



John Mason's NEW YORK DIARY - March 1984

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The latest dispatch from **John Mason**.

Oldest art form

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Each year in Knoxville, Tennessee, the National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling (NAPPS) draws together 1.000 people for its annual storytelling festival. In Toronto, 2.000 gather annually for the Toronto Festival of Storytelling, sponsored by the Storytellers School of Toronto which also runs courses and workshops throughout the year. 'Storytelling, one of the oldest, if not *the* oldest art form, is undergoing a tremendous revival today,' says Rafe Martin, owner of the Oxcart Bookshop in Rochester, New York, whose monthly storytelling sessions in his bookshop have become so popular - and profitable in terms of spin-off sales - that he has expanded the project into schools and libraries in the area. Americans, satiated with TV and movies, are rediscovering the ancient, simple satisfaction of listening to stories in the company of other humans. Weekly sessions in Toronto, called the '1.001 Friday Nights of Storytelling', have been going on for over four years and attract people from far and wide - even Europe and Australia. Anyone can come, and anyone (of whatever age) can tell a story. There is even a new breed of storyteller - the professional - who like the medieval bard travels the country telling stories for a fee. But most storytellers are still amateurs - booksellers, teachers, librarians and others - who do it as part of their job and because they love it, and because it turns people on to books. A tip from Rafe Martin: don't try to memorize a story word for word, but 'retell it in your own words ... in this way, the story is recreated by you and grows and changes with each performance. This fluidity is part of the authentic life of traditional oral storytelling.'

Ebullient

Le Var Burton, the actor who became famous as the young Kunte Kinte in **Roots**, is the ebullient host of a new series of 15 half-hour TV programmes about children's books, on public television stations. The series, called **Reading Rainbow**, is in a bright and chatty magazine format, with each segment centred around one main hook and three or four other related books - 67 children's books in all. Some scenes were filmed in libraries and bookshops, others out of doors, and all involve children 'getting into books. A children's magazine called **Reading Rainbow Gazette** is also available to go with the series. The series was largely funded by a grant from Kellogg's - public' (non-commercial) television in America being dependent on corporate and foundation sponsorship (as opposed to *network* television which is advertiser-financed). Now we've just heard the good news that Kellogg's has agreed to finance a further five programmes. News has also just arrived of Weston Woods's own television series to begin soon - a long-awaited development: sounds exciting.)

Maverick

Shock-waves reverberated through the children's publishing community of New York when it was learned that George Woods, long-time children's review editor of **The New York Times Book Review**, had suddenly been removed from

his job, and with no reason given. Though precise details remain a mystery, it appears that new management did not like his somewhat maverick style, and reassigned him to a less visible post. The question that now worries publishers is whether **The New York Times** may decide to decrease, or even eliminate altogether, its coverage of children's books, which would be a serious loss of a major national - even international - organ that is read by both professionals and the general public.

Streamlining

Children's books recently lost ground in another instance of streamlining, involving the American Book Awards. Last year I wrote in these columns about the children's books award ceremony with its celebrity presenter and TV coverage. Now the Association of American Publishers has decided that the awards programme as it then was, with 27 different categories of winners, was too costly and complex to administer, and did little to sell books because the impact was diluted by having so many winners. Impressed by the success of Britain's Booker Prize, they sent a team to England to investigate, and have now decided that this year there will be just three winners - for fiction, nonfiction, and best new writer -- with each receiving \$10,000 (instead of \$1,000 as previously). Clearly this makes a lot of sense for most publishers and for booksellers and the public, but children's books are unlikely to share any of the limelight.

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