

... only the rarest kind of best  
in anything can be good enough  
for the young.

—Walter de la Mare



## LEE BENNETT HOPKINS 2016 REGINA MEDALIST

*Regina Medal Luncheon*  
March 30, 2016  
*CLA Annual Convention*  
San Diego, California



## INTRODUCTION

by Anna Campos, CLA Children's Library Services Section

I would like to thank the Children's Section for bringing me out of retirement to present this award. I think I'm listed as the past chair of the section. My name is Anna Campos, and I am the past, past, past chair of the Children's Library Services Section. I'm really honored to be presenting this award, dedicated to the Blessed Mother, to Lee Bennett Hopkins. It's a very appropriate way to honor him because his body of work reflects the words of Walter de la Mare which are engraved on the obverse of the medal: "only the rarest kind of best in anything can be good enough for the young."

What I'm telling you is gleaned from the excellent article by Ashley Kitchens Wescott that appeared in the December 2015 issue of *Catholic Library World*. I had thought of Hopkins primarily as an anthologist, but he began his career as an educator writing many articles on various aspects of education. He was very interested in using poetry with struggling readers, and his many anthologies have grown out of his desire to help teachers integrate poetry into all areas of the curriculum. Hopkins holds the Guinness world record for the most children's poetry anthologies—more than one hundred now. Not one, but three

poetry awards are named after him, and the newest one was sponsored by the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. Among his works are many ALA notable books. *Been to Yesterdays: Poems of a Life* (Boyd's Mills Press/Wordsong) received both a Christopher Book Award and an SCBWI Golden Kite Honor Book.

He has also written *Mary's Song* (Eerdmans), a really beautiful book illustrated by Stephen Alcorn. It is Mary's reflections of the infant Jesus, and I thought, "How appropriate for us here today with this award dedicated to the Blessed Mother."

In conclusion, I'd like to say this is my eleventh Regina Medal luncheon. I counted back and my first one was when Eric Carle came to New Orleans in 1999. I've written some introspective articles on past Regina medalists for the Children's Section newsletter—ten so far, starting with the very first one—and I'm working my way up. In my estimation, Lee Bennett Hopkins is "in that number," as we say in New Orleans. For this reason, I am pleased to present the 2016 Regina Medal to Lee Bennett Hopkins. ■

# CONVERSATIONS WITH LEE BENNETT HOPKINS

## Participants

**[LBH]** Lee Bennett Hopkins, who joined the luncheon via teleconference from his home in Cape Coral, Florida

**[JBG]** Joan Bransfield Graham, poet and contributor to many of Hopkins's books

**[A]** Audience

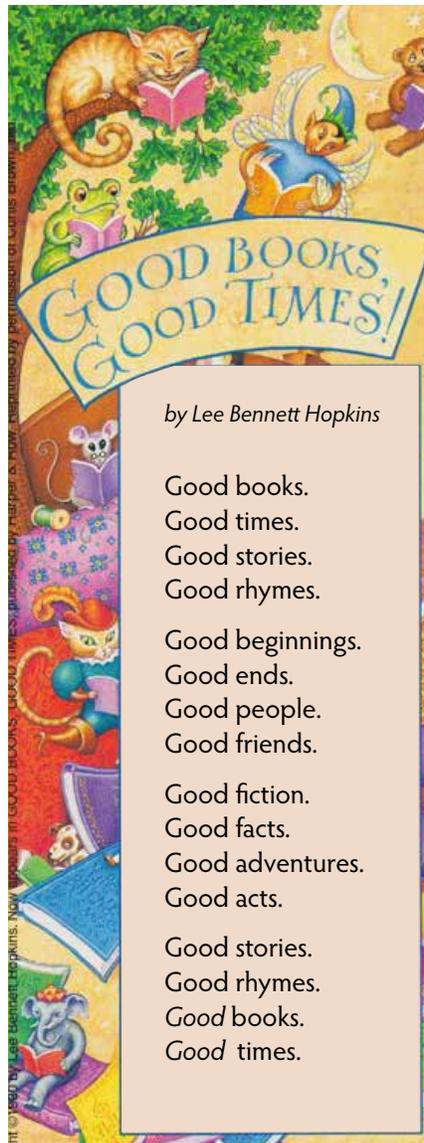
**LBH** • Thank you, thank you so much. This virtual luncheon is coming from my library in Cape Coral, Florida. It is touching to hear Anna Campos's wonderful introduction.

I am thrilled to be talking with you this afternoon, because I feel books are truly a connecting process. They connect authors, illustrators, teachers, librarians, and most importantly, books to reach our children. Back about thirty-five years ago or so, I was asked to be the National Children's Book Week poet. I had a poem printed on a bookmark that went to over a million children. It was illustrated at that time by a fairly young artist, Marc Brown.

The poem "Good Books, Good Times!" sums up my love of books, my love of children, and my love for people like you, who are bringing literature into the lives of boys and girls.

I am thrilled to become the recipient of this year's award, and I am also thrilled to be featured on your bookmark listing approximately sixty names of people who have received the award. I know or have known at least fifty people on this list. I'll skip around a little bit. In 1982, the award was given to Theodor Seuss Geisel, known better as Dr. Seuss. I interviewed Ted four times for books and major newspaper articles. We were very good friends right up until his death.

1983: Tomie DePoala. Tomie and I did three books together. Our relationship spans over forty years. Charlotte Zolotow, 2002. She was not only my editor for many books,



but together we did the very first I Can Read Poetry book, *Surprises* (HarperCollins), published in 1984, and in print for thirty-two years. 2003: Jean Craighead George. 2005: Jerry Pinkney; we were neighbors in Westchester County, New York, where I lived. 2008: Vera B. Williams. Vera was a neighbor who lived around the corner from my apartment on West 12th Street in Greenwich Village. We often met at night to walk my dog down Jane Street. The list goes on and on.

Writing through the years I have done professional books, novels, books of poetry, and of course,

anthologies. As Anna mentioned, in 2011 I was thrilled to become part of the *Guinness Book of Records*, then having produced more than 113 collections of poetry for all ages. The number is now approximately 120. I'm currently working on several more including a collection for younger readers and a very exciting book for young adult readers based on diversity of heritage.

*Manger* (Eerdmans) is based on the legend that on Christmas Eve, God gave all creatures the ability to talk for one hour. I thought, "What a wonderful idea to bring to children, if God gave the animals a voice." In the book there are poems about various animals. While doing the research I thought of course there was a horse, a donkey at the stable; there could have been a spider, but there couldn't have been any fish at the manger. I thought, "Gee, fish are God's creation too. Why not try to do this?" So I penned "Fish."



*Manger* is a very special book to me. It has won many awards. There is a poem in the collection by Joan Bransfield Graham, who is here with us today.

*Jumping Off Library Shelves* is a book of poems about my love of books and libraries. I just mentioned Joan who is one of the first people I contact to write a poem for me. In *Jumping Off Library Shelves*, she penned this magnificent work, "Librarian." Who would not want this poem in every library in the country, in schools, public libraries, college libraries, everywhere, because it says what we do?

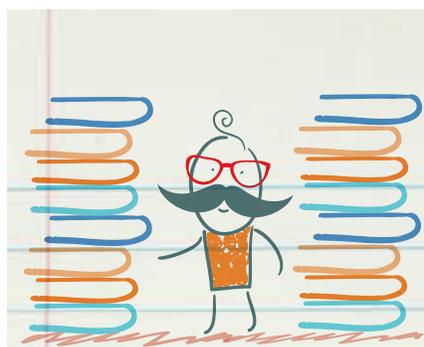
Thank you, Joan. I think it might be a good point here to entertain questions. Again, I have interviewed more than two hundred of the top authors and illustrators in America. I continue relationships with many authors. Don't be afraid. Youngsters would all have their hands up already asking, "How much money do you make?"

**A** • What kind of dogs did you and Vera walk?

**LBH** • I had a dog, Vera didn't. I had a Cavalier King Charles Spaniel which I had for twelve years and six days, whom I absolutely adored. That was when I was living in New York. I've been in Florida now for approximately twelve years after living in both Westchester County and New York City. I love it here; it is warm.

**A** • Can you give us the titles of the new forthcoming anthologies, or is that a secret?

**LBH** • I just finished a collection tentatively titled *School People* to be published by Boyds Mills Press/ Wordsong. Children's books are an odd animal: from the time I submit a full manuscript to the time it is published can take at least three years. That's for a picture book. I finished this manuscript in 2016; this book probably will not come out until 2019.



## Librarian

by Joan Bransfield Graham

How did you know?

Can you read my mind?

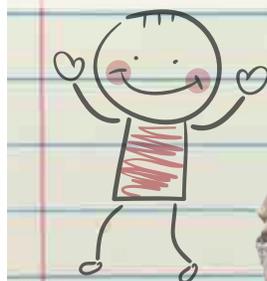
How do you always find the perfect book?

You get that look in your eyes and there it is...

another surprise to savor.

You watched, listened, sized me up from the start:

you've been a friend, you read my heart.



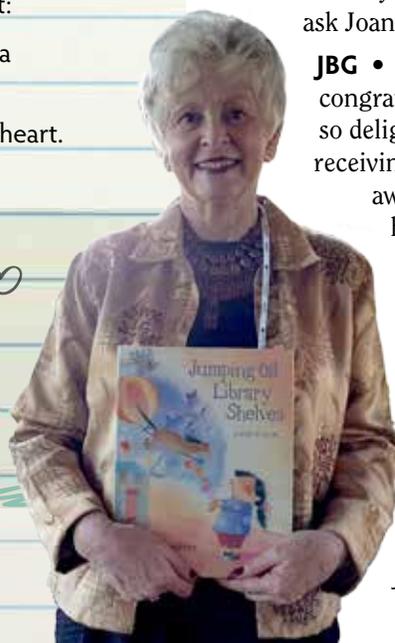
It has to go through editorial, an artist has to be contracted, the artist has to do the book, and it takes at least a year in the house for publicity. It is a very long road from now until finished product. It is a book for younger children about our school personnel. The school nurse, the art teacher, the drama coach, the gym teacher, the teacher, the principal, and all those people who contribute to the building and to the school plant itself.

The second book I am close to finishing is a young adult anthology tentatively titled (titles can change up to the minute of going to press) *Poems of Heritage*. I am working with fourteen quite distinguished poets including Kwame Alexander, Naomi Shihab Nye, Jane Yolen, and Marilyn Nelson. It deals with African American poets, Asian American poets, Native American poets, Palestinian, Latino, both male and female poets, and poets with Jewish heritage. It is their reflections of childhood memories of their heritage and state how and why they became what they are today. It is among one of the most exciting books I've worked on in years. That will be published by Lee & Low, slated for late 2018, spring 2019.

In essence, I am busy, but I love it. I also love communicating with the literary community. These are all very good friends of mine and they take criticism. I'm kind of hard but they kind of enjoy me. I'm a good editor, ask Joan.

**JBG** • Yes, I second that and congratulations to you. I am so delighted that you are receiving this well-deserved award. I'm happy to be here to celebrate with you today!

**LBH** • Thank you!



Joan Bransfield Graham

**A** • Do you try out any of your poetry on children before you publish it?

**LBH** • No. I started my career as a teacher. I taught all grades: kindergarten through post-college. Frankly, I could go into a classroom and read—well—there are no yellow pages in telephone books any more, I'm dating myself. I could read stuff on the Internet and have them enthralled. I know what children should have.

**A** • How has the publishing industry changed from when you started to how it works now?

**LBH** • What a wonderful question. I began publishing in the late 1960s. It is an industry like any other; its bottom line is money. It's harder for younger people to break in, although they do. Poetry is very difficult to get published. It is happening and we fight like mad to see more and more books of poetry being published. We don't have the great editors we used to have such as Ursula Nordstrom, Charlotte Zolotow, Margaret McElderry, and Susan Carr Hirschman. The industry has changed in leaps and bounds. We do have some extraordinary young editors but a lot of them just come and go from houses and it is very hard to keep up with who is going where and where they are now.

We also have seen publishing go with social trends—trends we never had back in the Sixties. We see more problem-oriented books, more diverse books. Some are wonderful, some are horrendous. We are living in a very odd time in our American history; one never knows what is going to happen next. We are in a tough period of our

lives, but again I think publishing does reflect much of the times we are living in and that is a good thing. Gone are the days of Dick and Jane and the Betsy-Tacy series. We are in a new era where children's books deal with everything possible.

I'd like to close with a poem I wrote about Augusta Baker who received the Regina Medal in 1981. Augusta Baker was the first African



American to hold a noted position in the New York Public Library system. We were friends, very close friends, up to her death. In *Jumping Off Library Shelves* I wrote a poem for Augusta to share my love for a woman who was very important in my life.

Know that I am extremely honored to receive this honor. Thank you.

## Storyteller

(For Augusta Baker)

by Lee Bennett Hopkins

As she speaks  
words  
leap from pages—

there are  
friends like  
frog and toad—

I walk  
down a  
yellow brick road.

Worlds of paper  
disappear—

only  
Miss Augusta  
and I  
are here  
in a room  
filled with magic  
story  
rhyme.

And as her voice  
reaches  
the highest rafter—

I believe in  
once-upon-a-time,

I believe in  
happily ever after. ■

### Acknowledgements

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