

have enough ideas that if I never idea in my life, I could write for the next 20 years acclaimed children's Yolen

BY LEAH K. GLASHEEN

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But as fate would have it, from 1960, when she published her first book, until today, when on a good day she writes in her attic office from dawn to thor Jane Yolen has spent her life dancing on the printed page, not *en pointe* on stage. And what a glorious performance it is, as evidenced by the stacks dusk, acclaimed children's book au-

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Northampton, Mass.; and several other samples of her work.
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to her office, a more complete Jane Hatfield, Mass.
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crowded with awards, framed posters and original art by talented illustrators—Jane Dyer, Ed Young, John Schoenherr. The rafters are hung with some of her muses Yolen comes into view: the walls are purple dragons,

children's literature—the history, the people who have helped make it," says Stephen Mooser, president of the Soforce in the field is that she is one of the most knowledgeable people about herself, plus myriad books by others. "The thing that makes Jane such a

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Bulletin reporter; tomorrow she'll be at a conference. "It's an intrusion ... but it's something you have to deal with," she says. "I feel a little like the saying:
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we not only lose great stories ... but also the great literary allusions upon which Western art and culture are based," she says.

Which isn't to say her work is tradiogy or legend—because I feel if we lose touch with that part of our past, fabulous tales of dragons and angels, or limning emotionally evocative stories of real children, "I make allusions Which shouldn't be surprising: Just about everything suggests an old sayto the old stories ing, a mythological tale or a folkloric truth to Yolen. Whether she's writing -because I feel if we whether it's mythol-

Whether writing a book based on a true story, such as "Letting Swift River Go" (a lyrical tale of a young girl's reor an over-the-top tale such as "Sister Emily's Lightship" (in which poet Emily Dickinson meets an alien—and razed to form the Quabbin Reservoir), ulous and the everyday, the extraterwhich this spring won a Nebula Award for science fiction writing), Yolen membrance of Massachusetts towns restrial and the interior writes with equal vigor about the fabtional, or of a particular mold or bent.

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- "Granddad Bill's Song" (Philomel

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your librarian for recommendations or check online bookstores librarian mon love of storytelling. See Yolen's Nebula For grown-ups: See Yolen's Nebula Shart story. Sister Emi-Award-winning short story, "Sister Emi-ly's Lightship," in "Starlight 1," edited by Patrick Nielson Hayden (Tor Books, bookstores like amazon.com

Leah K. Glasheer

Yolen

continued from page 20 er-daughter collaboration

It won't be the first such collaboration: In addition to books with Jason (in May, The New York Times said of "House, House": "Life is good. And this book is good, too."), she's done

books with musician son Adam.
She's written novels and short stories for teen-agers and adults, books of poetry—even song lyrics for Adam's world-beat band, "Boiled in Lead." Her latest manuscript: a collection of folk tales featuring characters who are wise, adventurous—and older.

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With all that's going on—juggling 10 or 12 books at a time, serving as a mentor to others, penning song lyrics—how does she keep track of so many projects?

"Lots of files," she laughs. "The minute I get an idea, I write it down. In fact, when I'm driving, I have to have the radio on ... so I can focus on the lyrics and not think. It's the only way I can get from here to [nearby] Northampton and back without getting completely lost!"

to imagine her with granddaughter Maddison Jane, giggling over nonsense stories, rhymes and stories of "three"—three bears, three pigs, three There's a merry side to Yolen, sitting in her family room surrounded by pictures—of weddings, kids on swings, the author and her husband in Scotland. She's accessible and fun; it's easy

But the serious side of Yolen is commanding as well; it is most evident as she talks about the state of literature—

"I think reading—today.

"I think reading is in trouble," she says frankly. The causes, according to her: an overreliance on television and the fast pace of society, which seldom allows time for reading, which "is really a very quiet and singular and individual activity," she notes.

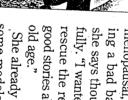
Yolen says her own love of writing grew out of an early interest in reading. "I was 8 years old when I came across a beautiful, two-volume boxed book," she says. "It was just gorgeous to touch and feel, so I started reading it. It was Thomas Mann's 'Joseph in Egypt.' "Most it went over her head, she admits. But the experience still a had value: It instilled in her a love of woods, of trying to unravel a difficult. books, of trying to unravel a difficult but rewarding tale.

Such challenges aren't offered

Such challenges aren't offered enough to today's children, she believes; instead, she says, much of children's literature is presented with "training wheels" to make topics more accessible—heavy on action, short on description, often with brief chapters (just like television, which solves all problems in half an hour and has commercials to "provide potty breaks," she says mischievously).

Yolen's concerns have done little to slow her own prolific career. And no matter the age for which she's writing—whether she's penning silly, rollicking books of rhyme for beginning readers or young adult fiction about the Holocaust—you could never accuse Yolen of using "training wheels"

with being post-menopausal, hav-ing a bad back," she says thought-fully. "I wanted to wrestling



Yolen: for all ages

grandmother, the inspiration for her book, "Miz Berlin Walks." "But she always looked like somebody's grandmother," Yolen says, whereas older maternal

people today "are up on the ski slopes ... schussing by the younger people. It's harder to tell who's 50, 60, 70 years old [today], "she smiles.

In researching "Gray Heroes," she writes, "It [took] quite a bit of searching to find the positive tales in which the elderly are treated with respect, even awe. But those stories are certainly there ..."

What the folk stories she's collected do, she says, is to evoke the world of possibilities—in this case, the possibilities of "an active, engaged and powerful old age."

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Yolen offers as an example a story not included in her book: "A woman was dying and her minister came to her and said, 'Let's talk about how you want to be buried.' She said, 'I want to be buried in my best dress, with my Bible in one hand and my fork in the

other.' "Minister says, 'Fork? Why your fork?'

"She says, 'Well, when we have all those wonderful potlucks at church we're always told to save your fork—after all, the best is yet to come.' "
On a breezy spring day in Hatfield, hand on her sore back, Yolen laughs.

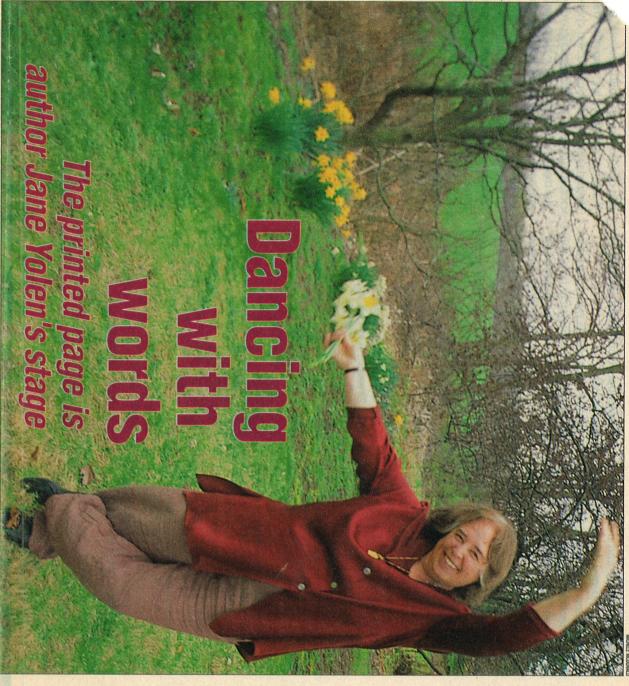
A transcript of the interview with Jane

or condescending to her readers.

"The very best books for not-quite-reading children must be written to charm and astonish the adults who read them aloud," said the New York Times in a review of Yolen's 1988 Caldecott award-winning "Owl Moon." "Owl Moon' does this better than any new children's book I have read in a long time," the reviewer added. But Yolen seldom slows down to acknowledge her successes. Sitting at her computer on this glorious spring day, she prints out her most recent effort, tentatively called "Gray Heroes: Elder Tales from Around the World."

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some models for aging with spirit and vigor, such as her She already had



"I have enough ideas that if I never got another idea in my life, I could write for the next 20 years," says acclaimed children's author Jane Yolen

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