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Discovering Contemporary Classics: An Interview with Ursula Nordstrom

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Ursula Nordstrom was a senior vice-president and publisher of Harper Junior Books for many years. She is now a senior editor of the department. She has also written a book for children, The Secret Language. She lives in Connecticut, where we interviewed her in the fall of '78.

GD: What first brought you into the field of children's literature?

UN: Well, at first I wanted to be a social worker because I went to boarding school at a very early age and was moved by the sadness of some of the youngest children.

RN: I can see that in *The Secret Language*.

UN: I was a daughter of the depression, so I wasn't able to go to college and get the necessary degrees. Since my next love was publishing, I went to Harper's and was fortunate enough to get a job in the college department. I didn't like it though; it wasn't like working for a publisher. Then I became good friends with Louise Raymond, the head of the children's book department. It was so small at the time that she had to go to the editor in the trade department, a man who knew nothing about children's books, before she could accept anything. Louise followed Virginia Kirkis—a lot of people don't think there actually was a Virginia Kirkis, but there was.

GD: Virginia Kirkis of *The Kirkis Review*?

UN: Right. So when Louise decided to leave to get married and begin a family, the head of Harper's said, "Well, do you think your assistant could take over?" That's how much they

thought of children's books—it was such a tiny department, you know. Louise said she was sure I could handle it, and I said to them “I will take the job and be very happy about it, but give me enough rope. If I hang myself, I hang myself.” So they gave me the opportunity. By this time I had worked for Louise for four years and had become very interested in the field. Then the letters started coming in from children who'd read books that I'd had a little bit to do with and that was a terrific thrill. And in those days you were able to do a lot of experimentation because you could print such small editions.

GD: How small?

UN: Well, I think I printed five thousand at a dollar a copy of *Bears* by Ruth Krauss, which is still in print. And I thought, “Well, the salesman can surely get rid of two thousand copies and I can buy up the rest of the three thousand at my fifty percent discount, over a period of time.” *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein was also a very small first edition.

RN: How small?

UN: I think it was five thousand or seventy-five hundred and it's now sold hundreds and hundreds of thousands of copies. It's still in print and, of course, he's gone on to do a lot of other very wonderful books. Now they do a book in lots of color; you have to print about fifty thousand copies. And even so, the list prices are getting very high. Here's a copy of *Cheerful* by Palmer Brown in color, that we published at a dollar and a half in 1957 and here's a copy of a slightly larger book by Palmer Brown, just published in 1978, with color, and it had to be \$6.95. So I was very fortunate in that the management didn't interfere with me and I could do so-called “crazy” books.

GD: Like which books?

UN: Well, like Ruth Krauss' first books. Nobody expected *A Hole is to Dig* to do what it did. She brought it in to me all on three-by-five cards, and I went into hysterics over some of the definitions, they were so marvelous and there had never been a book like it. She said she had a certain man in mind to illustrate it, and I thought he was the worst choice in the world, but I always tried to make the authors happy. So I asked him to come in with his agent and he didn't understand one three-by-five card. You know, “Rugs are so dogs can have napkins,” and things like that. He just sat there and said, “Well, when you all have decided how many pages and how many pictures you want, get in touch with me through my agent.” Of course, what we wanted was someone as creative as possible who could help us visualize the book. So when he left, I looked at Ruth and I said, “Are you still insisting on Mr. X?” and she said, “No.” And I said, “I have recently met a young man who is in the display department of [F.A.O.] Schwarz named Maurice Sendak. He's illustrated a book for us, Marcel Aymé's *The Wonderful Farm*, and I think he'd be perfect for this.” I had seen Maurice's sketchbooks, which is always what I want to see first from an artist, and I was tremendously impressed. He had hung out of his Brooklyn window and sketched these little Sendak kids on the streets. So he came in and he and Ruth struck it off immediately. Ruth and I made a pile of cards that we both adored, a pile of cards that I adored, a pile of cards I couldn't do without, and a pile of cards we both could do without. Maurice went through them all and he pulled out, “Buttons are to keep people warm,” from the pile both Ruth and I thought we could do without, and it's one of the dearest pictures in the book. And it was a wonderfully interesting experience for me as an editor to see these two creative people coming together and catching fire from each other. I was thrilled. The book sold and it's still selling; it's a classic.

GD: When was that published? How many books had Maurice Sendak done at that time?

UN: He'd only illustrated one, Marcel Ayme's book.

GD: He hadn't written *Kenny's Window* yet?

UN: No, not yet, so this was his second book. Then he began working on *Kenny's Window* and I think that was his third book.

GD: At that time did you have any sense that you had some special ability to find good authors, that you had an intuitive sense of what made a good children's book? Or that you were taking risks, doing things maybe that other people were afraid to do?

RN: You're known for that.

UN: Well, I was always nervous. I went by hunches. A librarian once said to me, "How dare you think you can be a children's book editor—you haven't been a teacher, you haven't been a librarian, and I said, "Well, I'm an ex-child and I haven't forgotten a thing."

RN: What a fantastic insight!

UN: And I *haven't* forgotten anything. I really can remember so much of the tactile sensations and emotions of when I was a little girl. And they are things that all children feel. I never had any sense that I could spot talent except that I'm a good listener. I've discovered that if people really think you're interested, and you can really convince them of that, they will tell you the most amazing things. When Tomi Ungerer came to see me, for instance, he was so nervous. He had been to another publisher who had said, "We're only interested in full color," and he was told to come and see me. He came in with the first of the *Mellops* books, which never had the reception they really should have had—I think children would love them. But when he came in, he was very nervous. I said, "Tomi,

don't be so nervous, you've come home, we love you, I love your work, you don't have to worry anymore." He, of course, has become very famous since then.

I always used to look for new artists in magazines like *Playboy* and *Esquire*. I have found some good artists in *Esquire*. I had a manuscript of Bible stories by Meindert DeJong, *Mighty Men*, it's a tremendous book. I was sitting reading it and I suddenly got up. My leg had gone to sleep, and I broke my ankle. Not many editors can make that claim, that they've broken their ankle over a manuscript. Anyhow, I didn't want one of the familiar well-known artists to do this book. I wanted somebody brand new, so in *Esquire* I found the screenplay of *The Goddess* by Paddy Chayevsky, and done in marvelous black-and-white technique by a man named Harvey Schmidt. So I looked him up in the phone book, called him, said I had a book of Bible stories, and asked him if he'd be interested. Well, he was thrilled and he came in to see me. He was very young. He later went on to write *The Fantastiks* which ran for fifteen years and is still running. Anyway, he said, "Miss Nordstrom, I'm glad that you are giving me this book to illustrate, because I come from a family of ministers in Texas, and when they ask me what I'm doing, I can't very often refer them to my recent work in *Esquire*. Now I can tell them that I'm doing a book of Bible stories for the fine old firm of Harper. It'll be a great thing." So he did a beautiful job. I don't think he's ever done another book, but he's done more than all right with *The Fantastiks* and other plays. And then I saw Shel Silverstein in *Playboy*. I called him up, and he said, "Bennett Cerf of Random House has been after me and you're way down on the list." He was quite cold. And I said, "Well, your stuff is too good for these stupid adults. Why don't you do something for children?" But he didn't give me the time of day. Not long after that, though, he went to have a hamburger with Tomi Ungerer and Tomi mentioned my name. Shel thought he had a dim recollection of having heard it. So

Tomi dragged Shel in to meet me and since then it's been a very happy relationship. People at Harper's used to look in amusement at the children's book editor walking around with copies of *Playboy* and *Esquire* under her arm, but the relationship with Silverstein proved wonderful for Harper and for Shel. Many people had turned down *The Giving Tree*.

RN: What do you think he was saying in that book?

UN: All I know is that I love the inside of his head and what he says is what I want to publish. And it's been taken up by children and by ministers and by college students. It's very big in college bookstores.

GD: My students always have debates about what it's about. Some people feel very offended by the idea of this little boy dismembering this tree, step by step. I remember being very touched by it, and I gave it to a child, who carried it around all over the place. But then I started thinking about what they were saying. They were so horrified by the idea of this giving tree just giving and giving and giving.

UN: But the tree was doing what it wanted to do. And the boy was doing what he wanted to do. And the tree was happy, that's the way it ends. I think it obviously means different things to different people, which is all right with me. But he's an honest artist. Always honest. And so was Tomi and so was Sendak and so was Louise Fitzhugh. Her path and mine separated before she died so suddenly. And I'm sorry for that. We came to a happier understanding just a month or so before she died.

RN: *Harriet the Spy* is a fantastic book. It was really fresh when it first came out. Harriet was so funny and so smart and so interesting. Today there are a lot of books about anger and all kinds of feelings. But when Fitzhugh wrote about them it was very fresh.

UN: Of course, now we have abortion, alcoholism, etc. You asked me where I thought children's books were going and that's the only thing I fear—that the new young people MUST have the chance to be new and do their own thing and there's so much imitation going on that I think it's a shame. I was a judge with Ed Gorey on a Children's Book Council panel for the best graphic book. It was all imitation of Sendak, just one book after another. There are people whom I won't mention who attempt to copy Sendak entirely.

GD: Do you think there are people imitating Fitzhugh?

UN: Well, I think they make a try. But I don't think anybody really can imitate either Sendak or Fitzhugh. I think that Louise's second book, *The Long Secret*, could have used more editing and I was anxious to do it, but she, by that time, resisted many editorial suggestions. She wasn't so sure of herself with *Harriet*. She knew what she wanted to do but if I made a suggestion she didn't take umbrage. By the time we got to *The Long Secret*, there was a character, the preacher, that I thought was a little overdone. But an editor can be wrong; the author is often more right than an editor. When I read that manuscript and I read about this girl's first menstruation, I wrote in the margin, "Thank you, Louise Fitzhugh!" because it was the first mention made in a book for young people of one of the most important things that any of us has ever gone through. Now it's just commonplace for people to say, "Well, I have my period," and so on.

I had for years also said that I wished somebody would write a book that would just give a hint that there could be a romantic feeling between two persons of the same sex. It happens to almost everybody when they're growing up, a crush on a teacher or something, and they outgrow it or they don't outgrow it. Unbeknownst to me, John Donovan wrote me a letter and said he was writing a book about the different varieties of love. And he sent me *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth The Trip*. Of course there's been so much about the

subject since then, some of it good, some of it not so good. But there's nothing too good for children. There's no better book, better written and better felt, than *Charlotte's Web*. And they adore it. The very best we can find for children will be what they like best, and will incidentally make money for the firm. Of course, they love comic books. When I first became a children's editor, I thought, "I'd better get some comic books and find out what the children like so much in them." So I got Dick Tracy, Orphan Annie, anything that was going, and I got hooked myself. They have strong characters, funny names and a lot of action. Some of the comic strips are very well drawn.

GD: Could you talk a little bit about E. B. White? I was looking through his letters and I saw the letters to you, and I was wondering how you felt when you saw the manuscript of *Charlotte's Web*. Did you know then that this was going to be a spectacular book?

UN: Well, of course, I'd already read *Stuart Little*. I tried eight artists for that book before I got Garth Williams. One day the receptionist came in and said, "A Mr. White is out there to see you." And I said, "E. B. White?" She said, "Yes." So I went rushing to the elevator and there stood E. B. White and he said, "I brought you a new book. It's called *Charlotte's Web*." And I said, "Can I have a carbon so I can send it off to Garth immediately?" And he said, "I didn't make a carbon." Well I didn't dare get on the train with the one copy of *Charlotte's Web*, so I closed my door and sat and read it and when I got to the part where Wilbur says, "Will the party who addressed me last night kindly make herself or himself known to me," I just broke down and called him up, and he answered the phone on the first ring, and I said, "Andy, it's better than *Stuart Little*. It is the most beautiful . . ." "Oh really?" he said. He was so funny. Even a person like E. B. White welcomes reassurance. Of course, some authors reach the point where their talent is waning and their ego seems to become more inflated and that's a very sad time for everybody.

Then you have to make up your mind to say goodbye.

One of the good things about working with Andy and Garth on *Stuart Little*—of course, there was no editorial work to be done, it was flawless—is that I would send Garth's pictures to Andy up in Maine, and Andy would return them with his comments. For example, he'd say, "The dentist should look more like President Truman," and if you look at a copy of the book you'll see that he does. But unlike a lot of authors, Andy would put compliments on a sketches. He'd say, "This is terrific, Garth, I think it's wonderful." And Garth did such interesting things. When the doctor held the stethoscope to Stuart to see how he was, instead of having him lying down, which would make him look like a little dead mouse, he had him standing up—such subtle awareness on Garth's part! It was such a beautiful partnership! The third book, *Trumpet of the Swan*, was illustrated by Ed Frascino and children seemed to like the Frascino pictures very much. It was always lovely working with Andy White. I did write a little article for the *Times* about working with him on his books and I don't think it would do any harm to requote from it. It used to be Harper's custom to send an author a very extravagant leatherbound copy of a book when it had finally sold one hundred thousand copies. So when *Stuart Little* had sold one hundred thousand copies, I was given this perfectly ridiculous linenbound book covered with tissue paper and all sorts of the most high flown decorations, and inside was this dear looking little unpretentious book *Stuart Little* with a note stuck in saying, "This is the one hundred thousandth copy." So Andy wrote me back and said that he was overwhelmed, and that as soon as he got over his one hundred thousandth headcold, he would take me to lunch at a smart cafe in New York, and we would eat one hundred thousand olives and one hundred thousand stalks of celery. And it would be known as the E. B. White—Ursula Nordstrom Book and Olive Luncheon. Oh, I treasured that letter. But it was the time of a smallpox scare in New York, and I'd never been vaccinated because I'd always gone to private school, so the doctor just threw me down and shot me

full of this cowpox. I had the worst case of cowpox in New York the day I had that famous luncheon with E. B. White.

RN: What is the series called the *Ursula Nordstrom Books*?

UN: It's not a series. It came about because I was working awfully hard. I was directing the editorial work and the department was getting so big that I couldn't stay close to all the authors, but at least I wanted to stay close to all the editors who were working with the authors. And then at the same time, I was going to inventory meetings, royalty write-off meetings, budget meetings and things like that. I remember talking to an author in my office who was in a terrible state of mind. I wanted to give him all the love and sympathy and listening that I possible could so he'd feel he really did have some love and understanding there in that little corner office. But all the time my stomach was tied up in knots because I was twenty minutes late for a meeting elsewhere on inventory write-offs. I was doing what I knew I should do, but I also knew I should be down there going to battle over the inventory. So I went to the president and said I wanted to leave Harper several years before I was sixty-five. And he did me the honor of being surprised to hear that. Of course he knew that it was going to happen eventually — they had at that time a mandatory sixty-five year retirement age. So he suggested that I work at home in Connecticut and do a limited number of books to be called the *Ursula Nordstrom Books*.

GD: So you actually edit these books?

UN: Oh yes!

GD: And any book that says an "Ursula Nordstrom Book" is a book that you've edited?

UN: Yes. But it's not a series.

GD: What do you think of M. E. Kerr?

UN: Well, I think that her books are very good, that they speak to today's youngsters as few other books do. And she's not afraid to tackle difficult subjects. It's very hard for me to be objective about them, I love them. I laugh out loud over them and sometimes I'm very much moved by them. I think *Gentlehands* is an extraordinary book.

GD: How do you think she compares with Zindel or Robert Cormier or John Donovan, people like that?

UN: Well, she's completely different. And every book John Donovan writes is different from anything he's written before. M. E. Kerr told her agent that she wanted to come to Harper because she'd read *The Pigman* by Paul Zindel. Do you know the play, *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds*?

GD: Yes, I do. I saw it on Broadway.

UN: I was watching it one night on Channel 13 and was absorbed by it, but I was called to the telephone before the end of it. The next day I went to work and Charlotte Zolotow, then senior editor, was all excited. She said, "I saw a wonderful thing on television last night. It's a play by Paul Zindel and he showed such empathy for young people that I'd like to call him up and ask him if he'd be interested in doing a book for young adults." And the result was *The Pigman*. I thought that was very fine of Charlotte. We had and still have the kind of department where editors are encouraged to follow their noses. Of course, if they're brand new, they need some supervision. But I had no doubt whatsoever that if Charlotte Zolotow thought Paul Zindel had talent, we should write him. Anyhow M. E. Kerr read *The Pigman* and thought it was different from any other book she'd read. She'd been writing paperbacks under pen names. And she thought, "If I could do

things like this in the young adult field, that's for me." So her first YA book was *Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack*, and I think it is a very good book.

GD: That's a nice one. When an author becomes as famous as Zindel or as popular as M. E. Kerr, do you ever find that when they write books you don't like as well, you're tempted to publish them anyway? Does it become a problem at a certain point whether to edit or to turn them down?

UN: Yes, of course it does. And I've often said that it takes as much careful thought to let an author go as it does to take on someone new. In fact, I think perhaps it takes more, because they can take that bad book to some other publisher and then write a couple of good ones. It's happened.

GD: I think that Zindel has done a couple of books that are pretty bad.

UN: I'm sorry you feel that way.

GD: I heard from somebody I respect that *The Undertaker's Gone Bananas* is really awful. This person did an article for our issue on the adolescent novel and he panned that book. But he does say, ultimately, that he thinks Zindel is very talented. He liked *Confessions of a Teenage Baboon*. But that kind of variation in quality is a real problem.

UN: Variation in quality can be true of the books of almost any writer.

GD: Then some of them become ALA Notable Books of the Year. It must be an embarrassment at a certain point.

UN: I'm never embarrassed to find a Harper Book on the Notable List! I've had many disagreements about Mary Stolz's books and in the past she's usually put the problem ones aside

and gone on to something else. Then she'd go back to the earlier work and see that it wasn't quite her best. I would say, "All I want is perfection. All I want is for you to do your very best, and I don't think this is your very best." I have a little shorthand thing that I used to write in the margins—I still do. "N.G.E.F.Y." that means "Not Good Enough For You." Sometimes authors get on soapboxes and the author starts speaking, not the character. Of course, that is bad writing.

RN: I'd like to ask you about your book, *The Secret Language*. I liked it.

UN: Thank you.

RN: I know I would have loved it as a little girl. I like the touches, the way the girls play together, the way they find each other. When Victoria is very sad at boarding school, you let her be sad. You don't try to explain it away or make it nicer than it is. It was very painful reading about her experiences at the boarding school. Even though Victoria manages, I had a terrible feeling that she should not be in that boarding school. She wanted to be home with her mother. She did okay with her friend Martha, she was lucky that she found her and that the headmistress got changed. But I liked the fact that you didn't lie. You mentioned that you went to boarding school. Did you hate it?

UN: Oh, that is a very *pretty* picture of boarding school. You should have seen the first version. It was full of self-pity and tears. It's dreadful for a woman my age, but as I say, I haven't forgotten anything about being a child. Earlier this month, in September, I was in the deepest depression imaginable and I had no reason to be. I like the place I live, I'm very fond of the friend I live with, and working this way is very pleasant. Last September I was depressed and I suddenly realized that it was what I call "name-tape weather." In those days my nurse and my mother would start sewing on nametapes and that

meant that pretty soon I'd be on the train, back to boarding school. I was very sad. But I've gotten very sweet letters from little girls about my book. Yesterday, a letter came from a little girl. She liked the book and said, "Oh, I wish I could go to boarding school." I wanted to write back and say, "That's not what I meant."

RN: I could tell that all the little girls wanted to be home with their mothers. But they did have fun together. You know, the title, *The Secret Language*, gave me the feeling of talking with a friend and feeling conspiratorial. And when the two little girls are under the covers with a flashlight, talking and gossiping, it's wonderful! Do people notice the book? I just sort of saw it on the bookshelves and picked it up.

UN: Well, sales are less each year, of course. But Harper's still publishes it in hardback and paperback.

GD: Did you ever write anything else for children?

UN: Well, I've written half of a sequel to this and I wish I had the time or the energy to finish it, because since then I've remembered a little more of those days.

GD: How do you feel about criticism in the field—in the past and today? Do you feel that critics writing about children's literature are in touch with the good stuff? Do they have pre-conceived notions or limited views?

UN: I think that in England there is much more serious literary criticism of children's books than there is here. I sometimes pick out the books that I think highly of and then I read a series of reviews of them that make me think, "Oh, for God's sake, they're not thinking about children, they're not thinking about the artist." And that, of course, is the responsibility of the critic. The editor has the responsibility to discern talent even if he or she doesn't like the whole book. I've seen some

people just decimated by unfavorable reviews. Virginia Woolf's bad reviews just flattened her. A lot of the most talented people I know don't pretend to be emotionally mature.

GD: Do you have anything to do with the non-fiction that's published for children?

UN: Well my love is fiction, but Harper has published some very good non-fiction.

GD: Does Harper read all the manuscripts they get even if they come in unsolicited or without an agent?

UN: The Junior Books Department does. And of course now that it's become a relatively big business, a lot of people who are not terribly talented are sending in manuscripts.

RN: That's one of the problems that the field has, that it's popular. I mean, it's a wonderful thing that it's popular, but that always happens when a form becomes popular. You have to wade through a lot of stuff. Still, I think it's wonderful.

UN: Yes, rather too much than too little. How do you get to see new books? From the publishers or libraries?

RN: Both. We get some from publishers. We pick them up in bookstores.

GD: Also we get manuscripts for the journal. Sometimes we're not even aware of an author, and then we get a manuscript on that author and we learn about him or her.

UN: Can you give me an example?

GD: Well, we got a manuscript on Leon Garfield, who has written many books.

RN: They're young adult adventure stories. He's a British author. I think he can really write. I never liked that genre as a kid, you know. I was a girl and I didn't know about adventure stories. But I love it now. And like Dickens, he has all these wonderful eccentric characters.

UN: What books does your eleven year old son like?

RN: He likes non-fiction mostly. Science fiction, particularly Madeline L'Engle's books. We're very different in our tastes. He likes science and math and I like poetry and fiction. And he likes *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator*—that's what he likes.

GD: Do you have any preferences among picture books, books for the middle group and full-length novels?

UN: I used to love the picture books, because that's what I really started with, with Krauss, Sendak, Margaret Wise Brown, Zolotow, Ungerer. and then of course I love the middle age books which I consider the *Little House* books to be. I really like the Laura Ingalls Wilder books, but they haven't done very well in England.

RN: It's curious that they wouldn't be interested in those books; they do very well here.

GD: But they're about America—English kids might be more interested in England.

UN: So what? I feel I could go to any of the big British public schools and know just exactly what to do and how to get around if I were a young boy, because I've read so many of those books. Why shouldn't the young English children read *The Little House in the Big Woods*? But it was not until very recently that they were finally published abroad. In fact, when I was a very new editor the first one was published by Virginia

Kirkis and then she left Harper's. The next several were published by Louise and I oversaw the publication of the last four or five. There was no editing on them, but I did get Garth Williams to reillustrate them, all eight books. They had been illustrated by Helen Sewell, who was a very well-known artist at the time, but she was very decorative and stylized and seemed to be all wrong for this frontier sort of thing. So Garth and his wife and his two little girls took a trip right through the Dakota territory, Kansas, Wisconsin—they think they've found the site of the sod house mentioned in *On the Banks of Plum Creek*. He followed the whole trail and went to see Mrs. Wilder, who was an old woman by that time. I think his pictures gave the books a lovely lift. I have had librarians say to me, "Well, of course, none of them would ever be eligible for a Newbery because we don't like series books." "Well," I said, "Madam, the *Little House* books are hardly the *Bobbsey Twins*!"

Now I'm particularly involved with Young Adult books, because they don't need pictures. In a picture book it's sitting down with the author and the artist, and going over the dummy, etc., and it's become geographically impossible for me to work on a picture book. So most of the books I've done have been Young Adult books.

GD: Do you have any feeling about where the field is going, or what's happened in the last twenty years? Do you see any trends?

UN: Not really, but I think there's too much imitation. And I can tell you what I hope. I hope talented new young people come along and are given a real opportunity.