

Pages and Ages

Reflections of an Author-Illustrator

by Gail E. Haley

On the last day of the 20th century, I found myself in the highlands of Thailand, riding a beautiful elephant, up, up, up through a meandering river, to a tiny village of happy children, loving mothers, and squealing piglets. I had few expectations of Thailand, other than what I had seen in travel brochures and the obligatory residue of more than one screening of *The King and I*. I was enchanted beyond my dreams.

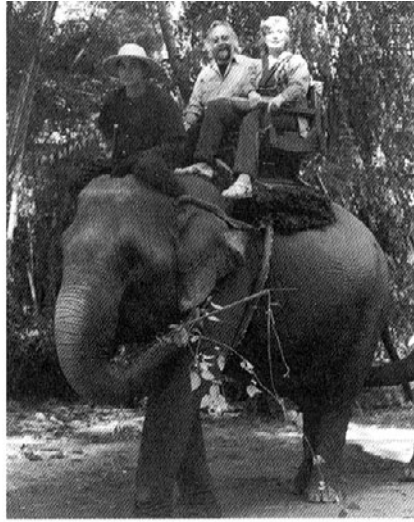
But my travels have not always been so rewarding. In my early twenties, when I landed in Rome, I cried. I realized at once that was not my city—the one I had read about in scores of books. It was not the Rome of *Bulfinch's Mythology*, nor *The Last Days of Pompeii*, nor *Quo Vadis*. It was not Shakespeare's Rome either. It did not synch with the resonance in my head, nor the hologram of the city in whose streets I had walked in my imagination. Books, for me, have always been truly experiential. Things I feel, hear, and see in them can be more real to me than the places in which I take my meals, do my work, and walk about.

I had loved Rome since I first read about it when I was eight years old. In my daydreams, I fled to this magical place as if it were my true homeland. I certainly had been born into the wrong family, on the wrong continent, in the wrong age. Shuffletown, North Carolina, where I grew up, was not the sort of place where my prince would come riding down the road on a chariot to carry me away. And if he had, we would have been in danger of being run over by a semi.

I not only read about Rome; I also read fairy tales from around the world. I read all of Andrew Lang's collections of fairy tales, from *The Blue Fairy Book* straight through to *The Yellow Fairy Book*. I read every book on worldwide myths and legends I could find. I was totally at home in these fairy tale worlds, but I never really expected to set foot in them. The Rome of my fantasies, however, seemed approachable enough so that I might actually get there. I was sad to learn that I couldn't.

As a child, I had found my refuge in books. I found idealism, excitement, romance, and acceptance. My temple was the Charlotte Public Library—a stately old building with a whole wing for children's literature. It had stained-glass windows depicting fairy rules mounted above the bookcases. Up a ladder, lit by light filtering through stained glass windows, there was a loft full of stereoptigans and boxes of three-dimensional pictures from around the world.

In the stacks (where I loved to roam), there were wrought iron staircases and floors made of glass tiles. Left to my own



Gail E. Haley with her husband David Considine in Thailand.

devices, I would have haunted them forever—a literary vampire absorbing wisdom and sustenance from the volumes which surrounded me. As an adult, I talked my way into the stacks of the New York Public Library and the Victoria and Albert in London. But nothing ever surpassed that early experience of exploring the Charlotte stacks.

I was born an outsider, so I peopled my fantasy world with characters from the books I read. There were few picture books in the library of my elementary school, so I quickly graduated to novels—those of Robert Louis Stevenson, Sir Walter Scott, Zane Grey, Sir Richard Burton, and Howard Pyle. I did not read them in any sensible order; I was a child set loose in a candy store when I went to the library. I took out whatever called to me.

Books changed my life—one could almost say they were my life. At some point in the fifth or sixth grade, I not only wanted to read books; I wanted to write them, too. I taught myself to type on a rickety old Royal typewriter (I can still smell die ribbon). The pages of my manuscript were the size of a book, and I arranged them with a cover so that they became a facsimile of a book. Of course, I added my own watercolor illustrations to my early, never quite completed novel, *Sign of the Lion*.

When I emerged from the world of books, I didn't like what I saw. I grew up in the South of the '40s and '50s. There was still rabid segregation evident at water fountains, motels, and the Woolworth's lunch counter. Schools and even churches were segregated. The *real* world made no sense to me. So at seventeen, when I went off to art school, I made the geographic flight I had already made in my head. I fled from a world in which I did not fit and went looking for one in which I did. I found that world in the magic of books.

I am not sure how much experience of books and stories today's children have. I find myself quite ambivalent about marketing, conglomerates, and the new technologies as they impact storytelling and story selling. As an artist, I am thrilled by the possibilities computer software brings to the world of illustration and graphics. But so much of the visual world presented to today's children seems little more than eye candy. I both recognize and resist the inevitability of today's tools.

In this I am not alone. Academics like Seymour Papert, author of *The Connected Family: Bridging the Digital Generation Gap* (Longstreet Press, 1996), and Jane Healy, author of *Failure to Connect* (Touchstone Press, 1999), describe the misuse of these technologies, with control

substituting for creativity. Even this year, as I have visited schools, teachers complain to me after hours about the tyranny of technology and the emphasis on testing with little attempt to provide children with the pure pleasure of reading.

My two now-adult children knew the world of books as part of their growing process. I am a grandmother now, and I wonder whether my little granddaughter Ellen will find the same joy, escape, and entertainment in reading that I experienced as a child. Will books be a sensory, emotional, and intellectual engagement for her, or will they have been replaced by high-tech gadgetry? Will she be able to connect to my work, so much of which depends on the low-tech world of talismans and totems.

Recently, I was in a school with an ethnically mixed audience of children. Holding my fly-tail switch, I started my story by saying, "We do not really mean, we do not really mean, that what we are about to say is true—A Story A Story—let it come, let it go." It was the same switch I had used on a stage in Johannesburg several years ago when I performed with two Zulu girls. They had their own switches—scepters of the storyteller in much of Africa.

And then I used my Cherokee story rattle to alert them to the sound of a Cherokee story telling. Through the turtle shell rattle, the Native American storyteller begins, "Listen Listen, Listen Listen—my story rattle has sounded. It is time to begin." The turtle has no voice, but it is a wise animal; in its hundred years upon the earth, it sees many things. The rattle allows the turtle to articulate the wisdom of native American folklore—the soul of a people.

Since my recent return from Thailand, I have a new and very noisy call to storytelling. It is a carved and hollow wooden frog. He came with a carved stick, and when I rub this stick up his knobby back, he makes the quavering sound of a frog at dusk-storytelling time. We ended our recent five-week trip with a visit to Melbourne, Australia (my husband's birthplace). While we were there, we went to see a Vietnamese water puppet show being performed in the park. Lo and behold, they introduced the show with the sound of wooden frogs just like mine.

My American audiences love the objects I use when I begin telling stories. They are transported by these objects.

What I still do not understand is how ideas are transmitted through these artifacts, but I know *that* it happens. There is so much that is magical about stories and books.

I have found that children pick up the resonance of things that I know when I write and illustrate my books. They see between the words and the pictures and pick up on things which are invisible to the eye and inaudible to the ear. That gift is lost to most adults who have been taught to live in a world in which part of their own potential has been systematically closed off to them by conditioning.

In my Caldecott Medal acceptance speech, delivered some 30 years ago, I voiced my concerns about the impact of television on children and on children's literature. During the 1990s, I took that a step further, teaming with my husband to write two textbooks to promote critical viewing skills and media literacy. I believe it is made harder for today's children, who are surrounded by more and more visual messages without necessarily having the patience to process those messages. The remote-control culture programs them to move on to the next distraction before they have had time to reflect upon what they have just seen.

Sadly, when I ask children what they know about mermaids, trolls, or unicorns, there is always a child who says "they do not exist" or "they are not real." I automatically know the child has been told that by an authoritative parent. I suppose such parents hope to protect their children from being hurt. But they do a disservice. Of course, such beings are "real". Are they not the stuff of universal dreams and stories? Whether they exist only in dreamtime, fairy tales, or cinematic adventures, they are *real* in the hearts and minds of children and to the child within us all.

As my elephant climbed higher in the hills of Chiang Dao, I drank in the sights, sounds, and textures of the world he opened to me. I knew that before long he would show up in a story I had yet to write. It was no accident that I closed the century riding an elephant and rafting a river. I wanted a non-technological closure. It was not fear of a Y2K catastrophe; rather, it was an affirmation of where I had been and where I am going. For all the possibilities and promise of computers as story tellers, they are a poor substitute for a parent, a grandparent or a teacher; what they most lack is a human lap and all the warmth and sharing that entails.

Gail E. Haley received the Caldecott medal for A Story, A Story: An African Tale (Atheneum, 1970) and the Kate Greenaway medal for The Post Office Cat (St comers, 1976). Her textbooks for Libraries Unlimited include the latest edition of Visual Messages: Integrating Imagery Into Instruction (Teacher Ideas Press, 1999). For information about her classes, workshops, books, and travels, access Gail at gailehaley.com



Illustration by Gail E. Haley.