On April 10, 2008, prominent Chicana author Amada Irma Pérez visited the SDSU campus and delivered a public lecture titled “Telling Our Stories: Transforming Our Dreams.” Her lecture is part of the Latino/a Children’s Literature Lecture Series that the Center for Latin American Studies and the National Center for the Study of Children’s Literature collaboratively launched several years ago.

Pérez is the author of several bilingual picture books for children, including *My Diary from Here to There*, *My Very Own Room*, and *Nana’s Big Surprise*. In all of her books, Pérez draws upon her personal experiences to depict, among other things, the “realities of immigration and the strength of [Mexican-American] families.” In *My Diary from Here to There*, which was...
I am a professor here now. But I was also a student at SDSU, and an English major, in the late 1970s when Peter Neumeyer offered the first class in children’s literature in the English Dept. I was there. I remember the excitement of those classes—the love of the literature, of course—but excitement mostly at what we were learning from Dr. Neumeyer: about John Locke’s influence on childhood education, Hans Christian Andersen’s attributes as a Romantic writer, Russell Hoban’s beautiful prose, E.B. White’s punctuation—so much.

More than that; we were lucky to be Peter’s students over the next many years because he himself was creating, translating, writing about, reviewing, and teaching Children’s Literature—mind you, he still does most of those things, and paints as well. Many people here were here then, like Ramon Ross, Helen Neumeyer; George Mehaffy was another, and Harold and Sandra Darling who had the magnificent Green Tiger Press right up College Blvd. The discussion/shared interest group they formed has morphed into SDSU’s Center for the Study of Children’s Literature. Class offerings in Children’s Literature have expanded since Peter’s first class; we even have a graduate level specialization now. Several of our children’s literature graduate students are here with us today. Best of all, faculty numbers have expanded; there are now five of us specialists in children’s literature. Two others, Carole Scott and Jerry Griswold, are abroad lecturing about Children’s Literature, but they send Peter their warm regards.

continued on p.3

On Saturday night, faculty members met at Prado Restaurant in Balboa Park. Certain forces, including the increasingly inclement weather, cooperated in such a way that the group got its own, private banquet room, situated at the top of a dark tower apart from the main restaurant. The atmosphere was gothic, the food great, the crowd convivial, and a good time was had by all.

Bright and early Sunday morning, in full daylight, conference participants met on campus again and continued the research workshop of the previous day. Then the SoCal group had its first official meeting. Everyone agreed that the conference worked well and that we should have more conferences in the near future. Jackie Stallcup from CSUN and Joe Sanders and Lisa Bartle from CSUSB expressed interest in having future conferences on their campuses.

The final event was held at the San Diego Brewing Company on Sunday afternoon. People shared lunch in a festive pre-St. Patrick’s Day mood, and graduate student Naomi Lesley serenaded everyone on her fiddle, playing Irish melodies germane to the upcoming holiday.

All in all, the first SoCal Children’s Literature Mini-Con was a success. It seems a tradition has been born, and we’ll get together many times more with our children’s literature friends across the Southern California region.
San Diego State University

THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF CHILDREN’S LITERATURE

SDSU Children’s Literature Specialists Make Contributions Across the Globe

International Connections — by Carole Scott

During the past year, Carole Scott participated in two international conferences. May 2007 marked the centennial of the birth of Sweden’s Astrid Lindgren, famous author of the Pippi Longstocking books and creator of the million-dollar ALMA award, the equivalent of the Nobel Prize in Children’s Literature. Svenska Barnboksinstitutet (the Swedish Institute for Children’s Books) held an Astrid Lindgren Centennial Conference in Stockholm, in association with the award ceremony where Crown Princess Victoria made the presentation to Venezuela’s Banco del Libro. The international conference featured a number of academic papers as well as an appearance by Banco del Libro’s key personnel who discussed their impact on literacy in their country over the past forty years. Scott presented “Harnessing the Monstrous; The dark side of Astrid Lindgren” (later selected for publication in Barnboken: Journal of Children’s Literature Research, Nov. 2007). She also chaired a panel on multi-media elements and impacts of Lindgren’s work, and made a presentation at the closing session.

In September the University of Barcelona sponsored New Impulses in Picture Book Research, a bilingual (English/Spanish) conference with simultaneous translation. Participants from Europe and North and South America made presentations from a variety of theoretical approaches, and there was considerable discussion between participants and attendees, many of whom were graduate students from European Union countries. Carole Scott presented “Frame-making and Frame-breaking” with particular emphasis on architectural elements in picture book construction. This turned out to be an apt choice in a city where Gaudi’s spectacular architecture delights the eye and the imagination.

Professor Scott has also held a position as Senior Scholar in the Nordic Children’s Literature Network where she taught Scandinavian Ph.D. students. One student affiliated with this network recently paid a visit to SDSU. Line Beck Rasmussen, a doctoral student from the Centre for Children’s Literature at University of Aarhus, Denmark, visited San Diego from February 12 to March 12. Writing a thesis on contemporary Danish poetry for children, Line worked closely with SDSU’s resident expert in children’s poetry, Joseph Thomas.

Children’s Literature Association of India — by Alida Allison

In 2005/06, the National Center for the Study of Children’s Literature at SDSU had the pleasure of hosting Fulbright scholar Anto Thomas Chakramakkil from Kerala in Southern India where he researched his dissertation topic. Alida Allison (an Indophile) and Anto became fast friends. Within a year of his return to India, Anto had 1) established the new Children’s Literature Association of India (CLAI), 2) organized its first international conference with Dr. Allison as the Keynote Speaker in March 2008, and 3) published the first edition of CLAI’s new scholarly journal, The Journal of Children’s Literature. Anto also, by the way, completed his PhD dissertation and became Dr. Chakramakkil all within this astonishingly brief period.

The link between Indian children’s literature scholars and those from others parts of the world is growing; the International Research Society for the Study of Children’s Literature is holding its semi-annual board meeting in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India. This will be followed the next day by the third international Children’s Literature Association conference hosted by CLAI. Dr. Allison will once again be the Keynote Speaker.

At the conclusion of the March 2008 conference, Dr. Allison was named “the Mother and Soul of Children’s Literature in India.” She says it was more than worth the entire trip just for the title.

Peter Neumeyer Honored by Mortar Board

When Peter and Helen still lived in La Mesa, their home was like the dollhouse in The Mouse and His Child, a gathering place where good food and good conversation never flagged. I feel now as I felt then: that Peter is the most cultured person I know. His personal resume spans his picture books illustrated by Edward Gorey (BTW, our library has a magnificent Special Collection holding of these), essays about John Clare the English poet and Tove Jansson, the 20th century Finnish children’s author of The Moomintrolls. I still give my students Peter’s essay on Randall Jarrell’s The Bat Poet. Then, of course, there’s Peter’s internationally-known The Annotated Charlotte’s Web. And so, you know how I must end this brief tribute; it’s with a twist on the last two lines of White’s novel: “It’s rare in life that you come across someone who is both a true friend and a good writer.” Peter is both.

continued from p. 2
In the Spotlight: Myra Cohn Livingston
—by Joseph T. Thomas, Jr.

“In the Spotlight” is a new, regular feature of Children’s Literature Circle. Each issue, our faculty will choose a children’s writer of note and prepare a brief appreciation of his or her life and work. New assistant professor Joseph Thomas has prepared our first installment, training the spotlight on poet Myra Cohn Livingston.

A renowned writer of children’s poetry, Myra Cohn Livingston (1926-1996) is also a respected reviewer, teacher, critic, anthologist, and child advocate. Daughter of Mayer Louis and Gertrude (Marks) Cohn, Livingston was born August 17, 1926, in Omaha, Nebraska, where she lived for most of her childhood, which she characterizes as a happy one informed by her love of books and musical performance. However, the Great Depression took its toll on the family, forcing them westward. They settled in southern California, where Livingston began playing the French horn in the junior high school orchestra. Livingston attributes the musicality of her poetry to her work in the orchestra, which continued professionally until 1948.

After high school, Livingston moved to Bronxville, New York, where she attended Sarah Lawrence College. At the urging of her freshman composition instructor, Livingston submitted seven poems to Story Parade, a reputable children’s magazine. The editors accepted three of the submissions, a success that—coupled with the absence of a college orchestra—motivated Livingston to abandon professional music and dedicate her life to writing.

Though Livingston was 18 when she finished her first book, Whispers, and Other Poems, it was not published until 1958, when she won a New York Herald Tribune Children’s Spring Book Festival Honor award, the first of her many awards and recognitions. In the interim, she graduated from college, moved to California, and, in 1952, settled in Dallas, Texas with her husband, Richard Roland Livingston. Myra was struck by Dallas’s profound racial inequality and extreme political conservatism, and, soon after the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, moved back to California with her husband and three children, Josh, Jonas, and Jennie. The political and racial tensions she experienced in Dallas inspired No Way Knowing: Dallas Poems (1980), a collection composed in a Black English dialect. It remains one of her most critically acclaimed and emotionally resonant pieces.

Livingston’s early work, including Whispers (1958), Wide Awake, and Other Poems (1959), I’m Hiding (1961), See What I Found (1962), I’m Not Me (1963), and Happy Birthday (1964), is characterized by—and often criticized for—an unrelenting optimism coupled with a concentration on quotidian and perhaps over-familiar details of childhood. In her later work Livingston begins to problematize her own idyllic assumptions about childhood, treating issues like child poverty, death, and divorce. Her later work emblematizes her career as a poet, and has been most favorably received by reviewers, parents, and children. The Way Things Are, and Other Poems (1974) garnered her the Society of Children’s Book Writers’ Golden Kite Honor Award, and in 1980 the National Council of Teachers of English presented Livingston with their prestigious award for excellence in poetry.


Remaining active as a teacher, scholar, and poet, Livingston was a senior instructor in the Writers Extension Program at the University of California at Los Angeles from 1973 until her death from cancer on Friday, August 23, 1996. She is still missed.

not knowing any English and not knowing anyone else in the class. School for him was an intimidating, disorienting, and daunting experience far removed from the comforts of home. His teacher, however, eventually helped him to discover a singing voice that he never knew he had. Upon impressing his teacher and himself with his rendition of “Three Blind Mice,” he enjoyed the pride of having a “beauuuuutiful” voice. Notably, the pleasure that he took in his newfound ability to express himself would lead to the exploration of other modes of self-expression, including poetry, acting, and music.

With his early school experiences in mind, Herrera urged the prospective teachers in attendance to be sensitive to the needs of their students and to be aware of their capacity as teachers to change students’ lives. He advised them that every teacher has the potential to be a “voice instructor” who can help a student find and develop a voice with which to express him/herself. Vanessa Chalmers, a children’s literature graduate student, remarked in response to Herrera’s exhortation, “The idea that ‘every teacher is a voice instructor’ made me realize the importance of a teacher’s role in a child’s academic and life experience. As a future educator myself, I hope to apply Herrera’s ideas of bringing a child’s voice forward rather than suppressing it.”

As Herrera continued to talk about his life and family, audiences caught glimpses of the inspirations for verse novels such as *Downtown Boy* and *Cinnamon Girl: Letters Found Inside a Cereal Box*. Given the fact that immigration has been a hotly contested subject the past few years, Herrera said, he concocted his more pointedly political picture book *Super Cilantro Girl*.

In all, attendees found Herrera’s talk an animated, insightful, inspired, and inspiring performance.

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**Campus Visit: Author Amada Irma Pérez**

named a Pura Belpre Honor Book, Pérez relates (in an intimate, diary-style narrative) the anxiety that she endured as a young girl when her family decided to leave Juárez, Mexico, for the United States. Elaborating on the broad appeal and relevance of this book, one reviewer suggests, “Any child who has moved away from a familiar neighborhood or a best friend will identify with Amada, but her story will especially resonate with immigrant kids.” With *My Very Own Room*, Pérez depicts the universal importance to a child of having a place for herself where she can read, write, think, and generally be herself.

Given Pérez’s commitment to encouraging literacy and multicultural understanding, it is not surprising that during her two-day visit to San Diego, besides delivering her public lecture, the author conducted a workshop on the SDSU campus with a group of teachers from local schools to discuss strategies for prompting students to write, and she visited a fourth grade class at Chula Vista Learning Community Charter School to read from her books and field students’ questions.
Last August, before the fires, before “Barack Obama” became household words, and before the economy began its nosedive, Joseph T. Thomas, Jr. began his new position as Assistant Professor in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at San Diego State University. Arriving with specialties in Children’s Literature and poetry (both children’s and adult), Thomas quickly became a full-fledged member of the Children’s Literature program, teaching old standards like English 306A (Children’s Literature) and developing new courses in his specialty areas. He’s been flying high ever since.

Joseph Thomas and Katie E. Strode enjoy a fine meal at Marah Gubar’s reception dinner

Thomas came to SDSU after teaching for four years at California State University, Northridge. Before that, he was living in Normal, IL, attending Illinois State University, the institution that granted him his doctorate in English Studies. Thomas remembers his doctoral program with pride, explaining that “it foregrounded the productive tensions that inform the discipline of English, so we studied linguistics, composition, rhetoric, pedagogy, literature, and theory of all stripes.” But even before Thomas went to ISU, he was already polymorphously engaged in a multitude of activities and interests, a reflection not only of the many, often international moves his family made as a result of his father’s military service, but also of his questioning intellect and many talents.

Before he began to study Children’s Literature, Thomas was an aspiring musician. His interest in music began in Germany, where he lived for many years. But it was in high school—two years in Fort Lee, Virginia and two in Savannah, Georgia—that he formed his first rock’n’roll band. With a C- average, which he calls a “gift” given to him by the kindness of teachers, he wasn’t interested in college and wanted to move to Los Angeles to pursue a career in music. His parents, however, had other plans and convinced him to attend Georgia Southern University. Thomas began college studying music composition and theory, but “my inability to sight-sing and my love of a particularly good philosophy class led me to change majors,” he said. “As there was no philosophy major at Georgia Southern, I chose the next best thing: English (I still love philosophy—or ‘theory’ as we sometimes call it in our discipline), with minors in philosophy and music.”

This set of choices led Thomas to take a course given by Richard Flynn, who quickly became his favorite professor. Thomas explained, “Never condescending, Flynn showed (and shows) his students that there is a broader discussion going on; he cited sources (instead of giving the impression that all his ideas sprang, armor-clad, from his head). He demonstrated the dialectical nature of the scholarly enterprise. His areas just happened to be Children’s Literature and contemporary poetry.” Through Flynn, Thomas’s interests expanded in these directions.

To this day, the variety of Thomas’s interests is apparent when he lists the kinds of classes and topics he’d love to teach at SDSU, which range from courses within Children’s Literature studies about “the alphabet as a formal constraint in picture books, avant-garde poetry and prose; taboo subjects; children’s poetry; and comic books” to courses within and beyond children’s literature such as “contemporary theory, queer theory, the avant-garde, 20th century and contemporary poetry, image-text, research methods, Situationist theory, Dada, ‘creative’ writing (poetry writing and hybrid forms), language poetry, nonsense, contemporary U.S. literature, cultural studies, literature and film, and childhood studies.”

And, not surprisingly, Thomas’s first two books are in divergent, although related, subject areas. Poetry’s Playground: The Culture of Contemporary Children’s Poetry (Wayne State UP, 2007) is a scholarly treatment of the poems written for and by children while Strong Measures (Make Now P, 2007) is a monograph of Thomas’s own poems. Poetry’s Playground has been nominated for the 2007 John G. Cawelti Award in Popular and American Culture.

True to his nature, Thomas is excited by the multiplicity of interests he sees in the Children’s Literature faculty at SDSU. “I love the faculty. From what I know (and have read), it’s an intellectually diverse group, and that kind of diversity can’t help but inspire good work. I’m also glad to be at an institution that has a long tradition of supporting work in children’s literature. Working with graduate students who are specializing in the subject will also be wonderful. And I’ve really been enjoying working with the undergraduates in my classes this year.”

His new colleagues, for their part, are very happy Thomas has joined them. Jerry Griswold, for instance, notes that Joseph is “both poet and critic,” one “as forward-looking as Eryka Badu and as retro as Randall Jarrell. It’s an honor that he joined us.” Likewise, department chair William Nericcio observes, “Joseph Thomas follows in a long tradition of multi-faceted Professors in the Department of English and Comparative Literature—as versed in Children’s Literature as he is in avant-garde poetry, as adept in experimental aesthetics as he is as a musician, Dr. Thomas’s talents will help to transform us into the 21st-century.” Students this semester report that they love Thomas’s classes. It has been less than a year, but it’s evident that Thomas and San Diego State University are a perfect fit.
Faculty and Student Accomplishments
—Prepared by Joseph T. Thomas, Jr.

Faculty

This year saw the publication of two essays by Alida Allison: “Fantasy and Fantasizing: An Interdisciplinary Look at What Children’s Minds Are up to” and “Centrifugal and Centripetal: Basic Patterns in American Young Adult Literature” both in The Children’s Literature Journal of India. Allison also presented two papers: at the 2007 MLA she presented “Fantasy and Fantasizing: An Interdisciplinary Look at What Children’s Minds Aren’t up to,” and at the first international Children’s Literature Association conference of India Allison gave the keynote address. Finally, she, alongside faculty and graduate students, helped write the one hundred new Spring Semester, 2008 children’s book reviews, which can be found at http://childlit.sdsu.edu/.

This year, June Cummins saw her chapter “Hermione in the Bathroom: The Gothic, Menarche, and Female Development in the Harry Potter Series” published in The Gothic in Children’s Literature: Haunting the Borders (Routledge 2008), edited by Karen Coats, Anna Jackson, and Rod McGillis. She was also invited to speak at the Mandelbaum Family Lecture Series, where she gave her lecture, “Sydney Taylor: All-of-a-Kind Family and the Jewish-American Dream.” At the 2007 Children’s Literature Association Conference in Newport News, VA, June presented “You are SO Not Sure of Your Jewish Identity: Contemporary Jewish Girls’ Fiction and the Rise of the Kvetchfessional.” Appropriately, June has a lot going on in June, when she will be presenting two papers, one in Cleveland—“From All-of-a-Kind Family to the Kvetchfessional: Depictions of Girls in Jewish Children’s Literature,” at the Association of Jewish Libraries Conference—and one in, of all places, Normal, IL: “A Pedagogy Is Born: Teaching American Born Chinese for the First Time,” at the Children’s Literature Association Conference. Finally, since August of 2007, June has been the discussion leader for the Let’s Talk About It: Jewish Literature series sponsored by the American Library Association and the Nextbook organization. She gave lectures and led discussions on five books written by either American or Israeli Jews at the Poway Public Library, and she’s currently in the middle of leading a second series being held at the Encinitas Public Library.

January of 2007 found Jerry Griswold among the stars at the Palm Springs International Film Festival and then among the aerial in Manhattan as he covered children’s films and then the Broadway play “Mary Poppins” as a columnist for the magazine Parents’ Choice. In the Spring he could be heard on the radio touting his new book (Feeling Like a Kid: Childhood and Children’s Literature) and lecturing on Fantasylands in Puebla, Mexico. Come August he landed at an awards ceremony in Berkeley (because his previous book, The Meanings of “Beauty and the Beast,” had been nominated for a prize by the Mythopoeic Society), but he was airborne again in September when he traveled to Japan and where he spent October giving lectures at seven universities. In November and December he was back in San Diego, recuperating, writing for the New York Times Book Review, and readying for his return to the classroom in January 2008. This Spring he can be found in Boston and in June in New Zealand. Keep up with him at his website: www.rohan.sdsu.edu/~jgriswool.

In addition to completing two essays, “Conflicting Inclinations: Contemporary Chicano/a Picture Books for Children” and “Semper Vigilance: Critical Breakdowns in Culture Clash’s ‘Revolutionary’ Comedy,” in January 2008 Phillip Serrato participated in a forum on the current state of Latino males. For this event, sponsored by New York University’s Metropolitan Center for Urban Education and the Ford Foundation, scholars from diverse disciplines (whose area of research covers Latino men) were invited to share their research and brainstorm ideas for future research and policy intervention.

Acknowledging Carole Scott’s expertise in the area of fantasy, KPBS public radio Morning Edition recently interviewed Scott for her insights on the work of Philip Pullman. Even the public intellectual, Scott additionally gave a community service presentation about Beatrice Potter evocatively titled, “The Lowdown on Peter Rabbit.” Her researches have also led to an new publication, a chapter called, “Ecological dress: art and pedagogy in the work of C.M. Barker,” featured in Kuhn and Carlson’s Styling Texts: Dress and Fashion in Literature (Cambria P, 2007).

Joseph T. Thomas, Jr. has had a productive first year at SDSU. His book Poetry’s Playground: The Culture of Contemporary American Children’s Poetry was published by Wayne State University; and the Los Angeles based Make Now Press has published his first volume of poetry, Strong Measures. His essay “Messages in a Bottle: The 2007 Lion and the Unicorn Award for Excellence in North American Poetry” (co-authored with Richard Flynn & Angela Sorby) was published In the fall issue of The Lion and the Unicorn: A Critical Journal of Children’s Literature, and his review of Aesthetic Approaches to Children’s Literature: An Introduction, by Maria Nikolajeva, was published in the special comics issue of the online journal ImageText. Thomas also read from his poetry at Beyond Baroque on April 12, and co-presented with Katie E. Strode a paper on Japanese Kawaii culture at the 2007 MLA conference in Chicago.

Graduate Students

Graduate students specializing in Children’s Literature presented at several recent events. Ellen Nef and Marie Soriano gave presentations at the SDSU Student Research Symposium. Marie Soriano spoke on “The Transformation of Witches in Children’s and Young Adult Literature,” and Ellen Nef presented “The Transformation of the Fairy Tale Genre: A Postmodern Analysis.” Emily Moore and Marie Soriano shared their latest research at the SoCal Children’s Literature Mini-Conference. SDSU graduate students attending the event included Amy Corral, Kira Hall, Ellen Malven, Marianne Paluso, and Katia Ravins. Among the other attendees, including SDSU alumni, independent scholars, and graduate students from other southern California universities, were Chandra Howard, JoAnn Jonas, Kimberly Kennelly, Amanda Schrader, Denise Schiller and Katie Strode.

Several students will be presenting at upcoming conferences as well. SarahEllen Hickle will discuss “ReVisions of a Fairytaile: ‘Hansel and Gretel’ in Picturebooks” at the American Comparative Literature Association’s conference in April. Emily Moore will be presenting various aspects of her research on literary depictions of artificially-created beings becoming human (i.e., Pinocchio, androids) at the Children’s Literature Association conference in June and at the Pacific Ancient and Modern Language Association conference in November.
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