



**THE ASTRID LINDGREN
MEMORIAL AWARD**

©Illustrations: Björn Berg, Ingrid Vang Nyman, Ilon Wikland

Award Lecture by Katherine Paterson Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award Recipient 2006

As you surely know by now, I was awakened on the morning of March 15th by the ringing of the telephone beside my bed. My immediate thought was “It must be bad news.” My husband thought it was someone wanting a taxi, our number being very close to the number of a local cab company. But it was neither bad news nor a wrong number. It was Larry Lempert calling on behalf of the Astrid Lindgren jury to tell me that I was their choice for this year’s prize.

You won’t be surprised to know that I did not go back to sleep. John and I both got up at once. I didn’t want the Swedish press to catch me in my nightgown even through a telephone line, so as I was dressing as fast as I could, I said to John, “Why me?” People accuse me of being modest. I’m not modest, I’m a good reader. So I am still marveling that this wonderful jury has chosen to honor my books in this extraordinary way. I am very grateful, I really am, but the question remains, “Why me?”

I have many friends who are very fine writers, and it seems to me that all of them knew by the time they were ten years old that they had been born to be writers. When I was ten years old I wasn’t sure whether I wanted to be a missionary or a movie star. Obviously, I never became a movie star.

It would be nice to be able to look back and see signs of early promise. Alas, you would search in vain. When I won my first literary prize at the age of 44, a friend, who had also lived in China and attended Shanghai American School during the time I was there, decided to look into her

collection of school newspapers and see if I had written anything for the school paper. This is what she found and gleefully quoted to anyone she heard congratulate me for winning an award:

Pat, pat, pat.

There is the rat.

Where is the cat?

Pat, pat, pat.

Right beside this, my first published work, was a letter from the teacher that read:

“The second graders’ work is not up to our usual standards this week. We were too busy working on the circus.” So my first published work was published alongside my first critical review, which, you will note, was not a rave. Even I must admit that there has been a marked improvement in my literary skills.

So with so little early promise, what happened to turn me into a writer at all? First of all, I was read to. Like Philip Pullman, “The Just So Stories” are among my earliest memories. I loved the Elephant Child devotedly, partly, perhaps, because I too was plagued by ‘satiabile curiosities,’ which often led me astray.

I once read a speech by a fine writer who said that the thing that qualified her to be a writer for children was her photographic memory of childhood. I don’t have a photographic memory of any event of my childhood. And many events of my childhood are lost or blurred. But I do have, I think, a good emotional memory. I remember not so much the events themselves, but how they felt to me.

I remember how it felt living in a loving family among loving Chinese neighbors. One of the friends who lived behind our gate was a Mrs. Liu. I would appear at her door nearly every day precisely at lunchtime, and she would always welcome me, feed me her delicious Chinese food, and talk with me as though she and I were the same age, although I was only three or four.

I remember how it felt to cuddle up to my mother while she read to me, and then how it felt to be displaced on my mother’s knee, by not one, but two baby sisters in rapid succession. I remember the feel of my small hand in my father’s huge one, and how it felt to hug his artificial leg. I remember how it felt to cower behind the black curtains in the living room and listen to the roar

of enemy planes overhead. Later I remember how it felt to be confronted by soldiers practicing manoeuvres across our front yard, and how it felt when enemy officers came to the house to question my parents and drink the tea my mother prepared for all her visitors.

There is one story from our childhood that I both remember and was told, so that I probably cannot disentangle the two. It was January of 1938. The war between China and Japan had begun in earnest the previous summer. We had been caught in the mountains on vacation, and with battles raging, only my father was allowed to go home. After five frightening months of air raids, not knowing what was happening to our beloved father, he returned. Soon afterwards, we went down the mountain and, along with many other foreign families, boarded a specially designated train covered with large Red Crosses.

We travelled from Central China all the way south to British ruled Hong Kong. The seven of us had spent nearly a week on the evacuation train, crowded into a single sleeping compartment where we both ate and slept. My sister Helen was not quite two and baby Anne was less than five months old. The British authorities had no idea what to do with this trainload of foreign refugees, so for most of a day, we just sat on our luggage in the vast lobby of the Peninsula Hotel which was then, and may still be, the grandest of all Hong Kong's grand hotels. Meantime, the fathers had gone out to scour the crowded city for reasonably priced shelter for their families.

Naturally, the elegant British, European and American tourists who had paid hundreds of pounds for the privilege of staying in the Peninsula were appalled and offended by this filthy lot of women and children who were cluttering up the lobby.

My mother, who was not a bitter woman, could not recall that day without bitterness. "I watched them as they passed by with sneers on their faces and I wanted to yell at them: 'Do you think I like being here? Do you think I want my children to be dirty?'" She would shake her head. "They couldn't even smile at the baby," she said. "What kind of person can't even smile at a baby?" And she would always end this story by saying, "I can never see a picture of refugees in the paper without remembering how it feels."

I was only five, but the years since have not cured me of the memory of how it feels. I hope they never do. If you need an explanation of why I write the kind of books that I do, perhaps it is found, at least in part, in the lobby of the Peninsula Hotel. I never want to forget that child. I want to keep her a part of all I write and do. This, if I can dare claim it, is something I have in

common with the mythical Astrid Lindgren. Children love her books because she obviously knew how it felt to be a child.

After a year in the United States, we went back to China only to be evacuated a second time at the end of 1940. We returned once again to the land my parents called home. I was frightened by the war, and I wanted America to be my home. But America was not my home. It was a foreign country to me. Both times when I came to the States I seemed quite as alien to my classmates as they did to me. They made fun of my clothes, my accent, and the country I loved best. I realize that the seeds of some of my best writing go back to those unhappy times, but I can't recall once saying to my forlorn little self, "Cheer up, little girl, someday all this misery will result in a magnificent award."

While the Calvin H. Wiley School's classrooms and playground were places of terror for me, the school library was my sanctuary. If at first I had no friends, the librarian gave me hundreds of friends living in the books on the library shelves. My book friends never made fun of me, never bullied me. They gently helped me to understand myself. They also helped me to become more understanding of other people and even other creatures. In the books I read I made friends with mice and dolls and deer and spiders and with children from different centuries and different lands. How, at the height of the Cold War, could I despise the Russian people? I had made friends with Soviet children through books I had read as a child.

And isn't this one of the miracles that books can perform? They can bind us intimately to other persons in a way we cannot hope to be bound in ordinary human life. Books allow us to eavesdrop on another person's soul.

At a conference once, a woman said, "I think it's wonderful how open you are." I was quite startled. "You don't understand," I said, "writers are very private people . . . who run around naked in public." So strangers who claim to know me intimately are right—they do know me intimately, if they have read my books.

When I was twenty-four years old I returned to Asia, but not to the land of my birth. It was closed to me. I went instead to Japan. If anyone had told me when I was nine that I would someday go to live in Japan, I wouldn't have believed him. The Japanese I knew as a child were soldiers, members of the occupying army. I hated and feared them. But in seminary I had a Japanese friend who persuaded me that if I would give the Japanese people a chance I would come to love them. I loved and respected her, so sixteen years after I left China I sailed for

Japan. And my friend was right. In the four years I lived in Japan, I lost my childish fears and hatreds. I not only came to love the Japanese people, but I came to know what it meant to be loved and cared for by persons I had once thought of as my enemies. In the world in which we live, that is a priceless gift.

I thought I was going to spend the rest of my life in Japan, but I returned to the United States for a year of study, met a handsome young minister and my life took off in a very different direction. The year before I left for Japan a favourite professor had asked me if I'd ever thought of becoming a writer. Now I have been a life long reader. I can't remember when I learned to read. I feel that I have always been reading, but, of course, that is not true. But reading and the love of reading have always been a large part of my life. It was a thrill to realize that I could actually get a degree in literature—which for me was hours of reading the greatest writing in the English language. So when my professor suggested that I become a writer, I was horrified. I knew what good writing was. How could she think on the basis of a research paper I had written for her class that I might have what it took to be a writer. "No," I said, "I wasn't going to be a writer. I wouldn't want to add another mediocre writer to the world." She suggested gently that perhaps that was what I was called to become. It took me several years to realize what she meant--that there are no guarantees beforehand that you will be good. If I didn't dare to be a mediocre writer, I would never be a writer at all.

I was pleased and amused to read in a children's biography of Astrid Lindgren that she was also determined not to add to the sum of mediocre books that have crowded the shelves of the world.

But my professor didn't give up. She seemed determined to see me become a writer whether I wanted to become one or not. About the time that our son John was born, she suggested my name to the church board that was seeking a writer to do a book for the church school curriculum. I felt obligated to the church board for giving me scholarship money for advanced study and to my professor for suggesting me and so I wrote the book for the church. By the time it was published I had three tiny children and we were looking to adopt a fourth.

I needed something at the end of the day that wasn't eaten up, dirtied up or torn up, so I began to write. It wasn't so much that I was daring to become a writer mediocre or otherwise, I was just trying to keep my brain from turning to mush. For the next seven years, I wrote in five and ten minute snatches of time. I published one short story. The tiny magazine that published it immediately ceased to exist. I sold one poem to a tiny magazine that folded before it published my poem. And then, finally, my first novel, set in 12th century Japan was pulled from the pile of

unsolicited manuscripts, read by a young assistant, and taken to the senior editor, who had just returned from a visit to Japan.

In 1970 the senior editor turned over my manuscript to an editor who was coming off maternity leave. I can promise you, if that had not happened, I would not be standing here tonight, for that first editor, Virginia Buckley, and I have been working together ever since. And if my books are good, it is because she won't let me stop working until they are.

If the fourth grade at Wiley School was the most miserable year of my childhood, I think I would have to choose 1974 as the most painful year of my adult life. I was working on my third novel with Virginia, when I was sent to the hospital to see about a suspicious lump that turned out to be a malignancy. Now Astrid Lindgren is right. Children are often afraid of death, and I certainly was as a child. But I was forty one years old now with four young children, and it was not only the dread of dying, but the idea of leaving my children behind that I could not bear to imagine. I knew my lovely husband would be fine. There would be women lining up around the block to snatch him the moment I was out of the picture, and one of them might even turn out to be a better mother than I was. But, surely, no one, I thought, no one, however fit to replace me, could ever love those children the way I did.

Of course, my death would not leave my children alone. They had a loving father and grandparents and aunts and uncles and a whole congregation of people who would care for them. Lin and John were not only brother and sister, but the closest of friends. Mary had a wonderful teacher with a daughter just Mary's age who looked out for her while I was in the hospital and, would, I knew, continue to care for her. And David had Lisa.

Lisa had come into our lives the previous autumn. The small school that our children attended was closed and all the students were moved to a much larger elementary school across town. David, our second grader was miserable. In the little school he was both the class artist and the class clown. In his new school he is simply weird. Every day he came home and declared that he was "never, never going back to school and you can't make me." And I, his mother, who had been in fifteen different schools by the time I was 18 and had been initially despised at nearly every one, was over-identifying with my seven year old, probably exacerbating his misery, but, nevertheless getting him up every morning and grimly pushing him out the door, fearing that his unhappiness would never end.

Then one afternoon, our bright funny little boy that I thought was gone forever came running into the house. “Me and Lisa Hill are making a diorama of Little House in the Big Woods,” he announced cheerily. I had never heard the name before, but from then on I was to hear hardly any other name. “Now I’d like to promise you girls,” I say when I’m talking to children, “that I was thrilled that my son’s best friend was a girl. But unfortunately, all I could think was ‘They thought he was weird before. If his best friend is a girl, he’ll never fit in.’”

But then I met Lisa, and my worries evaporated. Anyone would be fortunate to have her for his best friend. She was bright, imaginative and funny. She laughed at his jokes and he at hers. She was the only girl daring enough to invade the second grade boys’ ball team. She and David played together after school in the woods below her house and talked to each other in the evenings on the phone.

“It’s your girlfriend David,” his older brother would say.

But David takes the phone unperturbed. Girl friends are people who chase you down on the playground to grab you and kiss you. Lisa was no more a ‘girl friend’ than Margaret Thatcher was a Playboy Bunny.

Then on an August morning, the phone rang. It was a call from the Hill’s next door neighbor. “I thought you ought to know,” Mrs. Robinson said, “that Lisa was killed this morning.” While the family was on vacation at Bethany Beach, on a day when the lifeguards sensed no danger from thunder far off in the distance, a joyful little girl, dancing on a rock above the beach, was felled by a bolt of lightning from the sky.

How was I to make sense of this tragedy for my child? I couldn’t make sense of it for myself. So, eventually, I began to write a story, because I knew that a story has to make sense. It has a beginning, a middle and an ending, and when you get to the end, even if you cannot articulate intellectually what has happened, you know emotionally, that you have come from chaos to order. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche says: “One must have chaos within to give birth to a dancing star.” And somehow, dark as life itself sometimes seems, at the end of a well-told story, the dancing star, will shed light on the chaos.

So I began to write what I could not understand or explain, but when I came to the place in my story when I knew that if I went to work the next day I would write the chapter in which Leslie Burke would die, I did the only thing I could do to keep her alive, I didn’t go to work. I caught

up on my mail, I rearranged my bookshelves, I think I was even reduced to scrubbing the kitchen floor—anything to keep from writing the fatal chapter.

It was just then that I happened to have lunch with an old classmate. “How’s your new book coming?” she asked. Now, no one, as the longsuffering members of my family know all too well, no one is ever supposed to ask me how my work is coming, but Estelle had known me longer than any of them, and she has no respect. So I blurted out an answer. “I’m trying to write a book about a friendship between a boy and a girl in which the girl dies,” I said. “But I can’t let her die. I guess,” I added, thinking I was very wise, “I guess I can’t face going through Lisa’s death again.”

Estelle looked me straight in the eye. “I don’t think it’s Lisa’s death you can’t face,” she said. “I think it’s yours.”

I knew she was right. If it were Lisa’s death I couldn’t face, it was one thing, but if it were my death I couldn’t face, then I would have to finish the book. I went home that afternoon, and with sweat pouring down my arms, wrote the chapter and in a few days finished the draft. It was the most painful writing I had ever done—so painful I simply couldn’t stand having it in the house, so I did what no real writer would ever do, I mailed the draft to Virginia Buckley before the sweat had evaporated.

As soon as I mailed the manuscript, I knew that I had made a terrible mistake. Every day I expected the letter that would tell me politely, maybe even a little sorrowfully, that I had obviously lost whatever talent I had shown up until then. That my career as a writer was over. Instead I got a phone call. It was Virginia, saying that she wanted to talk to me about my new manuscript. I stopped breathing.

“I laughed through the first two-thirds,” she said, “and cried through the last.” I began to breathe again. “Now,” she continued, “Let’s turn it into a book.”

And then she did what I believe the great editors do, she asked me the question that would do just that. “Is this,” she asked, “a story about friendship or is it a story about death?”

Until that moment, I had thought I was writing a story about death. Hadn’t it been a year of death in our lives? But as soon as she asked the question, I knew I was wrong. “Oh,” I said, “it’s a story about friendship.” “Then you need to go back and write it that way.” She went on to remind me that in any true friendship both friends change and grow because they know each

other. “I see how Jesse has changed because he has known Leslie, but I don’t see how knowing Jesse has changed Leslie. How has Jesse made a difference in her life?”

That was the problem that had to be solved to turn my pitiful little cry of anguish into a real story. And as I pondered it, up from the dust of the playground at Calvin H. Wiley School arose Pansy and her two gigantic cohorts who bullied me when I was a fourth grader. “At last, Pansy,” I said. “I will have my revenge.”

But it didn’t work out that way. I will never know why Pansy was a bully, but I had to understand what had turned Janice Avery into one, and when I did I felt sorry for her and began to like her and it ruined a perfectly good revenge.

It does seem ironic, somehow, that my next book would be about a bully of sorts. I never really thought of it that way until I was writing this speech, but Gilly Hopkins is a worse bully than Janice Avery because she’s smarter and angrier and in even greater pain.

My first impulse after I had finished writing and extensively re-writing *Bridge to Terabithia* was to write a funny book. I was tired of writing about war and riots and death. Children love funny books, I reasoned. I like funny books, and even if most of my critics refuse to acknowledge it, I regard myself as a moderately funny person. But of course I had no ideas for any kind of new book, funny or otherwise. I did have the name of my main character—Galadriel, for the fairy queen in Tolkien’s saga, and Hopkins, for my favorite poet—a name--just no story to explain her peculiar name.

I was writing the first draft of *Bridge to Terabithia* in the spring of 1975. That was the spring, some of you may remember, when Saigon fell and Cambodia was overrun by the Khmer Rouge. Our children watched the news on television with horror. Children, like themselves were being killed and maimed, and the lucky ones were losing their homes and their parents, as they were airlifted from the war zones and flown to other countries, including our own.

Our own four children had been nagging me to adopt another baby ever since Mary got out of diapers, but I had refused. Four children and their dozens of assorted pets seemed to be my limit as a mother, but then an airplane load of children, thought to be Cambodian, ended up without any papers at Dulles Airport. For several days they were housed at a nearby church building, but not even the immigration service thought that was a solution, so they called on Washington area social agencies for help. We had adopted Mary through the local Lutheran Social Service,

and so we were asked to take in two brothers. It would be only for two weeks, the social worker said—just until they could determine what to do next.

I'd never thought of myself as the world's greatest mother, but I had always given myself a passing grade in parenthood. However, as the weeks turned into months, I realized that as a foster mother I was failing. It wasn't simply that there were problems, of course, there were problems, but what I realized was not that the boys had problems but that when a problem arose, I found myself thinking, "I can't deal with that, they're only going to be here a couple of weeks" or worse "Thank heavens, they're only going to be here a couple of weeks." And it finally dawned on me, that I was the real problem. I was treating two human beings as though they were disposable. I was horrified. This was the kind of thinking that led to crime, that caused wars and genocides—one person thinking another person was disposable.

That Christmas when my husband asked me to write yet another story for the Christmas Eve service, I wrote a story about a kindly man who takes in two needy children to give them Christmas, and to his amazement, they are not grateful.

Once I had written this story, I knew who Galadriel Hopkins was. She was the child of a Tolkien worshipping hippy mother who was too much of a child herself to care for her own—and so her abandoned daughter is shunted from foster to home to foster home until the child becomes so angry at a world that sees her as disposable that she fights back, only to be defeated by a woman wise in the ways of loving the unlovable --Maime Trotter--the world's greatest foster mother. Not exactly a funny topic, I'll admit, but still, I was determined to write my funny book.

Well, I laughed a lot while I was writing *The Great Gilly Hopkins*. I remember especially the day I was describing the grandmother's Thanksgiving visit to Maime Trotter's household. I was laughing so hard I could barely type. "Could it be too slapstick? Too Marx brothers?" I forced myself to sober down and reread and came to the conclusion, not that it was the funniest scene I had ever written, but that it was the funniest scene anyone had ever written. I don't have to be modest in the privacy of my study or even particularly honest as long as I'm still working on an early draft.

There were, as always, interruptions in the writing of the book, but I finally got through the first draft while we were on vacation at Lake George and turned it over to John to read. No one but me had ever read this book before. I had been working on it for a year and no one even knew what it was about. This first reading by another human being, is, therefore, fraught with anxiety

for me. I handed John the stack of messy pages, handwritten, typewritten, scribbled over, and try very hard not to breathe down his neck as he reads each word. My husband will wait for a year, or two or more, to find out what I've been up to, but I can't bear to wait a minute to see how he'll react.

As it turned out, I had to wait. John was busy playing tennis and didn't seize immediately upon the chance to read the fruit of my labor. I couldn't rush him, so I tried to catch up on my reading and forget about it.

A few days later, sitting on my towel at the beach, sometimes reading, but mostly counting heads of little Patersons out in the water—one, two, three, four— I realized it was nearly five o'clock and still John had not come down to swim. Finally, I saw him coming, and by the way he was walking, I could tell long before I could see his face that something terrible had happened. I rechecked the water. Four heads. The children were all right. He was on his feet, so he was physically safe. Had he wrecked his car on the mountain road? Had he had dreadful news from home?

"What's the matter?" I called out. "What happened?"

"I've been reading your book," he said.

"But, John, that's my funny book."

Somewhat shaken, I began reading Gilly out loud to my family that night. Our four children were laughing away, but back in a dark corner sat my husband, tears streaming down his face. Gilly was published nearly 30 years ago, and people are still arguing about whether or not it's a funny book. How can you have a funny book about a child who is abandoned by her mother, bounced about in foster care, a child so hurt by the woes the world has heaped upon her that she can't even recognize love until she's betrayed it? Okay, so it's not the Marx brothers, but it is a book that I hope children the world has regarded as disposable will not only find themselves in but will be able to laugh when they do. I won't mind if we adults who have responsibility for the many Gillys in our midst find ourselves in tears as we read.

Some years ago I was invited to speak with a book group that was discussing *The Great Gilly Hopkins*. The meeting was being held not at a school or the local library or in someone's home but in one of our state prisons. The inmates had read *The Great Gilly Hopkins* as part of their literacy program and they wanted an opportunity to talk with the author about it. It was my first

trip to prison. I registered at the window and then divested myself of purse and briefcase (which were closely examined), took off my coat and sent it through the x-ray, but when I walked through the metal detector the alarm rang. I couldn't understand it. "You have buckles on your shoes," the guard said. Meekly, I took off my shoes and tiptoed through. Then I went through a series of heavy doors the first shutting behind me before the next opened. Finally, I was in the large room where the inmates were waiting. A large table, consisting of a series of smaller tables, had been set up in the center of the room. Twenty men and four women were seated around the table with the instructor who had invited me.

After an initial awkwardness, we began to talk in earnest about the book and what it had meant to read it. One of the men said that when he was a young teenager he had been briefly in a foster home with a foster mother who was really kind to him. She had wanted him to read the book at that time, but, he sort of shrugged, "I was a kid that didn't want anybody telling me what to do. I guess that's why I'm here now. Now that I've read the book, I know what she was trying to say to me."

"Just out of curiosity," the instructor asked, "how many of you were ever in foster care?"

Every single inmate raised a hand.

As part of the literacy program, each participant was given a paperback copy of every book they discussed, so at the end of the session, the inmates lined up to have their books autographed.

"What's your name?" I asked the young man handing me his book.

"It's not for me," he said. "It's for my daughter. Her name is Angel."

It had been an emotional afternoon, but that one sentence was the one that haunted me for nearly thirteen years. But as I often tell students who ask me about ideas, one idea doth not a novel make.

At least a dozen years after that day in the prison, I was in California and a friend gave me a copy of a small magazine which her husband was editing. On the back of the magazine was a dramatic photo of Supernova remnant Cassiopeia A, and under the picture this quotation:

"When the Chandra telescope took its first image in August of this year, it caught not just another star in the heavens, but a foundry distributing its wares to the rest of the galaxy.

“Silicon, sulfur, argon, calcium, and iron were among the elements identified from Chandra’s X-ray image. ‘These are the materials we are made of,’ said the project scientist.”

The thrill that every writer recognizes went through my body. I knew I had a idea for a book in that quotation. At length I recognized it as the missing strand I had needed to write Angel’s story. What would it mean to a child that the world has discarded as waste material to learn that she is made of the same stuff as the stars?

“It’s scary,” [Angel] said.

“What’s scary?”

“How big everything is— how far away. I’d just be like an ant to that star.”

“Nah. Not nearly that big,” he said. “The whole world isn’t that big.”

“You mean we’re like nothing? The whole world is like nothing?” It frightened her to think of herself—her whole world— like less than a speck in the gigantic sky, like nothing at all.

“Yeah, we’re small, but we aren’t nothing,” he said. “Want to know a secret?”

“What?”

He reached over and pinched her arm.

“Ow,” she said. It didn’t hurt so much as surprise her.

“See this?” he said, lifting her arm up where he’d pinched it. “See this stuff here? This is the stuff of stars.”

“What do you mean?”

“The same elements, the same materials that make those stars up there is what makes you. You’re made from star stuff.”

It didn’t make sense. “They’re burning in the sky, and I’m just standing here, not shining at all.”

“Well, yes, but that doesn’t mean you’re made from different stuff. Just that something different is happening to those same elements. You’re still close kin to the stars.”

She was trembling out there in the August night in nothing but her pajamas, but it wasn't because of the cold . . .

I have been astounded not only by the fact that I was chosen for this award, but by the response to my winning it not only in Sweden but in my own little town in Vermont which splashed a huge “Congratulations” over my picture on the front page of the newspaper. I think everyone in town has written me a note or called me up or stopped me on the street to tell me how wonderful they think it is. And it is wonderful that a country would so value children and their books that they would give this magnificent prize to persons who write or illustrate or bring books to children in other creative ways—no matter where in the world they live and work.

It is astounding. But while I was asking myself why me? I had to remember all those uncounted persons in the world who give their lives to working with children. All too often I'll have one of these overworked, undervalued saints say to me wistfully, “I wish I could write a book,” somehow valuing my life's work above their own. It makes me deeply ashamed. What about all those unsung people in whatever field of endeavour who are serving their neighbours and their neighbour's children? All those people who think of themselves as ordinary and envy me for being creative? Let's face it. Is there any thing more creatively demanding than nurturing a child's growth and development? than helping a child learn how to become a full human self?

I was once asked to speak to a group of public school teachers who would be taking their classes to see a production of the play, *Bridge to Terabithia*. I spent more than an hour telling about how the book came to be written and rewritten and then how Stephanie Tolan and I had adapted it into the play their classes would see. There was the usual time of questions, at the end of which a young male teacher thanked me for my time and what I had told them that morning. “But I want to take something special back to my class. Can you give me some word to take back to them?”

I was momentarily silenced. After all, I had been talking continuously for nearly an hour and a half, surely he could pick out from that outpouring a word or two to take home to his students. Fortunately, I kept my mouth shut long enough to realize what I ought to say—

“I'm very Biblically oriented,” I said, “and so for me the most important thing is for the word to become flesh. I can write stories for children and young people, and in that sense I can offer them words, but you are the word become flesh in your classroom. Society has taught our children that they are nobodies unless their faces appear on television. But by your caring, by

your showing them how important each one of them is, you become the word that I would like to share with each of them. You are that word become flesh.”

That day long ago in the Chittenden prison one of the inmates asked me: “Do you think Gilly would have made it if there had been no Maime Trotter?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I just don’t know.”

Jim Wallis, one of America’s prophetic voices, tells a story of a young African-American woman from Washington, DC named Lisa Sullivan who earned a PH.D. at Yale, and then felt called to work in the city with forgotten children of color. She died at a tragically young age, though her legacy lives on in the young people she inspired and counselled. But, Wallis, said, “There is one thing [Lisa]often said to them and to all of us that has stayed with me . . . When people would complain, as they often do, that we don’t have any leaders today—or ask ‘where are the Martin Luther Kings now?’—Lisa would get angry. And she would declare: ‘We are the ones we have been waiting for.’”

So maybe that’s the answer to my question, Why me? Why us? Because we are the ones we’ve been waiting for. What I want to say to isolated, angry, fearful youth— to all the children society has regarded as disposable, children who cannot love others because they have not yet learned to love themselves, all the sad, the lonely, the frightened who might read my books is this: you are seen, you are not alone, you are not despised, you are unique and of infinite value in the human family. As a writer I can try to say this through the words of a story, but it is up to each of us who come into contact with these children every day in our homes, our schools, our communities and as citizens of this broken world—it is up to us to embody those words— to become their Mamie Trotters, their star men— we, each of us, are the word of hope become flesh.