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Kids' Book Fest, Nov. 8, returns to 'My Father's Dragon' for theme of adventure

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for Family Reading Partnership



Ruth Stiles Gannett, author of **My Father's Dragon**

The Family Reading Partnership's annual Kids' Book Fest began 10 years ago with a celebration of local author Ruth Stiles Gannett's "My Father's Dragon" on the occasion of the book's 50th anniversary. This year, the festival celebrates its 10th anniversary and also returns to Gannett and the book to mark its 60th.

This year's festival theme is "Adventure by Book" and it features not only Ruth Stiles Gannett (Kahn) and the "My Father's Dragon" trilogy, but other literary explorations involving dragons and adventure. The free festival will be held at Boynton Middle School on Cayuga Street from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 8. It is put on by local organizations, schools, libraries and businesses and celebrates children's books and the joy of family reading.

Gannett, of Trumansburg, wrote "My Father's Dragon" at the age of 23 in 1946, just a couple of years after she graduated from Vassar College in 1944. The enduring tale, which was published in 1948 and named a Newberry Honor Book in 1949, follows the adventures of a boy, Elmer Elevator, who assembles a list of special supplies and travels to Wild Island to rescue an enslaved baby dragon.

"My Father's Dragon" was the first of three – "Elmer and the Dragon" was published in 1950 and "The Dragons of Blueland" followed in 1951.

'The child within me' wrote the book

Gannett remains humble about the popularity of the series, which has never gone out of print and has now been published in 10 languages. She has spent decades visiting local classrooms, and an interactive Wild Island (and Gannett herself) has been a staple at many of the annual book festivals over the past 10 years. A musical version of the tale was staged several years ago – original music was composed by Eric Feinstein and performed by Music's Recreation musicians, along with an adapted story by Marie Sirakos.

In a recent interview at her home, Gannett talked about why Elmer Elevator has endured as a book character with whom children of several generations have identified.

"It's interesting to me – I was just recently at a school, and I was telling them that it was the child within me that wrote this book," Gannett said. "Because I didn't realize, it was not a [conscious] thought, that everything he has in his backpack, a child could assemble. And I think that's what's so empowering.

“I wrote it day by day, not knowing what would happen, having him get into trouble, having to find out how to get him out of trouble.”

Gannett said she didn't just randomly select the items that ended up in Elmer's backpack; the chewing gum and tangerines, the lollipops and toothpaste, all were special to her in some way.

Take the chewing gum, for example. “My mother didn't approve of chewing gum,” she recalled. “But when I walked to school, it was possible to walk through a subway station,” where there was a Chiclets vending machine. “You put in a penny and pulled down the lever, and out comes Chiclets. And sometimes people were rushing or whatever and didn't get their Chiclets, and so just once in a while, I got Chiclets. So chewing gum was sort of special.”

Similarly, she said, tangerines were special because back then, they were only available around Christmastime, as were cranberries.

“It all came out of that, my own experience, really,” she said.

How a story within a story became the story And why dragons?

To answer that question, Gannett says the original book she started was a story that contained “My Father's Dragon” within it – a story within a story.

“The dragons happened because I chopped off the first half of the book,” she said. “I started [writing] it one fall, then I went off and worked in a ski lodge, and by April, when there wasn't any snow, I had forgotten all about the story, but I didn't have a job.

So while she was looking employment, Gannett returned to her book with a fresh set of eyes. Initially, she said, the beginning of the story had two boys having a sleepover, and one boy began telling his friend that “you know, when my father was a little boy, he rescued a dragon.”

“It turned out that this man had a very dull job and what he did to make life more interesting was to tell his little boys bedtime stories,” Gannett said. “And when I looked at it, I said, ‘I don't need the beginning of this story.’” That's why the book starts right in with the story itself, though it still begins: “One cold rainy day when my father was a little boy ...”

But what about the dragons?

“I thought, if he's going to rescue something, it had to be something important, something impressive, so I said a dragon. It just crept in there,” she said. “That's what happened. So it's been serendipity from day one.”

Soon after completing the story, Gannett interviewed with a children's book editor at Random House – simply to discuss job possibilities in publishing. When the editor asked her if she did any writing herself, she told him about the story she had just written. Soon after the editor read it, Random House expressed a desire to publish it. Gannett's stepmother, Ruth Chrisman Gannett, already an established illustrator, was chosen to illustrate “My Father's Dragon” – and ended up doing the illustrations for all three books.

Achieving acclaim

An early version of the book was sent, in typed format, to a junior reviewers' group near Boston, where children of different ages read books headed for publication and gave feedback and their impressions.

“This is the work of a maddened mind,” the group’s adult representative wrote to Gannett. “But our function is to tell you what the children think, and they like it.”

Gannett has been struck by how many audiences have appreciated the books for different reasons. Kids identify with Elmer because he’s smart, she said, and many parents have liked the books because they are non violent. Teachers have taught sociology using the books, and island geography, botany, and math.

The trilogy achieved international acclaim early on and its popularity continues to increase. An anime version of the film was made a decade ago in Japan, and Gannett says a board game of sorts is also in the works.

In honor of the book’s 60th anniversary, Random House has published a 60th anniversary deluxe edition of the book and a signed, limited edition of the deluxe edition, featuring an unjacketed cloth cover, four-color illustrated end papers and an updated note from the author.

“Every week, I sort of get a pat on the back because somebody tells me some story like going into a bookstore and wanting to buy a present for their 7-year-old nephew or something and asking another child in the store, what would you suggest, and they have come up with [the book],” Gannett said. “And this sort of thing just keeps happening.”

A strong local audience

Gannett is preparing to meet fans of the book again at the festival, though still remains somewhat bewildered at the sheer number of her books that are distributed and sold, even locally.

“Particularly in Ithaca, where they distributed such a large number [of books] 10 years ago, and they have now distributed an even larger number,” Gannett mused. “Many of those children are going to come on Saturday and want their books autographed, so I expect I’m going to be very busy.”

Gannett recently visited teacher Karen Powers’ third-grade class at Northeast Elementary School. There is an ESL (English as a second language) class in Powers’ class this year, and two of her students were able to read aloud from the Japanese and Korean versions of the book Gannett brought with her to show how the book had been translated into different languages (10 so far, with several more, including Chinese and Spanish on the way).

“I didn’t know she would bring those [versions] that day,” Powers said. “But I knew those two kids would be just thrilled to see that, in their own language. They were thrilled, and they stood up and read from it.”

In what will be a much-expanded version of that spontaneous reading, and to celebrate the international editions of the book, one chapter of “My Father’s Dragon” will be read by local native speakers of nine different languages on the Boynton stage at 10:45 a.m. during the Nov. 8 book festival.

Each participant will take a turn reading a paragraph or two of the chapter “My Father Meets a Lion” in Korean, Portuguese, Hebrew, French, Danish, Italian, Swedish, Japanese and Dutch from that language’s edition of the book. Gannett will be on hand, pantomiming the action and playing Elmer as another actor plays the lion.

Other highlights of this year’s festival include: the presence of numerous local authors, including Gannett; the interactive “Wild Island” set based on “My Father’s Dragon”; school-made displays (from classes throughout the TST BOCES district) featuring dragons and adventure; book stations hosted by many community organizations, including the Big Red Story tent and the Fabric Story Globe; and entertainment by John Simon and Cal Walker. A pasta lunch will be available for sale.

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