
Volume 9
Number 3
Energizing Young Adult Services (Fall 2003)

July 2014

Winning Young Adult Authors

Marsha Weber
Multnomah County Library

Recommended Citation

Weber, M. (2014). Winning Young Adult Authors. *OLA Quarterly*, 9(3), 2-7. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1651>

© 2014 by the author(s).

OLA Quarterly is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374

Winning Young Adult Authors

by Marsha Weber
Library Assistant, Freelance Writer
Multnomah County Central Library

Virginia Euwer Wolff created her own niche in the Young Adult genre with the publication of *Probably Still Nick Swanson* (Holt, 1988) a novel that the American Library Association's (ALA) Notable Children's Book Committee selected as one of the year's best. *Bat 6* (Scholastic, 1998) was also chosen as an ALA Notable Book and, in November, 2001, *True Believer* (Simon & Schuster/Antheneum), the second of the *Make Lemonade Trilogy* featuring the endearing, indomitable LaVaughn, earned the National Book Award for Young People.

Sara Ryan's *Empress of the World* was awarded: the Oregon Book Award's 2002 Leslie Bradshaw Award for Young Readers with Judge Khafre Abif noting that "Ryan offers a straight-forward voice for young adults; one that will inspire teens to keep on reading and to find themselves in books;" named a YALSA Best Book for Young Adults; ranked among the best for young readers by the New York Public Library and Cooperative Children's Book Center—University of Wisconsin, Madison, and, in late 2002, was named a Lambda Literary Award finalist.

Hawaii born with a lineage that comes from a 100-year line of newspapermen associated with the Honolulu Advertiser, Graham Salisbury grew up on Oahu and on Hawaii, graduated from California State University and earned an M.F.A. from Vermont College of Norwich where he was a founder of the M.F.A. program in writing for children. His first novel, *Blue Skin of the Sea* won the Bank Street Child Study Association Children's Book Award, The Judy Lopez Award, the Oregon Book Award and was selected as an ALA Best Book for Young Adults. *Under the Blood Red Sun* won the Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction, the Oregon Book Award, Hawaii's Nene Award and the California Young Reader Medal and was an ALA Notable Book and Best Book for Young Adults. *Shark Bait* was selected for the Oregon Book Award and as a Parents'

Choice Silver Honor Book, and *Jungle Dogs* was an ALA Best Book for Young Adults. *Lord of the Deep* was awarded the Boston Globe/Horn Book Award.

Virginia Euwer Wolff

Anyone who harbors doubts about life after the age of 50 has not met Oregon City author Virginia Euwer Wolff. As she leaped into her fifth decade the effervescent author (who ranks giving birth and rearing her son and daughter as her greatest accomplishment) conquered an addiction to cigarettes, began taking violin lessons again after 30 years and turned her poet's pen to writing books for young people.

However, awards and accolades were not foremost in Wolff's thoughts when we settled into our conversation. "How about using all that we know about kindness and tolerance to get some world peace going?" she responded when asked about her ideas during the past year.

MW: *What is the most difficult decision you've ever had to make?*

VEW: As a writer, the difficult decision comes ever day: To write what is next to write, knowing it's not nearly as apt or compelling or lucid as I'd hoped it would be when I began to hear it in my mind. I think deciding to continue with a book when it appears to be impossible is always a difficult decision. I've made it lots of times.

MW: *What are some of the problems you encounter in your writing?*

VEW: Getting the words right. I just keep trying. The frustrations are everywhere. The notion that style comes down to the question of which word goes where is one I like. And which word goes where is a huge problem. For distraction, I play a lot of music. I have very absorbing rehearsals on Thursday and Friday evenings that help take my mind off the writing problems. I go to concerts, take violin lessons and



practice the violin every day, usually early in the mornings. I go to poetry readings, read a classic every winter and I swim, hike and garden. I let my drafts sit. I think most of us find that letting a draft sit and age for a while is a good step toward maintaining a healthy relationship with it.

MW: *Does your knowledge of music play any part in your writing?*

VEW: Playing an instrument helps me immensely in writing. When you have to practice a difficult passage 3,000 times or more it helps you approach revising and rewriting. Knowing that every musical performance could have been improved is a good background for trying to learn how to think through the composition of a story.

MW: *Are you aware of the rhythmic aspects of your work?*

VEW: Oh, my, yes. I write everything aloud, reading it over and over to myself. Jarring or lurching rhythms tell me something is up. The passage I'm working on may need to be jarring or lurching, or it may need to be just the opposite. As a musician it's my job to sense immediately the difference between pepper and sugar, between gravy and water, between burlap and silk. I spend my life trying to learn to hear these distinctions perceptively and those attempts move from music to writing and back again. I'm working with a narrative situation this week in which I must use what musicians sometimes call "hairpins" at the same time I'm deploying a Rossini crescendo. I suppose if I were a carpenter I'd use building analogies. If I were a physician I'd use medical ones. As it is, musical ones are what are available to me but I also use Trailblazer basketball analogies when they come to me.

MW: *Can you explain the continuing surge in the popularity of Young Adult literature?*

VEW: I think it's because adolescence is complex, elusive, multi-dimensional, with blurred lines and trembling boundaries. The books written for this age group attempt to catch the imbalance and—like all art—to bring some order out of the disordered experience. I think YA authors keep their readers' ears in mind at all times and the result is that their readers hear them. Kids discuss and disagree and argue and refute and get their dander up in wonderfully visceral ways about these books. As the late Mr. Rogers told us, "What is mentionable is manageable." Which brings us to the "unmentionable" things that appear in these novels. We know, down deep, that we remain silent about the most sensitive things in life at our peril. Listen to Mr. Rogers!

MW: *Here's your chance: Is there a thought you'd like to impart to readers that you've not had the opportunity to?*



Discover the titles that get overlooked because no one can find them.

EBSCO's A-to-Z service collects your titles into one easy-to-browse listing. No more wasted time searching through dozens of databases, catalogs or e-journal access sites to find what your patrons are looking for. All of your library's resources are at their fingertips.

Discover how EBSCO's A-to-Z service can simplify the search for the information your patrons need.

www.ebsco.com
205.991.6600

EBSCO
INFORMATION SERVICES
CUSTOMER FOCUSED CONTENT DRIVEN



VEW: Little kids act out their favorite stories all the time. I'd like to see more, older readers doing readers' theatre or other informally staged readings of excerpts from YA books. When stories stand up and talk to us we learn from them in ways that are different from the ways in which we learn when we're hunkered down in a chair reading silently, just one mind and one story in conversation. That one mind, one story partnership is wonderful and it has saved many of us from despair. But I'm suggesting that group readings are fun and engaging, too. Drama kids know already. I want everyone to know it.

Sara Ryan

The highlights in Sara Ryan's gleaming hair may change with the season but her enviable energy and ability to juggle a career as a lauded writer and her "day job" as a Youth Librarian at Multnomah County Library, Portland, are unwavering.

Ryan is the author of *Empress of the World* (Viking, 2001), a debut novel that tells the story of Nicola, a young girl who finds herself falling in love with Battle Hall Davies, a beautiful blond dancer from North Carolina, the daughter of a preacher and one of Nicola's fellow students at the Siegel Summer Program for Gifted Youth. From first draft to publication the novel took Ryan 5 years but her persistence and tenacity earned the young, Ohio born, author immediate accolades.

MW: *Does the great success of your first published book create any pressure to perform the second time out?*

SR: Boy howdy! I try not to think about it too much. I'm so honored that my work has been reaching people that the greatest pressure I feel is to give the people who have responded so positively to *Empress of the World* new work that will live up to their expectations.

MW: *What is the wildest idea you've had in the past year?*

SR: I don't know about wild, but I can tell you about the most unexpected writing project I've done in the past year. Steve Lieber and I were asked to do a story for a *Hellboy* anthology for Dark Horse Comics. I had never written a story about someone else's character before (Mike Magnolia is the creator of the character *Hellboy*) and it was a good stretch for me as a writer. Oh, and I'm doing a short story for an anthology called *Girl Meets Boy* that will be published by Simon and Schuster. Some people certainly might consider my interpretation of that theme wild.

MW: *Are there ways in which you maintain your integrity as a writer?*

SR: Not consciously, but I think everything you do as a writer reflects how you see the world—your values, your sense of how people interact with each other. And certainly part of all that for me is maintaining a sense of integrity.

MW: *What is the most frustrating problem you encounter in your writing?*

SR: Number one problem: Lack of time for writing! I love my day job as a librarian but it's definitely challenging to work full time and also be a writer. I wish I was one of those disciplined writers who writes every day at the same time of day but sometimes weeks go by without my having written a word. Sometimes I'll deliberately under schedule myself on the weekends and in the evenings just to make sure I have significant blocks of time to get the writing done.

MW: *You, like many other authors, are a musician. Does your knowledge of music play any part in your writing?*

SR: I've never thought about it before but I think it does. I do think about the rhythm



of my prose, on a sentence-by-sentence level. For my characters who are musicians I use my own experience of having played the violin and sung in choirs. I don't know about the discipline and practice part of being a musician. I don't think I was diligent enough about practicing to qualify!

MW: *Authors have told me that the Young Adult designation was once considered the “kiss of death” for a novel. Yet, that has changed.*

SR: There's a bunch of different things going on. I think there's an increasing awareness of and respect for the genre, both with teachers and librarians and among young adults themselves. There are awards now such as the Young Adult Library Services Association's Best Books for Young Adults and the Printz Award. There's better book design—with some notable exceptions—and awareness on the part of publishers about what works well for this audience. There is a huge population of teens and a constantly growing body of outstanding work in the genre.

MW: *Of all your writing accomplishments, what has given you the most satisfaction?*

SR: The e-mails I've gotten from fans of *Empress*. I've heard from so many amazing people. I'm thrilled that the book has affected them enough for them to want to write to me.

For more on, from, about or to correspond with Sara Ryan see her Web site: <http://www.sararyan.com>.

Graham “Sandy” Salisbury

The name Graham “Sandy” Salisbury has become nearly synonymous with Young Adult literature, particularly to librarians throughout the state of Oregon who delight in reading and recommending his long list of award winning titles that hold immediate appeal to voracious young

readers and their more reluctant fellows as well. His most recent book is *Island Boyz*, a collection of short stories dedicated to “all the guys” Salisbury “kicked around with in Kanehoe, Kailua, Honolulu, Kailua-Kona, Hilo and Kamuela.”

MW: *Has your integrity as a writer ever been challenged?*

GS: My intentions are not to shock or wow, but rather to explore and define the human condition as I feel it. If my integrity as a writer has ever been challenged, it went zooming over my head. I have not had huge challenges to what I do. But what others say about my work is always important to me. If someone were to challenge my integrity as a writer I would thank them for their feedback, consider the complaint, then move ahead in a manner appropriate to my deepest beliefs. For example, there are those out there who think saying the phrase, “under God” should not be said in the Pledge of Allegiance. Although I am not a religious person, I would never *not* say “under God” just because someone doesn't like it. I think it's appropriate and part of our heritage. So I will continue to say it despite the objections of others. Challenges are good. They keep us alert. But they usually do not alter my basic beliefs.

There are certain limits I place upon myself as a writer. I don't do gratuitous violence, sex scenes or inappropriate language if I am writing for young readers. Critics might cringe at this kind of self-editing, but I consider what I do a responsibility as much as I consider it an art. There is, in my mind, a line between the two and I try to keep that clear. Other writers go for mean realism in every case. There's much to be said for this. It's often gutsy stuff to read.

MW: *If you're willing to reveal it, what is the most difficult decision you've ever had to make?*



GS: I've had to make many difficult decision in my life, but as a writer the most difficult thing I've yet had to decide was that the novel I'd been working on for almost two years just wasn't working. It was a novel set in Oregon. I loved the theme and the setting but that particular story never had a heartbeat so I shelved it. That was not easy. No.

MW: *Are there other problems you've encountered in your writing?*

GS: Most of the problems I have in writing have to do with writing the first draft. That's the hardest part, without question. After I get the first draft down it becomes a question of fixing all its problems, which to me is far easier and more enjoyable. But in that first draft I have to fool myself into thinking that what I'm doing has merit. Sometimes it doesn't, like in the Oregon book. Sometimes it does, such as in *Lord of the Deep*, which was a very difficult book to pull together. Overcoming frustration has to do with self-talk. Writers only have themselves to depend upon. We have to be loving, understanding, encouraging and comforting—to ourselves.

MW: *Has the experience of playing a musical instrument made you more aware of the rhythmic aspects of your work?*

GS: Music does play a part in my written work, but it's very subtle. I think it is in the rhythms. Music is probably the single most powerful force in my life. It can move me like nothing else, but the way it touches my writing is as mysterious as the universe. Music touches all of my life. It's something that just is.

MW: *The field of Young Adult literature continues to expand at a surprising rate despite early criticism of the designation.*

GS: I think younger kids are reading the YA books. And some adults. Certainly

most writers for young readers read YA books. In my opinion, the true YA group probably also read adult novels. Who knows? A good book is a good book! The distinction between a middle reader and YA is drawn more for the sake of giving buyers some guess as to age appropriateness. That's how I view it. That's how Random House makes that distinction for my work. It's for marketing. They tell me what category my books will fit in. But to me a book is a book.

MW: *Of all your writing accomplishments, what has given you the most satisfaction?*

GS: The poem *Island Boyz*. Poetry has pretty much always eluded me. That I wrote at least one poem in my life is amazing. Poetry is a gift and an art that I do not possess. I'm too long winded and way to imprecise. Oh yeah!

MW: *In closing is there a message you'd like give to young readers?*

GS: As a kid I did not read. I became a reader when I was 30-years-old, by accident. I picked up a copy of *Roots*, by Alex Haley and read it. Why? I have no idea. But that book grabbed me by the throat and would not let go. *Roots* turned me into a reader. Until that point in my life I had never had the vicarious reading experience good readers have every day. It was awesome. If I could say anything to any young reader, or prospective young reader, it would be this: Reading can give your life a depth you might never reach as a non-reader. Give it a chance. A good chance. Give it your heart. You will not be disappointed. Aloha. 🌿

For more about the busy life and works of Graham Salisbury and to read or listen to his acceptance speech at the Boston Globe/Horn Book Award ceremony see his lively and engaging Web site at: www.grahamsalisbury.com.



Young Adult Literature Awards

And the Oscar, uh, I mean Printz goes to...

Young Adult Literature Awards and Their Winners

When you think of the Academy Awards, you might think of Michael Moore, Michael Caine, Michael Douglas ... Michael Printz? Book awards are the Oscars of the literary world, and young adult literature has its own honors for which authors can contend. Here is a sampling of awards and some recent winners. All of these are awarded by the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA), which is a division of ALA.

Michael L. Printz Award

<http://www.ala.org/yalsa/printz/>

The Michael L. Printz Award is an award for a book that exemplifies literary excellence in Young Adult literature. It is named for a Topeka, Kansas school librarian who was a long-time active member of YALSA.

2003 Award: *Postcards from No Man's Land* by Aidan Chambers

2002 Award: *A Step from Heaven* by An Na

2001 Award: *Kit's Wilderness* by David Almond

Margaret A. Edwards Award

<http://www.ala.org/yalsa/edwards/>

The Margaret A. Edwards Award, honors an author's lifetime achievement for writing books that have been popular over a period of time. It recognizes an author's work in helping adolescents become aware of themselves and addressing questions about their role and importance in relationships, society, and in the world.

2003 Award: Nancy Garden

2002 Award: Paul Zindel

2001 Award: Robert Lipsyte

Best Books for Young Adults

<http://www.ala.org/yalsa/booklists/bbya/>

The name says it all. This list of fiction and non-fiction includes books written specifically for teens as well as books published in the adult market. A selection of titles from the 2003 Top Ten list: *Feed* by M.T. Anderson; *The House of the Scorpion* by Nancy Farmer; *The Lightkeeper's Daughter* by Iain Lawrence; *Left for Dead: A Young Man's Search for Justice for the USS Indianapolis* by Peter Nelson; and *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East* by Naomi Shahib Nye.

Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers

<http://www.ala.org/yalsa/booklists/quickpicks/>

QP is a great list to have when you need a book that teens can get into easily. Think high interest, popular reading. A selection of titles from the 2003 Top 10 list: *Gingerbread* by Rachel Cohn; *Animé Mania: How to Draw Characters for Japanese Animation* by Christopher Hart; *Between Boardslides and Burnout: My Notes From the Road* by Tony Hawk; *Son of the Mob* by Gordon Korman; and *Sloppy Firsts* by Megan McCafferty.

