

Showtime for Children's Literature

The creators of works for young readers are experiencing their spotlight moment from the University of Oklahoma and a family with a history of rewarding the world's best writers.

BY LYNETTE LOBBAN

PHOTOS BY ROBERT TAYLOR

Kathy Neustadt Hankin of Denver, Colorado, was having trouble with her precocious daughter, Tess. Fresh from the fervor of the 2002 Olympic Winter Games, the four-year-old firmly and abruptly announced that she, too, would settle for nothing less than the gold while making her library selections. She told her mother and father that henceforth she only would read books “with medals on them.”

Lucky for Tess she comes from a family that takes such requests seriously. For the Neustadt clan of Ardmore, Oklahoma, the call of great literature is a siren's song that lures those who follow to the sweet music of poets, playwrights and novelists from around the world. Doris Westheimer Neustadt, matriarch of the pioneering oil family, began this literary legacy nearly half a century ago as a voracious reader and ardent member of the Ladies of the Leaf Book Club, and when OU's Bizzell Memorial Library was expanded in the 1980s, the

new west wing was named in her honor.

Doris also provided funding for the University of Oklahoma's *Books Abroad* International Prize, which evolved, with



the help of her son Walter Neustadt Jr. and his wife, Dolores, into the Neustadt International Prize for Literature. The \$50,000 prize, which is awarded by OU

and its international quarterly *World Literature Today*, the successor to *Books Abroad*, is widely considered to be one of the most prestigious literary prizes in the world, second only to the Nobel. Indeed, so similar are the two awards in spirit and merit that in the past 37 years, 25 Neustadt laureates, candidates or jurors subsequently have been awarded Nobel Prizes.

So Tess's resolution presented an opportunity to the literary-minded Neustadts. They could make due with Newbery and Caldecott winners, or they could, as Kathy's husband, Dr. Joe Hankin, suggested, create a new and unique prize dedicated to children's literature. The idea had great appeal to Kathy, who took the cause to her sisters,

AT RIGHT: Brian Doyle is surrounded by some of his biggest fans during a visit to Norman's Longfellow Middle School. The Canadian author tackles issues of racial and social injustice through the eyes of his young protagonists.



Susan Schwartz of Dallas and Nancy Barcelo of Watertown, Massachusetts.

“Mom and Dad started this wonderful legacy of literature, and it only seemed fitting that the kids would continue that tradition in their own way,” says Kathy. That “way” became the NSK Neustadt Prize for Children’s Literature. The “N-S-K” stands for the Neustadt daughters, Nancy, Susan and Kathy.

“Kathy called me and said she and her sisters wanted to give something back to OU and also honor their parents,” says R.C. Davis-Undiano, executive director of *World Literature Today* and dean of the Honors College.

“They thought a prize in children’s literature could help set a new standard of excellence in a genre that in the past has almost been overlooked by mainstream publishers,” he explains. “We discussed the proposal with President Boren and gradually the three sisters put an endowment in place.”

Despite busy schedules of their own—Barcelo is the director of a hospice volunteer program, Schwartz is a co-founder and board member of a therapeutic equestrian program for the disabled, and Hankin, a freelance field producer for ABC News—all three took a hands-on approach to the project.

“The Neustadt sisters were very personal about this,” says Davis-Undiano. “They didn’t just give us the money and say ‘I hope it goes well.’ They were involved every step of the way.”

Patterned after the biennial Neustadt International Prize for Literature, the NSK Prize consists of a \$25,000 cash award, a medal and a certificate. Also like the Neustadt Prize, the jury is composed of an international pool of writers, translators, editors and publishers, who each



Neustadt daughters (from left) Susan Schwartz, Kathy Hankin and Nancy Barcelo pose with Brian Doyle at the 2005 NSK Prize ceremony at the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History.

select one candidate for consideration. The jurors of the Neustadt Prize convene on the OU campus biennially to determine their champion, while jurors for the NSK Prize meet via summer conference

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call generated from the *World Literature Today* office on OU’s Norman campus.

“We very much want the winner to be selected by a jury of their peers,” says Davis-Undiano. “In many cases, members of the jury have just as prolific and distinguished careers as the writer they are nominating.”

At the end of the call, which can last more than two hours, the jurors are both exhausted and exhilarated by the selec-

tion of the new NSK laureate.

In 2003, Mildred D. Taylor, author of the 1977 Newbery winner *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, emerged as the frontrunner from a field including Tomi Ungerer of France, New Zealander Margaret Mahy and fellow American Lois Lowry, author of *The Giver*. Although not involved in the selection process, the Neustadt daughters were elated with the jurors’ choice of Taylor as the laureate of the inaugural NSK Prize.

“I was not a big reader as a child like everyone else in my family because I was dyslexic,” says Susan. “I was reading *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* in college for a course in children’s literature, and I had this “aha” moment. I felt like I got to make up for what I missed as a child. So when Mildred Taylor won, it was very emotional for me.”

Taylor has long been celebrated for tackling themes of racism and poverty with an honest and unsentimental voice. Her three-decade career has produced classics from *Song of the Trees* (1975) to *The Land* (2001), based on stories from her own family.

Despite a growing philosophy among academics that there is no predictable or measurable way of knowing what children are getting out of the literature they read, Davis-Undiano says Taylor’s works are an exception.

“There is a group of special writers who really can shape and break through the stereotypes and trends and get a lot of people to go a different direction with them,” he says. “Mildred is one of them. She was groundbreaking in her work. She has set a very high standard for what young people’s literature should aspire to.” That standard was met in 2005 by Canadian writer Brian Doyle, the second NSK Prize laureate.



Renowned author Mildred D. Taylor swaps stories with middle school students during her visit to OU to accept the inaugural NSK Prize. Interaction between seasoned writers and young readers is a key component of the international writing award.



An Ottawa native of Irish descent, Doyle is as irreverent as he is charming, a Canadian Bill Murray whose dry delivery is sprinkled with self-deprecating humor and wry observations of life. Like Taylor before him, he visited Norman not only to accept the award, but also to spend quality time with young readers and writers of the next generation.

In October 2005, Doyle took the podium in OU's Meacham Auditorium and faced one of the toughest audiences in the world—a packed house of 11- to 14-year-olds—who are there more or less by some will other than their own. Not known for deference to social convention, the crowd squeaked about noisily in their seats until Doyle took the stage. Within three minutes the room was quiet enough that the author no longer needed the microphone. The now-tamed crowd was eating politely from his hand morsels of the written word, delicacies of divine sentence structure, coupled with such exotic subjects as springtime in Ottawa, where “locals become heady on fermented beaver juice.”

But Doyle's humor is only the bait he uses to get young readers to take the hook of weightier subjects. Like Taylor, Doyle unapologetically reveals society's ugly underbelly from racial prejudice to religious intolerance and child abuse. Often utilizing a first-person narrative, Doyle talks the talk of his audience. He relates to the ubiquitous horrors of pre-adolescence—being called on unprepared in class, having unrequited crushes and running the gauntlet of bullies. Reading a passage from *Angel Square*, he referred to two teachers talking about a student as “two huge robins discussing a worm.”

“I grew up living my life within the pages of a book,” says Nancy Barcelo. “I loved to read. When I began to read Brian Doyle's work, I thought I was going to read these books as an adult, but I was transported back to the fourth grade. It

Brian Doyle answers questions during a visit to Longfellow Middle School. The author met with more than 400 students while in Norman for events celebrating the 2005 NSK Prize.

was like reading from the child's perspective again."

Doyle, who is a three-time winner of the Canadian Library Association's Book of the Year for Children Award, had this advice for his youthful audience: "For those of you who want to become writers, begin now," he said. "If you see geese flying overhead, write it down. Add adjectives to grocery lists. Write your own absent notes for school. Write everyday. Then, when it comes time to write something important, you will be in shape."

To those who love the written word, he said, "You have a lucky fascination. Literacy is power. It will get you through tough times."

Through four decades of the original international Neustadt Prize, the family has done much to empower readers by shining a light on exceptional works from around the globe. But for OU students who share the Neustadts' lucky fascination with literature, the prize takes on an even more personal and profound meaning. The Neustadt Fellowship Program offers a three-credit hour English class structured around the major works of current Neustadt Prize jurors. Then the students receive what many call "a highpoint" of their educational experience—informal face time with some of the brightest literary minds in the world.

This past fall the 11-member jury included Kwame Dawes, a poet and playwright from Ghana, Carter Revard, an American Indian poet and short-story writer, and Daisy Zamora, a Nicaraguan poet whose candidate Claribel Alegría was announced as the winner of the 2006 Neustadt Prize.

"Being a writer is all about capturing thoughts and turning them into words," says Amy Bourlon, international business and energy management major. "To have the opportunity to hear the author's views straight from the source is so uplifting and fulfilling. It's an intellectual high."

Armando Celaya, an Oklahoma City senior in professional writing, interviewed juror and poet Li-Young Lee of Indonesia for a research paper. "Sometimes when you meet a writer, you don't know what to say, but in the Neustadt class, you are familiar with their work before you meet



Dressed appropriately for the occasion, Brian Doyle speaks to a captive audience in Meacham Auditorium.

them, so you feel as if you already know them," says Celaya. "I want to be a writer, so being able to talk to professionals like this is an amazing opportunity."

The heightened interaction between students, jurors and laureates is largely the work of Davis-Undiano, who has established an intern program at *World*

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Literature Today and organized an annual symposium of Neustadt Prize jurors, which is free and open to the public.

"It's really interesting to think that at one time there was no interaction between students and jurors or students and writers. It was very Ivory Tower," he says. "The key scene used to be the jurors meeting with themselves. The focus has shifted so that the student/writer exchange is the center of it now."

"There have been times when there's a crush of people at my house, and I will

open the study door, and there will be one of the writers with three or four students, just talking. The writers love it. They want to talk about their work."

In addition to the benefit to OU students, the impact of both prizes also reaches into the Norman community. Teachers and librarians from local school districts are invited to all NSK Prize events and are encouraged to bring their students. After speaking to the crowd at Meacham, Doyle even took time to visit a Norman middle school to sign autographs before attending his own award ceremony that evening.

"It is wonderful to have this kind of recognition from the kids," says Doyle. "This prize is an incredible boost for the writers of children's literature. It recognizes us as legitimate writers in a field that has been neglected for far too long."

Eventually, the Neustadt daughters would like to see their prize grow, including building an OU class around children's literature similar to the Neustadt Fellowship Program. Davis-Undiano says that kind of forward thinking is already leading to bigger and better things.

"Walter and Dot Neustadt are so proud of what their daughters have done. They are newly excited," he says. "They are always thinking of new ways to expand. Now they want to bring in at-risk kids to literature classes through the Honors College. Do you know that saying by Kierkegaard, 'Purity of heart is to will one thing'? That one thing for the Neustadts is sharing great literature."

Daughter Susan agrees that the NSK award is a family affair. "The prize is a connection with our parents, with our children and with the University," she says.

"Thirty years ago my grandmother Doris had a vision of endowing a prize for literature. My daughter Tess just wanted more books with medals," adds Kathy. "I think it is appropriate that both NSK winners portray values that my parents have instilled in me. Both Brian Doyle's works and Mildred's address the conflicts of social and moral issues, the cruelty and injustice of racism... yet the protagonists' efforts are supported by strong values of a family and unconditional love."

For the Neustadts, that may be their most enduring legacy of all.

WLT Kids

From the phenomenon of Harry Potter to renewed enthusiasm for *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the spotlight on children's literature has never been brighter. Now a new feature in *World Literature Today*, OU's quarterly literary magazine, showcases works from around the globe written for and by children. The new editorial section works in harmony with the international NSK Neustadt Prize in Children's Literature to address an emerging sophistication and cultural literacy among young readers.

"I didn't want the NSK Prize to operate in a vacuum," says *World Literature Today* executive director R.C. Davis-Undiano. "So we started a children's lit column in *World Literature Today*, talking about the latest trends taking place in children's literature. That was good, but it seemed incomplete. And that's when we started moving in the direction of something children themselves could read and work with."

The result was *WLT Kids*, dedicated to an oft-overlooked niche of readers, ages 9 to 12. The eight-page, tear-out section within *World Literature Today* combines geography and literature in a kid-friendly format that includes poetry, essays and activities for children. Sara Ann Beach, associate professor of reading and literacy in the OU College of Education, serves as editor of the new section. Beach, who teaches Leadership and Academic Curriculum, has defined three main goals for the publication.

"We want this magazine to promote cultural understanding, cultural literacy and teach kids how to become literary critics and researchers," says Beach. "The marriage between the College of Education and the publishing expertise of *WLT* for this purpose is a very good thing."

Each issue is built around a particular area of the world and includes short stories, poetry and essays from or about that

region. The magazine also includes maps, graphics and photographs, activities for exploration and suggestions for further reading. In its first three outings, *WLT Kids* has explored Jordan and Israel, Karakhstan and New Zealand. Upcoming issues will feature China and Canada, home to Brian Doyle, the 2005 laureate of the NSK Prize.


"Global literacy includes awareness of culture," says Davis-Undiano. "*WLT Kids* has literature, poetry and journal entries by and for kids from around the world. What we would like to do eventually is make it the touchstone of a network of kids communicating with each other, sharing their experiences from around the globe."

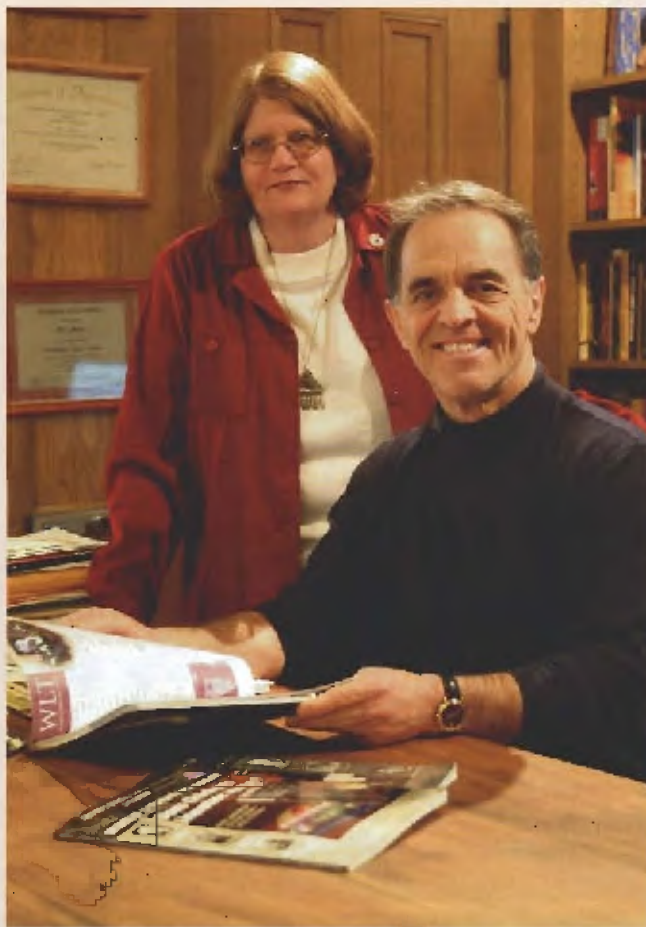
Beach is beginning to work with teachers in local school districts to help them utilize *WLT Kids* as an interdisciplinary teaching tool. Activities provided in the magazine are designed to help students meet the criteria of several national standards, including Priority Academic Student Skills (PASS) and the National Standards for the Social Studies Curriculum.

"We designed a crossmatch matrix between the *WLT Kids* literature activities and the PASS skills or Standards so teachers can choose which activities to focus on," explains Beach. "Each activity is matched with the PASS skill or Standard it helps to reach."

Eventually she would like to include the standards of New York, Texas and California in the cross referencing so teachers across the nation could use *WLT Kids* in their classrooms.

Davis-Undiano has even bigger plans. "I would like to see *WLT Kids* gain the distribution of *Weekly Reader* or *National Geographic for Kids*. Neither one focuses on what we offer—literature.

"We are constantly trying to improve, to make it look right, to be accessible for kids. I think it will grow into a major vehicle, not just connecting with the local school district, but the world." 



Sara Ann Beach, associate professor of reading and literacy in the College of Education, and R.C. Davis-Undiano, executive director of *World Literature Today*, are the driving force behind *WLT Kids*, a literary and cultural window to the world for children 9 to 12.