Teacher Appreciation Day | Authors and Illustrators Remember Early Educators

Apr 23, 2017 | Filed in People

Mrs. Alisch greeting her former student Jarrett J. Krosoczka. Photo by Amy Hopkinson.

For many children, educators are often the first adults they get to know outside their immediate families, and the impressions these men and women make on their youthful charges can be indelible. A few years back, we surveyed authors and illustrators about their teachers. Their shared visual and written reminiscences included educators that were "loved," "loathed," and those who "saved" their students. This group includes a similar mix of memories and experiences.

From Jarrett J. Krosoczka, author and illustrator of the "Lunch Lady" series and the soon-to-be-published *Naptastrophe!* (May 2017, all Random): When I hosted my very first book signing for my very first published book, I did so in my hometown of Worcester, MA. It was June 2001. Everyone that I ever knew was there—a friend described

it as a wake, but happy. The highlight of the parade of well-wishers was my first-grade teacher, Mrs. Alisch. There was already a line stretched across the bookstore floor, but Mrs. Alisch came charging in, cut the line, hugged me, gave me a big kiss and then turned to the crowd and proclaimed, "I TAUGHT HIM HOW TO READ!" She received a thunderous round of applause. I was left with bright red lipstick on my cheek. Of course, Mrs. Alisch did teach me how to read, but she also gave me so much more than that. She was a stable, maternal figure to my six-year-old self when things at home were turbulent. I arrived at her classroom every day, ready to learn knowing that she provided a safe, reassuring space for me. I grew up in a K-8 school and when my class graduated eighth grade, Mrs. Alisch retired from Gates Lane School. I was the student chosen to deliver a speech in tribute to her. I was proud to do so. On the 10th anniversary of my first published book, the Worcester Art Museum mounted an exhibit of the original artwork from my books. And, you know who attended the opening reception? Mrs. Alisch. "Mrs. Alisch! How are you?!" I asked. She grabbed my arm with a very firm grip, and said, "Well, I'm here!" Which was her way of saying that things were good because she was still alive. (She listed all of my former teachers who had since passed away.) But really, things were always good because she was there in the first place. Thank you, Mrs. Alisch.

From Erin Entrada Kelly, author *Land of the Forgotten Girls* (2016) and *Hello, Universe* (2017, both HarperCollins): Let's take a cue from Roald Dahl and call her Coach Trunchbull. She liked to blow her whistle and yell. Her voice was impossibly loud, and she didn't use it to say nice things. Not to me, at least. I was no star athlete. I was usually picked last—or almost last—when choosing sides for basketball. I stuck to the end of the line during softball games so my turn wouldn't come. I had asthma; I struggled. I had an attitude, sometimes. I admit it. Coach Trunchbull was in my life for three years. It doesn't take long to resent someone for exploiting your weaknesses. She called me a loser once. Sometimes once is all it takes. Maybe she was nicer to girls who ran far and jumped high. I wouldn't know. Even though Coach Trunchbull was loud, tall, and

mean, and I was none of those things, we had one thing in common: neither of us smiled very much. I smile now, though. I hope she does, too.

From R. Gregory Christie, illustrator of Carole Boston Weatherford's *Freedom in Congo Square* (little bee, 2016) and Shana Corey's *A Time to Act* (NorthSouth, Apr. 2017): I'm forever grateful to Elinor Peter, my high school art teacher. Mrs. Peter taught 14–18-year-olds the fundamentals of studio painting—on a college level. She expected the best from us and her catchphrase was "use what you see along with what you know." It was her mantra while we created images from life. At one point, she had one another teacher come in dressed in a leotard for a figure drawing class. As you can imagine, that was a very brave thing to do at that time in Scotch Plains, NJ, but those sessions prepared me for art school in NYC. Mrs. Peter was an amazing instructor and reflecting on who she was as an artist and what she did as a teacher still inspire me today.

From Deborah Heiligman, author *Charles and Emma* (2009) *and Vincent and Theo: The van Gogh Brothers* (Apr. 2017, both Holt): I've talked (and written) about many of my teachers over the years. My memories of so many of them are vivid—from my kindergarten teacher, Miss Erie, who looked like Mrs. Santa Claus and let us eat a whole big carrot as a snack (can't you tell how good she was just by that fact?) to my fourth-grade teacher, Miss Ryan, who had created reading nooks all over her classroom and let us go to them as a reward when we finished our regular work, to my fifth-grade teacher, Miss Laudenslager, a large woman with dandruffy hair, who read aloud in her booming voice *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* every day, always knowing exactly where and when to stop so we couldn't stand it. Oh how I adored her. I've even whined about how much my first-grade teacher, Miss Ward, hated me (for some unknown reason, honest) and stood at the front of the room every day after penmanship, and said, "OK, class, who's the worst writer in the room?" and wasn't satisfied until everyone screamed out my name, and then answered defiantly, "That's right, Deborah Heiligman is the worst writer in the room." But I've never

written about Mr. Hatzai, my high school chemistry teacher. He had curly brown hair, blue eyes, and dimples when he smiled. He was an actor, too, outside of school, and had such charisma, and a wonderful way of talking about—well, actually, I have no idea what he talked about. I didn't learn a thing that year.

From Hervè Tullet, author and illustrator of *Press Here* (2011) and the forthcoming *Say Zoop!* (Aug. 2017, both Chronicle): Mr. Plard taught French Literature and was so incredibly passionate about his subject that he created a print and audio library for senior students. At the beginning of the school year he asked if anyone would be interested in exploring Surrealism. Despite being an uncomfortable teen (spotty, uncommunicative, and somewhat withdrawn), my hand shot up. I viewed this opportunity to learn, share, and teach my fellow classmates about the movement as a huge responsibility. The study and the discovery were incredible; they encompassed Dadaism and Surrealism, including poetry, painting, sculpture, cinema, photography, and eroticism. The politics, passions, and youthful approach of these early 20th-century artists were the perfect subjects for the teenager and student that I was to take on. I still remember Mr. Plard's favorite line, which roughly translates into English as, "intelligence is the art of making bridges." In my work, I believe I am always striving to make connections with other disciplines. I learned this from my teacher, and, perhaps, from the Surrealists. In so many ways, Mr. Plard opened doors for me, and in doing so, possibly saved my life.

From Jason Chin, author of *Water is Water* (2015) and *Grand Canyon* (2017, both Roaring Brook): Mr. Riley was my first grade teacher. When I entered his class I was nervous—I was in a new school, in a new city. In this unfamiliar environment, I tried really hard to fit in and for me that meant following all the rules. I worried a lot about doing or saying the wrong thing. In fact, I worried so much that I didn't do anything unless instructed to do so by a teacher and I definitely didn't risk speaking if I didn't have to. So Mr. Riley came up with a plan to help me. He nicknamed me Jason "Bad Boy" Chin and he announced that if I broke enough rules, the class would have

a pizza party. I earned that pizza party, but I don't remember it very well. What I do remember are the friends that I made the year Mr. Riley helped me come out of my shell. Thank you, Mr. Riley!

From Tonya Bolden, author of *How to Build a Museum* (Viking, 2016), and *Pathfinders: The Journeys of 16 Extraordinary Black Souls* (Abrams, 2017) and the forthcoming *Crossing Ebenezer Creek* (Bloomsbury, May 2017): My ninth-grade English teacher, Judith Phelps, was the bane of my existence. When I wanted to spend weekends having fun, I was often working on a research paper for Dragon Phelps. If memory serves, the papers had to be at least 10 pages. Miss Phelps had us do those darned papers—it felt like every week. Or perhaps it was every two weeks. Even if it was once a month, man, oh, man, what a drag. My classmates and I were certain that this woman had absolutely no social life and so was intent on wrecking ours. Mind you, this was the same taskmaster who had us read and recite some of the *Canterbury Tales* in Middle English—

> *"WHAN that Aprille with his shoures soote The droghte of March hath perced to the roote."*

When it came to our papers Miss Phelps was uber-generous with ye olde red pen. She marked *everything*.

> Dangling this. Misplaced that. Passive voice. Word choice. A transition could always be stronger. A conclusion, too.

The woman didn't just want a good beginning, middle, and end. She demanded papers that were great—or near-great. "I remember she wanted us to give in-depth examples of our points of view and was always looking for parallel language," noted Mary. M., who also recalled that Phelps was "such a hard grader." "She was STRICT!" recalled another classmate. "I never took a class from her because I was scared to death of her," confessed Isabelle. As I recall, Miss Phelps had zero tolerance for the tiniest of typos. This was back in the days of manual typewriters. Writing not only meant rewriting and rewriting but often retyping and retyping. Dungeon days. Perhaps because Miss Phelps was so exacting, left such a mark, English classes in 10th, 11th, and 12th grades are a blur. Then came college. *Thank you, Miss Phelps!* Lo and behold, I discovered that

as I'd gotten the hang of a 10-page paper, a 20-pager, or an even longer one wasn't all that daunting. Yes, thank you, Miss Phelps! I believe I was a few years out of college when I returned to my alma mater, the Chapin School, and had a chance to thank Miss Phelps for those once loathsome assignments. Reciting Chaucer in Middle English? Not so much. But I simply didn't bring that up.

From Deborah Hopkinson, author of *A Letter to My Teacher* (Apr. 2017), and *Independence Cake* (May 2017, both Schwartz & Wade): Dear everyone at Oakland School, I'm sorry I never wrote to thank you. Now you are gone; I don't recall all your names. I do remember walking to kindergarten in the snow. It was a half mile and I wasn't quite five. Even in a Massachusetts winter, girls weren't allowed to wear pants to school. And I won't ever forget how excited I was to get Miss Mitchell for second grade. Miss Margaret Mitchell! In my memory you'll always be young and elegant. It was only recently I learned that, 20 years after I left your class, you served as acting principal when Mr. LeBlanc retired, but were passed over for the job. (The newspaper said a sexual discrimination suit had been filed.) Back then, I hadn't begun to question society's rules for girls. Perhaps you hadn't either, not yet. But I do not have a single memory of being held back. You encouraged me, let me sneak novels behind big textbooks, and loaded my arms with books to read over vacation. When, at age 11, I represented Oakland School at the city spelling bee, I trudged down to your office every afternoon for weeks, Mr. LeBlanc. You took the time to drill me on words I couldn't spell now if my life depended on it. I have a newspaper snippet from that time, a profile of each speller. In it, I said I wanted to be a writer. And, after years of trying, I have. Thank you for being my teachers. P.S. As for that dress code, it didn't change until after I graduated from Lowell High in 1969. We've made progress on that front, though sometimes skirmishes still arise. In fact, as I boarded a plane yesterday, I complimented the woman in front of me on her bright red leggings (something I am quite sure none of you, even Miss Mitchell, ever donned). "I wore them out of spite," she said.

Deborah Heiligman | Deborah Hopkinson | Erin Entrada Kelly | Hervé Tullet | Jarret J. Krosoczka | Jason Chin | R. Gregory Christie | Teacher Appreciation Day | Tonya Bolden

RELATED →

BLOGS

Interview: George O'Connor

by Esther Keller | Blogs

BLOGS

Interview: Writer Ridley Pearson On 'Super Sons: The Polarshield Project'

by J. Caleb Mozzocco | Blogs

BLOGS