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The Nebraska Center for the Book

an affiliate of the Library of Congress



Coming in 1994 . . .

**Lila Wallace Reader's Digest Grant
Reading Circles**
March 1994 — March 1995

National Affiliates Meeting
April 18, 1994

Nebraska Writing and Storytelling Festival
Saturday, June 4, 1994
Northeast Community College in Norfolk

Nebraska Literature Festival
“Go Big Read!”
September 23, 1994 – University of Nebraska at Omaha
September 24, 1994 – Peter Kiewit Conference Center, Omaha

Annual Meeting Nebraska Center for the Book
November 4, 1994
Heritage Room, Lincoln Library



Board of Directors

The Nebraska Center for the Book is the 23rd state affiliate of the Library of Congress's national Center for the Book. The Center is a non-profit corporation whose purpose is to stimulate public interest in books, reading, and the written word. The Center acts as a catalyst, bringing together individuals and organizations to build the Nebraska community of the book. The Center serves as a partner and supporter of programs, events, and unique projects which celebrate the written word. The current board members are:

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Nebraska Center for the Book Board of Directors Meetings 1994

March 2 — Host: Laureen Riedesel, Beatrice Public Library
Program: Storytelling

June 2 — Host: Golda Bockbrader, NCB President-elect, Grand Island
Program: Chautauqua

September 2 — Host: Board Members, UNO
Program: Lila Wallace Reader's Digest Fund Reading/Discussion Literature Project

November 4 — Host: Carol Connor: Heritage Room, Lincoln City Library
Program: Annual Meeting

Note: All Board of Directors Meetings are preceded by morning programs and committee work convening at 9:30 a.m. All NCB members are encouraged to join us for these activities and become more involved in our planning programs. Mem-

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President's Message — Elaine Booth

One of the featured events at the Nebraska Center for the Book Annual Meeting on November 12, was presentation of the Second Annual Jane Geske Award to the Nebraska Humanities Council.

Following are the nomination remarks submitted by Dick Allen, former NCB President

and a response to the award sent by Jane Renner Hood, Executive Director of the Humanities Council. These messages illustrate the positive collaborative relationship existing between our two organizations and the debt of gratitude owed to the NHC by the Nebraska Center for the Book.

TO: Nebraska Center for the Book Jane Geske Award Committee
FR: Dick Allen, Past President, Nebraska Center for the Book
RE: Nomination for the Jane Geske Award

I should like to nominate the **Nebraska Humanities Council** for the **1993 Jane Geske Award**.

The NHC has done so much to facilitate the establishment and continuation of the Nebraska Center for the Book that it is hard to know where to begin.

Molly Fisher, NHC Grants Administrator, was involved early on in discussions regarding formation of a Center for the Book affiliate in Nebraska. And it was NHC Planning Grant that made that memorable January 1990 meeting at the Cornhusker Hotel in Lincoln possible. As a result of this meeting, a planning committee proceeded to develop a mission statement, goals and objectives, articles of incorporation and bylaws for what was soon to become the Nebraska Center for the Book.

Subsequently, the **Nebraska Humanities Council** has been highly supportive of the NCB's undertakings and special programs. The early issues of the *NCB Quarterly* were in part supported by NHC funds and a number of special NCB programs received financial backing for NHC. And, of course, the annual Nebraska Literature Festival has received substantial support from the NHC. The Nebraska Writing and Storytelling Festival has also received several special grants for keynote speakers.

Just as important as grants made to the Nebraska Center for the Book and its committees has been the encouragement and involvement of the NHC in the mission of the NCB. Clearly, the NCB is involved in the promotion of the humanities through its advocacy of literacy, books, reading, libraries and booksellers, and recognizes the **Nebraska Humanities Council** as a valuable and indispensable ally in the fulfillment of its mission.

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The 1993 Jane Geske Award was presented to the Nebraska Humanities Council. Pictured from the left : Jane Renner Hood, Executive Director of the NHC; Dick Allen, past NCB President; George Garrison, Chair of the NHC Board; Elaine Booth, NCB President and Molly Fisher, NCB Board Member/NHC Grants Administrator.

continued from page 3

Dear Elaine,

I would like to add my written thanks to George Garrison's spoken thank you for the very valued recognition that the Center for the Book gave to the Nebraska Humanities Council at your annual meeting November 12.

I would like to echo George's acknowledgment of the valuable partnership of the Center for the Book. The Council is delighted with the recognition that the Center has given us for our work in promoting literature in Nebraska, but I hope you know how impossible that would be if it were not for the Center for the Book and all of the volunteers who make possible the Literature Festival, the reading circles, and all of the other programs that you do in our state.

The story of the Nebraska Humanities Council's success has always been written by our partners in the humanities. But I think that story is particularly exciting when it is told by new partners who see the need for enhancing the cultural life of the state and take on the daunting task of funding a new organization, with new goals, and new challenges. Those new challenges are often undertaken at the urging of experienced friends, and so we are particularly pleased to receive an award named after Jane Geske. I can think of no one in Nebraska who has been more devoted and more optimistic in that devotion about the possibilities for a rich cultural life here in Nebraska.

Again, on behalf of the Nebraska Humanities council, I thank you and the Center for the Book for the wonderful honor that you have given the Nebraska Humanities Council.

Cordially,

Jane Renner Hood
Executive Director



Nebraska Literature Festival Go Big Read

Planning for the 1994 Nebraska Literature Festival is beginning. Would you like to be part of it? We need your help and your ideas.

The fourth Festival will be September 23 (at UNO for high school students) and September 24 (at Peter Kiewit Conference Center, near the Mall in downtown Omaha). "Go Big Read" will be listed among activities associated with River City Roundup.

We've discussed a musical fundraiser, readings and story-telling and panels and workshops, a third volume in the resource guides to Nebraska writers, a mystery theater evening, presentations by cowboy poets, a tour of the new children's theater at the old Astro, a book fair — and we've just begun to think.

Please help us with your participation in planning programs, presentations, displays, publicity, funding, registration — everything it will take to once again remind Nebraskans of our literary heritage and to celebrate it. And do share this letter/invitation with anyone interested in literature in Nebraska.

Nebraska Literature Festival Department of English

University of Nebraska at Omaha

Omaha, Nebraska 68182-0175 – (402) 554-3312

Virginia Frank Tracey Lemke Diana Wendt Robin Bland Art Homer
Denise Brady Michael Carroll Linda Johnson Robert Runyon

Recognizing Our Roots

The 1994 Nebraska Writing and Storytelling Festival is set for Saturday, June 4, Northeast Community College in Norfolk. The theme for this year's program is intended to encourage exploration of one's own ethnic identity and appreciation of a multi-cultural society through writing and telling experiences.

Schedules will be available at a later date. There will also be a keynote speaker, book/material exhibit and an end-of-day "concert"

to showcase the best of writing and storytelling by Festival participants. In addition, participants will be able to sign up for a critique of their writing. Writers are encouraged to seek publication in the *NCB Quarterly* which devotes one edition to Festival submissions.

For further information, contact Mary Jackson, Lincoln (402-421-6078) or Karen Warner, Norfolk (402-644-0515).

Nebraska Writers Guild Spring Meeting

April 23, 1994 — Seward Concordia College

For information contact Linda Dageforde, 941 'O' Street, Lincoln, NE 68508 – (402) 475-1123.



Award Winning Poet at Love Library

Who Philip Levine Is

The Nebraska Humanities Council brought Philip Levine to Nebraska on January 13 through January 16 for a series of presentations called "The Writing Life," a program funded by the National Book Foundation and the Lila Wallace Reader's Digest Fund. As Editor for the Council, and a big fan of Levine's writing, I jumped at the chance to drive him to and from some of his engagements in the state.

My first impression of Levine was shaped by two comments he made when I drove him to lunch with Hilda Raz of the *Prairie Schooner* and about ten guests. The first was his most personally significant comment to me. I told him that I loved the title poem of his book, *What Work Is*, that I felt it expressed an essential human truth. "It is a poem about how the real work in our lives is not just punching a clock and getting a paycheck, but getting along with people. I showed that poem to my brother-in-law, who was 'out of work' at the time, and I thought he really needed to hear this truth. But he didn't get it at all, and I thought, how could he not get it? It is right here in black and white." And Levine said, "He did not get the poem because he still needs to learn the lesson behind it." I was flattered when, at the end of his visit, he autographed by copy, "For Jim, who knows *What Work Is*. With thanks, Philip Levine."

The second comment came after I previewed the day's itinerary, and said that he had an interview at 2:30, which I would take him to after lunch. Then I said, "lunch may not last that long, but you never know," and he

Jim Cihlar

laughed and repeated, "You never know." Lunch did last that long, with him telling funny stories and the guests switching chairs so each could get a chance to hear him. Although he complained toward the end of his four-day stay that we had overscheduled him, I think he enjoyed it all, the being "on," all the publicity, interviews, press coverage, and the opportunity to hold forth before an interested and even adoring audience. My final impression is of a man with great talent, great humor, and great honesty. He was approachable and accessible, with an edge that prevented him from being taken advantage of.

In keeping with a program sponsored in part by the Nebraska Center for the Book, and a program that began last year with Reading Circles meeting across the state to read and discuss books, the main lesson I learned from Philip Levine's visit was the need our culture, our society has for not only talented writers, but also for talented readers. Not just educated or even voracious readers, but *talented* readers.

We began that discussion at the lunch with the English Department on Friday. Levine said he believes some poets write long sequence poems in order to avoid the terror of waiting, of having to come up with a new poem. In the process, some bad — even if critically acclaimed — poems get written. "How many poem sequences are readable? Has anyone

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read and liked all of Ezra Pound's Cantos?" I agreed with him. Judith Minty asked, "What about 'Patterson' by William Carlos Williams?"

"Yes, that is the exception," he answered. "A truly great poem. But most of the time, a lot of bad sequence poems get written because of the author's terror of waiting, of finishing a poem and not knowing if another will come. But you just have to wait, it will come."

Ok. Lunch was over. We headed down to Nebraska Hall for his interview with Mary Jane Bruce. I asked the question, "Yeah, sure, you can wait if you are a Philip Levine or a John Berryman, but what about the rest of us?"

"I know what you are saying. For thirty years I taught at a third rate school. But even there, the students who signed up for my classes had an interest, a commitment. They wouldn't be there if they didn't — or they wouldn't last."

"What about as a teacher, what do you say to your students? If you have somebody who is really good, do you take them aside and tell them?"

"Yes, I do." This was not the answer I expected, since nobody ever took me aside and told me one way or the other. "I've had two really great students that I took aside."

"What did you say?"

"I took one guy aside and talked to him about a group of poems he'd shown to the class, and then I said, 'You know, you have a hell of a talent.' The other student, she was from Sweden, and she was modest about her writing. She didn't think she was any good, never submitted any of her writing for publi-

cation, etc. I talked to her, and then I sent six of her poems out to good literary journals, like *Ploughshares* and *Harpers*, and all of her poems got accepted."

"That's great," I said. "She had the talent to write those poems, and the editors at *Ploughshares* and *Harpers* had the talent to recognize they were good. But what about the people who are talented and who don't get recognized? Is that their failing, or ours, as a culture?"

"I know what you are talking about. I myself wasn't 'successful' as a poet until my mid-thirties. So, what, I turn 35 and all of a sudden I'm good? But for me it was a blessing, because I was able to develop my *life* before I had to develop my *career*."

I think Levine's best answer to this dilemma is in the first essay in *The Bread of Time*, where he discussed the camaraderie he and other students felt in John Berryman's class at the Iowa Writers Workshop. "We were learning how much farther we could go together than we could go singly, alone, unknown, unread in an America that had never much cared for poetry" (26). This points out that we need to do more to create an America that does read and care for poetry. One way to do it is through classes, through groups, through Reading Circles, even. Just as the Writers Workshops and Creative Writing classes throughout the country function to help writers develop their talent, so perhaps the function of Book Clubs and Reading Circles could and should be to help *readers* develop their talent.

That was a word Levine used often during his visit. Talent. He is a man who worked hard to raise himself out of a working class

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background, and is proud of the “success” he has made of his life, even by conventional, monetary standards, but also by artistic, literary standards—but ultimately, what got him where he is today is not work but talent.

At his interview with Mary Jane Bruce, he mentioned that readers occasionally send him their poems. He kind of groaned about it, and said that it could turn into “a burden, a chore” to read them, and yet he said that he has helped the good ones get published. That’s kind of a lot for a published poet to do for his readers.

Back to our discussion in the car. I asked him if he thought everyone had the potential, the ability to write. I’m a former composition teacher, and a big fan of Natalie Goldberg’s books, *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*, *Wild Mind*, and *Long Quiet Highway*. Her big line is “just do it,” which she came up with before Nike did. I guess I had always cherished the belief that we all have the writing gene, and just some of us chose to develop it. As a teacher, I really had to convince myself: we all can write; some of us start a little ahead of the others, but if you are willing to put in the effort and time, you can get there. So his answer surprised me a little.

“No, not everyone can be a writer. You know as well as I that facility with language is a gift. It is a talent, like every other talent. Not everyone can be a high-jumper—they don’t have the muscles, the body, the discipline, the aptitude. The same is true of writing.”

We found our way to the University Relations office for his interview with Mary Jane Bruce. That interview ended up on the radio program, “University Edition,” which is broadcast on 19 stations throughout the

state, and in the January 21 issue of the weekly paper for University employees, “The Scarlet.” It is a great interview. One thing about Philip Levine — when it is his turn to take the mike, he is ready. He held up his end of the bargain during his whole stay in Nebraska — when he was “on stage,” he was definitely “on” — he was funny, insightful, inspiring.

We talked a lot about books. About writing them, reading them, publishing them, collecting them, selling them, signing them. At the Saturday Bellevue Reading Circle events, when I talked to him about his own writing, and I made sense, I could see it on his face. At lunch, Elaine Booth said how her daughters had started saying “Forget you,” from “What Work Is.” I had to yell out, “Yes! When you were talking about ‘characters’ at the Reading Circle, I was thinking one of the ‘characters’ in the book is just the *voice*. Only a certain character would say, ‘Forget you.’ The *voice* is a character.” I looked at Philip Levine’s face across the table, and I could see I had said something true.

One simple event at the Bellevue Reading Circle sticks with me, because it is the one time I heard him say this during his whole visit. A member asked him something about his writing and he said, “That’s a very good question.” Of all the people who asked him questions during his visit—and that includes a reporter for the University Relations Office and a TV news veteran, a reporter for the *Omaha World Herald*, and myself, the Editor for the Nebraska Humanities Council—the one person he said that to was a member of a Reading Circle. That doesn’t mean he wasn’t asked good questions by other people as well, but it does say something about who Philip Levine is, as a teacher.



New Directors Elected to NCB Board

The Nebraska Center for the Book is delighted to welcome three new members to its Board of Directors. The following are short sketches which will serve as brief introductions to Frank Chipasula, Diane Kirkle and Barbara Lehn

Frank Chipasula is a Malawian poet, editor and fiction writer. He received a B.A. from the University of Zambia in 1976; an M.A. from Brown University in Creative Writing in 1980; an M.A. from Yale University in Afro-American Literature in 1982 and a Ph.D. in English Literature-Yeats from Brown University in 1987. He is currently an Associate Professor of Black Literature at the University of Nebraska-Omaha. He has also

New members of the NCB Board of Directors Barbara Lehn and Diane Kirkle. Not pictured: Frank Chipasula



taught at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, and been the English Editor for NECZAM, Ltd., the former national publishing house of Zambia in Lusaka. He also served as a freelance broadcaster in the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (M.B.C.) in Blantyre.

Diane Kirkle has studied creative writing at the University of Iowa and Creighton University. Her published medical articles, poetry, and short stories have appeared in national and regional publications. Her one-act play, *The Legacy*, will be part of a trilogy of plays produced by the Omaha Workshop Theatre, January 28 - February 6, 1994. she received third place in *Byline Magazine's* Children's Book Contest for *Rachel Serves a Stew*. Her medical thriller, *A Caduceus is for Killing*, is currently being marketed by her agent and she is working on a sequel. She was Secretary for the Board of Directors of the First Nebraska Literature Festival, past president, vice president, and secretary of the Nebraska Writers Guild, and is on the board of the romance Writers of the Heartland. By day, she is Manager of Pediatric financial Affairs at Creighton University, served as chair of the Creighton University Committee on the Status of Women and Staff Infrastructure Implementation Committee, and currently serves on the University Grievance Committee.

Barbara Lehn shares in the mission of the NCB through her responsibilities as Librarian in the Language and Literature Department.

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Celebration of Books

Now that Nebraska has wrapped up its first "Writing Life" project, this quote from one the "Creating a Character" theme authors, Norman Rush, seems appropriate in expressing our appreciation to the Nebraska Humanities council and the Lila Wallace Reader's Digest Fund for making this enlightening reading/discussion program possible.

"Several tendencies in our culture are grimly menacing to the future of the book, all books, not excluding the most narrowly technical and utilitarian. Most conspicuously, there is the persistence of illiteracy and the growth of paraliteracy. The statistics are oppressive — thirty-six million adult Americans reading at an eighth-grade level or below — and the causes track back to defects in formal education, to deterioration in educative processes within families, and to the deskilling effects flowing from the rise of competitive visual media ... with their commercially driven bias toward shallow amusement, repetition (again), interruptability, generic amiability, amnesia, and the micro-division of units of presentation.

Additionally, the forces favoring censorship are growing bolder, drawing sustenance from the old and new political and religious fundamentalisms currently asserting themselves. And then there is the sheer, brute crowding out of books by cultural substitutes whose use requires less energy and less attention. In this connection, I briefly quote from Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death*:

From Erasmus in the sixteenth century to Elizabeth Eisenstein in the twentieth, almost every scholar who has grappled with the question of what reading does to one's habits of mind has concluded that the process encourages rationality; that the sequential, propositional character of the written word fosters what Walter Ong calls the "analytical management of knowledge."

Norman Rush
From: *The Writing Life*

New Directors

continued from page 79

ment at the Omaha Public Library. She is committed to promoting cross-cultural communication via the book; and to preserving intellectual freedom via print. Barbara expects to be very active in Literature Festival preparations and welcomes this opportunity to serve.

These newly-elected members along with Thomas Boyle and Robert Runyon who were re-elected will complete the Board of directors this year. Elmer Baker of York whose contributions in talent and hard work will be sorely missed.



Life Stories

by Peggy H. Benjamin

It is rewarding to be a part of the ongoing project *Life Stories* and to work with residents of retirement homes.

When the Nebraska Center for the Book suggested expanding the project *Life Stories* to ten homes, including Riverside Lodge, Grand Island, where a storytelling group has been meeting for the past year, the idea was considered and approved.

Three of the homes responded positively, North Platte, Alliance and Albion. The personnel at the remaining six, Broken Bow, Kearney, Scottsbluff, York, Columbus and Beatrice, generally concede that the project is mentally motivating; however, there is not a firm commitment so far.

Key People To Take Charge of the Program

Harry Spohn, weather reporter at KNOP-TV, North Platte, assisted by volunteers, is willing to oversee the video-taping at the Pawnee Retirement Home. Robert Howard, retired editor of the Nebraska Cattleman, Alliance, considers the project a "great idea," and is willing to lend a hand. Hanni Wolf, Albion, published author who with her husband, the late Robert Wolf, endowed the Wolf Home, shared Bob Howard's sentiment.

How to proceed from here on?

In the beginning at Riverside Lodge, manu-

scripts were read on a one-on-one basis. Brief, explicit reviews were submitted, giving suggestions for revisions and reasons why this is necessary.

Teaching elements of short-story writing, technically, is out of the question. The main thing is to write the stories down on paper in the author's own words. Most of the memoirs, family stories and historical stories will be recorded for the first time. Some may have been previously published.

A literary critic once said that Nebraska pioneer stores are similar in context. This is true in a sense. We also have to consider that pioneers were individual people, whose stores related personalities, actions, and contributions to the growth and development of our state. This is the reason it is important to record as many stories as possible; otherwise, they will be lost.

Momentum, impatience and time, the inevitable, must be reckoned with. Taping stories is a practical solution. It was soon evident that using pens or pencils for those with arthritic hands and fingers was a painful ordeal. Those whose memories lapsed from fatigue, or lost interest, dropped out, asking, "Why am I doing this?"

We are now working toward collecting for the first published volume. Once this is done, with luck and cooperation, we hope the results will be worthwhile.

“Share the Joy of Reading” Donated Book Drive Successful in Grand Island

The third annual “Share the Joy of Reading” donated book drive successfully ended December 10, 1993, with retired teachers sorting books to give to children. The effort was coordinated in conjunction with the Lions Club Christmas Cheer Toy Drive according to Golda Bockbrader, Literacy Awareness Chairman for the Nebraska Center for the Book.

The donated book drive gives children books to call their own in addition to the toys they receive through the Christmas Cheer project.

Because of the success of the “Share the Joy of Reading” project in Grand Island, the Nebraska Center for the Book set a goal to expand this effort to additional communities. Drives in other communities were conducted in conjunction with community organizations.

Anyone wishing more information may contact Golda Bockbrader at 402-382-1748.

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136 South 14th Street
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