

Dancing with Words

The printed page is
author Jane Yolen's stage

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BY LEAH K. GLASHEEN

She says she's a dancer at heart and demonstrates in her spring garden the ballet positions she's taught granddaughter Maddison Jane: "One, two, three, *pliz*..." 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 dusk, acclaimed children's book author 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

of new books crowding the kitchen table of her Victorian farmhouse in Hatfield, Mass.

"Today's mail," she says, pointing to final copies and printer's proofs she's laid out for husband David Stemple to see. It's a snapshot of a prolific career: There's "Home, Home," and "Snow, Snow," two books done with photographer son Jason; "Tea with an Old Dragon," about local legend Sophia Smith, founder of Smith College in Northampton, Mass.; and several other samples of her work.

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Which shouldn't be surprising: Just about everything suggests an old saying, a mythological tale or a folkloric truth to Yolen. Whether she's writing fabulous tales of dragons and angels, or limning emotionally evocative stories of real children, "I make allusions to the old stories—whether it's mythology or legend—because I feel if we lose touch with that part of our past, 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 traditional, or of a particular mold or bent. Whether writing a book based on a true story, such as "Letting Swift River Go" (a lyrical tale of a young girl's remembrance of Massachusetts towns razed to form the Quabbin Reservoir), or an over-the-top tale such as "Sister Emily's Lightship" (in which poet Emily Dickinson meets an alien—and which this spring won a Nebula Award for science fiction writing), Yolen writes with equal vigor about the fabulous and the everyday, the extraterrestrial and the interior.

"The joke in the family has always been that there are only three things I wasn't interested in: cookbooks, sports and hard science," she laughs.

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1994). About the range of emotions in one family the day Granddad Bill died, recorded with sensitivity and restraint.

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For grown-ups: See Yolen's Nebula Award-winning short story, "Sister Emily's Lightship," in "Starlight 1," edited by Patrick Nielsen Hayden (For Books, 1996). For readers ages 8 and up, ask your librarian for recommendations or check online bookstores like amazon.com or BarnesandNoble.com.

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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.

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!"

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 to imagine her with granddaughter Maddison Jane, giggling over nonsense stories, rhymes and stories of "three"—three bears, three pigs, three billy goats gruff.

But the serious side of Yolen is commanding as well; it is most evident as she talks about the state of literature—and 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 had value: It instilled in her a love of books, of trying to unravel a difficult but rewarding tale.

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" 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."

"I'm wrestling with being post-menopausal, having a bad back," she says thoughtfully. "I wanted to rescue the really good stories about old age."

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

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

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?'"

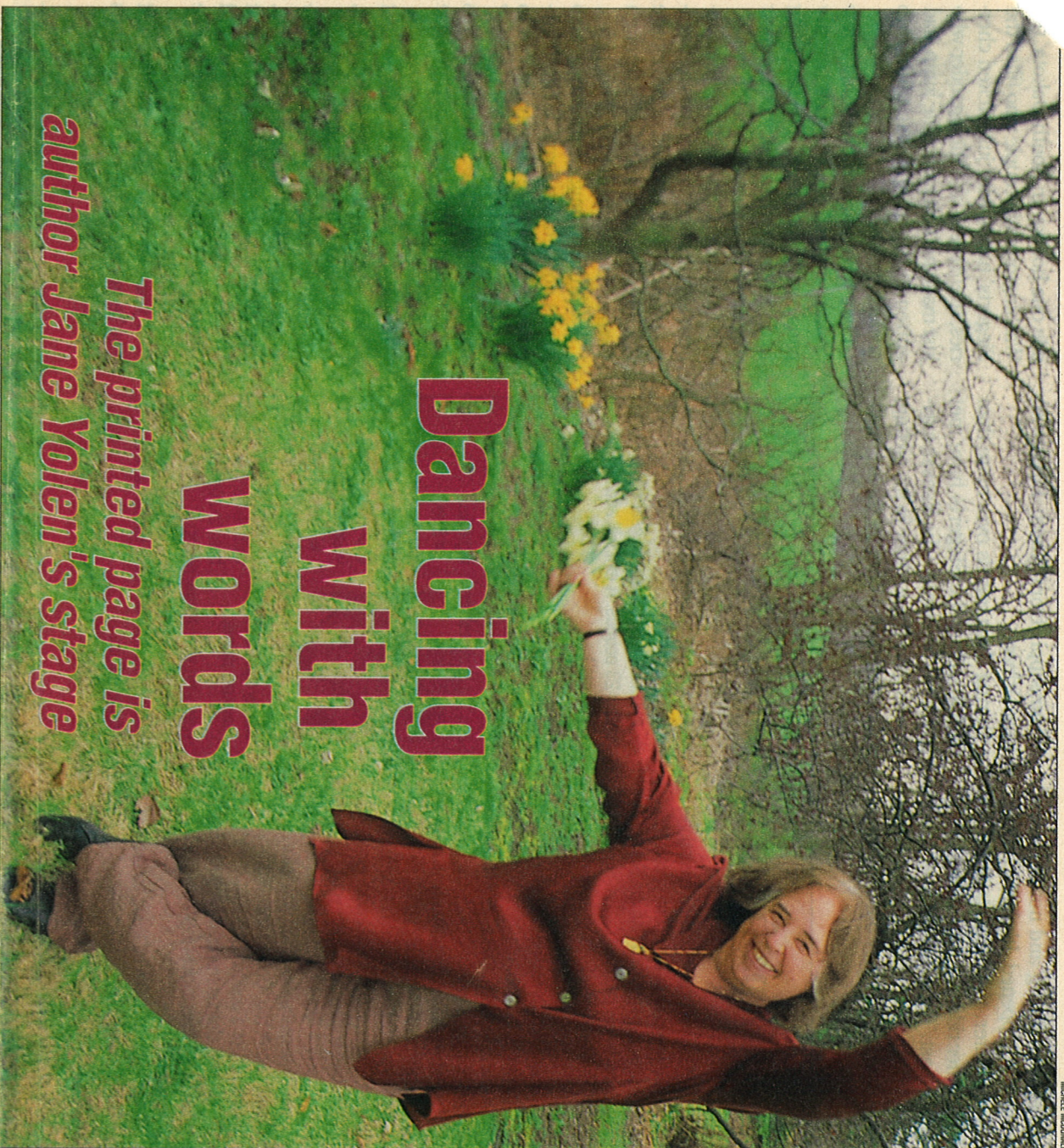
"She says, 'Well, when we have all those wonderful potlucks at church we're always told to save your fork—after all, the best is yet to come.'"

On a breezy spring day in Hatfield, hand on her sore back, Yolen laughs.

A transcript of the interview with Jane Yolen is at www.aarp.org/bulletin.



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Yolen comes into view: the walls are 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—purple dragons, handmade mermaids. The bookshelves are stacked with the more than 200 books she's written or edited herself, plus myriad books by others.

"The thing that makes Jane such a force in the field is that she is one of the most knowledgeable people about children's literature—the history, the people who have helped make it," says Stephen Mooser, president of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. "There's nobody in all of children's books that has the breadth of her knowledge."

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