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Ann Gifford

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(A Few) Golden Moments with David Harrison

BY ANN GIFFORD

Getting to know David Harrison was a golden opportunity. As president of the Missouri State Council of the International Reading Association, I had just that opportunity. I was to introduce Walter Dean Meyers, Jane Yolen, and David Harrison, who were the featured authors at the Children's and Young Authors' Literature Festival in Cape Girardeau. To prepare myself, I read the authors' books prior to their arrival. Although we have resided in the same state for more than 40 years, it was not until then that I discovered that David Harrison was not only a *currently* published author, he was the same David Harrison who authored the many Golden Books I had shared with my children many years ago!

When I learned that he was to address the Young Authors' Luncheon in Michigan, I arranged to interview him so that those who did not hear him speak could be introduced to this true Renaissance Man. With a BS in biology and a master's in parasitology, he was recently conferred an honorary doctorate. A prolific writer, David has an extensive list and range of publications. Besides all that, David gets up every morning and heads to work as president of the *Glen Block Cement Company* in Springfield, Missouri.

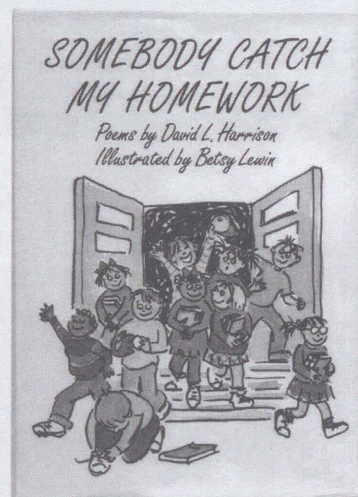
Listening to David speak before an audience is a treasure. David manages to have his audience *eating out of his hand* leaving them spellbound, inspired, entertained, and with smiles on their faces. For those who have not yet met David Harrison, either through his books or on stage, I share the following interview with this fascinating man.

AG: I heard about your surprise treat at the Michigan State Young Authors' Luncheon. Tell me what happened.

DH: When I discovered that *Somebody Catch My Homework*—Sandy Asher's play inspired by my poetry—was being performed in Grand Rapids, I invited the cast to join me at the luncheon and present a scene from the play. There were 500 young authors, parents, and teachers in the audience. I don't know who had more fun, the crowd or the cast.

AG: For those of us not lucky enough to be there in person to hear your keynote address, please describe this event for us. And would you also share one of the poems that inspired the play? Maybe the more daring of us will challenge our students to write a Readers Theater adaptation, but probably we will buy a copy of Sandy Asher's play first.

DH: The luncheon was to honor winning student authors statewide. My talk was called "Ten Important Secrets That Young Writers Should Know." I always tell students that the first secret to writing is that only those who write can become writers. Sometimes people smile, but it's the best advice I can give them. The advice is just as true of playing basketball, becoming a teacher, or diving for pearls. Only those who try it will ever succeed.



Ann Gifford is a professor at Southeast Missouri State University.

As for the poems that inspired Sandy's play, they came from nearly every one of my eight books of poetry. Sandy read them all, pulled both humorous and serious poems that stirred her imagination, and wove the poems and characters into her play starring a class of fourth graders. Sydney, an impulsive, impatient boy, borrows a poem from *The Mouse was Out at Recess* for his class assignment.

MY ESSAY ON BIRDS

The ostrich has a graceful neck,

The eagle has fierce eyes,
The heron has amazing legs,
The condor has great size,
But the humble chicken beats them all,
It has delicious thighs.

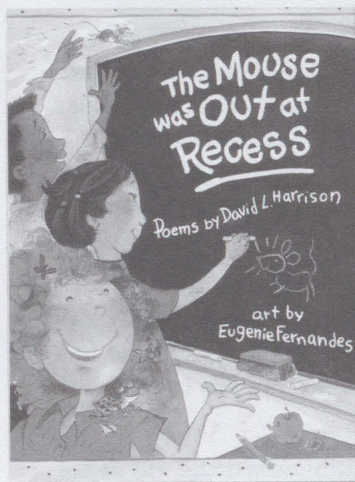
Claire, on the other hand, is concerned about the new baby at her house. Her words come from *The Alligator in the Closet*.

BABY STUFF

Diapers in the bathtub
Stroller in the hall
Highchair in the kitchen
Spinach on the wall
Drool on the tables
Crackers on the floor
Playpen by the sofa
Gate across the door
Cookies in the cushions
Bottles on the chairs
Teething rings and rattles
And ointment everywhere
Jars of yucky peaches
You wouldn't want to touch
Jammies, booties, blankets
A hundred times too much
Every seat is sticky
I recommend you stand
The baby stuff at our house
Is totally out of hand.

AG: One of the five components of the No Child Left Behind legislation was fluency. To be in compliance with this requirement many teachers are utilizing more echo, repeated, and choral reading. I find that so many of your poems for two voices have proven invaluable for this. My students found using *Tortoise*, *Caterpillar* and *Spider*, all from your newly released book, *Farmer's Dog Goes to the Forest: More Rhymes for Two Voices*, to be very effective with the younger children. My own favorite to use with students is *Woodpecker*. Will you share it with us and tell us about your experiences in writing this book?

DH: Thank you very much. I've been aware for years that poems for two voices work well in the classroom and at home for emerging readers and/or choral reading. You'll find at least one or two poems for two voices in several of my books. With that in mind I wrote *Farmer's Dog* entirely in two voices. An inquisitive dog interviews creatures (and even vegetables) he meets in the garden. The artist, Arden Johnson-Petrov, used



her dog named Bear as a model. Based on very positive responses from teachers, I wrote the follow-up book that you mention.

Farmer's Dog Goes to the Forest is also done in rhymes for two voices. I have ideas in mind for future adventures so I'm keeping my fingers crossed that this one does as well as the first one.

WOODPECKER

Woodpecker, Woodpecker,
what do you see?

Juicy bugs
inside this tree!

How do you find them
in the dark?

I rat-a-tat-tat
right through the bark.

AG: When I share your 1972 Christopher Award book, *The Book of Giant Stories*, I have found the same rapt attention given by all ages from primary grade students to the university pre-service teachers. What gives this book such universal spellbinding appeal? What can you tell us about its history?

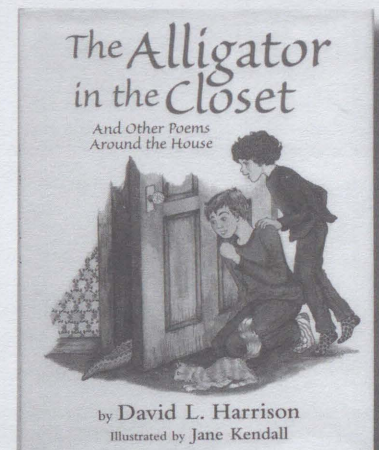
DH: It took me 97 months and 152 submissions to learn how to tell a story. Finally, in 1967, I sold my first picture book, *The Boy with a Drum*. The next year I wrote *The Little Boy and the Giant*. The emphasis was on the boy character and his cleverness in overcoming a giant-sized problem.

A year later I went to New York to visit Kathleen Daly, my editor for *The Boy with a Drum*. Kathleen had moved to American Heritage Press and was interested in getting a book from me. We settled on a collection of three stories. I wanted a theme with broad appeal so I decided to try three more giant stories featuring a boy hero who must deal with blustery giants (and crabby witches) with modern problems.

When I finished the manuscript, Kathleen placed the work with Philippe Fix, a wonderful French artist. Many months later Kathleen called to ask if I would consider writing another story for the book. Philippe wanted to paint pictures of a giant who thinks everything looks bigger than he is. I wrote "The Giant Who Was Afraid of Butterflies," which became the middle story in place of the one originally written for that spot, "Little Boy Soup." In 1990, 21 years after I wrote it, *Little Boy Soup* was published in England by Ladybird Books.

The Book of Giant Stories came out in the spring of 1972, 4 years after I began work on it. Jonathan Cape co-published it in England. Translations and other English editions appeared in a dozen countries. That winter Kathleen called with the news that the book had won the Christopher Medal.

Giants sold 750,000 copies in hard cover before going out of print in the mid-80s. Boyds Mills Press reissued the book in 2001. I couldn't be happier to offer these stories and limericks to a new generation of readers. The single change made to the original text is that the boy with a secret is now coming down with chicken pox instead of measles.



AG: Researching your background I discovered that you have a BS degree in biology and that you won the Outstanding Scientific Research Award when pursuing your MS in parasitology. How have you used your college degree in science to help you in your writing? I realize that you have developed a series of nonfiction books for Boyd Mills. Will you continue in the nonfiction genre versus the poetry books that I enjoy sharing with my students?

DH: More than 30 years ago I wrote a full-length book about caves for young adults. More recently, I agreed with Boyd Mills to develop a series of books for primary students about the way Earth works. We named the series *Earthworks*. Titles have included *Caves*, *Rivers*, *Volcanoes*, *Oceans*, *Earthquakes*, and *Mountains*. The final title, due out in 2006, will be *Glaciers*. *Caves* has been nominated twice on state reading lists—Michigan and Arizona. I'm currently considering other nonfiction subjects that might develop into a new series.

This doesn't signal a loss of interest in poetry. I have a new manuscript finished and have started preliminary work on the next one, which will be my 10th collection of original poems.

AG: Do you try to have several books going at one time? If you do, are they all of the same genre?

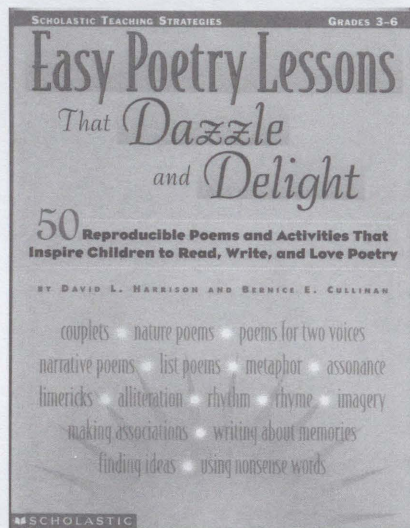
DH: At this time I'm working on four projects and thinking about others. All the books would be for kids, but they include poetry, nonfiction, and fiction. A trip up the Amazon in 1999 stimulated a new collection of poetry. A lifelong interest in caves has led to my third cave book, and I'm playing with the framework of a new book of fiction. I'm also working with Sandy Asher on a book of collected works for boys.

AG: I know that you are often the keynote speaker at conferences for teachers and librarians. Do you consider this more important than your writing? Are you changing directions and becoming the keynote speaker instead of the children's author?

DH: I love giving talks, especially keynote and luncheon talks. After writing all these books over so many years I have good stories to share with teachers, librarians, and students about the art and craft of writing. I've written a book for upper elementary students [*Writing Stories, Fantastic Fiction from Start to Finish*] and co-written two teaching strategy books on poetry [*Easy Poetry Lessons That Dazzle and Delight* and *Using the Power of Poetry to Teach Language Arts, Social Studies, Math, and More*]. Each year I seem to receive a growing number of invitations to speak at conferences. On the one hand, that's very flattering and I truly enjoy those opportunities to stand at the microphone and discuss what I've learned as a writer. On the other, the trips do subtract time from my writing schedule. Because of that concern I don't accept all the invitations and my calendar usually fills a year or more in advance.

AG: You have received so many top quality accolades what do you consider the greatest honor of your life?

DH: That's hard to answer. Every time something nice happens, I appreciate the thought and effort behind it and feel honored. Having a room named for me at our main public library in Springfield, Missouri, would definitely go near the top of the list. I was delighted to have one of my poems preserved in the sidewalk of the Children's Garden at the Burton Barr Central Library in Phoenix. Being named Poet Laureate for Drury University and receiving an honorary doctorate of letters



from Missouri State University are recognitions that I'll always cherish. Having my reading project [SKY HIGH ON READING] singled out by International Reading Association for first place in community involvement was a thrill. But as a children's author, recognition that comes directly from kids means a great deal to me. When 10,000 boys and girls vote on their favorite books, and one of mine shows up among those chosen, I feel truly honored. Three of my titles have made the Kids' Choice lists: *Somebody Catch My Homework*, *When Cows Come Home*, and *A Thousand Cousins*. I was especially happy that two of the three books are poetry.

AG: I know you and your wife, Sandy, have traveled around the United States and also abroad. Is their one location, weather, or time that you find inspires you more to write?

DH: We love a lot of places. First place goes to St. John in the Virgin Islands. We've been returning there from time to time since 1969. We've also spent a week each year in Florida for more than 30 years. I write best at home surrounded by my books and files. But journals provide a way to keep up with the flow of ideas when I'm traveling. More than one book has begun on flights or motel rooms. The first poem in *The Purchase of Small Secrets* was written in Florida.

AG: I know I speak for your thousands of readers: We don't care where you write as long as you keep writing! From all of us, thank you for sharing so much insight into

what has made you the person and the writer you are. During the time spent with me, you might have started another poem or story, and we're all waiting to see where your imagination will take us next. Whether you make us laugh, smile, or cogitate, we're eager to find out!

DH: Thank you, Ann! The pleasure is always mine.

David Harrison is an amazingly versatile individual. After this interview, I discovered his newest publication, *Miss Grubb, Super Sub A Write-In Reader*. This delightful book is filled with more wonderful writing ideas such as Knock, Knock Jokes, Chants, Journal Writing, and an unfinished "Day of the Great Germ Story" that are perfect for young writers. Whether reading or listening to David Harrison, the moments with him are golden.

Current Books in Print by David Harrison:

Harrison, David L, (2004). *Connecting dots, poems of my journey*. PA: Boyds Mills Press. ISBN 1-59078-260-7.

Harrison, David L, (2004). *Earthquakes, Earth's mightiest moments*. PA: Boyds Mills Press. ISBN 1-59078-243-7.

Harrison, David L, (2004). *Writing stories, fantastic fiction from start to finish*. New York: Scholastic. ISBN 0-439-51914-4.

Harrison, David L, (2003). *Oceans, the vast, mysterious deep*. PA: Boyds Mills Press. ISBN 1-59078-018-3.

Harrison, David L, (2003). *The mouse was out at recess*. PA: Boyds Mills Press. ISBN 1-56397-550-5.

Harrison, David L, (2003), *The alligator in the closet*. PA: Boyds Mills Press. ISBN 1-56397-994-2.

Harrison, David L and Holderith, K, (2003). *Using the power of poetry to teach language arts, social studies, math, and more*. New York: Scholastic. ISBN 0-439-28232-2.

Harrison, David L, (2002). *Dylan the eagle-hearted chicken*. PA: Boyds Mills Press. ISBN 1-56397-982-9.

Harrison, David L, (2002). *Volcanoes, nature's incredible fireworks*. PA: Boyds Mills Press. ISBN 1-56397-996-9.

Harrison, David L, (2002). *Rivers, nature's wondrous waterways*. PA: Boyds Mills Press. ISBN 1-56397-968-3.

Harrison, David L, (2001). *The book of giant stories*. PA: Boyds Mills Press. ISBN 1-56397-976-4 (hardback) and 1-56397-797-4 (paperback).

Harrison, David L, (2001). *Caves, mysteries beneath our feet*. PA: Boyds Mills Press. ISBN 1-56397-915-2.

- Harrison, David L, (2001). *Johnny Appleseed, my story*. New York: Random House. ISBN 0-375-91247-9 (hardback) and 0-375-81247-4 (paperback).
- Harrison, David L, (2000), *Farmer's garden*. PA: Boyds Mills Press. ISBN 1-56397-776-1.
- Harrison, David L and Cullinan, Bernice E, (1999), *Easy poetry lessons that dazzle and delight*. New York: Scholastic. ISBN 0-590-12050-6.
- Harrison, David L, (1999). *Wild country*. PA: Boyds Mills Press. ISBN 1-56397-784-2.
- Harrison, David L, (1998). *The purchase of small secrets*. PA: Boyds Mills Press. ISBN 1-56397-054-6.
- Harrison, David L, (1997). *The animals' song*. PA: Boyds Mills Press. ISBN 1-56397-144-5 (hardback) and 1-59078-076-0 (paperback).
- Harrison, David L, (1996). *A thousand cousins*. PA: Boyds Mills Press. ISBN 1-56397-131-3.
- Harrison, David L, (1994). *When cows come home*. PA: Boyds Mills Press.. ISBN 1-56397-143-7 (hardback) and 1-56397-946-2 (paperback).
- Harrison, David L, (1993). *Somebody catch my homework*. PA: Boyds Mills Press. ISBN 1-878093-87-8 (hardback) and 1-56397-520-3 (paperback).
- Harrison, David L, (1986). *Wake up, Sun!* New York: Random House. ISBN 0-394-88256-3.