

# PROFILE: Myra Cohn Livingston

E. Jane Porter

*Ohio Department of Education Columbus, Ohio*

Myra Cohn Livingston is a poet who shares her deep commitment to the need for higher standards for children's creative writing with all who will listen. Through her articles, speeches, teaching, and writing she urges those who teach and those who write to "learn the craft of poetry."

Mrs. Livingston credits her parents with helping her to develop the sensitivity so essential to writing poetry. "Mother taught me to be aware of the changing wonders of nature." As a three year old with rheumatic fever she came to love the sound of poetry read by her mother. Her father, a balloonist in World War I, was a great visionary who predicted, as early as she can remember, that someday man would go to the moon. As she describes his great sense of humor, his collection of classic cars and ability to design, it is easy to understand the influence he has had on the content and style of her writing.

Myra Cohn Livingston was born in Omaha, Nebraska in 1926 and moved to California when she was eleven years old. There she began her creative career as musician and writer. She studied the French horn from age twelve to twenty, becoming so accomplished that she was invited to join the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra at sixteen. It was at this time, however, that she decided to pursue a career as a writer and not as a professional musician. Mrs. Livingston still loves chamber music and concerts and misses performing with other musicians. She remains a close friend of many classical musicians including Jascha Heifetz to whom she dedicated *The Malibu and Other Poems*.

While a student at Sarah Lawrence College she served as literary editor of the college newspaper and co-editor of the literary magazine and continued to write. Her freshman writing professor urged her to send a group of her poems to *Story Parade* magazine, and thus "Whispers" became her first published poem in 1946. Although her first complete manuscript was rejected initially, Siddie Joe Johnson of Dallas, Texas, where she lived from 1952 to 1964, encouraged her to submit her work once again, and in 1958 *Whispers and Other Poems* was published by Margaret K. McElderry, her editor at Harcourt Brace.

Mrs. Livingston describes her work habits as very erratic. She writes at any time of the day or night, a practice she acquired through the necessity of juggling cooking, housekeeping, driving, teaching, beachbumming, social life, haunting second-hand bookstores, time with her family, and tending a veritable menagerie of dogs and cats. Most important of all, she was able to give time and be at home for her children while they were growing up.

She lives with her husband, Richard R. Livingston, a C.P.A. who wrote one book for children, *The Hunkendunks*, in Los Angeles, California. Their three children are all involved in the arts. Josh, an MIT graduate, is Fine Arts and Classical Music Director for a National Public Radio Station in Sacramento, California. Jonas, a 1980 graduate of Sarah Lawrence College is an aspiring novelist living in New York, and Jennie is a sophomore at Yale, who has already won prizes for her artwork. "Thank heavens for Dick," she says, "who is the only practical member of our family."

Working at her desk at home she can look out from the Santa Monica Mountains to the Pacific Ocean. She describes herself as "a view person" and this is clearly reflected in many of her poems. She has kept a journal since she was ten years old. Everyday sights provide fuel for her writing—the powerlines and poles driving home from the airport become tall robots; memories of her two trips to England and France are woven into poems of trees and place names into limericks. Mrs. Livingston is influenced by the children she teaches for "they will do something that triggers an idea." She emphasized, however, that "the only child I really know is myself."

Mrs. Livingston has remained highly critical of using the terms "poets" or "authors" for children who write verse, for it gives them a false notion of the craft of writing, a belief she spelled out in "Beginnings," published in *Language Arts*, and in a two-part article for *The Horn Book*, "But Is It Poetry?" "We have to work hard at becoming anything—whether a poet or a musician, a sports star or a teacher. There are no easy ways—no magic pills." She recalls studying counterpoint with Darius Milhaud who told her "You have to learn the rules before you can break them." She recommends helping children develop sensitivity and an awareness of the world around them first; then teaching them the form and mechanics into which they can put their own voices, feelings and observations.

Education is of great importance to Myra Cohn Livingston. She has served as Poet-in-Residence for the Beverly Hills Unified School District since 1967, working in a variety of ways. At the teacher's request she will come once a week to the whole class, work with a high school class offered at lunch time, teach an after-school class for gifted students, or merely share poetry with other groups. In addition, she is a Senior Instructor at UCLA Extension, teaching courses in Creative Writing in the Classroom, The Background of Poetry Children Enjoy, and The Craft of Poetry. As to her own style of writing, Mrs. Livingston replied, "I am a traditionalist," but her suggestions for fostering creativity in young people are most imaginative. She urges honesty in the expression of feelings, a concern for the individual child, and a portfolio into which the child places private writing not yet ready for sharing. Observation sheets and journals are encouraged so that facts and feelings are recorded for later use.

With so many demands on her time it is easy to understand why Mrs. Livingston describes her writing as sporadic and hasn't the luxury of daily writing. She recalls a piano teacher who long ago rebuked her for not finding time to practice with "You don't ever *have* the time, you have to *make* it." Myra Cohn Livingston has indeed made the time to write eleven books of poetry, six of (what she calls) "rhythmic prose," one allegory, to edit eight anthologies, and to provide us all with the wisdom of her approach to creative writing in *When You Are Alone/It Keeps You Capone* published by Atheneum in 1973. She likes to speak to groups and communicate her joy in poetry as a humanizing force. She emphasizes the importance of the commitment of both teacher and student to learning techniques and trying to assimilate the best of the many important poets whose works they read.

*Whispers and Other Poems*, she says, was a reflection of her own secure and happy childhood, written when she was eighteen. Today, the devil has entered into her world in the form of pollution and the many unsettling conditions in society. Her more recent poetry reflects the changes in a world that is not all beauty and light. She prefers not to have her work characterized for this reason, "People change as the world changes—and I've changed." She believes it is important to keep up to date, to keep in touch with today's child. The fifth grader today is not the same fifth grader of a few years ago. Children's lack of imagination distresses her the most; the overemphasis on television watching, the world of battery-operated toys and dolls who speak in phrases are not conducive to developing the imagination. "The doll who says nothing," she believes, "says everything." But she is heartened by recent trends towards fantasy in literature which engage the imagination and the potential in young people to spell out the cankers of society.

Mrs. Livingston is the 1980 recipient of the NCTE Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children, presented annually for the total contribution of a living American poet. She has many other honors to her credit. Her first book, *Whispers and Other Poems*, won an Honor Award in the New York Herald Tribune Children's Spring Book Festival in 1958. For *I'm Hiding* she received the Texas Institute of Letters award in 1962. In 1968 the Southern California Council on Literature for Children and Young People award was given for her Comprehensive Contribution in the Field of Literature, as well as the Notable Book Award in 1972 for *The Malibu and Other Poems*. Among her recent honors is a Golden Kite Honor Award from the Society of Children's Book Writers for *The Way Things Are and Other Poems*, presented in 1975.

This very busy and talented writer does more! She has recently written and recorded a *Prelude* cassette on selecting poetry for children, and created four seasonal bookmarks, both issued by the Children's Book Council. She has completed a set of film strips for classroom use for Harcourt Brace Jovanovich on the Writing of Poetry that will be released at the end of 1980. Now, through tape and film, Mrs. Livingston can encourage the selection of excellent poetry to teach the basic tools of poetry writing. She is currently working as a poetry consultant to Harcourt on a new literature series.

When asked if she has favorite books of her own, she replied, "it is the one coming out—or the one I am working on now." Her readers can look forward to two new books in 1980 *No Way of Knowing: Dallas Poems* and an anthology *Poems of Christmas*, both published by Margaret K. McElderry Books, Atheneum. They will be added to the long list of exceptionally fine books that Mrs. Livingston has written and edited.

Myra Cohn Livingston may characterize herself as a traditionalist with erratic work habits, but the pace she sets for herself and the standards under which she writes, teaches, and lectures are exacting. And though the devil may be in her world, she has made the world of children come to life in the emotions, insights, and sheer delight she offers to all who read and listen to her words.

## **Bibliography**

### Books of Poems

- A Crazy Flight and Other Poems*. Harcourt, 1969.  
*4-Way Stop and Other Poems*. Atheneum, 1976.  
*A Lollygag of Limericks*. Atheneum, 1978.  
*The Malibu and Other Poems*. Atheneum, 1972.  
*The Moon and a Star and Other Poems*. Harcourt, 1965.  
*No Way of Knowing: Dallas Poems*. Atheneum, 1980.  
*Old Mrs. Twindlytart and Other Rhymes*. Harcourt, 1967.  
*O Sliver of Liver and Other Poems*. Atheneum, 1979.  
*The Way Things Are and Other Poems*. Atheneum, 1974.  
*Whispers and Other Poems*. Harcourt, 1958.  
*Wide Awake and Other Poems*. Harcourt, 1959.

### Anthologies

- Callooh! Callay!: Holiday Poems for Young Readers*. Atheneum, 1978.  
*Listen, Children, Listen: An Anthology of Poems for the Very Young*. Harcourt, 1972.  
*O Frabjous Day!: Poetry for Holidays and Special Occasions*. Atheneum, 1977.  
*One Little Room, An Everywhere: Poems of Love*. Atheneum, 1975.  
*Poems of Christmas*. Atheneum, 1980.  
*The Poems of Lewis Carroll*. Crowell, 1973.  
*Speak Roughly to Your Little Boy: A Collection of Parodies and Burlesques*. Harcourt, 1971.  
*A Tune Beyond Us: A Collection of Poetry*. Harcourt, 1968.  
*What a Wonderful Bird the Frog Are: An Assortment of Humorous Poetry and Verse*. Harcourt, 1973.

### Books of Rhythmic Prose

- Happy Birthday*. Harcourt, 1964.  
*I'm Hiding*. Harcourt, 1961.  
*I'm Not Me*. Harcourt, 1963.  
*I Talk to Elephants*. Harcourt, 1962.  
*I'm Waiting!* Harcourt, 1966.  
*See What I Found*. Harcourt, 1962.

### Other

- Come Away*. Atheneum, 1974.  
*When You Are Alone/It Keeps You Capone: An Approach to Creative Writing with Children*. Atheneum, 1973.