American Writers for Children Since 1960: Fiction, edited by Glenn E. Estes, vol. 52, Gale, 1986

E. L. Konigsburg

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BOOKS: *Jennifer, Hecate, Macbeth, William McKinley, and Me, Elizabeth* (New York: Atheneum, 1967; London: Macmillan, 1968);
From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler (New York: Atheneum, 1967; London: Macmillan, 1969);
About the B'nai Bagels (New York: Atheneum, 1969);
(George) (New York: Atheneum, 1970); republished as *Benjamin Dickinson Carr and His (George)* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1974);
Altogether, One at a Time, illustrated by Gail E. Haley and others (New York: Atheneum, 1971);
A Proud Taste for Scarlet and Miniver (New York: Atheneum, 1973);
The Dragon in the Ghetto Caper (New York: Atheneum, 1974);
The Second Mrs. Giaconda (New York: Atheneum, 1975; London: Macmillan, 1976);
Father's Arcane Daughter (New York: Atheneum, 1976; London: Macmillan, 1977);
Throwing Shadows (New York: Atheneum, 1979);
Journey to an 800 Number (New York: Atheneum, 1982);
Up From Jericho Tel (New York: Atheneum, 1986).

PERIODICAL PUBLICATIONS: "The Double Image: Language as the Perimeter of Culture," *Library Journal* (15 February 1970): 731-734;
"Sprezzatura: A Kind of Excellence," *Horn Book,* 52 (June 1976): 253-261.

E. L. Konigsburg

As a chemistry student in graduate school, E. L. Konigsburg twice blew up the laboratory sink, "losing my eyebrows and bangs in the flash." She claims it was her fault that "the University of Pittsburgh moved their Graduate School of Chemistry the year after I left." Since then, Konigsburg has regrown her eyebrows and written twelve excellent, sometimes annoying, but always interesting children's books. "I shall probably not return to the lab," she says, "but all those years in chemistry were not wasted; I learned useful things: to use the materials at hand, to have a point of view, to distill. And I obviously learned how to handle messy sinks—move."

These useful things are the essence of Konigsburg's writing. Her books have grown out of the material closest to hand, the events of her own life. Her writing is a witty distillation of complex experience, and she always tells her stories from an interesting point of view. Above all, Konigsburg is in her writing as in her chemistry a creator of interesting messes. A constant experimenter, she has

invented more different kinds of children's fiction than any two or three other writers. When her experiments work, they do something unusually well; when they fail, they are messy. But she knows how to handle messes; she moves on, usually to something just as unusual and just as interesting.

The middle of three daughters, Elaine Lobl Konigsburg was born in New York City on 10 February 1930 to Adolph Lobl, a businessman, and Beulah Klein Lobl. She spent her childhood in various small towns in Pennsylvania, where she read books like P. L. Travers's *Mary Poppins* (1934) and Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911) and "thought that they were the norm and that the way I lived was subnormal waiting for normal. . . . Where were the stories that made having a class full of Radasevitches and Gabellas and Zaharious normal?" As a teenager she was a bookkeeper at the Shenango Valley Provision Company, and there she met David Konigsburg, a brother of one of the owners. After graduating from high school in Farrell, Pennsylvania, she attended Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh, where she supported herself by working as manager of a dormitory laundry, playground instructor, waitress, and library page. She received a B.S. from Carnegie in 1952 and married David Konigsburg on 6 July of that year.

While David Konigsburg studied psychology at the University of Pittsburgh, his wife was "determined to push back the frontiers of science" at the same university. She was a research assistant in the tissue culture lab and pursued her own explosive studies in chemistry. Two years later, when her husband began his career as an industrial psychologist in Jacksonville, Florida, Konigsburg found "that the only thing I had succeeded in pushing back was my hairline," and gave up chemistry.

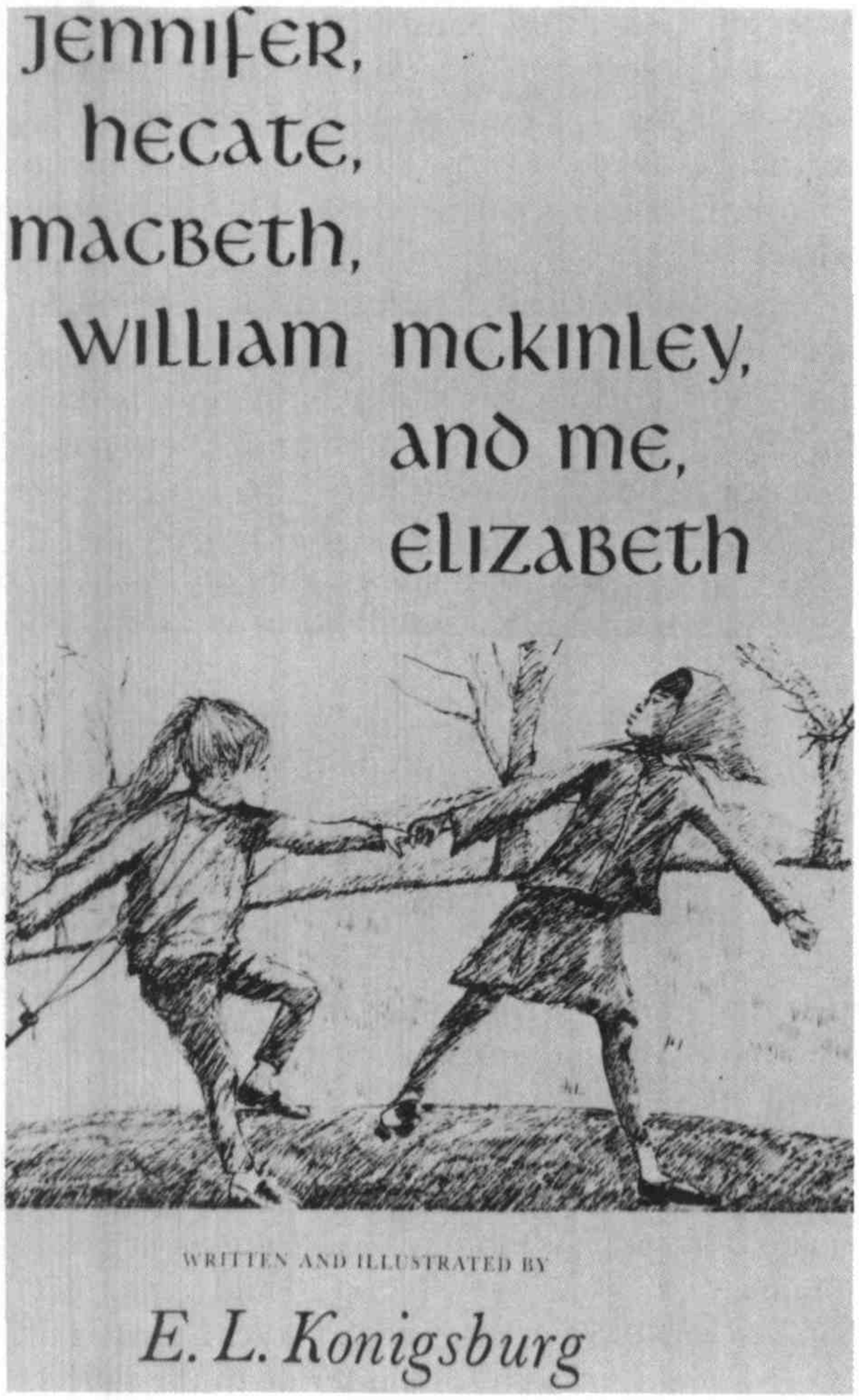
In Jacksonville she taught science at Bartram, a private girls' school, until her first child, Paul, was born in 1955. In 1956 she gave birth to a daughter, Laurie, and in 1959 to a son, Ross. She devoted herself to getting her children through their childhoods and, unwittingly, preparing herself for her future career. "As the children grew older," says David Konigsburg, "and we became more involved with suburban living, Elaine was intrigued with the various forces exerting an influence on us." She herself says that "chemistry was my larval stage, and those nine years at home doing diaper service was my cocoon." She first thought of writing for children at this time but turned to art instead. When her husband was transferred to New York in 1962, Elaine Konigsburg took lessons at the Art Students League on Saturdays. The rest of the week she experienced what she has called "the dailiness of living. . . . I am involved in the everyday, corn-flakes, worn-out sneakers way of life of my children; yet I am detached from it by several decades."

Konigsburg had found a subject. She began her first novel in response to actual events in her daughter's life. Laurie had a hard time making friends when her family moved from New Jersey to Port Chester, New York. After many weeks she finally found one, and her mother was pleased to learn that Laurie's new friend was black: "two outsiders had found each other, and a friendship had begun."

Konigsburg told her first editor, Jean Karl, that she wrote in the morning, then read what she had written to the children when they came home for lunch: "their reaction determined what happened next: 'They laugh or they don't,' she said, 'which means I revise or I don't.' " Konigsburg brought her finished manuscript to Karl in July 1966, and Atheneum published it the following spring.

A superficial description of *Jennifer, Hecate, Macbeth, William McKinley, and Me, Elizabeth* (1967) makes it sound like a typical wish-fulfillment novel, a fantasy of power told from a child's uncritical point of view. New in town, friendless, and small for her age, Elizabeth feels inferior to the perfect Cynthia, who is "pretty and neat and smart. I guess that makes her perfect to almost any grownup." Elizabeth knows that Cynthia is a cruel hypocrite; but adults, who have all the power and none of the brains, cannot see through her. In fact, most adults are as inadequate as Great Aunt Drusilla and Great Uncle Frank, who "thought that kids were pets that talked."

Fortunately Elizabeth meets Jennifer, another outsider, who claims that she is "a witch, disguised as a perfectly normal girl." Like Superman, Jennifer is not the friendless outsider that a conventional observer might assume her to be; she actually has superheroic qualities, "nerves of steel and the heart of a witch." Armed with her wonderful secret, Jennifer defies mere circumstance. She never lets Elizabeth win an argument and never mentions where she lives or who her family is. For Elizabeth, this unbending defiance of the ordinary is wonderful; she says that even if she "discovered that Jennifer lived in an ordinary house and did ordinary things, I would know it was a disguise." Elizabeth becomes Jennifer's apprentice witch. The two enjoy feeling superior to "nor-



Dust jacket for Konigsburg's first novel (Atheneum)

mal" children, and they even plan a superheroic feat: flying.

So far, the story appears rather typical, but as its title suggests this is no ordinary novel. It is too witty; Konigsburg has given Elizabeth her own acerbic sense of humor and wonderful timing: "My mother was not always too patient about my food habits. . . . But I had this reputation for being a fussy eater. Besides, I was an only child; besides, I was a nag." Konigsburg also provides her young humorist with richly comic situations, including an outrageous school play about the cloying magic of love, and the manufacturing of a witch's flying ointment based on a three-pound can of Crisco. The novel transcends typicality in another way also; its adults are not all bad. When Elizabeth's mother displays enough real loving concern to worry about her daughter's "abnormal" lack of friends, her surprisingly sensible husband straightens her out: "my father told her that a usual body temperature was 98.6 degrees, but some people were healthy with a body temperature of only 98.4 degrees. That was normal for them. 'So who's to say exactly what *normal* is?' my father said. My mother seemed to understand." Most adults in children's novels would not understand.

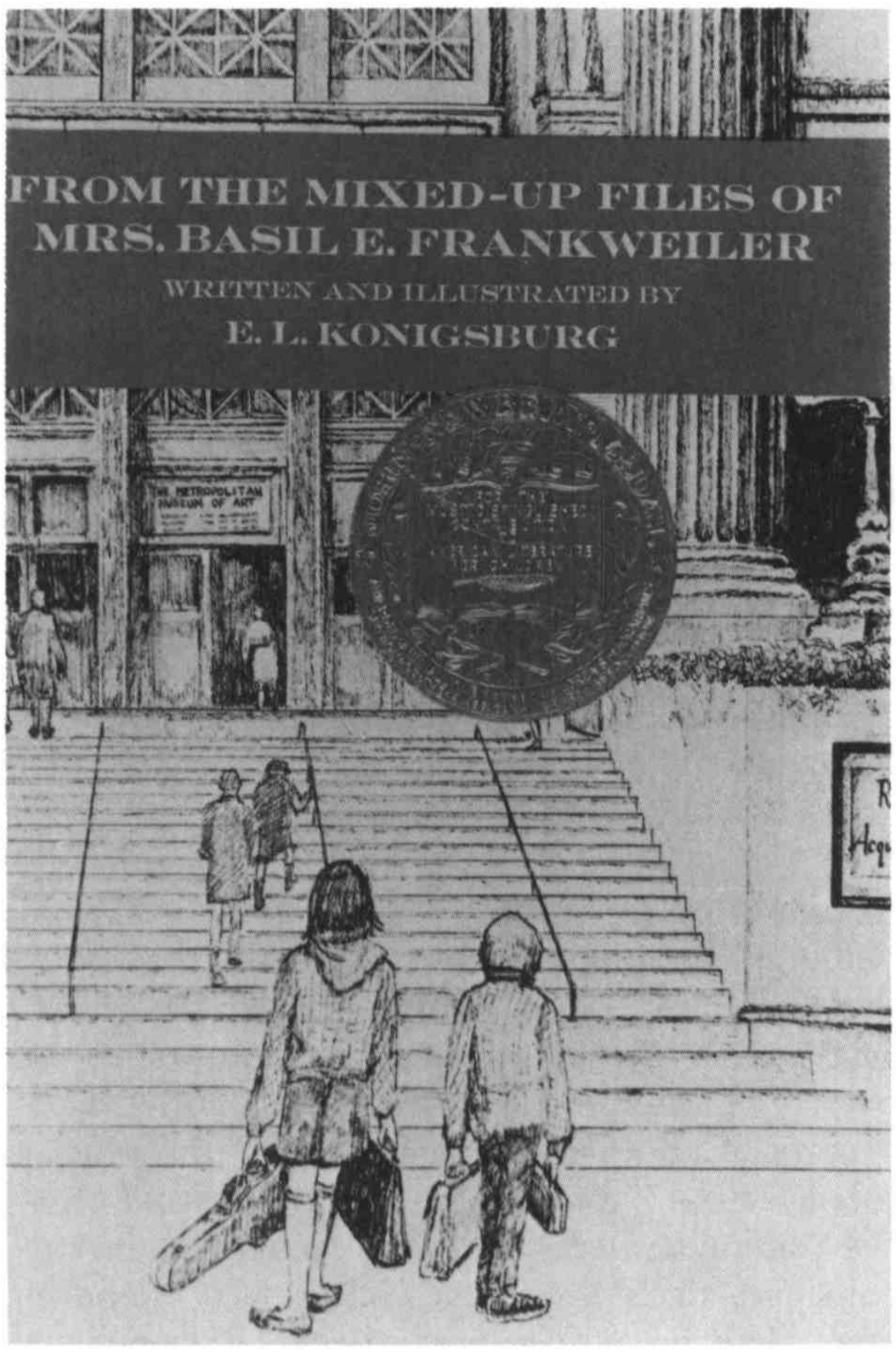
The idea that it is better to be yourself than to be "normal" and accepted by others transcends the cheap egocentricity of most wish-fulfillment fantasies, in which one gets to be both triumphantly oneself and unconditionally accepted by others. Elizabeth is not accepted by anyone except Jennifer, but she learns that it is possible "to enjoy being odd. And I did." Jennifer has dealt successfully with her loneliness in much the same way, by turning to her secret fantasy of witchcraft. But Konigsburg is not content even with that; she makes both girls see that reveling in one's oddness is no easy choice. Elizabeth starts her career as a witch by learning the ugly truth about the Salem witches: "Some of them were little kids. Just like Jennifer; just like me. Some of them were hanged." As she pursues her apprenticeship she must face the discomfort of Jennifer's rituals, all of which keep her apart from normalcy and "normal" children; they allow her next to no fun at Cynthia's birthday party.

The flirtation with witchcraft culminates when Elizabeth falls in love with the toad that is to be boiled as part of the flying ointment. Jennifer tries to warn Elizabeth about giving the toad the humanity of a name; but she does it anyway. When the time comes for the toad to be thrown into the melted Crisco, Elizabeth cannot do it. If witchcraft represents the girls' retreat from society into self-sufficient oddness, then they should be hard-hearted enough, self-sufficient enough, odd enough, to kill a mere toad. The interesting thing is not that Elizabeth turns out to have more loving concern for others that she thought or hoped; it is not even that she is sensitive enough to see that Jennifer actually wanted her to save the toad: "She had purposely kept him until last. She had purposely dangled him over the pot so long. She always found a way not to get mad at herself but to get mad at me instead." What is really interesting is that Konigsburg allowed this confrontation to happen at all; suddenly a pleasurable game becomes a painful reality. The strong demands Konigsburg makes of her characters and the fine moral intelligence she gives them imply much respect for children, a respect she has continued to express in all of her books.

The novel's ending, however, is disappointing. Jennifer, who has been an enticingly myste-

rious, decidedly self-reliant, and resolutely eccentric character throughout the book, suddenly seems to turn into a nice, normal girl; Elizabeth admits to being the nice normal girl she seems to think she always really was: "Neither of us pretends to be a witch any more. Now we mostly enjoy being what we really are . . . just Jennifer and just me . . . just good friends." This is too succinct; it doesn't make clear how being "just Jennifer and just me" does not mean that the girls are just conventional. Whether or not Konigsburg intended it, both girls seem to lose their personalities for the sake of a message.

Earlier in the novel, Elizabeth noticed how Jennifer made her life more interesting: "each trip to and from school had become an adventure." *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler,* published in the fall of 1967, is a more thorough investigation of the possibilities of adventure in the lives of protected suburban children. Konigsburg has said the book originated at a family picnic in Yellowstone National Park, during which her children complained about everything they could think of: "I realized that if my children ever left home, they would never revert to barbarism. They would carry with them all the fussiness and tidiness of suburban life. Where could they go. . . ? Maybe they could find some way to live with caution and compulsiveness and still satisfy their need for adventure."



Dust jacket for a later edition of Konigsburg's Newbery Medal-winning novel about a young brother and sister who run away from home and hide in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City (Atheneum)

Adventure stories usually take a paradoxical attitude toward home life; one leaves the boredom of security in order to have the excitement of adventure but, in facing the danger of adventure, learns to value security. In *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler,* Claudia's adventure starts typically, with boredom: "She was bored with simply being straight-A's Claudia Kincaid. She was tired of arguing about whose turn it was to choose the Sunday night seven-thirty television show, of injustice, and of the monotony of everything." But ironically, Claudia "didn't like discomfort," including the untidiness of picnics; so the only adventure she is capable of choosing for herself offers her no real escape. She and her brother Jamie hide out comfortably in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, which is only a safe imitation of truly different and dangerous places.

At the museum, Claudia insists on fresh underwear every day and scolds Jamie for not eating properly. Jamie realizes what this means: "Claudia simply did not know how to escape." Nevertheless, both children find that even a safe adventure can be uncomfortable—and that they do not like or want discomfort. The Elizabethan bed Claudia chooses as "the most elegant place in the world to hide" smells musty, and she longs for the comforting odor of detergent; Jamie feels a thrill of horror when he realizes he has gone to bed without brushing his teeth.

Even so, things go surprisingly well, and the children begin to understand that they have not actually run away at all. The situation they have carefully placed themselves in allows nothing to happen different enough to make them homesick, and they plan so well that no one ever realizes they are staying in the museum. As Claudia says herself, "heaven knows, we're well trained. Just look how nicely we've managed. It's really their fault if we're not homesick."

Konigsburg might have left it at that and written a charming, safe novel about the safe fun of hiding in the museum. But she will not allow Claudia and Jamie to believe their safe adventure is just

fun any more than she let Elizabeth and Jennifer believe that their witchcraft was just fun. Claudia especially realizes she is not satisfied by it. When she says, "I didn't run away to come home the same," she admits that she actually ran away to escape, not home, but herself, the safe values she inevitably carried with her.

Rather than do the obvious and actually provide her heroine with an exciting adventure, an escape from herself, Konigsburg does something much more subtle and meaningful: she puts Claudia in a situation which forces her to become different only in her acceptance of the fact that she *cannot* be different—at least not in the way she imagines. She develops a painful, and therefore, truly adventurous, understanding of who she is, why she cannot escape it, and what can be done about it.

Claudia reaches that understanding through a rich widow, Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler. Claudia and Jamie leave the safety of the museum to find Mrs. Frankweiler, in hopes that she knows who made Angel, the mysterious statue she has donated to the museum. She does know the secret, and she shares it with them; and she is the person who tells us the children's story. John Rowe Townsend says, "The fact that Mrs. Frankweiler narrates the whole story, which she herself does not enter until near the end, seems to me to be a major flaw"; indeed, the biggest question about this novel is why Mrs. Frankweiler is in it at all.

But it is Mrs. Frankweiler's presence in the book that allows it to be more than lightweight. Konigsburg could not let Claudia realize the inadequacy of her museum adventure unless there was a way for her to move past it; that way is Mrs. Frankweiler, and not just because she knows the secret of Angel. Mrs. Frankweiler understands Claudia because she is herself much like Claudia. She reveals her Claudia-like dislike of discomfort as the children stare at her: "it was uncomfortable. I put a stop to that." Mrs. Frankweiler's home is filled with baths and the odors of cleanliness, and she has herself kept the secret of the statue because, like Claudia, she needs an escape from the comfortable safety her character demands: "I need having the secret more than I need the money." In fact, what Mrs. Frankweiler offers Claudia is a share in her own solution to the problem they both have: "Returning with a secret is what she really wants. . . . Claudia doesn't want adventure. She likes baths and feeling comfortable too much for that kind of thing. Secrets are the kind of adventure she needs. Secrets are safe, and they do much to make you different. On the inside, where it counts."

That is a very explicit statement of theme. Mrs. Frankweiler has an excellent understanding of what Elaine Konigsburg wants this novel to be about, and sometimes she is an annoyingly blatant narrator. Konigsburg once admonished people who make such statements: "For goodness' sake, say all that very softly." Mrs. Frankweiler shouts it from the rooftops, but there is a good reason for it. What Mrs. Frankweiler says is not simple. If it were not said explicitly, few readers of any age would understand it. Even a child as intelligent as Claudia, who might well understand it, could not convincingly find the words to say it. So it is necessary that it be said loudly by someone other than Claudia or Jamie, and appropriate that Mrs. Frankweiler be the one to say it. She is enough like Claudia to see what Claudia would see, enough a mature observer to understand its implications. Furthermore, her telling makes for a better story; if Claudia or Jamie had told it, they would not have had the distance, the maturity, or the wit to point out its comic ironies: "She found Jamie standing on that corner, probably one of the most civilized street corners in the whole world, consulting a compass and announcing that when they turned left, they would be heading 'due northwest.' "

From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler was published just a few months after *Jennifer, Hecate, Macbeth, William McKinley, and Me, Elizabeth;* both books were critical successes. Meanwhile, the Konigsburgs moved back to Jacksonville, where they have lived since. In the midst of moving, Elaine Konigsburg learned of her astonishing coup: her first novel was a runner-up for the 1968 Newbery Medal; her second novel had actually won the medal. The Newbery list has not included two books by the same author before or since.

Not surprisingly, critics found Konigsburg's next novel disappointing; and *About the B'nai Bagels* (1969) is certainly not as strong as the two books that precede it. David Konigsburg tells how *About the B'nai Bagels* grew out of his son Paul's involvement in Little League sports: "not satisfied with superficial knowledge, Elaine studied the official rule books. . . . We even got her to Shea and Yankee Stadiums where she let her opinions about the managers' decisions be known." In fact, the novel finally fails because Konigsburg lets her opinions about her characters' decisions be known, and not softly at all.

The first half of *About the B'nai Bagels* reads like many of the "contemporary junior problem

novels" that followed it throughout the 1970s. Mark is a typical child of typical Jewish parents who tells his own typical story of his problems with interfering parents as it unfolds, with no apparent knowledge of what will occur beyond the end of each chapter; and he feels an apparently uncriticized self-pity: "You can't win with parents. They always have reasons. Even if you, their own flesh and blood child, have reasons as logical as theirs, they have more of them." Mark's mother, who seems to have sprung full grown from the untidy graves of countless Jewish-mother jokes, becomes the coach of his Little League baseball team; Mark has to put up with leftovers, the loss of friends, and his mother's interference everywhere.

But unlike the writers of most books of this type, Konigsburg does not let her protagonist enjoy his delicious self-pity for long. Mark learns that his original understanding of things is simpleminded; his mother is more than a caricature and does understand his problems. She has humbly and sensitively chosen to leave him alone to find his own way. Forced eventually to decide whether he should gain points for himself by interfering in the relationships of his teammates, Mark finds he has enough character to admire and follow his mother's high standards: "I never told Hersch about Barry then or ever. It was a decision to do the right thing."

As in her earlier novels, Konigsburg has taken easy clichés and turned them inside out. She has provided her protagonist with an easy way to understand a problem and then forced him to see its inadequacy. Unfortunately, in *About the B'nai Bagels* she seems to know what she is doing too well. Having found her theme by exploring the implications of what happens to Elizabeth and Jennifer, and to Claudia and Jamie, she states it blatantly again and again in *About the B'nai Bagels.* Like an academic essay, the book starts with a thesis statement, as Mark tells how his mother "invaded my privacy and might have declared practically the last little piece of my life as occupied territory," and closes with a priggishly sententious summary: "But I figure you don't become a man overnight. Because it is a becoming; becoming more yourself. . . . And only some of it happens on official time plus family time. A lot of it happens being alone."

Having somewhere to be alone, a secret space beyond the occupied territory of secure but numbing comfort, is as important for Mark as it was for Claudia. Mark's mother says, "every boy needs to have a little something to hide from his mother." In *(George)* (1970), Konigsburg's next novel, Ben Carr has a lot more than a little something to hide. George, his "concentric twin" and "the funniest little man in the whole world," lives inside him. George is Ben's "unoccupied territory"; Konigsburg's idea of turning that pop-psychology commonplace into a separate personality led her to write her most unusual, messiest, and most interesting book. Not inappropriately, she provides Ben with some of her own messy background and makes him a student of chemistry.

(George) is the first of Konigsburg's novels not narrated by one of the characters involved in the story, and for good reasons. No one but Ben (or George) could accurately understand George's existence as a real, separate being. The adults in the novel are convinced he is a figment of Ben's disturbed imagination. On the other hand, Ben (or George) would believe too firmly in George's reality to tell the story accurately, for Konigsburg would like for readers to see that George is not merely real, but symbolic. While her omniscient narration never once says or even implies that George is actually not a real being, she constantly works at making his symbolic meaning clear in a way no character involved in the story could.

George is a rich symbol. He provides Ben with the sense that he is special: "If I'm peculiar, it's you who makes me so." What makes Ben peculiar might more positively be called his sense of self, for to be oneself is to be different from other people. Consequently, George acts as Ben's memory, the repository of his personal experience, and possesses his intelligence: "It was always George who understood things that didn't make sense." But, gloriously vulgar, satirically cynical, and egocentric, George also represents Ben's antisocial tendencies—his need to say to himself the things he would rarely dare to say to others, his honest perceptions of things he would rather not publically admit to perceiving. So when Ben wants to be like other people, and liked by them, George becomes Ben's conscience. George has high moral standards; he "hated people who were more concerned with appearing different than with being different. More concerned with appearing smart than being smart." In this way, too, George represents antisocial tendencies, but this time they are positive ones; he stands for Ben's need to be himself as opposed to his desire to conform, and therefore, misrepresent himself. Ben has an understandable streak of weakness; he "didn't like having George tell him things he didn't want to hear and that were correct." When Ben is weak enough to tell lies for his morally weak but attractive friend William, George refuses to talk to him anymore; Ben has made himself less

than he actually is, blotted out a part of himself in order to be socially successful.

As a little *man,* George represents Ben's maturity. Ben is a child facing the usual blandishments of adolescence, the need to be "normal," to be liked, to be anything but oneself: "I never thought much about what other kids might think of me before this year. I was so busy listening to George." George represents both Ben's childish egocentricity, his vulgar lack of concern for others, and also his mature self-respect. As a child and a man, George is everything that is not adolescent.

The division of one character into two personalities allows Konigsburg to describe emotions with a subtlety unusual in children's fiction. Ben and George's arguments imply the complex confusion of Ben's self-perception; at one point, Ben even wonders "if George was jealous of William," a decidedly complex thought to have about a part of your own character. Given this psychological complexity, the number of direct theme statements in *(George)* is understandable. As in *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler,* the ideas are complex and probably need to be stated directly: "George realized that it would take a quiet revolution to keep Ben from making a sand castle of his life, building turrets of science surrounded by moats of silence and from wanting praise and friendship instead of growth for his skills." Since George is Ben's moral conscience, Konigsburg frequently gives him her own truths to tell. He says, among other things, "I intend to see that you are not a neat, prepackaged chemist who fits things into neat, labelled jars. . . . I, I, me, vulgar George, intend to keep you slightly out of bounds so that you can move, swing. In short, Benjamin Body, I intend to make a man of you, a man I'll be proud to live in."

These obvious statements of values are still perceptive enough, clever enough, to be worth saying. In fact, cleverness is the defining quality of *(George).* The idea of the book is itself clever, and it is executed with a clever and deliciously wicked wit. Nasty-minded George calls Ben's undomestic mother every name he can think of: Betty Anti-Crocker, Queen of the Maytag, The Pillsbury Princess, Chef Burn-ar-dee, Queen Frozen Pot Pie. Konigsburg also presents a thoroughly wicked picture of Ben's father's second wife: "Marilyn was a home economics major and regularly waged anti-germ warfare. In Marilyn's house the milk cartons were put away so promptly that they never sweated, and the mayonnaise was treated like some hopelessly insane relative that was never allowed out." This latter image is clearly related to George, whom Marilyn would never allow out either. Marilyn is like one of George's "prepackaged" people; when she uses her knowledge of children gained "from my minor in psych and all" to baldly announce to Ben that he is a paranoid schizophrenic, readers can see the comparative virtues of messiness: "I want you to know, Ben, that it wasn't easy convincing your father that you're crazy."

In a novel which makes messiness a virtue, messiness abounds. The plot complicates itself endlessly and Konigsburg allows herself every sort of verbal excess; but she is always most interesting when she seems to be least sure of her material and has least control of it. Like Claudia and Mrs. Frankweiler, she needs to escape from her own stultifying competence. In *(George)* she shows little control and accomplishes much—perhaps more than she ever did before or has since. David Rees suggested in *Horn Book* that *(George)* "is probably Elaine Konigsburg's finest achievement so far. . . . a lighthearted, genuinely comic novel."

Konigsburg has said, "Had I not won the Newbery, I don't know if I would have had the courage to experiment." *(George)* was the first of a series of experiments. While the innovative stories which constitute her next book, *Altogether, One at a Time* (1971), are all about children facing their limitations, they are quite different from each other, from her earlier work, and from most children's fiction.

The narrator of "Inviting Jason" never gets past his flawed perception of himself. Perceptive readers will see how fitting it is that Dick, the most popular boy in school, likes the dyslexic outsider Jason more than he likes Stanley; Stanley did not want to invite Jason to his party for fear of offending Dick. But Stanley, who tells the story with a blindness rare in children's fiction, feels too sorry for himself to see the irony. The boy in "Night of the Leonids" is more perceptive; he understands why his sixty-three-year-old grandmother slaps him when he complains about the clouds that cover the star shower which will not occur again for another third of a century: "I added it up. Sixty-three and thirty-three don't add up to another chance. . . . I held the hand that hit me." What is unusual here is that a child comes to understand and offer solace for an adult's pain, instead of the other way around. "Camp Fat" is a contrived allegory quite unlike anything else by Konigsburg. The annoyingly profound ghost of a dead counselor offers symbolic jewelry to help a girl find "what is inside all that fat of yours"; it turns out to

be just what the girl claimed earlier (although not in the joking way she meant it): "a skinny little girl screaming 'I'm hungry!' " She was unwittingly hungry for self-perception; while the theme is typically Konigsburg's, the story seems to be trying to find a tidy way of presenting complex ideas. It fails because it takes its pretentious symbolism too seriously. "Momma at the Pearly Gates" is also too serious. It describes a confrontation between a "dirty nigger" and a "Ding Dong Dago." The "dirty nigger," who is the narrator's mother as a child, is actually the self-sufficient superchild that Jennifer only pretended to be. There is no real conflict in this story, only growing satisfaction at Momma's inevitable triumph; apparently, Konigsburg felt too strongly about the issues here to present them subtly.

Altogether, One at a Time is the only one of Konigsburg's books illustrated by someone other than herself. Each story has pictures by a different artist, and the techniques of illustration are themselves unusual. Some of Laurel Schindelman's pictures for "Night of the Leonids" communicate part of the plot; for instance, a picture rather than words show it is cloudy. But since that does not happen consistently, these pictures demand a close attention that is not always repaid; and the illustrator tries much too hard to be as witty as Konigsburg is in her prose. Gary Parker's pictures for "Camp Fat" are blurry and mostly pointless, and Gail E. Haley's folk-oriented pictures for "Momma at the Pearly Gates" do not suit the sociologically precise feeling of the story. Only Mercer Mayer's straightforward sketches for "Inviting Jason" work as well as Konigsburg's own dramatic and engagingly clumsy pictures usually do. They have something like her own mixture of careful line and sparseness of detail, an effect that beautifully balances the richly detailed comedy of her prose.

Konigsburg's next book was another surprise. An exploration of the life and times of Eleanor of Aquitaine, *A Proud Taste for Scarlet and Miniver* (1973) is filled with facts about the Middle Ages and framed by an ingenious depiction of Eleanor and her friends in a delightfully absurd version of heaven. Konigsburg says the book emerged from her consideration of the term "middle-aged child," used by publishers to define an audience for children's books, which she first thought silly: "But my acceptance of the term has come about as a result of establishing a relationship between the child, aged eight through twelve, and the Middle Ages. The Middle Ages of Western civilization." She believes that both are literal-minded, superstitious, and filled with contradictions. She also believes that Eleanor is both representative of that childlike age and "in essence everything that woman's liberation is in slogans." And for all her independence, Konigsburg's Eleanor is indeed a little childish. Like many middle-aged children, she is pleasure-loving, restriction-hating, and self-centered; above all, she has a childlike vitality, an exuberance that mesmerizes everyone in the book: "she knew what she wanted, and she had the energy to do it all."

But the book itself is not so energetic. Four narrators describe their involvement with Eleanor as they sit with each other in heaven after the event; they all know how their various stories come out and can create no suspense for each other or for us. Furthermore, they tell us what people felt rather than showing it; even Eleanor tells her part of the story in this uninvolved way. The result is like a bad historical movie: lots of lavish local color, lots of grandiose passion described grandiosely, little sense of real people engaged in real human activities; too much glamor, too little "dailiness."

Even worse, Eleanor is not allowed the humanity of being seen differently by different people. The use of four narrators cries out for four different interpretations of Eleanor, and we get only one. They all adore her. As Eleanor says herself, "No one who matters questions that I have turned out anything but right." While the novel provides evidence of much to criticize in Eleanor, Konigsburg uncritically lets her get away with attitudes and behavior that she would make her more youthful protagonists question.

In *The Dragon in the Ghetto Caper* (1974), Konigsburg returns to more familiar territory as she tells of Andrew J. Chronister's search "for something uncertain" in her most certain, most confident book. Konigsburg strides with the mastery of ownership through the territory she tentatively explored earlier, never stumbling, hardly even stopping to admire the scenery she knows so well. The book is like the ghetto it describes—like Andy's wealthy suburban home in Foxmeadow, "the whole world to the people who lived there," with "a fence circled all around it, and a security guard . . . posted at the only gate."

Andy does not understand how Foxmeadow is a ghetto, so he misses the irony when he says to a black woman about her own neighborhood, "Nice ghetto you've got here," and she replies, "It's home t'me." But while he does not know that his home is as much his prison (and his protection) as the black woman's is hers, he still feels hemmed in by it. Like Claudia, he is discomfitted by too much

Chapter 1

One of the things that Andrew J. Chronister never did was to attend music class. They could not make him, and they knew it. He could not carry a tune, and he knew it. They was Emerson Country Day School.

Andy had gone to Emerson C.D.S. (Country. Day. School.) for almost seven years, counting kindergarten. The policy there was not to make Andrew go to music, but to make him want to go. They never succeeded. So when the other students went to singing, Andy went to the art room where he drew dragons. Sometimes he painted dragons. One was made out of papier-mâché, and two were made out of construction paper, burlap and Elmer's glue; those took four music lessons each and were the largest.

Dragons, however, were not Andy's true passion; crime was. ~~Dragons were one of Andy's passions and crime was the other.~~ He was determined to be a detective when he grew up. Not an ordinary police detective. A famous one. Famous, tough and cool. Like Ellery Queen, for God's sake.

Immediately after he had decided that he would be a (famous) (tough) (cool) detective, Andy had put himself into training. He would be ready to solve the crime of the century the minute it occurred in Foxmeadow. Foxmeadow was where Andy lived, and it met the logical requirements ~~of being~~ the scene of a puzzling murder. That is, when a famous, cool, tough detective like Ellery or Sherlock solved a crime, it always involved a closed group of people. Like guests in a hotel. Or movie stars working on a film. Or travellers on an ocean liner. Foxmeadow met that requirement. It certainly was closed.

Foxmeadow was part of the town of Gainesboro. It was ~~It was part of the town of Gainesboro,~~ a ring of houses built around acres and acres (eighteen holes) of a championship golf course. Plus four tennis courts and one swimming pool, Olympic-sized. There were only

Revised typescript page for The Dragon in the Ghetto Caper *(by permission of the author)*

comfort and can imagine only unsatisfying escapes from it. Also like Claudia, he meets a woman older than himself who shares his situation and leads him to self-understanding.

Edie Yakots is a young, attractive married woman who is so different from the orderly norms of Foxmeadow that she even talks confusingly. Andy finds her fascinating: "The other kids . . . were all so much alike that they could have interchangeable parts. Edie was different, bordering on strange." As Andy's "sidekick" in his safe game of tough detective, Edie unwittingly leads him into the middle of a *real* game, a numbers racket in a black ghetto that forces him to face the actual implications of his imagined adventure. Furthermore, she is "better at making sense than at making sentences," as outrageous a speaker of theme statements as Mrs. Frankweiler or George. Edie sees that the dragons Andy always draws represent his difference from other people, that thing which is negatively egocentric but positively self-understanding; and she often speaks oracularly of dragons. The essence of her wisdom is, "You've got to know your dragon, but you've also got to keep him under control." Konigsburg herself makes the meaning of dragons crystal clear in a statement about Andy's sister: "Mary Jane had no room for dragons in her life. Her whole life was predictable. She would always be cool. She would never do anything foolish. . . . She would always be a nerd. Dragons were what made life hard to live, yet no fun to live without."

This is all familiar, as dragons are another version of what George stands for or of the secret Mrs. Frankweiler gives Claudia. Konigsburg is at her most confident in *The Dragon in the Ghetto Caper*. There are few moments in her writing funnier than the one in which Andy displays his ignorance of slang by saying, "I see nothing wrong with calling a spade a spade or a ghetto a ghetto." She had absolute control of her material, to the extent of giving Andy the ultimately Foxmeadowian weapon to fend off what he thinks are thieves, a can of spray deodorant: "Move, Edie. I don't have enough deodorant to hold these stinkers all day." The only problem with this novel is that it has no problems. It is as predictable as Foxmeadow, and as Edie says, "You can't get lost in Foxmeadow. All the dragons are locked out."

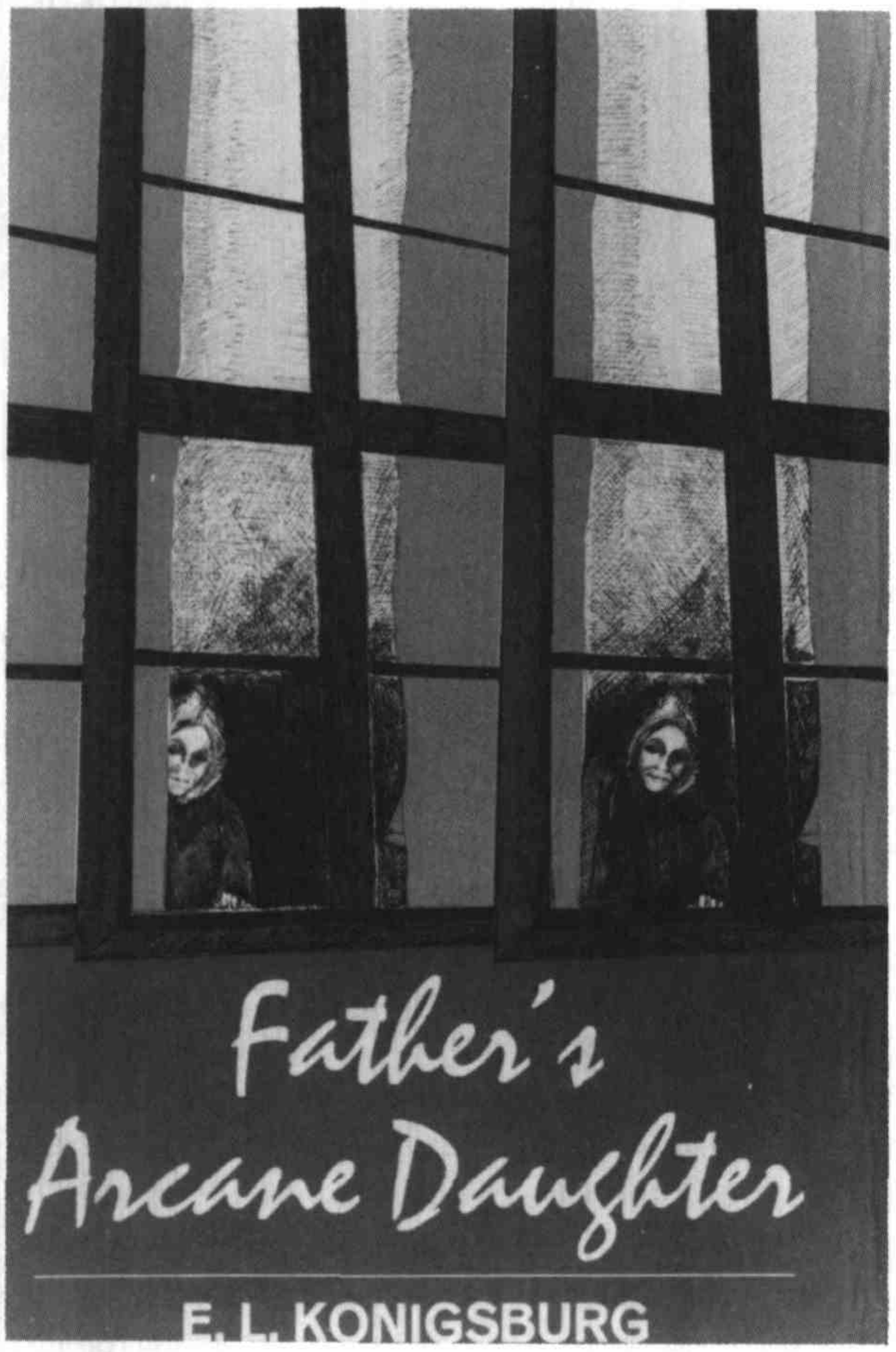
Given the strange failing of *The Dragon in the Ghetto Caper* to be messy enough to mirror its message, *The Second Mrs. Giaconda* (1975) might be understood as a competent person's sour grapes about competence. In her second historical novel, Konigsburg depicts Leonardo da Vinci as a competent person who lacks the courage to express the dragons within him. In her *Horn Book* article about this book, Konigsburg says, "Leonardo lacked the ability to make a giant leap; he was too inhibited. He was too much the experimenter. . . ." She might almost be talking about herself, an experimenter whose best experiments are glorious messes and who loses her brilliance when she stops experimenting. In fact, she says that Leonardo's last painting failed because "he had written a book of rules, his famous *Treatise on Painting*, and was conscientiously following these rules." Something like that could be said of *The Dragon in the Ghetto Caper*.

That Konigsburg might be accused of seeing herself in the universally admired Leonardo quite unfairly implies a glorious conceit; but it does have the advantage of explaining her need to criticize him. For the Leonardo of *The Second Mrs. Giaconda* is not particularly lovable; a *New York Times* reviewer called him "curiously stunted." He is utterly self-centered; even worse, he is afraid of feelings: "Salai recognized the look, frozen and withdrawn, on his master's face. It was the look he always wore when human emotions became too intense or too raw."

Feeling that Leonardo clearly lacks a dragon, Konigsburg provides him with one in the person of the boy Salai. According to Leonardo's notebooks, Salai was a thief and a liar; *The Second Mrs. Giaconda* is an attempt to explain why Leonardo kept him with him for more than thirty years. The usual explanation is that Leonardo was homosexual; "but," says Konigsburg, "I am glad that I write for children. For that explanation of his use of a young boy will never do. It is simply not enough; it is not deep enough." Her deeper answer is that Salai had the human vitality Leonardo lacked. Konigsburg's Salai combines the vulgarity of George and the vitality of Eleanor of Aquitaine. As his friend Beatrice tells Salai, "Your master needs something from you. He needs your rudeness and irresponsibility. . . . He needs a wild element. . . . All great art needs it; something that leaps and flickers. Some artists can put that wild element into the treatment itself, but Leonardo cannot." Unfortunately, neither can Konigsburg, at least not in this book. Despite its breezy style, *The Second Mrs. Giaconda* is no less flat than *A Proud Taste for Scarlet and Miniver*, and for the same ironic reason: it presents Konigsburg's interpretations of character too clearly and carefully to partake itself of the wildness it praises.

Father's Arcane Daughter (1976) is another matter altogether. This novel may be Konigsburg's most daring experiment. The difference is not in meaning, for as David Rees rightly said in *Horn Book,* "This novel makes more explicit the themes that were explored in the earlier books." Here, Konigsburg develops those themes in a volatile, new mixture of highly melodramatic plotting and bald, matter-of-fact style.

Like so many of Konigsburg's other young characters, Winston Carmichael and his handicapped sister Heidi are imprisoned by their protective environment. Their parents protect Heidi because of her handicap, and both children for fear of another kidnapping like the one years earlier that led to the presumed death of their half sister Caroline. The children respond to imprisonment by imprisoning themselves even further. Uncoordinated and hard of hearing, Heidi has disappeared into a protective shell of childishness, "cutesy, clinging and cuddling." Winston is overcareful and friendless; he has sacrificed his freedom to his concern for (and embarrassment about) Heidi. Not surprisingly in a novel by Konigsburg, Winston and Heidi escape their safe prison with the help of an unusual woman older than themselves, who understands their situation because she shares it. Martha, who pretends to be Caroline, tells Winston, "If we stretch the bars of the cage very wide—very, very wide indeed—even a cripple can walk through." Martha is, as Winston says, "unguarded" herself and gradually helps both children through the bars of their emotional handicaps.



Dust jacket for Konigsburg's 1976 novel about a young boy and his handicapped sister burdened by their overprotective parents (Atheneum)

But despite the familiarity of this situation, Konigsburg explores its ironies and ambiguities far more deeply than she explored similar situations in earlier novels. Winston and Heidi are imprisoned not by an ordinary life but by a highly unusual one. While George was afraid that Ben would imprison himself in a castle of science, Heidi's wealthy mother "was able to hide her daughter in Carmichael castle and pull up the drawbridge." Wealthy, cossetted, and victimized by undesirable celebrity, Winston and Heidi first think their half sister will free them to be normal. But Martha knows better and tells Heidi, when she says she wants to be normal, "If Heidi wants to be 'normal,' she can just go on home and continue the pretending." Ironically, Heidi's life as a handicapped person becomes a perverse but interesting image of normalcy; she is protected from her own real self because she is weak enough to need and accept protection. When she discovers the "fine mind" she has kept secret even from herself, she turns out to be the "arcane daughter" of the title.

Even more ironically, Martha, the presumed arcane daughter, wants the children to see the truth about themselves, but she herself "continues the pretending" and lets people go on believing she is actually Caroline. She lets herself be imprisoned by this lie so that she can help the children live truthfully. She does so in order to free Winston from a prison of self-sacrifice, his need to protect Heidi, and his guilt over his secret wish that she remain handicapped and inferior. But in doing so, she herself sacrifices her love for Winston's father, and pretends to be his child in order to save Heidi and Winston from the prison of their childhood and to allow them to be their own real selves. At one point, the reader is told that "it was her love for Winston and her increased recognition of and, eventually, love for Heidi that kept her bound to the role of Caroline Carmichael." But love or not, she is indeed bound, and Konigsburg insists we notice that and see the ambiguity of her entire situation.

She also has much to say about the passing of time. Winston says, "There was no history more strange to me than the immediate past history of my family." Parental horror at that lurid history has built Winston and Heidi's prison; because of history, they are protected from actually having a history—having anything happen to them interesting enough to be noteworthy. Their lives are always the same, and Winston wearily describes the comforting sameness of their "usual" Saturdays. They are imprisoned by the "comfortable" past, "where everything was known and unfinished and required no action." Martha, as Caroline emerging from the past and living in the present, hides under the "known and finished" shadow of Caroline and saves the children from what Winston calls the "shadow" of the past. She saves them from history so that they can have a history of their own—the excitingly melodramatic story Winston is in the process of telling Heidi as the novel unfolds, in which "time passes so easily."

Father's Arcane Daughter carefully balances that which is safe but stultifying with that which is dangerous but filled with potential. Konigsburg can explore her characteristic concern with security and its effect on freedom subtly here, because *Father's Arcane Daughter* reads like a well-made play. The exploration is more in the complexities of the events the books describes than in complex statements of their meaning. The meaning *is* the action; by choosing to tell of these complex events matter-of-factly, Konigsburg allows them to speak for themselves. While she does allow her characters to make statements about what it all means, they do not in fact entirely account for the novel's complexity. Winston says that his telling of the story "will be a string of incidents. Like the separate frames of a comic strip." Like a comic strip, the book is clearly drawn, succinctly detailed, episodic, filled with action, highly melodramatic—showing only the high points but doing it in a way that makes them seem like parables and implies the complexity of everything in between. In her review of this book in the *New York Times,* Natalie Babbitt suggested that "there is a great potential in what it almost says," and adds that Konigsburg should have actually written "the big adult novel it wants to be." But *Father's Arcane Daughter* is interesting exactly because it does *almost* say, because it is not that complicated, detailed adult novel. Konigsburg has found a way of communicating her rich perception of the subtleties in human relationships in a book that is surprisingly easy to read and to understand.

The same might be said of at least two of the five stories in *Throwing Shadows* (1979), which was nominated for an American Book Award. In all these stories, Konigsburg confidently describes children coming to hard terms with the difficulty of being themselves and with their ability to influence others. Avery of "The Catchee" must accept that he *is* a "catchee" and that he will never get away with anything. A lesser writer would have merely sympathized with his comic plight, but Konigsburg characteristically turns it into a source of moral strength: "It can make you very honest. . . . It can make you very brave." Ampara, the young Ecuadorian guide who tells the story "In the Village of the Weavers," guides her friend Antonio into being very brave, very honest—and very humble. Like most of Konigsburg's youngsters, Antonio has "a fine fire in his brain" and must face the dangers of arrogance. Conversely, young William in "With Bert and Ray" is surprised to learn that he and his mother are better at selling antiques than the self-styled experts who started them in the business; he also learns that he is a mature enough child to be understanding and generous about Bert and Ray's adult childishness about "being beat out by Ma."

The other two stories in the collection impressively explore the subtler implications of similar situations. In both "At the Home" and "On Shark's Tooth Beach," children confront the inadequacies of childish adults and learn how to cope with them both humbly and humanely. President Bob of "On Shark's Tooth Beach" is a retired university president incapable of seeing young Ned or his Oriental mother as anything but a child and an Oriental. Ned hates President Bob's arrogance enough to compete with him in finding shark's teeth, but when Ned finds part of a shark's jaw, the ultimate trophy, he realizes he has himself become what he despised in the very act of combatting it; "if his face was a movie called *Jealousy and Greed,* I didn't like the words I could put to mine." Ned's real triumph is an act of humility; he gives President Bob the trophy, and Bob childishly gloats over "the jawbone with which he had been smitten." Ned wins by being willing to lose; but he does clearly win. In "At the Home," Phillip wins too. The old woman whose life story he tape-records is not anything like President Bob. In fact, Phillip finds her fascinating and quickly gets past his original idea that old people are all alike and all boring. But ironically, each of the old people in the home assumes that all of the other old people are all alike and all boring; Phillip realizes he must show them

they are wrong. Once again a child transcends childish egocentricity and, in doing so, discovers that he knows better and can act with more maturity than childishly egocentric adults.

Journey to an 800 Number (1982) is an accomplished variation on Konigsburg's familiar themes. A novel about a boy from a ritzy private school who spends a summer with his post-hippie father escorting a camel to shopping malls and conventions and who has strange encounters along the way with a wild assortment of eccentrics, this book might well seem strange to those who have read nothing else by Konigsburg; but those who know her work will easily recognize her distinctive style and her usual thematic concerns. Like the central characters in all of Konigsburg's later work, Maximilian R. Stubbs wittily tells his own story. Also like many of Konigsburg's protagonists, Max is a victim of an overprotected life, but he is more like Ben of *(George)* or Winston of *Father's Arcane Daughter* than like Claudia of *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* or Andy of *The Dragon in the Ghetto Caper;* rather than feel constrained and seek escape from the confines of his safe life, Max actively seeks safety and confinement. As he finally admits to himself late in the novel, "I had never thought of myself as strange; I can honestly say that I have spent all my time that I can remember trying not to be strange. Trying to be as normal as everyone else at Fortnum Preparatory School for Boys."

Of course, Max is not normal; one of the underlying themes of Konigsburg's fiction is that nobody is normal—that we are all different from each other, and that wise people enjoy the differences. *Journey to an 800 Number* is the story of Max's voyage into a perception and acceptance of his own strangeness and, along with that, his acceptance and enjoyment of the strangeness of others.

Max learns from the best teacher; simply having the experience of meeting new and unusual people and liking them for what they are. Indeed, what most distinguishes this novel from Konigsburg's other books is the rich feast of weird people she offers the reader: former and current hippies, trailer-park dwellers, sexy school librarians, midgets, taco-stand operators, and even a world famous Las Vegas star.

Max comes to understand what he has learned—and as a result, Konigsburg makes it explicit for her readers—through conversations with Sabrina, a young girl he meets along the way. Max is attracted to Sabrina even though, as he says, "she was as skinny as a ball point pen and as straight"; so he is both confused and delighted when she and her mother keep showing up at different conventions with different names on their name tags. Max finally learns the truth—that, unable to afford a holiday, Sabrina's mother Lily has managed to arrange one by sneaking into conventions without paying. Lily works for most of the year as an operator at an 800 number, accepting telephone orders: "It is the most anonymous job in the world, speaking to people you'll never know and who will never know you. Always available. Always a polite voice. Never a face. Never a personality. Never a before. Never an after." Lily's job has trained her to be the perfect conventioneer; perfectly anonymous, in no way different, she blends in equally well with groups of travel agents or members of a sorority. In fact, Lily and her 800 number anonymity represent the essence of what Max aspires to—she is exactly "as normal as everyone else."

Max comes to realize the negative implications of that as he talks to Sabrina about "freaks." Sabrina collects information about people with unique problems; they fascinate her because of their inability ever to be anonymous. As Sabrina says, "Maximilian, what you don't seem to understand is that once you're a freak, a born one or a man-made one, anything you do that's normal becomes freakish." Max's response is, "By your logic, then, anything freakish that a freak does is normal." To be a freak is directly antithetical to being an 800 number. At work, Lily has no choice but to be anonymous, and, as Sabrina says, freaks have no choice but to be freakish: "Everyone wants to pretend sometime. Needs to. But freaks like David who lives in a bubble or the Crisco Kid or Renee cannot. They cannot live with disguises. . . . I'm telling you, Max, only freaks have to live without disguises." In other words, everyone but freaks and "800 numbers" has a choice—to try to be anonymous and normal, or to accept one's own particular difference from others, one's tendency to freakishness, and not disguise it in anonymity: "Only normal people like you and me and Lily and Woody have any choice about whether or not we want to present ourselves or present a disguise."

Max only hears this at the end of the novel—after he has begun to realize how it might relate to his own situation. At the beginning he has made a choice; by the end, he has come to see what is wrong with it. Throughout, however, Konigsburg has cleverly implied what is wrong with Max's choice by paradoxically suggesting that it is his desire to be "normal" that makes him a freak. His desperate attempt to deny anything about himself that might be considered strange is a symbolic form

of amputation; since he sees Woody, his father, as representing everything his school does not stand for, he tries to detest him. He accepts only those aspects of himself that he associates with his mother, who left his father and the camel because, she said, "I want a dog and a house. And meals from china plates instead of from Styrofoam containers. I don't want a life that is tied to a camel." Because his mother gave him the name Maximilian, he insists on it, and refuses to accept his father's name for him: Bo, short for Rainbow.

Having tried to cut off anything interesting and unusual about himself, Max is like the talented flute player Renee, whose hand was cut off by a subway train and who has had it sewn on again. Sabrina's comment about Renee early in the novel is good advice for Max: "No one knows if she can ever play the flute again. But you should always remember to put any part that's cut off—even if it's just a finger—into a plastic bag and take it to the hospital with you." As the novel progresses, Max rediscovers his amputated part; finally, he learns to live with the horrifying fact that he loves his father and can "just enjoy being his son"—even after he finds out that Woody is not in fact his biological father.

While it is brilliantly witty and enjoyably eccentric, there is nothing particularly new in *Journey to an 800 Number;* it has the same qualities as the best of Konigsburg's writing. It is humorously told by its young central character with Konigsburg's fine ear for the way people talk. The narrator starts out misunderstanding something, so that he is blind to various ironies in his situation; someone wiser (and female) shows him the way to better understanding by knowing what to value. Like many previous Konigsburg protagonists, Max leaves the safety of childhood for the tougher insecurity of maturity. He grows into a deeper consciousness of human individuality, his own and others, that makes him humble but that does not allow him to deny his own personality. And here as in all of Konigsburg's writing, the ironies only go so far; her characters typically grow beyond their original flawed understanding into a clear, unironic perception of the truth. Her stories typically start as satiric comedies and end as serious moral parables; like Benjamin Dickinson Carr of *(George),* they hide the essence of their meaning under a safe veneer of cleverness, until circumstances force it to emerge. As a result, Konigsburg's biggest strength is also her most damaging weakness; her subtle perception of moral truths sometimes makes her overstate those truths.

Elaine Konigsburg continues to live in Jacksonville, where she moved in 1968. Her family has grown up; her youngest child, Ross, graduated from college in the spring of 1981. She spends her time, she says, drawing, painting, and gardening: "I have a small garden of wild things, plants that I've dug up from the fields around my house. I like to walk along the beach, and I like to think, and I like to read." Above all, she keeps writing; Atheneum published her twelfth book, *Up From Jericho Tel,* in the spring of 1986. The story of an encounter between some eccentric children and the ghost of a dead actress named Tallulah, it shares many of the best characteristics of her earlier work. It is messy and intriguing, filled with clearly etched characters, subtle moral dilemmas, and sharp wit.

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