
Life and Work

David McPhail

I don't know how many of you got 6:00 wake-up calls like I did. I didn't know what was going on, where I was. I didn't know it was dark at 6:00 in the morning. I used to work at night. I'd be going to bed about the time that the tradesmen would be going to work. We'd all have coffee at the local coffee shop. I'd be on my way home to bed and they'd be on their way to work. That's about the only time I saw them. I'm happy to be here. I really didn't know it was a 7:30 breakfast. When Diana told me, I said, "No wonder Donne Forest at Dutton didn't tell me what time it was."

Donne Forest, who works at my publisher, Dutton, and helped make arrangements for me to be here said, "They want to know what you're going to talk about." I didn't know until I looked at the program last night that I was talking about my life and my work. So I'll attempt to do that.

In past years I've gone to schools. I have done five or ten, or as many as fifteen, school visits a year. It's quite an experience. It's recharging, and it's one of the few ways that I'm in touch directly with my audience. It occurred to me one day, that the only other person that saw my art, that I seemed to be working for, was the editor. I would do drawings. I would have to determine whether they were any good or not, take them to an editor, and she or he would then pass judgment. That would be the end of it. Then I'd go home and start something else. Years later, a year later, or many months later at the earliest, I'd start getting some reaction to my work. Going to schools is where I get some interesting questions. Second graders, first graders, up to about the fifth grade, these kids want to know something. You all know that. They ask! They say what they feel. I think about the fifth or the sixth grade they start either becoming wise guys, or they're too polite. They won't ask. My favorites, I guess, are the second, third, and fourth graders. They want to know things like how old I am. How tall I am. How many kids I have. Even more personal things like that. Are you still married? Are you divorced? Things

like that. But they're fun, and I do enjoy that. It is a recharging experience.

One of the things I'm often asked and have never been able to get a good answer for is, "Where do your stories come from? Where do you get your ideas? Every time I'm asked that, there's this long silence. I make some attempt to answer the question. Usually, I think, an inadequate response to that question. So, I say, when I'm leaving, I'll go home and work on that, and I'll come up with a better answer. I never do. I'm not going to wait for someone to ask me where those stories come from. I'm going to answer it before it's asked. That is from things that I remember, things that I lived or saw growing up, I don't write them down literally. I write down my version of what happened or, in a lot of cases, what I wish had happened. Either if it's happening to me something that's good or if it's happening to my brother maybe something that was bad. One of the stories that I wrote about my brother is called *Bernard Meets Jerome*. It's kind of an obscure book. The whole title is *That Grand Master Jumping Teacher Bernard Meets Jerome the Great Jumping Glump*. I insisted on having the whole title included. There was some trouble with that. It is about my brother Ben. One of the stories I'm going to tell you that may be suitable for this morning is about Ben at the library. I wrote a story called *The Comic Book Collector*. It's not in print. It's still sitting on my desk, but it tells about this boy who collects comic books. He loves comic books. This was in the days when comic books were 10 cents. That was the main form of entertainment. Even before we had television, we had comic books. Those comic books came out on the 29th of the month. My brother was right there with whatever dimes he'd collected, waiting for the man to unload at the newstand. He was probably only ten years old. I think a lot of this is me, not just Ben, because I collected comic books. We had to figure out where to get the money. It wasn't easy. One good thing was returnable bottles. We collected returnable bottles. We sometimes resorted to such things as washing pots and pans. Copper bottoms before the age of Twinkle were murder.

David McPhail made this presentation at the Children's Services Section breakfast at NCLA.

That was a last resort. One of the most lucrative sources of dimes to pay for these comic books was the library, the Newspaper and Periodicals Room at the Newburyport, Massachusetts Public Library. They had all of these old easy chairs, but stuffed chairs with removable cushions. All you had to do was lift up a cushion, and you'd find change under there. It sounds easy but, the Head Librarian, I assume she was the Head Librarian, was also in charge of the N & P Room. Her desk was on a platform. She could survey the whole room. Kids were not allowed in that room. It was difficult to get in there and ransack the cushions. We would go in the door to the Children's Room, which was near the front door. The N & P Room was at the end of the hall, so she could see the length of the hall and see who came and went. But it was a ways down. I don't think her eyesight was all that good. We'd go in and go into the Children's Room. And then when she wasn't looking, we'd go out the rear door of the Children's Room into the corridor and duck quickly into this little alcove where the bathroom was. We'd sneak into the bathroom and flush the toilet and stick the han-

dle, so it would keep running. Now, we'd sneak back into the Children's Room and get behind the door. The poor Children's Librarian was always blamed for that handle being stuck. So the Librarian in the N & P Room could not stand it any longer. It would flush and flush and flush. It was just running. She'd finally jump down off that platform and come steaming down the hall into the Children's Room to yell, to take the Children's Librarian to task. The minute she'd pass that door, we'd go around and make a dash for that first chair. We'd tip that cushion out. If there were too many people sitting there we'd say, "Mister, you dropped your pipe over there." He'd get up and look for it. We'd go through the cushions. In a good day, we'd probably get 85¢. It was worth it. We'd stay till we were chased out. But she never really put it all together that that's how it worked. That's my library story.

I do work once in awhile, contrary to what some of my editors think. I was working, not yesterday. The last day I worked was Wednesday. I have a little office I go to down in the village that I live in. I had put in a great day. I didn't want the



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day to end. As I was leaving, I locked the door and I said, "Why is it so hard to get here? Why don't I work more? I love it. I don't want to go home." There are days when I do everything but work. I put every obstacle in the way of what I'm doing, of even getting there. I have an errand to do. I have wood to chop. I have animals to feed. I have visitors. I start the day thinking I'm going to work, and every day I know I'm going to work and don't.

My editor, on Wednesday, when I was telling her what a good day I'd had said, "if I lived in New Hampshire, I'd have this great picture window. I'd have a view of the mountains and a brook and all that stuff."

I said, "Well, it sounds good."

She said, "Well, isn't that what you have?"

I said, "No ..."

She said, "What do you look out on?"

I said, "Well, I have a tiny window, if I care to look out, it looks out on a parking lot and a gas pump."

She said, "No wonder you don't like to go there. Do you have music?"

I said, "No! There's no radio. There's no coffee machine."

Well, you've got to do those things.

I said, "No, I thought that I should set something up, an office where everything was really Spartan where I would do nothing but work. Because, if I had a radio, I'd find a way to spend 20 minutes turning the dials every morning. If I had a coffee machine, I'd be doing that for another hour. If I had a window, of course, I'd be looking out. "So," I said, "I have to do it this way."

She said, "It doesn't matter. You don't go there. You might as well have a window and a coffee machine and at least get there!"

It's true. I don't work very often. When I hear stories about people working hard, in any line of work, I don't think I'm envious. I can do it if I want to. Nobody's keeping me but myself. But I admire people who can work.

I met Trina Hyman one day when I went to her farm. She said, "Come in and visit." She would work while she was visiting. She would sit there and draw. This was in the days she was doing probably eight or ten books a year. Drawing ten or twelve hours a day. An incredible capacity for work. A lovely lady.

Just one more story about working or not working. My editor when I started in this business, the editor on *The Bear's Toothache* and a number of my books, also wrote a story that I illustrated. Emily McCleod wrote *The Bear's Bicycle*. She was a lovely lady. She always knew when I came to Boston, and we were having lunch, that I would

have some complaints about how much money I didn't have, and how little she was paying me. I was going back to driving a truck. Never mind this drawing business.

Emily said, "That's a lot of money. Now tell me ..."

But, I said, "It's not enough money. I had to borrow car fare to get here."

She said, "Tell me, how much do you work to get that money?"

I said, "No, I don't work eight hours a day."

She said, "Well, six?"

I didn't say anything.

"Four?"



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I said, "Well, some days."

She said, "We're not talking about some days. We're talking about the average day. How much time do you put in? Do you work more than an hour a day?"

I said, "That's about right."

She said, "My God, you make more than my psychiatrist makes."

It's been getting better. I know when I did *The Bear's Toothache*, Emily took me to lunch on the publication date, which was one of the wonderful things about publishing in the *old* days. On the publication day, I would get a telegram saying, "Today is the publication date of your book." Around Christmas time, I'd get a leather bound volume of that book and get invited to New York or Boston for lunch. Now it's more of a business, sad to say. There's still lovely people involved. A lot of those little touches are gone. All in all, I'd rather have the money, but they're nice touches.

When *The Bear's Toothache* was published, Emily invited me to Boston and we had lunch. She said, "What are you going to do now?"

I had no plans to do another book. "Well, I'm going to retire, of course. I'm going to buy a farm. I'm going to be a gentleman farmer."

She said, "Did you inherit some money?"

I said, "No, I got a trade book published."

She said, "I know that. I'm the publisher of it, aren't I?"

I said, "What are you asking me that silly question for?"

She said, "You come back in ten or fifteen years when you have twenty, twenty-five, or thirty books done and tell me how rich you are. How you're going to retire."

I laughed and I said, "Emily, this book is going to do well. It's going to make me rich."

One of the things I'm often asked and have never been able to get a good answer for is: "Where do your stories come from? Where do you get your ideas?"

It sort of has. It's still in print. That was 1972. It still sells a couple or 3,000 copies a year. I figure each one of those twenty-five drawings has earned me several thousand dollars. But it didn't come the next day like I thought it would.

She's right. I've done twenty-five or thirty or thirty-five books. Financially, things are looking up. I wouldn't want to go back. I wouldn't want to be starting these days. I'm happy to have the freedom to do what I please. When I do a book, I have a lot of say about what size it is, and if it's going to be color or black and white. What kind of paper even, what kind of type. So I have a wonderful time working with people. Helping to design and that sort of thing. I'm probably not the best person to work with. I don't like the confinements of a page. I'm doing a book now where I don't know what size the book will be. I've got some lovely paper that I bought and I want to use as much of that paper, as much of that surface as I can. Then, I'm going to turn them over to the art director, and we'll discuss what size book it ought to be.

It's a wonderful business. It's nice to be able to do for an hour a day what you really like to do. It took me a while to reconcile that I was getting paid for art. I was prepared to go without. When it came time to choose between bread and tubes of paint, I was going to be buying tubes of paint. In children's books, there have been times when I've been lucky enough to have the opportunity to choose that. But I wanted to be a fine artist and starve. It took a while to reconcile that. Yes, you can get paid for doing something that you like. You don't have to be embarrassed by it. I still have friends whom I was in school with who don't paint, who work for insurance companies and other things. I don't think it was any great initia-



Dr. Dudley E. Flood, Associate State Superintendent, N.C. Department of Public Instruction, entertained banquet-goers with the "Magic of the Written Word."

tive on my part. It has a lot to do with circumstance. With having loving and encouraging people around me.

I want to tell you one quick story about Tristian, who's now sixteen. A difficult age for me, sixteen. Not when I was sixteen, but him being sixteen. No longer a boy. A big man-child, with a job. Going from a \$5.00 a week allowance to a \$175.00 a week carpentry job, wanting to buy a car. Well, learn to drive first. Get his car license. An electric guitar turned up loud. You don't have to be sixteen to have that I'm sure.

When he was about four, I was doing a book called *Henry Bear's Park*. It was a difficult time when I was working on that book. My family life was falling apart. My wife and I were about to be separated. It was hard doing that book. There's a lot of my feelings in that book. It's a book of line drawings. Tiny, tiny lines. Millions of little lines make up those pictures. I would work at night. I would work all night and then would go to bed about daylight. I was going to bed about 5:30. Then Tristian would be up about 6:30 or so. The ritual was that I would work on the drawings all night. Then Tristian would get up, and the first

thing he would do was go to my drawing board, which was in the corner of my bedroom. He would look at the drawing I'd done and pass judgment. It was judgment. It was critical. It was important to me. One night I did a drawing of Henry Bear playing his cello in the rain under the umbrella tree. I loved it. Every one of those lines I'd feel. Every one of those lines was important to me. I loved doing it. It's almost therapy. You draw a million little lines this way, and you change the angle and draw a million that way. It's fun.

I loved the drawing, but I wasn't sure that it looked like rain. There's Henry playing the cello, but there's just all those lines. Does it really look like rain? I hate that feeling of not knowing. I never know for sure whether it's good or bad, but I get good feelings or bad feelings. It's the in-between feelings that drive me crazy. I couldn't keep my eyes open any longer, so I did go to bed. I nodded off. The next thing I remember was Tristian shaking me. I managed to get my eyes open. He was holding the drawing of Henry Bear playing the cello. "Dad, it's beautiful. It's Henry playing the cello in the rain! Playing music in the rain!"

That made the drawing for me. He's now sixteen. I don't hear much from him about what I do.



The guy with the glasses is the governor. He joined the Davidson Jazz Ensemble for a number during the President's Dance.