

>> This is Matt Raymond at the Library of Congress. For the past nine years, booklovers of all ages have gathered in Washington D.C. to celebrate reading at the Library of Congress National Book Festival. This year, the library is proud to commemorate a decade of words and wonder at the 10th Annual National Book Festival on September 25, 2010. President and Mrs. Obama are honorary chairs of the event, which provides D.C. locals and visitors from across the country and around the world the opportunity to see and meet their favorite authors, illustrators, poets and characters. The festival, which is free and open to the public, will be held between 3rd and 7th Streets on the National Mall between 10 a.m. and 5:30 p.m., rain or shine. I am thrilled now to welcome Judith Viorst. She's an author-winning journalist, poet and author of the bestselling children's books and adult books as well. Her book, *Alexander's Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*, has been a favorite for generations of kids and continues to be read and enjoyed widely. Her latest children's book, *Lulu and the Brontosaurus*, takes readers along on a young girl's wild adventure to find what she thinks will be the perfect pet. Judith, it's a pleasure to speak with you. We're honored to have you here with us today.

>> Delighted to be here, Matt.

>> Let's go back in time a little bit. *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* was published in 1972. It sold over 200 million copies, if I've got that --

>> No, that sounds wonderful. How about 4 million.

>> Four million?

>> Yeah. Maybe we'll get to 200 million one of these days.

>> Heaven willing. Well, I think it's accurate to say that kids today love a book as much as the first readers of the book did nearly four decades ago. Why do you think it's had such staying power?

>> Well, I get letters from kids which tell me why it has such staying power: because it's a mirroring of their own experiences. They have all had rotten days. They all have thoughts about how to deal with these rotten days. I get hundreds of letters giving *Alexander* advice. Like, when you have a bad day, blame your brother or punch a pillow, and then very poignant letters from kids that say you had one bad day. All my days are bad. It's a big identification factor here. And I also think, I feel very strongly about this, that the kids like this book because there are no angels or sweetie-pies in this book.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> Everybody's a little bit of a pain in the backside. They pick on their brothers or, if you're *Alexander*, you can be a big grump. And I think they say hey, that's me, too.

>> Either from those letters that you receive or from your own personal experience, how do you think kids have changed since you originally wrote the book?

>> Well, I think that there has certainly been exposed to a ton more television and computer games and maybe are a bit more impatient to be entertained fast. One of the changes in children's books as a result of kids being exposed to TV is that I don't think you can do a picture book anymore that's in black and white. Kids want colors and I get letters from kids saying why are the Alexander pictures not in colors and I always say, the better to use your imagination, my dear. Though, my Lulu book, which is for a slightly older audience is not in color, and I love it not in color.

>> Let's talk about that book a little bit. It's a book about Lulu's quest to make a dinosaur her pet, basically. How did you come up with the idea for this story?

>> Very grandmotherly way. I was in Maine on vacation with my grandsons, Benjamin and Nathaniel, and it was a rainy, nasty, terrible day, and we had played Bingo, Hide-and-Seek, Sorry, built card houses, read a million books, done Simon Says, and it was only 10:30 in the morning and what was I going to do with them for the rest of the day? So they said make up stories and tell them to us. And I made up stories. Now, the stories you make up when you're doing it off the top of your head like that are pretty dopey stories, pretty lame stories. But I went on grinding out one after another. Then I started telling one about a very, very spoiled brat little girl named Lulu who decides she wants a brontosaurus for her birthday present. And as I was telling the story, it struck me, I like this story. I'm really getting into this story. I bet if I actually sat down and worked on it, I could make a book out of the story. And that's how it happened. The book is dedicated to the two grandsons who inspired me.

>> Well, now, on her journey she meets a lot of other animals, a tiger, a bear, a, you know, some pretty cool animals, some would say. How did you choose a brontosaurus?

>> You know, this whole -- the whole writing of this book was something of a mystery to me. It just came to me. It just came to me that there would be this really difficult girl and this kind of elegant, well-mannered brontosaurus. But there was also me in the book, the storyteller in the book saying okay, I know that a brontosaurus and a human being do not live on earth at the same time, but that's the story I'm writing and deal with it. And I do this throughout when I have the animal [Inaudible] but in my book they do. So I'm kind of a bossy narrator and as a bossy narrator, I want to put a brontosaurus in my book. So there.

>> A lot of your books have dealt with some of the troubles or issues, problems that kids have, including a bad day, as you've all ready said, or even the death of a pet. How do you decide these obstacles, the kind of obstacle that kids will face? Does this go back to even your own childhood?

>> Well, apparently, the feelings and emotions that go into the book, in my children's books, they're right out of my own childhood experiences. I mean, I don't sit here figuring out how would I feel if a best friend said he wasn't my best friend anymore or how would I feel if my pussy cat died. I know it from that kid who lives inside of me.

>> Mm-hmm.

>> But some of the issues that I deal with, I really came to out of watching my children's experiences and watching their friends' experiences. I have bad days, there's sibling rivalry, there's spirited monsters. All those things came up in my own kids' life. I had -- I wrote a book called Earrings, which came out of my interviewing a bunch of 7 to 11 year old girls about their lives for a grown-up book. Necessary Losses. I wanted to write about these girls. And I heard what wonderful lives they had, how confident they were, how free they were and that there was only one thing that was completely ruining their lives: their moms and dads wouldn't let them have pierced ears. And I said that is a book.

>> Are you intentionally or consciously trying to impart messages through your books or is it more about the experience that some will have while reading it?

>> I want it to be about the experience. You know, the idea of deliberately imparting a message, I think, can fatally lead to, you know, very didactic and preachy prose. I have an idea that there is a problem here or a sadness or an irritation or disappointment in kids' lives and I write about that and I write about what that feels like. And I don't think I very often offer magical solutions to anything.

>> I was interested to learn that you have a background in the study of psychology. Do you think that gives you sort of a leg up in getting inside the minds of some of your characters?

>> Well, I wouldn't say a leg up. More, it's like a well that I dip into, not even necessarily thinking about it. I went back to school in the 1970s and I graduated from the Washington Psychoanalytic Institute and it was a wealth of knowledge that became part of my repertoire, which I love, but which I never sort of set out to write about directly in my children's books. I did in an adult book, in Necessary Losses, but my kids' books, for a lot of my poetry, it's a well to dip into, either consciously or unconsciously. It's just there and it is delicious and useful knowledge that I'm very thrilled to have.

>> Psychological topics are important to some of the books you've actually written for adults as well. Can you talk about some of those?

>> Well, Necessary Losses was a book about the losses we experience from birth to death, loss in a very broad sense. Not just loss through death, but loss through separation from mother, loss by having siblings and not being the only special kid in the family, loss when your expectations and the realities of marriage do not match, and the losses as we age and change. The book was written because when I came out of the institute I

was so excited about what I had learned there that I wanted to tell it to my friends who, many of whom could tell you the difference, you know, immediately between this piece of music and that piece of music, but didn't know very much about the unconscious or the way we defend ourselves from anxiety or a tendency to repeat old patterns unless rationality intervenes. So, I very specifically used my training at the institute to write Necessary Losses, but I wrote it as a friend to my friends, taking them by the hand and walking them down these paths and showing them that what we thought were mere theories were all the stuff of real life, of Greek drama, of everyday experience.

>> In your experience, have you found that children and adults deal with issues of loss or other challenges in different ways?

>> One of the things I'm so interested, because I write for both audiences, is all of the shared experiences adults and children experience. I, you know, if I write a poem for a 40-year old called No More Babies, you know, you're not going to have any more babies, and then I write a book about the Teddy Bear Poem for kids about giving up your teddy bear because you've grown out of it, I'm talking about the same kinds of feelings and the same experience of loss. I'm just using different imagery and I'm standing in a lot smaller shoes when I write for kids.

>> Sort of in a similar vein, you write a pretty good deal about the process of growing older and people coming to terms with that. Do you have any advice for people who are making these transitions, aging gracefully, I guess you could say?

>> Advice. Well, I guess, this minute or any minute now I'm going to have to publish a book called Unexpectedly AD. So, I have been studying this matter for several decades and I think that the big thing as we get older is, and this is something I'm advising people to do as much as I'm noticing that I and most of my friends are doing it, is developing a capacity for gratitude, for pleasure and gratitude for what you've got, gratitude for what's going on in your life right now. I'm sitting here talking to you. I'm looking out the window at the most beautiful, crape myrtle flower blooming outside my window. And it feels like a lucky thing that I can do that and I think that when I talk about gratitude, I suppose you could say talk about the glass half full rather than half empty, but it's a theory of immediacy of that pleasure, not waiting until you've collected all your photographs and are leafing through an album and you say, oh, that was nice back then. Love it now.

>> You also have a journalistic background. Does one influence the other? Are there differences in the way that you approach writing books versus writing journalistic pieces?

>> Yeah. You know, I think every area of my writing calls for different skills and I think one of the reasons I loved doing all these different kinds of writing is that I've loved the opportunity to, you know, flex all of my muscles or a lot of them. When you're being a journalist, you are sticking to the facts [Inaudible] quotes, what somebody said, not something you wish they said. And your information is dependable. When

you're writing fiction, I wrote one adult novel and fiction for kids, you can lean back and say let it fly, let your imagination fly away. You don't know about the situation, you can make it up. This is, you know, it has to have some kind of convincing quality to it, but it doesn't have to be the literal truth like journalism. And when I write poetry, I am compressing, compressing, compressing a lot of ideas and when I'm writing prose, I am expanding on those ideas. It's all different sets of muscles.

>> Getting back to your children's books, just briefly, I've talked with other authors about how they work with illustrators, and you've worked with some, including Ray Cruz, Robin Price Glasser, Lane Smith, who illustrated your most recent book. Some of them have a very close kind of relationship. Some of them, honestly, don't even talk or maybe just a brief e-mail. What is your process?

>> Well, Ray Cruz, who did the Alexander book, and I, we met once, maybe 15 years ago, and we're pen pals. We write to each other. He lives in New York. We write snail mail, not e-mail, recommending, you know, telling each other stories about kids and recommending noir movies from the 30s and 40s, which we both love. We have a great correspondence going. Lane Smith is the person who illustrated Lulu and, you know, I sort of get on my knees and thank my lucky stars about ten times a day that he did this, that he did this book, because when you're writing a children's book, you have some kind of fantasy. If I could only draw, oh, God, if I could only draw, this is what I would -- Lulu, this is who I would use as a brontosaurus. And there was Lane, you know, exceeding my wildest dreams and fantasies about the perfect art for this book. It is wonderful.

>> All right. I'm going to put you on the spot, just a little bit and it's sort of a Sophie's choice, but do you have a favorite book that you've written or one that you're proudest of?

>> No, I do not. I mean, that is asking who is your favorite child.

>> Yeah.

>> The answer is no one is my favorite. It also is dependent on the day.

>> Now, I've seen you're an advocate for libraries as well, American Library Association and other ways. Talk a little bit about that. Why are you a supporter of libraries?

>> Well, libraries were my church, my synagogue, my haven when I was a little girl. I used to go and take out as many books as I could carry with my hands all the way down low and then the books piled up and held on top with my chin. I loved reading. I gobbled them up. They took me all over the world and introduced me to people I never would have met otherwise, and I just found them a huge, huge joy. And I'm a, you know, I'm a major book person. I'm starting a movement, if you would like to know about it, which is Give Grandma a Children's Book. I'm starting a movement where all of us who take our friends out to lunch for their birthdays and give them a scarf or some stationary. I want everybody to give your grandmother friend a children's book to put in her library so

when the grandkids come over they'll be able to read to their grandchildren out of their books.

>> It's interesting, we've, ourselves, here at the Library of Congress, drawn on a lot of research that shows when you read to your child, whether it's a parent or a caregiver, that it, you know, it affects their life. They tend to be life-long learners, readers, better citizens, really.

>> Yeah, I mean, isn't that incredible research information? I read that, too, recently. It is so thrilling to think that along with this being a major joy in your life, a book can be a transformation of your life.

>> Well, Judith Viorst, is there anything I didn't ask you that I should have, maybe?

>> I don't think so.

>> Okay.

>> I think you asked me some wonderful questions.

>> Great.

>> And I tried to answer them as best I could.

>> Well, you've been featured at many past book festivals. What keeps you coming back?

>> What keeps me coming back?

>> Yeah.

>> All these fantastic kids with their wide eyes and their delicious questions and their enthusiasm. You know, I'll keep coming back as long as I'm invited.

>> Well, Judith Viorst, thank you so much for taking time out to talk with me today.

>> Thank you.

>> We look forward to seeing you. Once again, it's the Children's Pavilion at the National Book Festival on September 25, 2010, 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., rain or shine on the National Mall. From the Library of Congress, this is Matt Raymond. Thank you so much for listening.