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Voices in Michigan Literacy

An Interview with Gloria Whelan

By Linda M. Pavonetti and Jim Cipielewski
Oakland University, Rochester, Michigan

National Book Award Winner Gloria Whelan epitomizes much of what is good about our state. She is a Michigan native and a long-time resident of northern Michigan. The natural beauty of Michigan inspires much of her writing. In “Thoughts from a Conservation Easement Donor: Gloria Whelan,” she writes:

In every book I write, there is something of our land around Oxbow Lake...The scarlet tanager that brings Lily and T.R. together in *Forgive the River, Forgive the Sky*, is the tanager we see flashing like a small flame through our own trees. The blue heron is a frequent visitor to Oxbow and appears in my book about India and in *The Pathless Woods*, a book about Ernest Hemingway...The writer and conservationist, Wallace Stegner, says, ‘We need wild country available to us, even if we never do more than drive to its edge and look in. For it can be a means of reassuring ourselves of our sanity as creatures, as a part of the geography of hope.’ (Whelan, 1998, unpagged)

Indeed Gloria Whelan has written books that allow children and adults to experience that “geography of hope” whether in Michigan, Alaska, India, or Russia.

Gloria Whelan has spent most of her life writing, starting with short stories and poetry for adults, coming later to create the wonderful children’s books that have earned her international attention. Just as Gloria Whelan and her husband have left a legacy to the people of Michigan by donating a conservation easement on their Northern Michigan property, Ms. Whelan has provided a body of literature for children and adults that will stand as a lasting monument to her own nature and talent.



Gloria Whelan

Photograph courtesy of Iwona Biedermann

LMP: We know that you currently live and write in Michigan. Have you always been a Michigan resident?

GW: I was born in Detroit and lived there until I left for the University of Michigan. After I was married we lived in Minnesota for a year and then back we came to Detroit where I raised a family and worked as a social worker. During those years I also wrote short stories and poetry for adults. About 25 years ago my husband and I moved to Northern Michigan where I began writing books for young readers.

LMP: In an interview on National Public Radio (Farnsworth, 2000) shortly after you won the National Book Award, Elizabeth Farnsworth asked you about the inception of *Homeless Bird*. You had been talking about the widowed women in Bernasi who wear white saris and sing in the Temples. Then, a few days later, you saw an exhibit of Indian embroidery.

Elizabeth Farnsworth: "So these two things came together in your mind and produced the story. Is that how it usually happens?"

Gloria Whelan: "That's always how it happens. I have to have two things. One thing doesn't seem to do it. There have to be two things in juxtaposition and suddenly the story comes to life for me."

Can you explain this concept of "two things in juxtaposition"? Why doesn't one idea work?

GW: Stories have dimensions. To me a story with only one dimension doesn't work, stories need to open out, to develop levels, and I am unsure that will happen to a story until I begin to see a variety of possibilities. In *Homeless Bird* Koly's embroidery allowed me to imagine a way for her to become independent, that in turn opened other possibilities.

LMP: Some authors believe that they need to develop the character first; others believe it is plot. After reading *Homeless Bird* and *Angel on the Square*, I'd be tempted to say that setting is your fundamental element because you evoke such a strong sense of place for the reader. What comes first for you?

GW: It is always the setting. I'm very influenced by my surroundings and deeply sensitive to nature. Our cabin is on a little lake and a mile from the nearest house. The things I see on my walks in the woods and from my study window made their way into my *Next Spring an Oriole* trilogy. My fascination with Mackinac Island led me to write the Island trilogy. The Au Sable river which I have loved and fished since childhood appears in one disguise or another in nearly all my books and has been a central character in *Forgive the River*, *Forgive the Sky* and most recently, *The Wanigan*, which is about Michigan's logging story.

I visited Fruitlands, the home where Louisa May Alcott spent 8 months during a period when her father planned a utopian community. It was magical seeing the attic where she and her sisters slept and the orchard where they played. I could imagine the strange cast of characters that lived with the family during those months. Out of that visit came *Fruitlands*, an imagined diary of Louisa May Alcott's, which will be out in the fall of 2002.

A couple of years ago we visited St. Petersburg, Russia, and fell in love with the city which led me to write *Angel in the Square*.

LMP: Is there a common theme in your writing?

GW: I am not sure there is one common theme in my writing, but I often write about the healing aspect of nature and I am always interested in how people make ethical decisions in their lives, what makes them want to struggle to do the right thing, and of course, I explore that impulse we all have to love and be loved.

LMP: You write for both children and adults. Is there a difference in your process?

GW: There is very little difference in writing for adults or children. Since there is both an adult and a child inside each of us, it is all a matter of ascendancy—who is in charge of the story. If it is the child, the story will be less gloomy, less downbeat. In books for children, bears don't chew people up and alligators don't swallow them. Alice finds her way back

through the looking glass, and C. S. Lewis's children find their way back through the wardrobe, all the better for their trip. While the adult in us might suffer disillusionment, the child in us is still a believer. Although I deal with divorce and death in my stories for children, the children in those stories come to terms with these crises and get on with their lives.

LMP: In 2000, you won one of the most prestigious prizes for literature, the National Book Award. What do you say to the critics—and they still exist, even in Michigan—who consider "juvenile" books less literary than "adult" literature?

GW: I once heard the great Argentinean author, Jorge Luis Borges speak. He said, "The greatest books in the world are books for children, or books that become books for children. The books I read as a child became my private mythology and I've been spreading that private mythology ever since." I am sure that the books I read as a child helped to form me.

LMP: The Michigan Library Association presented the 1998 Michigan Author Award to you several years ago. What did that award mean to you?

GW: Nothing is more gratifying than to be recognized in one's "home town." I care about Michigan and it meant a great deal to me to have my affection for my surroundings recognized by the state.

LMP: Has the National Book Award made a difference in your life?

GW: I believe an award like the National Book Award is a little daunting. You tend to evaluate your work more seriously and wonder if you are living up to the award. Certainly the award has opened up a number of possibilities for me and has brought my work to readers who might not otherwise have found it.

LMP: Do you have personal goals for your writing?

GW: I think I have two goals that are simply stated: Do the best work I can and be as honest in my writing as I can.

LMP: What are you working on now?

GW: *Angel on the Square* was the story of a young Russian girl, Katya, who starts out as the daughter of a lady-in-waiting to the Empress Alexandra. Katya is caught up in the Russian Revolution and must take her future into her own hands. The sequel to *Angel on the Square* takes place in 1934 at the beginning of the Stalin arrests. In the sequel, *The Impossible Journey*, Katya's daughter and son journey a thousand miles along a Siberian river to find their exiled parents.

LMP: What would you like your child and young adult readers to consider as they finish reading your books?

GW: I would hope first of all that readers would be entertained and that they would have inhabited the story and would have been carried along by it. I would also hope that they would identify with the characters in the book who overcome difficult situations by finding within themselves the resources of strength and courage. I don't have a lot of sympathy for heroines to whom things just happen. I like to think that we can make a difference in what happens to us. Even if we don't always reach our goal, the struggle itself is exciting. Koly and Katya sometimes rush headlong into trouble but their lives are never dull.

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