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Tribute to M. Jerry Weiss: Professor, Author, Inspiration

By Maria Schantz and Lois Sullivan

“I am not sure that I want to be written up at this time. I think I’m too young and haven’t done that much. I’m being very realistic,” quipped Morton “Jerry” Weiss at the initiation of this interview. However, thousands of teachers from every level of education who know Weiss’s name due to his many years working as an educator, international teacher consultant and author/editor, as well as his many contributions to the language arts field, might respectfully disagree. Today, at age 91, he continues his involvement in the world of young adult literature, sponsorship of talented authors, guest lecturer, and “player” in the world of reading and writing.

Weiss, born in April, 1928, claims that he did not enjoy high school because of the emphasis on rote learning. While he did recall a French teacher as being “pretty dynamic,” English class was a different story. He disliked that the entire class had to read the same book at the same time within the same timeframe. The reason was pragmatic: books had to be kept moving among other class sections because of limited access to copies, but the result left Weiss disenchanted with his language arts classes. At the time, “young adult books” or modern works were not valued in the classroom, just canonized literature. At the time, students were forbidden to choose then-modern authors, like Hemingway and Steinbeck, for their reports.

Weiss responded to this high school experience by dropping out of school in his senior year. He joined the United States Naval Reserve in World War II and served aboard the LST 869, remaining in the Pacific for a little more than two years. He grew up during this time, reflected Weiss in the interview.

After his Navy discharge, Weiss attended Hershey Junior College in Hershey, PA, where he found the learning environment stimulating. In spite of some difficulty with certain courses, he earned good grades. The experience of living in a rooming house owned by an elderly landlady provided opportunities to get to know some of the neighbors' children who were also attending college. They became good friends with Weiss, as would so many people that he met during his life-journey. Weiss's own personality, intelligence, and magnetism were the reasons that people listened to him – and still do -- and why he has developed so many friendships.

After this community college experience, Weiss decided to take full advantage of the GI Bill, so he applied to the University of Missouri and to University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, preferring to major in English rather than selecting Journalism as a major. Academic success came naturally to him, as did his ability to continue making friends.

In order to prepare for his life's work, Weiss incorporated education courses into his program and ultimately pursued a teaching position. He was successful on all counts. He met the "lady" he would marry at a social event at her college in Greensboro, NC. Married in 1950, they eventually settled in Helen Weiss' home state of New Jersey where the newlyweds flourished in their goals related to teaching and in developing teachers for future generations. While living there, Weiss earned his Master of Arts and Doctor of Education degrees from Teachers College, Columbia University in New York.

Before moving to New Jersey, "Dr. Jerry" taught in a rural high school in Virginia for one year, where he discovered a great deal about the differences among students, particularly those who lived in the small town and those who lived on farms. Textbooks were outdated, the school library was antiquated, and no modern authors were included in the curriculum. Weiss followed his own muse and forged his

own path, taking students to see live plays at the University of North Carolina and recommending modern adult books to some of them. Of course, these books included slang, curse words, and even hints of sex. Although some of the students got hooked on reading and writing, Weiss was fired at the end of that year for using books not approved by the Board of Education.

Weiss contends that the board members did not seem to know much about these children, while the children themselves were developing their own intellects and longing to attend college. He felt that the needs of these students were far from being addressed. Weiss surfaced from the firing by enrolling in Teachers College at Columbia University, NY, and began work on his Master of Arts degree in Guidance and Counseling.

Learning new information, techniques, theories, and the solving of problems in ways never before experienced encouraged Weiss, confirming his views that listening to students, finding out what they know, and engaging in subjects that were of interest to them would make all the difference in whether or not the student was going to develop solid reading and writing skills. Students' interests led Weiss to build upon what he knew would serve as a catalyst. He noted that many of his students had been labeled, the result of scores achieved on standardized tests and in their own tepid classroom performances. While teaching at the Rhodes School in New York City for four years, the messages of his Teachers College mentors, Dr. Ruth Strang and Dr. Frances Wilson, played a part in guiding him. He followed their advice and recommendations and brought books to the students to read. For many of these students, a transformation occurred, and reading worked its way into becoming a priority. Weiss reflected upon his experience in the teaching profession in his own words:

Wherever I have gone in this country, particularly in New York, New Jersey, Ohio, Pennsylvania, I have found students, even in college, who did not place reading or writing as a high priority. I listened to them, I learned more about them, and I could make reading suggestions. I do not know if there is a single author who is the most important for all the students whom I have taught. Every year, I discover new authors. I joined professional organizations: International Reading Association and National Council of Teachers of English. I met many people with whom I became lifelong friends. I met publishers and started to hear authors and professionals who were using a wide range of materials and techniques.

I have always loved reading, meeting authors, illustrators, reviewers, and the people involved in bringing the reading experience to the readers. I consistently ponder and ask myself the questions: Where do authors get their ideas? Where do students get their ideas? It is hard work. Yes, it is hard work. I have to keep on reading! I have to keep abreast of the new and at times, mingle the past with the new. Who will inspire? What book will evoke this student response: "GEE, THAT WAS GOOD!" Any other suggestions about what I could read? And so, I reflect within myself: What have I given to these students for the rest of their lives? Is it a love of reading? Is it a step toward a literate society? For years, I was the liaison person between the National Council of Teachers of English and publishers. I helped to arrange author appearances for their conventions. I did the same for International Reading Association, and I am still trying to help New Jersey Council of Teachers of English.

We need teachers who enjoy reading and are capable of getting their own enthusiasm across to their students. A teacher is an actor, a life force. Words make impressions. Often words lead to actions. This means that critical thinking and imagination are just as important as factual recall and regurgitation. I once had to take an important test. The test involved a poem without a title. The title was left off. My task was to interpret what was the meaning of the poem. In the poem, there were these words: "red," "falling," and "dying." I interpreted the poem to be about someone being critically ill. As it turned out, the poem was about falling leaves. Was I wrong?

When I was a youngster, I could not imagine what life was like in many countries. I could not imagine what flying or driving to distant places would be like. I had no idea of what comprised a world of electronics or computers!

Early on, I appreciated reading [Edgar Allen] Poe. Over the years, I have come to enjoy so many mystery

writers. I enjoy biographies. I enjoy reading and seeing plays. Editorials infuriate me. I have learned that ads can confuse me. A book, a newspaper, a magazine, a letter—all are precious to me. I have been on ships; I have seen monsters; I have fallen in love; I have lived an adventurous life.

It is because I am not only an English teacher; I am also a person who loves what I have to do: Help others to enrich their lives from our encounters.

Weiss concluded the interview, offering a small glimpse into his education, personal life, and beliefs. He made no mention of his numerous awards or honors, perhaps because his main pride is his role as a teacher who continues to share his love of reading and writing. Today, from his home in Montclair, NJ, he continues to help others enrich their lives by lecturing and making public appearances where he presents his concepts on the world of reading and the significance of young adult literature. M. Jerry Weiss continues to be an inspiration to all of us.



Photo: M. Jerry Weiss, courtesy of Eileen Weiss

Selected Publications by M. Jerry Weiss

Books edited by M. Jerry Weiss and Helen Weiss: *The Signet Book of American Essays*; *The Signet Book of American Short Plays*; *Big City Cool: Short Stories About Urban Youth*.

Book edited by M. Jerry Weiss and Bernice E. Cullinan: *Books I Read When I Was Young: The Favorite Books of Famous People*.

Book M. Jerry Weiss authored: *An English Teacher's Reader: Grades 7-12*. He has also contributed articles to many professional journals over the span of his long career.

Maria Schantz is a Professor Emerita from Montclair State University who has been a leader in the field of reading, presenting the first Master of Arts in Reading program at Montclair State University and coordinating the MSU Reading Center for 35 years. She is active in numerous national and statewide professional organizations, serving on several Boards. The Children's Museum of Newark is one of her preferences where she sees an impact made on children and the way they learn. She has enjoyed being a visiting professor at the University of Hawaii for eight summer sessions.

Lois Sullivan is a Professor Emerita from Bergen Community College where she was a founding faculty member in 1967. Her career at BCC involved her as a member of two academic divisions, teaching in a variety of programs in Business, and later changing her career to teach Speech Communications. Throughout the 1990's, she became involved in Faculty Development, working through a FIPSE Grant with Seton Hall University. Sullivan coordinated the program Partners in Learning on 27 college campuses in the northern New Jersey.

Schantz and Sullivan are both graduates of Teachers College, Columbia University, NY.