where she "belongs" and saddened for her adopted parents who weathered the scorn of the village and accepted her as their own. So, in the tradition of many Celtic legends, on midsummer's eve she bravely ventures into the fairie realm to find and bring back their true child. In the end, she does find a place to belong: not with the fairies, but with her newfound reclusive human father and her ally, a gypsy boy named Tam.

A sleepy, peaceful home, an evil villain, a shy, unlikely hero, and a legendary weapon: all the elements of a classic adventure fantasy. Since J. R. R. Tolkien, probably no one has told this ancient story better than Brian Jacques. With *Redwall*, Jacques opened the door to Redwall Abbey, Mossflower Woods, and its pastoral mouse inhabitants. When Cluny the Scourge, "big and tough: an evil rat with ragged fur and curved, jagged teeth...(wearing a)...black eyepatch (because) his eye had been torn out in battle with a pike," with his seemingly endless horde of evil creatures comes to the gates of the Abbey, it is young Matthias who answers the challenge and searches for the lost sword of the legendary hero, Martin the Warrior, to defend his home. A timeless mix of adventure and humor, Jacques' many young fans have clamored for more sequels and prequels ever since. Their passion is unmatched: ask a Jacques fan what they like best and brace yourself for endless tales of battles, weapons, and

memorable animal characters. This is what reading is all about!

In a departure from the classic *Pigman*, the zany *My Darling, My Hamburger*, or even the touching and memorable *Begonia for Miss Applebaum*, Paul Zindel has begun writing short, punchy adventures that are guaranteed hits. *Loch* pits 15-year-old "Loch" Perkins and his younger sister Zaidee against their father's opportunistic boss whose search for a pod of New England plesiosaurs turns deliciously bloody. In *The Doom Stone*, Zindel tells a similar tale at Stonehenge where Jackson Cawley's forensic anthropologist aunt has discovered a blood-thirsty but possibly misunderstood missing link.

Early adolescence is the perfect time to introduce both science fiction and historical fiction, so it's no surprise that sixth graders have loved the stunning twist in Margaret Peterson Haddix' *Running Out of Time*. Our young heroine Jessie lives in a seemingly utopian village in the year 1840. But that perfection is shattered one night when she joins her mother, the village's midwife, on a late-night emergency visit: the children are dying of an epidemic for which there is no cure. No cure, that is, in the year 1840...but it is actually the year 1996. The village of Clifton is the ultimate historical re-creation. The adults all volunteered for the opportunity to follow their ancient crafts or interest in history, but part of the bargain was that they couldn't share that knowledge with the children until they were grown. For some sinister reason, the village's backers have now reneged and refuse Jessie's mother's requests for medicine. So Jessie must escape the village and the park to find help in the alien world of 1996. *Running Out of Time* almost becomes a suspense thriller as the modern people her mother believes she can trust to help save the village betray her, and she must use the media to draw attention to Clifton's plight.

Many great books have been Newbery "also-rans"; long after the winner has been forgotten, Karen Cushman's 1995 Newbery Honor book *Catherine, Called Birdy* will be treasured by readers who will delight in Catherine's medieval swear words and mischievous plots against disgusting and doltish would-be suitors. Straight out of Chaucer, this most memorable character in re-

cent children's literature is condemned to life as a minor 13th century nobleman's daughter, and inevitably, to become some disgusting, shaggy-bearded minor nobleman's wife. But her cleric brother has taught her the gift of writing, and so the dullness of her fate is relieved by her witty and irreverent diary. *Corpus Bones!* Second time's the charm: Cushman's next effort *Midwife's Apprentice* won the 1996 Newbery with an equally plucky medieval heroine. Perhaps not as good, but why quibble?

Some 20 years after her classic *Dark Is Rising* series collected a Newbery Medal and a Newbery Honor, Susan Cooper has returned with a somewhat lighter, but no-less-compelling series drawn from Celtic legend. For centuries the Boggart has inhabited the tumbledown highland Castle Keep, playing minor pranks on the castle's tolerant human inhabitants in the first of her series, *The Boggart*. But then the property is left to Canadian relatives, Emily and Jessup and their parents. For the Boggart, the 20th Century ways of the Volnick family are both frustrating and the ultimate challenge. A local boy named Tommy soon clues Emily and her brother Jessup in on the Boggart. When the family returns home to Toronto, the Boggart steals along aboard an antique desk for Emily's room. But technology and magic don't mix well. For his last spectacular prank, the Boggart gets into the light board at Mr. Volnick's theater creating the most memorable presentation of Shakespeare's "Cymbeline" ever. But even Emily and Jessup's sympathy and patience can't prevent Boggart from becoming homesick. So Jessup puts his skill in programming to the unusual task of creating a computer game for the Boggart to return home via cyberspace. When their friend Tommy plays the game in Scotland, the Boggart is free. In *The Boggart and the Monster*, Emily and Jessup return to the Highlands for a camping trip at Loch Ness. Naturally the Boggart tags along and discovers a kindred spirit: Nessie, the Loch Ness monster is actually the Boggart of the ruined Castle Urquhart stuck in monster form in his loneliness. Once again technology and magic clash as the Boggart and his new-found comrade play havoc with a high-tech-monster sighting crew. Emily, Jessup, and Tommy

take little time to sort out whether to help the two magical creatures or the adults.

In my own "Third Place" for almost 30 years is the escape to the Metropolitan Museum of Art from *The Mixed-Up Files*. At some point, all of the most important people in my life have shared the discussion about what we would do inside the Met (or any number of other museums) late at night. Over the past few months I've pondered how to repay the fourth grade teacher who is still to this day the voice of Claudia to me. Perhaps every time I booktalk that book or any number of others, I do just that.

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