

James Richardson “drifts and gazes” toward new poems

by Anndee Hochman

For James Richardson—Princeton professor of creative writing, National Book Award finalist and this year’s featured reader at the March 13 People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos benefit at Princeton’s Nassau Club—a poem often starts with a long stare out the window.

“Drifting and gazing,” he says, describing the early stages of gathering ideas, feelings and rhythms. “I guess you get into a kind of state of receptivity...I don’t always get the words right away. I might start writing down a cloud of notes.

“Then I need to go back to it over and over again. It takes me years. In a five-year space, I might be working on 80 or 100 things. Near the end, they all start to come together at once.” That’s when he shifts gears into the intense, detail-focused work of revision.

The most recent volume to emerge from that effort is *By the Numbers: Poems and Aphorisms*, a finalist for the 2010 National Book Award. His poetry and aphorisms, a marriage of wisecrack and Zen koan (“All work is the avoidance of harder work... You’ve never said anything as stupid as what people thought you said.”), have been published in *Slate*, *The New Yorker*, *Paris Review* and elsewhere.

Richardson has taught at Princeton, in both the English and creative writing departments, since 1980.

But his own reading life began with Dr. Seuss. He was the kind of first-grader who liked having 155 books, including the Dick and Jane primers, on his list. Later (and against the wishes of a strict librarian), he gravitated toward baseball books, submarine stories and Norse mythology.

In grade school, Richardson was the go-to guy for each December’s parody of “The Night Before Christmas.” A 7th-grade poetry teacher schooled the class in Keats and Shelley; by high school, Richardson began to prefer poetry to physics.

“In college [at Princeton], I took hardly anything but poetry. I read the mainstream English poets kind of compulsively. But I was afraid to admit that [being a poet] was what I really wanted to do.”

It was only after 20 years and several published books that Richardson began to answer, “I’m a writer,” in response to “What do you do?” Meanwhile, he was honing his skills as a teacher: learning to express himself clearly and manage the social dynamics of a college classroom. He says teaching is the harder task: “Writing depends on you; teaching depends on everybody in the room.”

After learning about People & Stories through Princeton colleague Tracy K. Smith, Richardson visited groups at the Trenton Rescue Mission; he was struck by participants’ insights and personal connections to the work. “They weren’t couched in any kind of professional vocabulary, but I was taken with how clearly they saw what they were reading and how it might be relevant to them.

“The idea that literature can actually help people is a powerful one. I was curious: Is that true? At the Rescue Mission, I ran into some really thoughtful people who were obviously getting something out of what they were reading.”

This year, Richardson is on leave from teaching, spending his days in the vague, early stages of what will, he trusts, eventually become new poems. “I’m looking out the window,” he says. “It’s like filling the reservoir. I know a book will come out of it. It always does.”

The People & Stories benefit featuring James Richardson is open to the public. Invite your colleagues, neighbors and members of your book club! Details at www.peopleandstories.org.

Stories & silence: ways to navigate both life & death

by Anndee Hochman

**"Miracles are a retelling
in small letters of the
very same story which
is written across the
whole world in letters
too large for some of us
to see."**

--C.S. Lewis

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That day, the story rang true: "*Roberta James became one of the silent people in Seeker County when her daughter, Harriet, died at six years of age.*"

Before I read Linda Hogan's aching, angry story of tribal and personal loss, I told the group the news I'd just learned from a staff member at the UU Outreach Program in Northwest Philadelphia: one of our regular participants had died of a heart attack that morning. It was Vivian, who used a wheelchair, whose extravagant hats matched her crisply pressed jackets, who had just been fitted for prosthetic legs.

Like Roberta, who loses not just one but three young children in the course of "Making Do," we were struck silent.

This Crossing Borders group—older adults from Philadelphia's Germantown neighborhood and medical students from Drexel University—had been meeting throughout the fall, reading stories by a range of authors including Langston Hughes, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Isaac Bashevis Singer and Chinua Achebe.

We'd discovered common ground between the generations as well as stark differences within them; two of the older adults, a woman with a cynical view of politics and a man with a more benign outlook, often jostled verbally. After reading "Thank You, M'am," the woman suggested that young people stopped using honorifics such as "Mr." and "Mrs." in the 1960s because they were disillusioned by adults' behavior and the world that had been left to them. "So that gave them a license to be disrespectful?" her ideological rival volleyed back.

Every session held surprises. After reading "Marriage is a Private Affair," about an African father's dismay when his son marries outside the tribe, one of the Drexel students said an arranged marriage was likely to work because "parents would probably make the best choice for their children, having their interests at heart." An

older man in the group immediately countered that he would never have wanted his parents to choose his mate.

Together, we'd chuckled at Hughes' formidable Luella Bates Washington Jones, "a large woman with a large purse," and we'd argued about whether the dialogue in Catherine Ryan Hyde's "The Man Who Found You in the Woods" truly captured the voice of a sullen teenaged boy.

But on this afternoon, we were drawn toward one another in unexpected grief. With the stories still untouched on our laps, we remembered Vivian as best we could: Elegant. Articulate. Kind. But none of us had known her intimately, and soon there was nothing left to say. We sat together for a long, mute moment.

I remembered what my friend Naomi said after her father died, how one writing pal had sent her a book of poetry with the inscription, "Now you're part of the club no one wants to join." Those poems didn't erase her grief, but they mirrored it, affirmed it and gave it company. Poetry—impressionistic, lush, subtle, succinct, with its pulses of rhythm and sound—could comfort when ordinary words failed.

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So perhaps it was no surprise, when we began to discuss "Making Do," that the story's poetic fragments swam to the surface of our talk: "one of the silent people... Seeker County... We make art out of our loss." Even the title, "Making Do," evoked images and associations. Varun said it meant "using what you have," while others talked about "making the best of a bad situation" or "being grateful." I told of my grandmother, a Depression-era bride who never lost her memory of ration coupons and who boasted of "making do" in the kitchen: "Look at all these cookies I

baked on just one egg!” As I told the story, I missed her voice.

For every bit of healing poetry, “Making Do” suggests, there are words— clichés, rationalizations and lies—that do no one a lick of good. Roberta’s mother offers platitudes to her grieving daughter—“Life goes on,” she scrawls on the mirror in Peach Promise lipstick; “There is a time for everything in heaven,” she says later. Sandy and Mary scoffed at those.

They suggested that the story offers no easy formulas for managing cultural or personal sorrow; in fact, the name “Seeker County” implied that Roberta and other characters had more questions than answers. “Seeker” made Sandy think of religious pilgrims; Varun noted that everyone in “Making Do” seems to have lost something or someone. And we acknowledged the mysteries that swirl in the wake of any death: Why did it happen? Why now? Could it have been prevented? How do I keep going?

Justin said, “I think Roberta’s ‘making do’ when she goes on living after her children die.”

We were quiet again. Then Stanley began to speak. “I don’t think you ever ‘get over’ a death,” he said. “At the beginning, you feel kind of selfish about it—you think about the effect on you. But after a while, you start to think about the person who died, and maybe it was better for them not to be suffering.” And Sandy, his usual sparring partner, had nothing but shared experience to offer. “I felt broken when my husband died,” she told the group. “Like my life was broken in two parts.”

Even the word “hospital” transmuted to a kind of poetry, as Stanley explained that the word shares a root with “hospitality” and Sandy reminded us that the first hospitals/hostels were way-stations on routes for weary or ill travelers. Today, Joe said, many hospitals have renamed themselves “medical centers,” a term one of the medical students said he disliked because “it sounds like a place you go to be fixed, not to be healed.”

In the story, Roberta seeks healing outside her community: she settles in unfamiliar territory and begins carving tiny wooden birds to be placed on the graves of her children. That idea—making art out of our loss—resonated for this group in other ways. Think of all those country songs,

Stanley said, that are about a break-up or a loss. It’s true of classical music, too, Sandy offered, with examples of symphonies and operas propelled by tragedy.

And what about comedy? Mary and Alice mentioned Robin Williams, who transmuted his depression into hilarious stand-up routines. Even the slapstick cliché of someone slipping on a banana peel (cue the laugh track) reminds us how closely pain and absurdity, danger and humor are braided together.

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For closure, I read “What the Living Do,” by Marie Howe, a poem she wrote after her brother died of AIDS. In it, she talks about the ordinary moments of existence—buying a hairbrush, slamming the car door—“what you finally gave up.” Johnny’s death, she writes, awakened a love of that dailiness:

But there are moments, walking, when I catch a glimpse of myself in the window glass,

say, the window of the corner video store, and I’m gripped by a cherishing so deep for my own blowing hair, chapped face, and unbuttoned coat that I’m speechless

Again, there was quiet as participants took in Howe’s final words: “I am living, I remember you.”

I gathered the folders, a stack that included Vivian’s tidily organized collection of the first five stories. One of the medical students asked for a copy of Howe’s poem. Then we reached for purses and backpacks, car keys and canes, and headed into the chilly night, full of stories and silences. It’s what the living do.

“Humanity’s legacy of stories and storytelling is the most precious we have. All wisdom is in our stories and songs.”

--Doris Lessing

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P&S in 2014: the numbers and the names

“The one thing that you have that nobody else has is you. Your voice, your mind, your story, your vision. So write and draw and build and play and dance and live as only you can.”

--Neil Gaiman

In the end, it's a simple formula: the number of people whose minds are changed by People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos; the hundreds of others whose generosity helps us continue the work. We extend our thanks in both directions.

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“A story should have a beginning, a middle and an end, but not necessarily in that order.”

--Jean-Luc Godard

Irony startles, brings us closer to story's heart

by Patricia Andres

“My responsibility is to tell true stories. To me a true story is always hopeful, but never simply, uncomplicatedly happy.”

--John Green

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“Irony” is a word that glides easily between everyday speech and the literary lexicon. In literature, as in life, the ironic carries a sense of the unexpected, the incongruent, the coincidence that startles.

Often, it is timing that provides the hinge: “Ironically, the house sold as soon as the seller decided to take it off the market.” So is the sense—sometimes comical—that something doesn’t fit: “It’s ironic that the logic and probability professor’s name was Mr. Random.”

Or, as in Alanis Morissette’s, “Isn’t It Ironic,” irony is like “rain on your wedding day; a free ride when you’ve already paid”—just plain bad coincidence.

In fiction, though, irony can draw readers into intimate contact with the story, bringing us into the thick of things. In the short story, a genre built on economy of means, irony is often responsible for the impact achieved in a very short space. Examples from the *People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos* bibliography illustrate how irony removes blind spots, often subverting the status quo.

There’s the classic O. Henry story, “The Gift of the Magi,” which uses irony to deconstruct the custom of exchanging valuable material goods at Christmas. When the story opens, we learn that Della has only \$1.87 to buy her husband, Jim, a Christmas present, even though she has saved every penny she could all year.

Just as she is about to cut and sell her hair to buy an extravagant chain for Jim’s watch, the narrator foreshadows the story’s ending: “Now, there were two possessions of the James Dillingham Youngs in which they both took a mighty pride. One was Jim’s gold watch that had been his father’s and his grandfather’s. The other was Della’s hair.”

Naturally, we begin to fear for the watch, and sure enough, Jim sells the watch to buy

expensive combs for his wife. Both gifts, in the end, are useless. Irony has subverted the expected order; the love behind each spouse’s sacrifice is the true gift.

The use of irony to subvert is also found in Kate Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour,” a 19th-century tale that packs a feminist message by inviting the reader to witness what other characters in the story do not.

In literature, as in life, the ironic carries a sense of the unexpected, the incongruent, the coincidence that startles.

The narrative, spanning less than three pages and delineating the events of a single hour, opens, “Knowing that Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with a heart trouble, great care was taken to break to her as gently as possible the news of her husband’s death.” Her sister and a family friend decide to share the news in “broken sentences; veiled hints that revealed in half concealing.”

But when Josephine Mallard withdraws to her room to “grieve,” the reader alone witnesses her barely-controlled exuberance as she contemplates her future: “There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow creature.”

In the story’s final moments, Brently Mallard opens the door (he was nowhere near the train crash), and his wife collapses. The other characters assume she has died of the “joy that kills.”

Once, after reading this story with men who were incarcerated, I asked about any ironic reversals they might have experienced. One inmate said it was ironic to be in prison and yet feel such freedom while reading and discussing short stories. Everyone agreed, and then we continued exploring the world into which we had been transported by Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour.”

“Playing school” flagged lifelong love of teaching

Talking with Anne Sobel

by Anndee Hochman

Anne Davison Sobel wanted to bring community members to the table.

The seminar table, that is. Typically, participants in Princeton University’s auditing program would sit in the rear seats of large lecture classes; they were barred from the smaller discussion sections where passionate dialogue unfolded.

Sobel thought these learners deserved seminars of their own; eventually, the university agreed. Last fall, Sobel taught literature to two small groups—18 people in one class and 15 in the other—that included physicians, engineers, attorneys and stay-at-home parents ranging from 40 to 80, some who had studied literature in college and others who were diving in for the first time.

“I find them almost starved for this kind of a course,” Sobel says. “They’re really grateful for an opportunity to do something serious that they can’t do anywhere else. They are so eager to learn new skills—close reading, for the most part.”

To teach community members, and to work with People & Stories as a recent board member, brings Sobel full-circle from the start of her career at Queensboro Community College thirty years ago.

Actually, she says with a laugh, she began wearing the professor’s cap long before that—as a child, when she set her dolls in a circle and played school. At four, Sobel begged her mother to teach her to read. At six, she fell in love with *Charlotte’s Web* and a biography of Abraham Lincoln, books she squirreled under the covers long after bedtime.

When she didn’t like her 3rd-grade teacher, she threatened not to return to school, and her mother moved her to The Chapin School in New York; there, Sobel’s mother was also her 5th-grade teacher in a tiny class of ten.

Later she spent a summer at Cornell, studying French and English. “I knew from

that moment that I wanted to be a college professor.”

Sobel loved poetry, too; her dissertation was on the Romantic poets, and she met her husband when both were doctoral students at Johns Hopkins in a class on 16th-century poetry. Her husband later jettisoned literature to get an MBA, and Sobel shifted her focus to a different continent, becoming versed in American literature because that’s what students in the 1990s wanted to study.

Her two favorite authors are the “diametrically opposed” Marilynne Robinson and Philip Roth. But her reading tastes range wide: history, culture, a recent book on neuroscience called *The Spiritual Doorway in the Brain: A Neurologist’s Search for the God Experience*. “The intellectual life absorbs me,” she says.

“Books...come to a different kind of life when you discuss them.”

That’s why it saddens her to see college students gravitate toward “marketable” majors such as economics and computer science. “We need to reflect on our history and how we’ve become the people that we are. In literature, you can enter into the psyches of other characters. Just slowing down and being reflective, having that kind of space to think is very important.”

People & Stories, she says, creates the space for deep listening. “Books come to life when you read them individually; they come to a different kind of life when you discuss them... You see other points of view and hear what others are saying.”

While television shows and movies also incorporate story lines, Sobel says, to read from the page is a different, irreplicable experience. “We were talking in my class just this morning about how you pace yourself when you read.”

And while she sometimes shares the gloomy prediction of one of her literary heroes, Philip Roth, who forecast the novel’s disappearance, Sobel believes storytelling is here to stay. “I don’t think we would be humans if we didn’t tell each other stories.”

“...we have to give ourselves the opportunity to identify, to plunge ourselves in a story where we see the world from the bottom up or through another’s eyes or heart.”

--Sue Monk Kidd

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Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption, by Bryan Stevenson. New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2014.

by Anndee Hochman

Bryan Stevenson's grandmother, the daughter of enslaved people, used to hug him so fiercely he could hardly breathe. "You can't understand most of the important things from a distance, Bryan," she told him. "You have to get close."

As a young law student, Stevenson "got close" to a world he'd never witnessed: death row of a maximum-security prison. The people he met—including a man condemned to death for a crime he did not commit—shaped his career path and his outlook. "I have discovered, deep in the hearts of many condemned and incarcerated people, the scattered traces of hope and humanity," he writes.

Stevenson's book is a searing indictment

of a "justice" system that is far from just. He details cases of people sentenced to life in prison for crimes they committed as children; a woman wrongly convicted of killing her stillborn infant; a man whose trial was a charade of false testimony. Over and over, he shows that people who are black, or poor, or both, are more apt to be arrested, convicted and harshly sentenced than those who are white or wealthy.

But the book is also a testament to resilience and hope. Stevenson's Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) helped win a Supreme Court ban on life-without-parole sentences for kids convicted of non-homicide offenses. He describes the trauma-laced lives of some of those children, including Ian, a 13-year-old who wrote poems titled "Uncried Tears" and "Tied Up with Words" while in prison.

From his work, Stevenson draws this essential lesson: "Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done."