Children's Literature Association Quarterly 10,4 (Winter 1985): 162-3, 207.

editor's comments

Facts as Art

In the Proceedings section of this issue, you'll find versions of the talks given at the 1985 ChLA conference in Ann Arbor by Lloyd Alexander, Nancy Willard, and Milton Meltzer. Also, Rosemary Sutcliff has kindly given us permission to reprint her letter to the Association in response to the naming of her *Mark of the Horse-Lord* as first recipient of the ChLA's Phoenix Award. To represent the many fine papers given in Ann Arbor, we include essays based on the five of those papers that the conference paper call committee considered most suitable for publication; among these is the one paper the committee thought most deserving of presentation at a plenary session, George Shannon's "All Times in One: Four Characters and Their Vessels of Time."

Since the ChLA board has decided to return next year to the publication of more complete Conference Proceedings in a separate volume, this is the last Proceedings issue of the *Quarterly*. One result of that change is that it has given me some future issues of the *Quarterly* to fill; one result of this year's conference is that it gave me the idea for an excellent way of filling one of them.

In the question period following his talk on biography, Milton Meltzer insisted that critics and scholars of children's literature have been remiss in ignoring non-fiction as a subject for analysis and discussion; as he has since written in a letter to me, "What I said in the discussion following my paper may have upset some, but it was intended to spur concern and, God willing, *action*." I share his hope it did upset some, for he's right: action is needed.

As I browse through the issues of the *Quarterly* I've edited in the past three years, I can find exactly *one* article about non-fiction; Jon Stott's discussion of David Macaulay's picture books in the Spring 1983 issue is the only article in twelve *Quarterlies* that deals with this important part of literature for children.

I'm embarassed about that—but not surprised by it. Most of us who think and write about children's literature have had the sort of literary training that focuses on fiction and poetry, and just about ignores other kinds of literature. Beyond the occasional tract or sermon in a course in seventeenth century literature, the only non-fictional prose most students of literature study are those monumental (and often monumentally boring) books by Thomas Carlyle and Matthew Arnold and Cardinal Newman that scholars of the Victorian period seem to adore. I don't imagine I am alone in having to admit that the one course I dropped as an undergraduate was the one in Victorian Literature, and that my reason for dropping it was my distaste for those supremely non-fictional tomes by Carlyle and Arnold and Newman.

Indeed, it was my distaste for those monstrosities that made me what I am today; for of course, my graduate school advisor forced me to take a course in the one period of literature I had successfully avoided as an undergraduate, and that course in Victorian poetry led me to an enthusiasm for Tennyson that eventually resulted in my writing my dissertation on him. It wasn't until I'd finished that dissertation and began applying for a job that I realized the enormity of what I'd done: having written a dissertation on Tennyson, I was now a full-fledged Victorian specialist—and as such, I was expected to spend my whole life teaching, guess what? Carlyle. And Newman. And a lot more of Arnold than just his fine poems. Augh. When a chance to teach children's literature developed, I leaped at it; for, I thought, even stories about cuddly bunnies would be better than *Culture and Anarchy*.

And they were; I've learned a lot more about culture and anarchy from Beatrix Potter than I ever did from Matthew Arnold. So I have to admit to a prejudice about non-fiction—and also, to some doubt about how one might go about being an analytical reader of it.

The obvious questions to ask about a work of non-fiction are, "Is the information accurate? And is it presented clearly?" Answering those questions requires some prior knowledge of the subject—factual information of the sort literary critics are not always equipped with; how, for instance, could I evaluate a children's introduction to nuclear physics without a large prior knowledge of nuclear physics? More significantly, answering those questions about accuracy and clarity does *not* require any of the skills literary analysts have developed in order to discuss what does strike them as interesting about literature: matters of language and structure and style. We rarely limit our considerations of language to the question of clarity; we like to believe that how an idea is expressed is as important, as interesting and as meaningful, as the general idea itself.

Nevertheless, we do almost inevitably judge a novel on the basis of its accuracy—on whether or not we believe it to accurately represent reality; and when we presume to do so, we claim for ourselves some general understanding of reality. Making judgments about the accuracy of non-fiction is different only because it requires a specialized knowledge rather than a general one—a specialized knowledge we might easily develop.

Furthermore, if novels can be judged on their factuality, then surely non-fiction can be judged for its artistry. Indeed, that is exactly what Jon Stott does in that piece on Macaulay; his article shows how these books offer a critical attitude to modern life as well as accurate information about the past. In other words, Stott shows that Macaulay's choices of what specific information to present and of how to present it imply an interpretation

of his subjects, just as the language of novels and poems implies an interpretation of the subjects and events they describe.

Such analyses of non-fiction are not only possible; they are necessary. Leaving aside the undeniable significance of our ability to distinguish between good prose and bad prose, it is of great practical importance that we understand how the style and structure of works of non-fiction allow them to communicate more than just the information they contain; if literature inculcates values, then non-fiction, which makes more obvious claims to truth than does fiction, inculcates them far more insidiously.

So much, then, for my doubts about the analysis of non-fiction. It can be done, and it should be done. Non-fiction shares the same qualities as fiction or poetry: good non-fiction is not just clear, accurate information, but clear, accurate information presented with an artistry that deserves attention.

I know no greater proof of that than the work of one Milton Meltzer. Having been persuaded by his comments at the conference that I was ignorant of some worthwhile literature, I set out to dispel my ignorance by reading *his* books. I discovered that his *Never to Forget* is as finely shaped as a good novel; this history of the Jews during Nazi years is emotionally devastating, not just because the events it describes are emotionally devastating, but because Meltzer has selected and shaped those events into a symphonic crescendo, a structure of his own and other voices that both informs and involves. This is literature of the highest order—and like all literature of the highest order, its artistry deserves and will repay close attention.

In the discussion after Meltzer's conference talk, I said that I'd personally be willing to take up his challenge and try to do some critical analysis of children's non-fiction, but for one thing: my ignorance of it. Like most specialists in children's literature, I'd not read much non-fiction for children; and I hadn't the vaguest idea of where to start reading. I asked if he could give me and the other critics in the room some idea of what books might be particularly interesting to a literary analyst. He has accepted my challenge; at the end of this editorial you'll find a list of books that, in the expert opinion of Milton Meltzer, might well repay critical attention.

I publish this list as a service to potential contributors, for Meltzer's challenge has indeed resulted in action. We have decided to make "Non-Fiction" the special topic of the Winter 1987 *Quarterly*. Jill May has graciously consented to act as Guest Editor. We are looking for articles on all aspects of this topic, including, obviously, the social and cultural implications of the presentation of information to children. But we are particularly interested in close readings of specific worthwhile books, readings that attempt to show just why those books are worthwhile. That is, we would like to focus on the artistry of non-fiction, just as we otherwise focus on the artistry of poetry and fiction. The deadline is April 1, 1987, and I urge any of you who enjoy doing literary analysis to read some of the books Meltzer suggests and consider a submission.

Milton Meltzer's List of Works of Non-Fiction for Children and Young Adults That Deserve Critical Attention

Biography

Kerop Bedoukian, *Some of us Survived*

Marchette Chute, *Shakespeare of London*

Olivia Coolidge, almost any of her biographies

Ann Frank, *Diary of a Young Girl*

Jean Fritz, *Homesick*

Esther Hautzig, *The Endless Steppe*

Jesse Jackson, *Make a Joyful Noise Unto the Lord* (Mahalia Jackson)

Milton Meltzer, biographies of Langston Hughes, Dorothea Lange, Mark Twain; *A Writer's Life* (this fall)

Carman Moore, *Somebody's Angel Child* (Bessie Smith)

Robin McKown, *The World of Mary Cassatt*

Walter Terry, *Frontiers of Dance* (Martha Graham)

Arank Siegal, *Upon the Head of the Goat*

Philip Sterling, *Sea and Earth* (Rachel Carson)

And these books originally written for adults:

Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

Russell Baker, *Growing Up*

Frederick Douglas, *Narrative of a Life*

Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*

Hugh Leonard, *Home Before Night*

Wole Soyinka, *Ake The Year of Childhood*

Richard Wright, *Black Boy*

Science and Nature

Judith and Herbert Kohl, *The View from the Oak*

Laurence Pringle, several of his titles

Millicent Selsam, many titles

Seymour Simon, many titles

And these books originally written for adults:

Edward Abbey, *Beyond the Walls*, any of his others

Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring, The Sea Around Us*

Loren Eisely, any of his books

Stephen Jay Gould, any of his titles

Edward Hoagland, any of his titles, such as *African Calliope*

Continued on page 207

Editor's Comments *continued from page 163*

John McPhee, almost any of his books

Lewis Thomas, *The Medusa and the Snail;* or any of his others

Thoreau, *Walden*

History, Public Affairs, Social Issues, etc.
Milton Meltzer, numerous titles

James Forman, many titles

And these books originally written for adults:

John Howard Griffin, *Black Like Me*

Alex Haley, *Roots*

John Hershey, *Hiroshima*

Perry Nodelman

Oops!

We promised to put the arrows on this chart when pasting up Paul Avakelian's article in the fall 1985 Special Section. But we forgot! Here is the complete chart as it should have appeared on page 125 of the fall *Quarterly.*