An interview with William C. Morris

LEONARD S. MARCUS: What are your responsibilities at HarperCollins?

WILLIAM C. MORRIS: My title is Director of Library Promotion and Advertising, which means I try to let the institutional world know about our children's books. I do this at conventions, by arranging for author visits, by preparing advertising and promotional material. I'm also the liaison between Harper children's books and the institutional world. When they have problems, I'm the one they know they can call.

LM: When did you come to Harper?

WM: In 1955. Prior to that I'd worked at the Doubleday bookstore in Grand Central Station, which I left within a year — after being told that I would never get very far in the bookselling world, certainly not at Doubleday. Harper then took me on as a temporary secretary. Fortunately for me, the woman for whom I was substituting was sick a lot longer than expected, so I was kept on. Then I was asked to be a junior salesman, which meant calling on small bookstores in the New York area. I then became a salesman (that's what sales representatives were called in those days) and held that job for ten years.
LM: Were you selling adult titles as well as children's books?

WM: Yes. Adult and children's books and Bibles — everything.

LM: What were your thoughts about children's books at that time?

WM: There were two very influential women who bought children's books, one at Altman's department store and one at F.A.O. Schwarz; they couldn't get along with many salespeople. But they did like me. So I always went out of my way to do things for them. Therefore, I paid more attention to children's books than most salespeople did in those days. It stood me in good stead because when Fred Wagner, the person who had been doing library promotion for Harper, decided to go on for his Ph.D., he recommended me for the job. Those two influential women, who were good friends of Ursula Nordstrom, said that they, too, thought I'd be fine. And so it was decided.

LM: During the 1950s and 1960s, where were children's trade books sold?

WM: There were very few bookstores that specialized in children's books, but the larger stores, in New York certainly, all carried some, though they didn't pay much attention to them.

LM: When did that start to change?

WM: I've sort of lost track, but it was with the rather sudden rise, starting in the 1970s, of children's-books-only bookstores, beginning in California. Before that time, the libraries were what kept children's books going. Libraries bought at least seventy-five percent of all the children's books published. The libraries are still important, but bookstores now play a larger part, particularly with bestsellers like Shel Silverstein's books and Maurice Sendak's.

LM: Can you give me a snapshot of Harper & Brothers in the 1950s?

WM: Harper's offices were on Thirty-third Street. The house was known for its adult books in the fields of history and politics. Harper published Adlai Stevenson; we often felt that no one was eligible to be nominated for the presidency unless he'd done a book for us. On the other hand, Harper was never all that strong in fiction. But in those days Ursula was going full strength.

LM: When did you meet Ursula Nordstrom?

WM: Oh, soon after I arrived. In fact, I think I can say I was the first male who physically worked in her department. While the sales department was trying to find enough money in the budget to make me a junior salesman, I worked part-time in her department returning rejected manuscripts.

LM: What were your first impressions of her?

WM: I thought she was terribly funny and nice. I knew there were tears around somewhere — not hers! — but that didn't affect me.

She was well known and admired by the children's librarians, but very few, if any, of her books ever got on the American Library Association Notable lists. She was always, we all felt, too far ahead of her time.

LM: How did Harper's president and others at the highest levels within the firm regard the children's book department then?
WM: It's the old story. The department was treated in the way that adults treat children. They thought, It's nice and we make lots of money out of them, but they're relatively unimportant.

Ursula was an officer of the corporation, and at meetings with the other executives she always would profess not to know what they were talking about when they got down to the financial part of the business. But any time they tried to pick on her in any way, she knew exactly what to do. She was a very sharp business person, and admired by Harper's chairman, Cass Canfield.

LM: Do you recall the monthly editorial luncheons which the Children's Book Council sponsored during the 1950s?

WM: I don't know about that directly, but they must have been interesting because there was an intense rivalry among all those editors. I can't see them getting together for a luncheon. Ursula and Elizabeth Riley at Crowell got along because they didn't impinge on each other's fields. Miss Riley was interested in science. Ursula wasn't at all. So they admired and respected each other; Ursula respected a lot of the editors but didn't have much to do with them. Very early on I met Miss May Massee, who was Viking's editor. I found her so charismatic that I went up and introduced myself, and she said, "Oh, you work with Ursula! I look on her as a protegee." Well, I went back to the office thinking that Ursula would be very pleased to hear about that. "Protegee!" she growled. She was furious.

LM: What were Ursula's relations like with the library world?

WM: Ursula knew everyone. In those days Harper didn't take exhibit booths at American Library Association conferences. They just didn't think it was that important. So Ursula would go to ALA conferences on her own — walk the aisles, meet librarians, get ideas for books, and talk about those she was editing. She worked the field.

In 1953, at the time when Ursula was bringing out the new, uniform edition of Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House books with Garth Williams's illustrations, she and several librarians got to talking on the train ride to the ALA midwinter meeting in Chicago. They were all lamenting the fact that no Wilder book had ever won the Newbery Medal. And Ursula told me it was then, with a lot of bourbon flowing, that they hit upon the idea of establishing the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award.

Also during the 1950s, Virginia Haviland, the children's coordinator at the Boston Public Library, told Ursula about the children who came up to her saying: "I can read, I can read! What do you have for me?" Virginia told Ursula that all that the library had for those children were primers — and they were so dull. Then, when Else Minarik's Little Bear (1957) came in, Ursula thought, This is it! — and that of course was the beginning of Harper's "I Can Read" books.

LM: How powerful a force on the national scene was the New York Public Library's Anne Carroll Moore and her successor, Frances Clarke Sayers?

WM: Very powerful. If a book wasn't on the New York Public Library's annual list, it had little chance of winning the Newbery or the Caldecott Medal. One reason Ursula's books didn't often make it onto that list, or the Notables list, is because of Ursula's involvement with Margaret Wise Brown and her clashes with Anne Carroll Moore. Even Augusta Baker, the Harlem branch librarian who later headed children's services for the entire New York library system, got into a little trouble with Miss Moore because she had had something to do with Margaret Wise Brown's retellings of the "Brer Rabbit" stories. Miss Moore was upset that she had had anything to do with "that progressive education crowd."
I don't know that this is true, though I've been told it is, that during the years when Miss Moore was chair of the Newbery-Caldecott committee, the committee would never actually meet. The other members would just send in their ballots to her, and she and Miss Massee would get together to count them! If you look at the list of medal winners, there was a period when Viking won something almost every year! It's a marvelous story, whether or not it's true.

Where the Wild Things Are (1963) was only Harper's second Caldecott-winner, A Tree Is Nice (1956) having been the first.

LM: What was a typical day at the office like for Ursula?

WM: Ursula did a lot of letter writing. She could type like crazy. It sounded like a machine gun! She always answered her own phone. And I remember her saying, "My door is always open." Authors would just come by without appointments, and if they were ones she cared about, she certainly saw them. Then she'd close the door, and often a book would come out of one of their sessions.

Before he had done any books for Harper, Russell Hoban came in one day with material for a book about heavy machinery — what it does and how it works. Now, heavy machinery was not something Ursula particularly cared about. But she saw something in it and published the book, for which Hoban did his own illustrations.

Every waking moment, it seemed to me, she had it in mind to get new books for Harper. She became intrigued with Shel Silverstein while reading Playboy! She was up on everything, and you'd feel like a dolt if you weren't also.

LM: How would you characterize her relationships with her authors?

WM: She worked with most of the authors initially, and then sometimes she would ease them over to another editor. When that happened, there were often hurt feelings because Ursula's authors so adored her.

She was mother, friend, and someone who cared deeply about whomever she felt was creative. Hence the withdrawal of that affection that these authors and artists felt could be quite intense.

Ursula had one author who always got good reviews in the library world but was always panned by the New York Times. Ursula would see the latest Times review and call up this author and say, "I don't want you to forget the press did not like Keat's Endymion." She must have had to say that several times, because finally the author told her one day, "I do not want to hear about the press and Endymion ever again!"

LM: What was the state of the field at the time you were promoted to your present job?

WM: Fortunately, not too long after I got into library promotion, Lyndon Johnson persuaded Congress to enact the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which, under the Act's Title II, gave school libraries lots of money for book purchases. I didn't have to know anything or anybody; the orders just poured in. I distinctly remember one Head Start program here in New York ordering a hundred copies of Ruth Krauss's A Hole Is to Dig (1952). Those were certainly the glory days. Almost no books went out of print; our backlist, everything, sold.

LM: What impact, if any, did Harper & Brother's transformation, in 1962, into Harper & Row have on the children's trade department?

WM: The old Harper didn't have a textbook department for the elementary level, and so it bought Row, Peterson, a company based in Evanston, Illinois. Poor Mr. Peterson — I don't know what happened to him! They remained in the Midwest, and we didn't have much to do with them, except when they'd become alarmed by one of the
books Ursula was publishing. They'd say, "Such and such a school system will not buy our textbooks because Harper publishes such and such book." They would try to censor us, to no avail. Row, Peterson, however, never proved to be the money machine Harper thought it would be, and it was finally sold to Macmillian.

**LM:** What were some of the books Ursula published which proved controversial?

**WM:** One of the comes to mind is Harriet the Spy (1964), which alarmed librarians, but which Ursula was determined to make a success. Children liked it so much that eventually the librarians had to come around.

**LM:** What could an editor, or someone in your position, do in such a case to rescue a book?

**WM:** Ursula knew who to call. One of my jobs is to send out review copies to my list of four hundred or so library reviewing groups all over the country, as well as to certain college professors and to a whole array of people who will read the books and then perhaps like them. Ursula knew all the important people in the field and would get on the phone and say, "You've got to read Harriet the Spy!"

**LM:** Can you think of another book besides Harriet that met with similar resistance?

**WM:** Shel Silverstein's The Giving Tree (1964). Here was this guy from Playboy — this cartoonist. He had done one children's book for Simon and Schuster. I don't know how much Ursula like The Giving Tree, but she wanted him to create books for children. The book did not sell. The library world hated it. Everyone seemed to, and Harper wanted to declare it out of print. But Ursula said, "Over my dead body!" Strangely enough, what saved The Giving Tree was the Catholic Church. Many Catholic schools began using the book in conjunction with confirmation classes. I never understood why. It became a grassroots phenomenon that developed years after the book was published.

Another book that had a problem at first — at least all our sales representatives said so — was Charlotte Zolotow's William's Doll (1972). They said it would never sell in bookstores. Parents were not going to raise their boys to be sissies and love dolls. But, of course, it became a landmark book.

**LM:** What sort of reception did the "problem novels" for young adults, which Harper began publishing in the late 1960s, receive?

**WM:** Paul Zindel's The Pigman (1968) was the first book of that kind which Harper published. Charlotte Zolotow discovered Zindel when she happened to see his play The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the Moon Marigolds done on television. She wrote to him, "You have such a feeling for young adults. Why don't you try your hand at a novel?" And so he wrote The Pigman. Ursula was a little leery of it, but she was always so brave and never afraid to break molds or go out in different directions. And then M. E. Kerr, after reading The Pigman, became interested in the genre and wrote Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack! (1972) for Harper; prior to that she'd written adult novels. Another of her young adult books, Is That You, Miss Blue? (1975), includes an important character who is deaf. One year when I was at the National Council of Teachers of English conference in San Diego a very nice young person came up to me and said, "Do you have any books about deaf people?" I showed her Is That You, and in fact later sent her a copy. That was Jeanne Peterson, who went on to write I Have a Sister, My Sister Is Deaf (1977), a picture book that has been on Harper's list ever since.

John Donovan's I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip (1969) has a fleeting mention of homosexuality, and Ursula was determined to publish it. She called in some people from the Gesell Institute at Yale and got them to give us quotes saying how healthy it was to raise the issue this way in a novel. We had to alert people, but because of the limited amount of copy the book got in ads, homosexuality sounded like the dominant theme.
Then we started getting calls from people wanting to know, "Where's the dirty part?" Our protective measures amounted to overkill in that case.

**LM:** Another impact Ursula had on the field followed from her bringing younger people into her department who went on to head departments of their own. Would you say something about that?

**WM:** Phyllis Fogelman was production editor and later senior editor. Susan Hirschman was Ursula's second in command. She always had a second in command — and they usually bit the dust! Ferd Monjo, who later headed Coward-McCann, came after Susan. Janet Chenery was also in the department before going to Simon & Schuster. When I saw the public television series "Elizabeth R." about Queen Elizabeth I, with Glenda Jackson, all I could think of was was Ursula. Anyone who came too close to the throne …

Charlotte Zolotow rose through the ranks, having started as a junior assistant. She later took a number of years off to write books and raise her children. She then came back but was somehow never in the hierarchy, which was probably a good thing.

But when she became head of the department, she ran it marvelously. I can't remember when everyone seemed to enjoy working together as much as we did then. And through her husband, a writer who worked with theater people, she knew a whole different group of people than Ursula. Charlotte's husband was also mixed up with the Partisan Review crowd. So Charlotte knew them too and would encourage them to write books for children. Out of her theater friendships, for example, came books by Alan Sherman and Mary Rodgers.

**LM:** Did authors make as many school and library visits twenty and thirty years ago as they do now?

**WM:** Nothing like today. There were certain cities — Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland — that held annual children's books festivals, and authors would go to these. It was rare for a school to call up and say, "We want an author."

A lot of us like to think that the interest many adults have today in children's books is because they grew up in a time when money was being given to schools for books, so a larger group became familiar with children's trade books than ever before. They remember the books they read as children and don't dismiss them the way adults used to.

**LM:** Has the field changed in other significant ways since you entered it?

**WM:** The bottom line is more important today. Many houses aren't so willing to take gambles. In Ursula's day, everyone was trying to get new authors. Now many seem to prefer getting someone who's already established. They want immediate hits.

**LM:** How has the more pressured environment you've just described affected your work?

**WM:** Every book is still treated the same. If a book is starred in a major review source, I always run an ad. So if the book shows any sign of taking off, it gets that extra help. But more important is what the library world and booksellers — who've become much more important than they used to be — think of a book. The booksellers can become enthusiastic about a book that librarians don't particularly like and make it a bestseller. Then the book comes into the library world that way.

**LM:** You seem really to love your job.

**WM:** I have loved what I've done because of the enthusiasm of librarians. The selflessness of most of them, and their eagerness to get good books to children, is so heartening. They care about the things Ursula cared about.

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They're remarkable people, as of course are the authors and artists we've published. That is what I've liked most about my job — being the sort of middle person who could bring them all together.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): From By the Shores of Silver Lake. Copyright 1953 by Garth Williams.

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By Leonard S. Marcus

Leonard S. Marcus is chief children's book reviewer for Parenting magazine. He is the author of Margaret Wise Brown: Awakened by the Moon (Beacon) and 75 Years of Children's Book Week Posters (Knopf), and is currently at work on a history of children's book publishing in America, to be published by Ticknor & Fields. All children's books mentioned in the article are published by HarperCollins.

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