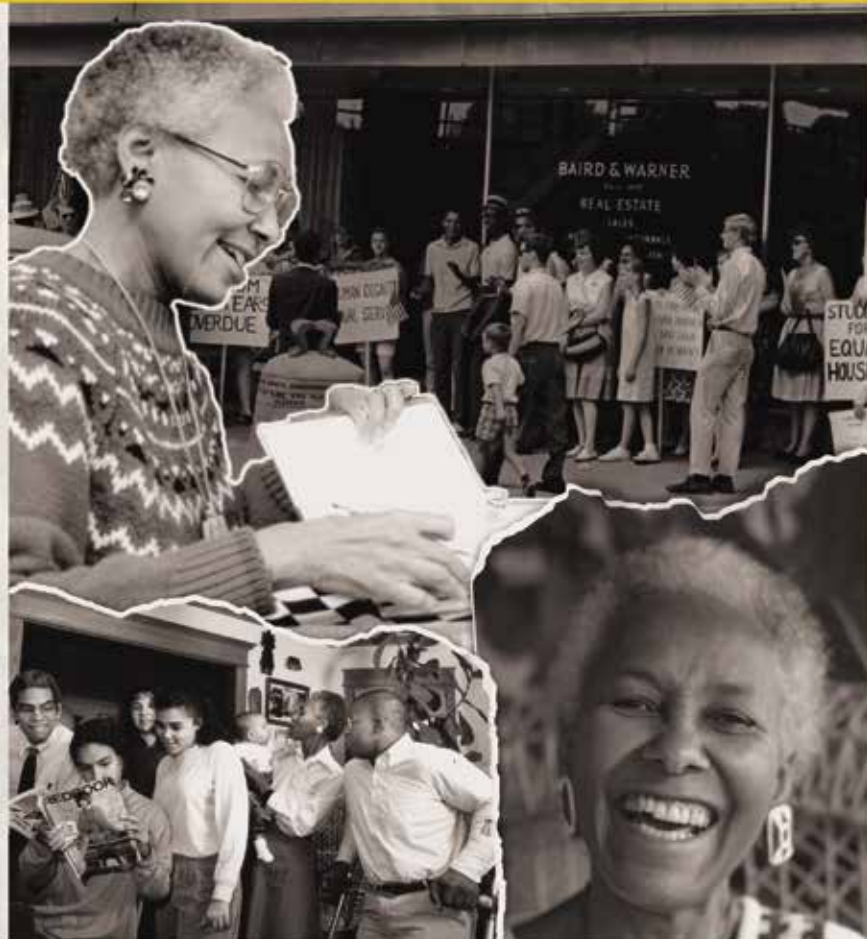


FULLER AWARD FOR LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT

HARRIETTE GILLEM ROBINET



DOMINICAN UNIVERSITY

PERFORMING ARTS CENTER • MARCH 14, 2023

CHICAGO LITERARY HALL OF FAME

ChicagoLiteraryHoF.org

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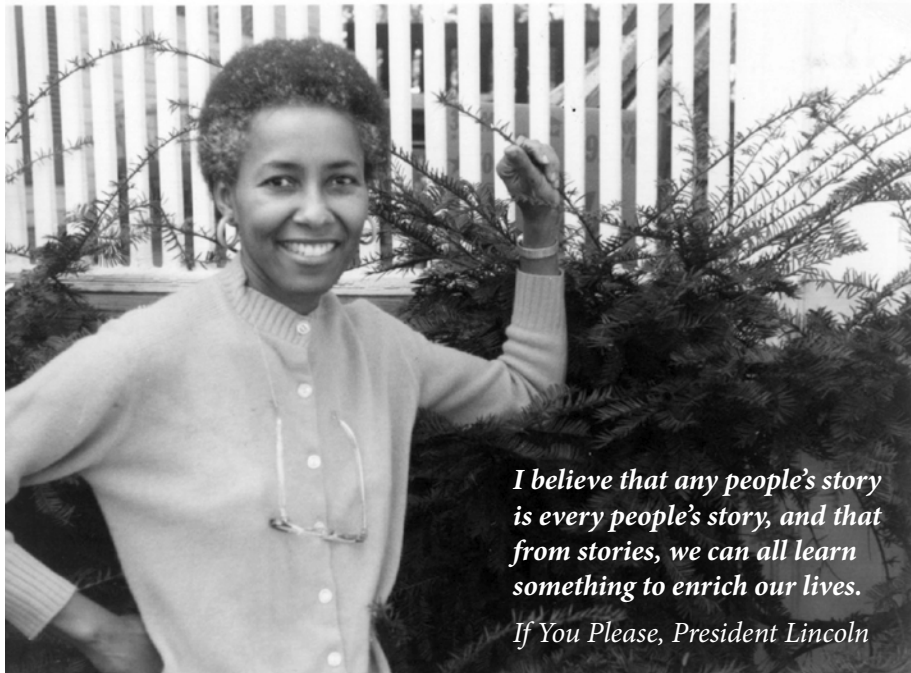
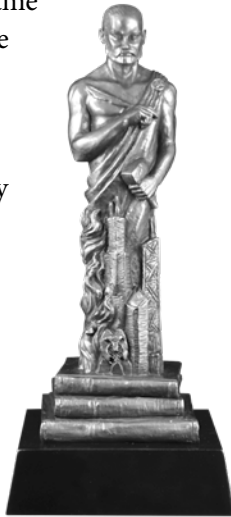
TONIGHT'S PROGRAM

Jane Hseu	Welcome to Dominican University
Donald G. Evans	About the Fuller Award and the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame
Tsehaye GERALYN Hébert	<i>Falling in Love with Treasure: Upon Discovering Harriette</i>
Madyson Strong and Amira Hogan	Reading from <i>Children of the Fire</i> (Anna Hyslop adaptation of Robinet's original work)
Frank Lipo	<i>History in the Writing</i>
Oak Park Regional Housing Center	Video
Athena Williams	Short reading
Nora Brooks Blakely	<i>Let History Be History Again</i>
Madyson Strong and Timothy David Rey	Staged Reading: <i>Missing from Haymarket Square</i> (Anna Hyslop adaptation of Robinet's original work)
Glennette Tilley Turner	<i>Kindred Spirits</i>
Linda Robinet	Accepting the Fuller Award on behalf of her mother, Harriette
Donald G. Evans	Thanks

THE FULLER AWARD

“The Fuller” is awarded by the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame to a Chicago author who has made an outstanding lifetime contribution to literature. The first 13 Fuller Awards were presented to Gene Wolfe (2012), Harry Mark Petrakis (2014), Haki Madhubuti (2015), Rosellen Brown (2016), Angela Jackson (2018), Stuart Dybek (2018), Sara Paretsky (2019), Sterling Plumpp (2019), Sandra Cisneros (2021), Reginald Gibbons (2021), Luis Alberto Urrea (2021), Ana Castillo (2022) and Rick Kogan (2022).

With the passing of Wolfe in 2019 and Petrakis in 2021, the CLHOF established a policy of elevating all Fuller Award winners to induction status, pending board approval. Thus, both Wolfe and Petrakis are now officially part of the CLHOF’s historical canon.



I believe that any people’s story is every people’s story, and that from stories, we can all learn something to enrich our lives.

If You Please, President Lincoln

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Jay and the Marigold. Children’s Press, 1976: Eight-year-old Jay has cerebral palsy and struggles with a desire to blossom on his own. When he makes a friend in Pedro, together they help a marigold that is struggling to grow in a crack in the sidewalk. After seeing the “disabled” flower blossom, Jay gains confidence in the fact that one day, he too will bloom.

Ride the Red Cycle. Houghton Mifflin, 1980: After contracting influenza at three years old, Jerome Johnson became disabled. Now, at age eleven, he realizes his dream to ride a three-wheel cycle and struggles to overcome outside challenges to obtain his goal. Included in fourth and fifth grade readers.

Children of the Fire. Atheneum Books, 1991: During the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, young Hallelujah navigates the city on her own throughout the tragedy, where she encounters people from all over the city and forms unlikely alliances. Through the experience, she learns about the effects of both classism and racism and helps to rebuild the city. Recipient of the 1991 Award from Friends of American Writers.

Mississippi Chariot. Atheneum Books, 1994: In Depression-era Mississippi, young Shortnin’ and his little sister Peanuts discover their father will be sent to work on a chain gang for a crime he has been wrongfully accused of. In an unlikely alliance, they work with a white, openly racist man to free their father and receive justice for their family.

If You Please, President Lincoln. Atheneum Books, 1995: After the Emancipation Proclamation, fourteen-year-old Moses is tricked into being part of a scheme to send freed slaves to Haiti as agreed upon by President Abraham Lincoln. Along with 400 others, Moses is subject to starvation and disease while he hopes to be rescued. Based on a true incident.

Washington City is Burning. Atheneum Books, 1996: During the War of 1812, James Madison’s twelve-year-old slave, Virginia, works from the White House to help slaves escape to freedom during the invasion of the British Army. Recipient of the 1997 Carl Sandburg Award.

The Twins, the Pirates, and the Battle of New Orleans. Atheneum Books, 1997: When two twins, Andrew and Pierre, run away from slavery during the War of 1812, they soon find themselves hiding out in the swamps below New Orleans. Together, they plan how to free their mother and baby sister with the help of pirates and even General Andrew Jackson. Recipient of the 1998 Midland Authors Award.

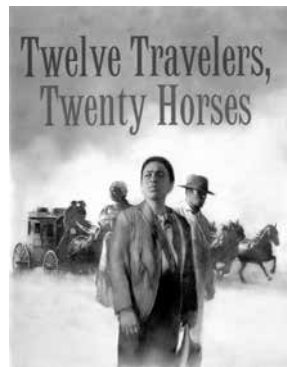


Forty Acres and Maybe a Mule. Atheneum Books, 1998: Three siblings run away from home in search of the forty acres of land promised to their family during the Reconstruction era of 1865. Together, they learn about what is fair and the crippling flaws in the country's plans for freed slaves following the Emancipation Proclamation. Recipient of the 1999 Scott O'Dell Award for historical fiction for children.

Walking to the Bus-Rider Blues. Atheneum Books, 2000: In 1956 Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks has been arrested for refusing to give up her seat on the bus, sparking a city-wide bus boycott. Young Alfa and his sister, Zinnia, participate in the boycott and find they must learn how to use non-violent methods in the face of harassment while they work to solve a crime their grandmother has been falsely accused of. Recipient of the Jane Addams Award Honor in 2001.

Missing from Haymarket Square. Atheneum Books, 2001: During the Haymarket tragedy of 1886, young Dinah and her German immigrant friends plot and scheme to find and free her union organizer father from imprisonment. In the meantime, they work to feed their united family and continue the fight for the Eight-Hour Day.

Twelve Travelers, Twenty Horses. Atheneum Books, 2003: On the eve of the 1860 presidential election, young Jacob and his friend, Solomon, stand for sale on the auction block. When he is one of ten slaves bought by a young master, he soon learns of his master's plan to rob the Pony Express before it can deliver news of Abraham Lincoln's victory. With the help of his friends, he works to stop this from happening and ensure the results arrive safely.



TONIGHT'S PARTICIPANTS



Nora Brooks Blakely founded Brooks Permissions, in 2001, to license and promote the work of her mother, Gwendolyn Brooks, by producing programming and publications which demonstrate her continuing relevance. A playwright for young audiences for many years, Nora's first picture book, *Moyenda and The Golden Heart*, is an origin tale for Kwanzaa, published in 2021. Publication of her next children's book is set for the summer of 2023. flyingcolorsunlimited.com.



Donald G. Evans is the author of a novel and story collection, as well as the editor of two anthologies of Chicago literature, most recently *Wherever I'm At: An Anthology of Chicago Poetry*, which won the Midwestern Modern Language Association's 2022 Book of the Year prize. He is the Founding Executive Director of the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame.



Tsehaye Geralyn Hébert, citizen playwright, (Alliance Keneda; Vermont Studio Center; American College Theatre Festival/Kennedy Center; Sundance Theatre Lab; 3Arts Fellow/Bodies of Work, UIC) engages accessibility and inclusion from page to stage. The founder of Cook County Women Writers Workshop (Chicago, Cook County Jail), she taught writing (Gallery 37/After School Matters, Chicago Dramatists, Pegasus Theatre's Young Playwrights Program/CPS) across Chicago. The Northwestern University and School of the Art Institute of Chicago graduate sits on Piven Theatre Company's honorary board, and is a Cultural Access Collab member. With women-led Artists Design the Future, she advocates affordable artist/creative owned accessible, inclusive, innovative and sustainable work-live spaces.



Amira Hogan is a fifth-grade student at William Beye Elementary School. She has previously performed at Ovation Theatre in *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* and is currently performing in *Once Upon This Island* at Beye School. She's an avid swimmer and artist. She enjoys nature and technology and taking care of dogs.



Jane Hseu is Professor and Chair of English at Dominican University. She teaches classes in racial minority US literatures and writing creative nonfiction. Jane has published scholarly essays on Asian American and Latinx literature, and personal essays on funky Chinese American names and writing as recovery. She is currently working on a memoir about a family history of mental illness and is a proud core organizer for Chicago-based Banyan: Asian American Writers Collective.



Frank Lipo has served as Executive Director of The Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest since 1993. He spearheaded the planning, fundraising, and renovation that created Oak Park River Forest Museum. Frank is a graduate of University of Notre Dame and earned a Masters degree in Public History from Loyola University.



Timothy David Rey is a Chicago-based poet, playwright, performer, and educator. He is a two-time Survive & Thrive Changing Worlds/Arts Work Fund Grant Awardee, a 2022 Lambda Literary Fellow for Emerging LBGT+ Writers, a 2015 Semi-Finalist for the Guild Literary Complex's Gwendolyn Brooks Open Mic Poetry Award, and one of the winners of Project Exploration (The Poetry Center of Chicago). He co-founded the LBGT+ Solo Performance Showcase, Solo Homo (2002-2011). Timothy's writing has been widely performed, published and anthologized, in both English and Spanish.



Linda Robinet is the youngest of Harriette Gillem Robinet's six children. She was an elementary teacher for more than 20 years at the local school that she also attended. Linda used her mother's historical fiction in her classroom for years. Linda is currently an executive assistant for a local recruitment marketing agency in Oak Park. She is a proud daughter of her remarkable parents, McLouis and Harriette.



Madyson Strong is a fourth grader at William Beye Elementary school and a native of Oak Park. From birth, Madyson has had a creative spirit and a passion for performing arts. At two, she began taking gymnastics at the GRC in Oak Park, and since then she has found great joy in dancing, music, and acting. Madyson's strong will, determination, and outgoing personality have created space to turn her hobbies into a passion. She aspires to be a dance teacher and an entrepreneur in the future.



Glennette Tilley Turner is an author, historian, and educator. The Underground Railroad has been the focus of much of her historical research. Her book, *The Underground Railroad in Illinois*, is considered to be the definitive work on that subject. Glennette has written 12 books that range from scholarly and historical works to stories for young adults. Her most recent title is *A Man Called Horse: John Horse and the Black Seminole Underground Railroad*. Among Glennette's many honors, she received induction into the International Literary Hall of Fame for Writers of African Descent at the Gwendolyn Brooks Center of Chicago State University; a lifetime achievement award from Operation Uplift; and an Excellence in Education Award from NAACP Youth Committee. Glennette will receive the Illinois State Historical Society's lifetime achievement award on April 29 of this year.



Athena Williams was born, raised, and continues to reside on Chicago's Westside. Since 2021, Athena has served as Oak Park Regional Housing Center's executive director. A former government employee, Athena is an active advocate throughout the city and greater Chicagoland area. She has served with the Westside Minister's Coalition since 2000. Previously, as community liaison for Building a Healthier Chicago, Athena developed and implemented the first 5k walk program through an underserved community. In 2010, Athena founded Performing Community Solutions, an organization whose mission is to improve, empower, and educate community residents with access to healthy living and continued education, with the integration and collaboration of private and public partnerships.

Harriette Gillem Robinet

(July 14, 1931 - Present)

by Donald G. Evans



The voices capture you first. *Children of the Fire's* Hallelujah. *Missing from Haymarket Square's* Dinah. *If You Please, President Lincoln's* Moses. *Washington City is Burning's* Virginia. *Walking to the Bus-Rider Blues'* Alfa. *Forty Acres and Maybe a Mule's* Pascal. These children and adolescents speak an unvarnished truth, with ground-level insight into the details of the historical event at hand. They approach their extraordinary circumstances with dignity and humility. They offer compassion in the face of oppression (and much worse). Above all, their voices charm and delight, and bring you into their world.

These characters and others provide entree into historically urgent moments explored throughout Harriette Gillem Robinet's oeuvre of 11 novels for young adults. As a decorated author and tireless champion of social justice, Harriette, now 91, has spent her whole adult life embracing and exemplifying those laudable qualities you hear in the voices of her characters.

"Any time I read any of my mother's books, I hear her voice," said Harriette's youngest of six children, Linda. "She always articulates with precision and a slow tempo."

Harriette published her first novel, *Jay and the Marigold* in 1976, the start of an important literary career that came after a full career as a scientist and teacher, amid a full career as a mother. At that point, Harriette had been in the Chicago area two decades.

Writing had always been a part of Harriette's life—she spent her girlhood summers in Arlington, Virginia, where her maternal grandfather had been enslaved under Robert E. Lee. There, Harriette's school teacher father, Richard Avitus Gillem, made her write a story a day.

"I was writing all of my life," Harriette said. "I wrote short stories, jokes, everything..."

But Harriette's early passion and training were in the hard sciences, not the humanities. She attended the College of New Rochelle in New York and received graduate degrees in microbiology from the Catholic University of America in her birth city of Washington, DC. She practiced her science education during a decade-long career as a bacteriologist in food and dairy research for the United States Army and a stint teaching biology at Xavier University.

That scientific training prepared Harriette to undergo the rigors of serious research that enabled her to recreate, with precision and detail, long gone eras, noteworthy characters, even manners of speech. "I could do the research forever," she said.

Remarkably, Harriette pursued her writing career even as she raised one, then two, then three, then four, then five...finally six children. Married in 1960, the Robinets moved to Chicago that same year to follow McLouis' job teaching physics to medical students at The University of Illinois Chicago, the launch of a long science career that eventually found him employed as a health physicist at Argonne National Laboratory. The young married couple lived in university housing, what Mac called a "zero bedroom" apartment on Wood Street, overlooking Ashland Avenue. Their first child, Steven, was born in 1963, prompting their move to a one-bedroom unit. Then, they adopted Phillip in 1964.

Their 1965 move to Oak Park as early integrators is well documented. That same year, Harriette wrote of the experience in her breakthrough *Redbook* essay. Rita was adopted a year later, in 1966. Jonathan and Marsha were adopted in 1969, making the brood five.

"We said 'five kids, that's it.'" said Mac. "A few years later [1974], Harriette was forty-two then, we had Linda."

So picture this: a vibrant but middle-aged mother of six, *writing*, even as she managed to prepare daily home meals, make obsessive grocery store runs, clean and maintain the house, help her children with all the things dependents need, deal with the realities of being Black in a heretofore all-white suburb, and...so forth. *Writing*. These were, at least part of the time,

days of cloth diapers and hang-dried clothes: the laundry alone!!! And not just scribbling for fun, but taking on serious, high-caliber projects that would be published and read and admired. Important *writing* work. Without ever missing a beat in her domestic responsibilities.

“From my days at home from elementary school, when my older siblings were in junior high or high school or off at college, my mother’s days at home were spent cleaning, meal preparation, then she’d write like it was her job,” said Linda. “My mother LOVED being a mother, I do not doubt that or question whether she’d have led her life a different way. And, I know that she enjoyed the work she did before children (BC as we kids would joke) and had been known to say that writing helped her keep her sanity while raising children.”

It’s a credit to Harriette’s discipline and temperament, also her ambition to engage the world, that she started and accelerated her literary career during the first two decades at 214 S. Elmwood Avenue.

She wrote while her children did homework, or watched TV, or played, or finished their chores. While hovered over her makeshift, portable writing desk, or the stolen corners of the dining room or bedroom, Harriette created stories that traveled expansively in time and space. Her novels take us to a wide range of places and historical moments, including Chicago during the Great Chicago Fire of October 8-10, 1871 and the Haymarket Square riot of May 4, 1886. For each novel, Harriette took extensive notes, poring over archives and reference material in the Oak Park Library, the Newberry Library and the Harold Washington Library’s Special Collection. An obsessive researcher, she filled notebook after notebook with handwritten “colloquialisms” spanning the historical time periods in which her novels are set, from the early 19th century through the 1930s. More than a hundred such notebooks survive.

“I go through writers who wrote in the era and I put down all the phrases of their language,” she said in a *Chicago Tribune* interview with Cassandra West on August 4, 1996.

While historical accuracy formed the bedrock of Harriette’s stories, inclusivity and open mindedness, especially as relates to young people, informed their character development. Embedded in many of the novels is the idea that family bonds are not exclusive to blood relations, that a family takes many forms and includes many people, a whole community of surrogate or adoptive

parents, children, siblings, and friends. In *If You Please, President Lincoln* Aunt Rebekah assumes the role of mother to the orphaned Moses, while Goshen accepts the role of father and Sarah gladly joins this extended family.

Goshen is an example of a disabled character (he’s blind) who overcomes his limitations to find steady, productive work, eventually as a barber, and also helps lead a congregation of dying people towards safety. He even falls in love and marries. The support of Moses (and, in lesser ways, others) plays a critical role in Goshen overcoming his handicap, just as Goshen’s support plays a critical role in Moses living and thriving as a future scholar. In *Forty Acres and Maybe a Mule*, Pascal’s seriously injured leg and mangled hand gets him labeled as *crook-legged*, but despite his physical limitations the younger brother, through guile and determination and courage, rescues his older, physically gifted brother, Gideon, many times.

“It was pretty deliberate,” said Mac. “She had a policy, in all of her books--she has somebody who has a handicap, even if it was subtle. She followed a [template]; a character followed certain traits and behaviors.”

True, Harriette’s novels follow a form, but they are not formulaic. These are well-crafted stories as nuanced in their language as in their ideas. Harriette honed her craft with the help of an Oak Park writing group—almost all Jewish women except herself—that met regularly. At one time, that critique group included Linda Schwab, Esther Hershenhorn, Phyllis Mandler, Franny Billingsley, and Myra Sanderman. Harriette became active in organizations like Mystery Writers of America, Sisters in Crime, and the Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators.

That short debut novel, in which Jay, a boy born with cerebral palsy, watches a flower grow, is a parable, or at least extended metaphor. Jay sees that he, like the marigold, can grow and blossom and thrive. His epiphany promises to be an epiphany for other young readers, and thus Harriette established the core belief system that would inform all her work. That book is dedicated to her son and “all youngsters who grow and bloom in their own ways.” Harriette wanted to help children overcome adversity.



Harriette, as a Black woman born in 1931, at the height of the Great Depression, naturally knew adversity. She was born into and lived in a society institutionally opposed to Black rights and freedoms. She knew adversity as a Black female in academia and a Black woman in science and as a Black woman in a white village. Harriette, countless times throughout her life and career, was forced to defend that which should have needed no defense. Story after story characterizes Harriette as returning hostility with kindness, vulgarity with dignity, and discrimination with open-mindedness.

“You could choose anger, you could be upset, or you could carry yourself with grace,” Linda said. “My parents are both very humble, but also filled with grace. My mom was not going to lash out because she was coming from a place of empathy. She carried herself with grace. If somebody scowled at her, she would smile and purposely say, ‘How are you? Great to see you.’ They came at her with contempt, and she returned kindness.”

Ride the Red Cycle (1980) followed the pattern Harriette established in her debut novel. She had gained a foothold in the literary world and moved steadily forward. That literary career ran on a parallel tract to her motherhood career. Her home on South Elmwood teemed with the activity and laughter and raucousness of dozens of school-age children. Most of the neighbors welcomed the Robinets and in fact came to trust Harriette as a secondary minder of their precious children. Kids ran to Harriette with scraped knees and banged elbows and hurt feelings. “Dr. Robinet,” as Linda called her, would clean and bandage a wound, ice a sore, or say just the right words.

In *Ride the Red Cycle*, Harriette created another edifying and instructional story, based on her own experiences raising a son with cerebral palsy. The challenges that Harriette faced, she turned, with laser focus, into opportunities to engage and empower children.

The nine ensuing novels were more expansive, written for a slightly older audience. These stories, strategically set during historical periods of high emotion and drama, chart the lives of characters who’ve had their parents or siblings or both torn apart. They detail acts of cruelty, like lynchings, beatings, cold-blooded murders, and forced deprivation. They explore systematic injustice in the form of legalized oppression, bans on education, segregation, and more. They show human beings who cave to their lowest, most despicable instincts.

But underlying it all are the heroes, everyday people, including adolescents and children, white and Black, confronting society’s bleakest hours with strength, compassion, courage, creativity, and resilience.

The stakes in every Harriette Gillem Robinet story are extremely high. Life and death. In *Forty Acres and Maybe a Mule*, set during Reconstruction, Southern states aggressively try to undermine - indeed, *undo* - the freedom granted slaves under President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation. And they are succeeding. In *Missing from Haymarket Square*, a Black father teeters toward a life in prison through bigoted and oppressive police tactics meant to squelch resistance to unfair labor practices. In *Mississippi Chariot* and *Children of the Fire*, among other novels, inadvertently entwined white and Black children must depend on each other for survival.

These are situations and characters with almost no safety net and almost no opportunity. And yet...

And yet, they persist. They overcome. They even thrive.

It’s incredible that stories written for young adults can at once be so brutally frank and immensely enjoyable. The experience is never purely satisfying. It’s to the author’s credit that she trusts and respects her young readers to process these historical realities, grim though they sometimes be, and to come out on the other side with a great deal more wisdom. Perhaps even a great deal more empathy. The stories are powerfully told from young points of view.

“My mother is a natural writer, but her writing is not fanciful,” said Linda. “She writes with rigor and with a purpose...to bring history to life.”

Harriette communicated these stories and messages through her books, but also through an aggressive appearance schedule. She traveled to the Florida “D” schools that almost never had author visits; it was a conscious choice to visit these students who felt embarrassed or ostracized because of their status. She talked to a Muslim classroom in Chicago which had never met a Black woman writer. She went to an experimental Kentucky school that made her an honorary Colonel. In Las Vegas, Harriette would speak to children during the day and parents at night, all while Mac, in this time before computers, shuffled poster boards and clicked overhead projector slides. At a white Chicago school, a security guard denied Harriette entry for a scheduled appearance; a workman had to go inside to let the principal know she had

arrived. She Skyped with students in Texas. Spent a lot of time at Chicago's South Side Hispanic schools.

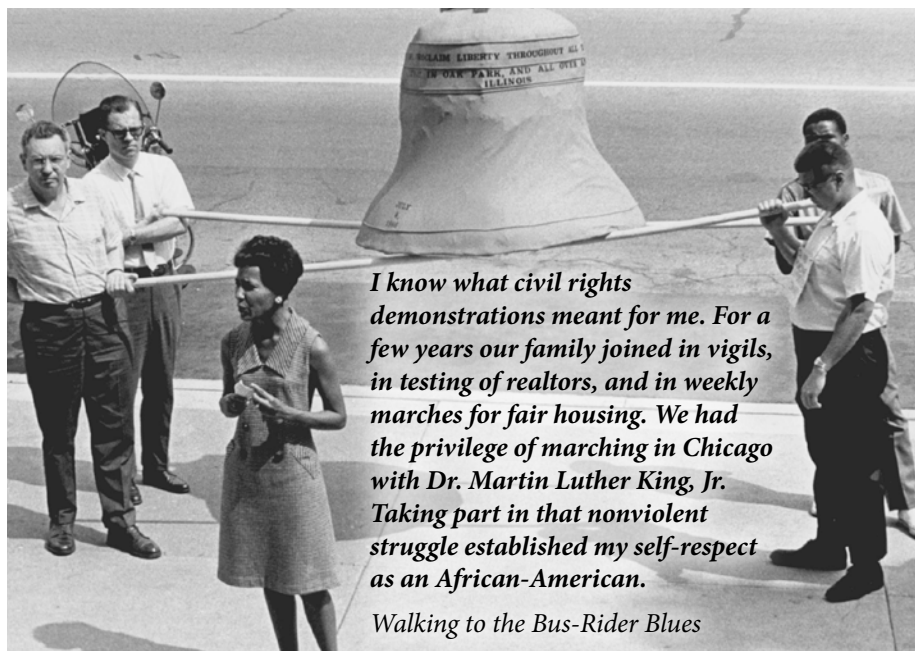
In her last public appearance, her memory starting to falter as Alzheimer's took control, Harriette blanked when a student asked her a question. She panicked. She tried to bluff her way through, but the class sensed something was wrong. Parents, too, were in the audience. This was a school she had visited frequently. Then, a student stood up and answered the question for her. He did it again. Essentially, the student put himself in the role of Harriette's protector, allowing her to leave the session with some grace and dignity.

Isn't that a testament to the love readers had for this author?

Isn't it tangible evidence that her stories of empathy and human kindness and courage had taken root?

Wasn't it a sign that Harriette's lifelong insistence on allowing, rather than judging, people their flaws stood a chance at wider acceptance?

Donald G. Evans is the Founding Executive Director of the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame.



Interview with Linda Robinet

by Donald G. Evans

Sitting in the Oak Park family home that she has known her entire life, Linda Robinet projects and embodies a certain dignity, warmth, humility and generosity that radiate as she patiently listens to the conversation around her. She never interrupts. She always responds thoughtfully. Her intelligence is effortless. She grew up in this house and stayed through young adulthood, dropping out of Oak Park-River Forest High School, then, after her son Conrad was born, going back to earn her GED, as well as undergraduate and master's degrees. Linda's mother helped her raised Conrad as she grinded her way through university coursework and a series of jobs. Long on her own, Linda still lives just a short distance away. All the values instilled in her growing up reflect like a mirror in the two people facing her across the living room, her parents McLouis and Harriette Gillem Robinet. She even reflects the beauty and grace of her nonagenarian parents; it shows in her eyes and posture and her smile.



Linda served as an elementary school teacher for nearly a quarter century and now works as an executive assistant for a local recruitment marketing agency in Oak Park. She holds a certificate in elementary education, a BS in psychology (Rosary, now Dominican, University) and a master's in Elementary Mathematics (Walden University). Summers, Linda taught swimming and managed pools, and still works in that capacity at River Forest Tennis Club. Linda, now a middle-aged, highly accomplished woman in her own right, is Harriette and Mac's youngest child. She bears witness to her mother's impressive and important literary career, as an intimate observer and as an educator whose scholarship encompasses her mom's oeuvre of 11 young adult historical novels.

It is through Linda that we're able to access memories and deeper insights into Harriette's work. Harriette, at 91, suffers from Alzheimer's. The first signs of memory loss began in 2016 and her symptoms accelerated to the point that

she gave up writing. She'd stopped doing public appearances a decade and a half earlier, mostly due to her advanced age. Harriette's condition, now severe, prevents Harriette from any real recollection of her life as a writer, even the fact that she has written the books she has written.

In this comfortable, casual setting, Harriette reacts to conversation with joyful smiles and playful expressions of "Oh, wow!" She is able to process and understand much of the surface conversation, even to answer—accurately, it seems—basic questions. She signs my personal copies of her novels in pretty, legible cursive. But as with all Alzheimer's sufferers, Harriette's memory is shallow and unreliable, a curse which does not cause any of the Robinets, including herself, to outwardly alter their treatment of each other. The love and respect and pride the family has in each other remains steadfast.

Linda, though, is able to fill in some of the inevitable blanks.

DGE: You're the youngest of six children. When you were two years old, your mom published her first novel, *Jay and the Marigold*, about a young boy with cerebral palsy watching a flower grow. For this novel, did your mom draw from her experience raising your brother, Jonathan?

LR: My mother definitely drew on her experiences raising my brother Jonathan for her first two picture books. When Jonathan (and my sister Marsha - both were adopted at the same time) was adopted from Catholic Charities, my parents did not know that he had cerebral palsy, nor did they have any details about his birth parents. As Jonathan and Marsha grew and developed very differently, both of my parents did everything in their power and means to help Jonathan. They went to doctors, specialists, therapists, ophthalmologists, speech therapists, physical therapists, the list is too long to include everyone.

From my understanding, my mother was at the library in Oak Park one day. One of the librarians had just returned from a conference of librarians. She had a conversation with my mother regarding the needs of the literary world. The librarian told my mother that there was a great need for books for children that included characters with a variety of disabilities. My mother said, "I could do that," and she proceeded to write *Jay and the Marigold*.

I have also heard that my mother was inspired by a moment when Jonathan was watching an episode of *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* on Channel 11 WTTW

Chicago. Jonathan was sitting on the floor wearing his long-legged braces, already having had a few of the operations on his legs. Mr. Rogers said, "I like you just the way you are," in his gentle, conversational way, looking directly at his television audience.

My brother responded, "But, my legs no go-go."

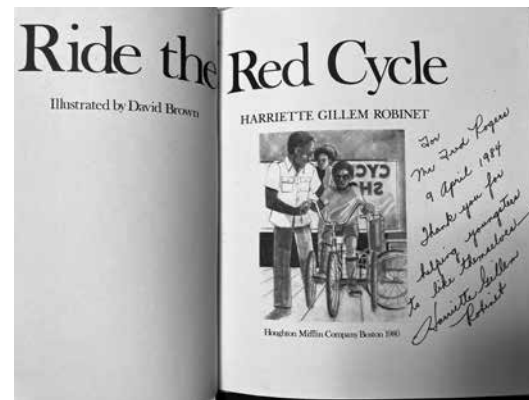
Mr. Rogers replied, "I do like you just the way you are." My parents eventually shared this story with Mr. Rogers who years later came to visit our family. My mother was watching this conversation between Jonathan and Mr.

Rogers, very emotional. She wanted him and other children with disabilities to see themselves in stories and to like themselves just the way they were.

DGE: Reading the novel as an adult, what aspects of your family history did you recognize in the story, and what techniques did your mother employ to transform biography into literature?

LR: Any time I read any of my mother's books, I hear her voice. She always articulated with precision and a slow tempo. My mother made a concerted effort to NOT include our personal family history in her books, out of respect for our family's privacy. With the exception of *Ride the Red Cycle*, none of the characters or situations had connection to instances or traits of us children. *Ride the Red Cycle* was written soon after my father had created a hand-crank, quad-cycle for Jonathan. There is a lovely article in the *Wednesday Journal* about my father's invention back then and mentioned in this article: <https://www.oakpark.com/2022/03/29/the-power-of-showing-up/>

The family history aspects that I recognize in all of my mother's books is the concept of always learning and striving to understand. I know this quote is overused but it is poignant as a message of my mother's writing and our family history: Of her books, Harriette says (on her website), "Unless we know our history, we have no perspective on life today. How can we know where we're going, or appreciate where we are today, if we don't know where we're coming from?"



My mother, my parents, wanted us to strive for learning and understanding of our own history and the history of many cultures. My mother's father was a junior high school teacher of history and geography. My grandfather instilled in my mother a desire to learn about everywhere in the world and the history of those places. A magazine that I fondly remember always being the centerpiece at our house and the starting point of many dinner conversations was *National Geographic*, which was also something she read with her parents.

I think a technique my mother used to transform biography into literature was to tap into empathy. I remember often talking "on the stairs" (my siblings and I were sent to sit on the stairs to think if we had made a mistake) about "How do you think they might feel?" If I were to have to speculate about how she wove her own biography into her stories, it was to come from a place of understanding.

My mother did not write fantasy, she wrote multicultural historical fiction. She loved to research, always learning more and more, as her father had taught her. It was a challenge for her to integrate historical facts with fiction to bring history to life. My mother is a natural writer but her writing is not fanciful. She writes with rigor and with a purpose...to bring history to life.

DGE: By the time you were born, your mother was 42 years old and there were six children in the house. As you were growing up, did you observe the ways in which your mom managed to steal some writing time amidst her duties raising a large family and maintaining the household?

LR: Reading, writing and homework were always being done in our home. Someone of my siblings were always reading for a book report; going to the library to get books or study; making flashcards for test review; editing a paper or essay that had been written, etc. My mother often wrote as we were doing homework. She'd be writing at her desk in the dining room while a few of us would be working at the dining room table. She'd be writing with her laptop turquoise desk on her lap in the den, where our television is, to monitor our comings-and-goings. My mother kept a rather strict cleaning, cooking, shopping, laundry schedule that involved getting her tasks done efficiently so that she had time to write. My siblings and I were raised with chores. The duties of the house were divided up between us kids, and my mother monitored like a hawk. The rule was that we had to get our chores

done before we could play. She taught us the duties of the house very well, including cooking dinner once a week when we were old enough (so even the meals were divided up, including the shopping for ingredients, preparing the meal and cleaning the dishes). She is a phenomenal mother whose full-time job was preparing her children to be independent, self-sufficient adults. My father also taught us to change oil in our cars, rotate tires, cut the lawn grass, shovel snow, wash the storm windows (taking them down and putting them back up was an entire family project) and perform endless science experiments in the basement. From my days at home from elementary school, when my older siblings were in junior high or high school or off at college, my mother's days at home were spent cleaning, meal preparation, then she'd write like it was her job.

DGE: Where did your mom write?

LR: To the best of my memory, my mother wrote in four different places:

1. She wrote at the desk my father set up in the corner of the dining room. She'd have her piles of notebooks and books that she used for researching in neat piles.
2. She wrote in the den/tv room or on the front porch, if the weather was nice, using her turquoise laptop desk. If we kids were playing outside during the late spring, summer or early fall, my mother was often sitting on the front porch, keeping watch while writing.
3. My mother had a writing desk in the room my two older sisters shared once they had completed college and moved away from home. After I moved away. She had a computer by then, though she started with the typewriter and moved onto a word processor and eventually a computer.
4. My mother had a writing desk in the room that was my room when I was a child that my father built for her. She worked back and forth between the two bedrooms. When I would come to visit with my son, I would often hear the clack-clack-clack of the keys from upstairs.

DGE: Tell me about the house on 214 S. Elmwood. It's been in your family nearly six decades. What was that house like when you were growing up? What was Oak Park like?

LR: 214 South Elmwood was more than a home, it was a sanctuary. Not many adult children can say that their parents still live in their childhood home or that they can always go “home.” The house was where my parents taught me how to cook; clean; do well in school; become responsible; love and lose pets; have every “first” that typical childhoods are filled with; and it also was the home that I brought my newborn infant son to for the four weeks of my maternity leave. The 200 block of South Elmwood was extraordinary: at one time its claim to fame was having over 80 children under the age of 18. My best friends since birth grew up there, we stood up in each other’s weddings, welcomed each other’s babies, and grieved when their parents passed away. It was a block that was filled with summer memories of playing Jail Break, catching fireflies or walking to Ridgeland Commons pool or hill together. The house was never quiet; it was filled with music (we all took an instrument, all of us took the piano); we had a record player that played many different types of music, from folk, to metal, to alternative, to rock and roll; we often played elaborate make believe games, usually led by our eldest brother, Stephen, that involved building forts and wearing costumes. The house had routines like chores before playtime; dinner together, all around the table in the dining room, and every meal started with prayer; taking turns watching television shows especially Saturday morning cartoons; making lunches the night before school; and going to church weekly at St. Edmund. We camped every summer at the Indiana Dunes and frequented local museums, constantly learning.

By the time I went off to elementary school, Oak Park was a different Oak Park from the one my siblings grew up in. I knew what my brothers and



sisters had experienced, but I did not experience anything racially motivated (oddly enough not until I went to college as a single mother). Oak Park was a community that I would consider to be perfect to grow up in. I loved my schools, so much so that I taught at the elementary school for 24 years that I had attended and my son attended. I loved climbing trees, playing outside with friends, walking to the mall to shop at Woolworth, catch a movie at the Lake Theater, eat a hot dog from Tasty Dog, read books at the library, or get some candy from Katie’s Country Candy Store. Oak Park was full of park district activities like fishing during the summer, swim lessons at Oak Park-River Forest High School, sledding on Ridgeland Commons hill during the winters, or building a sledding hill down our front porch stairs (often zooming out into the street).

DGE: Your parents bought the house and began living there in 1965, when discrimination in the housing market all but prevented a Black family from ownership. Your parents still live there today, in an Oak Park that has grown from a white, entitled, bigoted community to one that prides itself on diversity and inclusivity. Were you aware of the house as a symbol of progress, or in other ways cognizant of your place in a movement toward social justice?

LR: My mother and father are storytellers. I grew up understanding that our “home” was very symbolic of the achievements of the Civil Rights Movement. I listened when Bob and Lynn Bell would visit or Don and Joyce Beisswenger stopped by about their efforts to help my family find their forever home to raise their children in a safe community. I do not believe that I had a place in the movement toward social justice, but I reaped the benefits of the peaceful efforts of my parents and siblings.

DGE: Your mother carried on the duty of raising six children while finding success as an author. Tell me a little bit about how this changed her life, if at all.

LR: My mother LOVED being a mother, I do not doubt that or question whether she’d have led her life a different way. And, I know that she enjoyed the work she did before children (BC as we kids would joke) and had been known to say that writing helped her keep her sanity while raising children. After I became a mother, I developed a new respect for my mother. She made the enormous sacrifice to help raise my son, starting when he was four weeks old while I went to college, then started teaching and while I got my master’s degree. When we would talk about parenting, my mother

shared that she lost herself in diapers (cloth diapers back then that had to be washed), nursing or bottles, nap times, bedtimes, snacks, breakfast, lunch, dinners, shopping (there was a time that she went grocery shopping every day...we'd go through a gallon of milk every day), laundry, laundry and more laundry. I would speculate that writing absolutely changed her life, it gave her an adult purpose beyond children; it challenged her mind; it woke up her creative spirit; it fulfilled her spirit for learning.

DGE: You're a teacher. Tell me a bit about your career in education.

LR: Just this year, I have taken a leave from teaching. For 24 years I taught elementary education, 18 of those years at the 4th grade level. Twenty-one of those years at Beye Elementary, where I went to school and my son went to school. A huge reason why I went into education was because of my parents. My mother shared books with me, read to me at bedtime, helped me with my schoolwork every step of the way and I became an avid reader. My early dream was to become a ballerina, but reality set in and I debated between a teacher and a librarian. My mother and father were my first teachers. They were patient and encouraging. They were loving and joyful. They were passionate and enthusiastic. I wanted to give children what my parents and siblings had given me.

Since I started teaching in my own homeroom, I have always used my mother's books. I used *Ride the Red Cycle* and *Jay and the Marigold* to teach about empathy and diversity. I used all of her books for reading, writing, social studies and history. When I taught Chicago History, I would read *Children of the Fire* and my children identified with Hallelujah. When I taught *Missing from Haymarket Square*, my class would go to Haymarket Square for a field trip and delighted that Hallelujah had become so successful and helpful as an adult working at the soup kitchen. In social studies, when we learned about government and our presidents, we'd read *If You Please, President*

Lincoln and were shocked to learn about different policies when all they knew was about the Emancipation Proclamation. When we'd learn about the Civil Rights Movement, we'd read *Walking to the Bus-Rider Blues* and we'd talk about the elements of a mystery. My mother



has been woven in every year of my teaching and generations of students were exposed to her writing.

DGE: At the heart of your mother's books are themes of social justice, acceptance, compassion, and empathy. Some of those themes arise organically, others are more insistently placed within the context of the story. As a teacher, what about these stories and the characters within strike you as useful for classroom instruction? Why is it important for young people to learn about differences in circumstance and race and the ways in which prejudice might be unraveled?

LR: My mother's stories are relatable. Students hear that inner voice that my mother writes so well. And, something my students have shared over and over again over the years, is that my mother's characters were never perfect, just like them. Her characters were scared and brave. Her characters were angry and loving. Her characters were disabled and differently abled. Her books are so powerful for children because they get to experience the historical events through the eyes of the characters. My students would often fumble to find the words to explain what they learned about prejudice and if I were to summarize the gist of their sharings, it is that prejudice became humanized. Prejudice was about fear and differences and blame and bottom line, it was about not understanding and being willing to learn. My students often felt so empowered because they felt like they were more likely to be open minded than adults. My mother's books gave them hope that children have power through understanding our history, understanding biases, stereotypes, preferences and that there is no shame, but there must be awareness.

DGE: Describe your mother's personality and temperament. What inspired her to be a writer?

LR: My mother is classic. She is always professional and reserved. She is well-spoken and eloquent. I would speculate that my mother felt constant pressure to represent the African-American race well. She was a representative of what her ancestors had fought so valiantly for. Her temperament was calm, in control, and polite. She is soft spoken and gentle though incredibly strong. If any of my siblings or myself had made a mistake, my mother would lower her voice, that's when we knew we were really in trouble. She is value driven and her faith is her guide. She was always reading and learning something. She was almost militaristic in how consistent her habits were like praying,

exercise, healthy eating, always learning, writing. Even now, she writes down what happens in her day and rereads, though she does not remember the events she writes about.

What inspired my mother to be a writer? I wish my mother could answer this question herself, it is one I have never asked. I have lost my mother to Alzheimer's, she doesn't even remember that she wrote any books.

I think my mother has always been a writer. I do know that her father made her write during the summers when she was a child just like she did with me. I do know that she had lived such a full life and had stories to tell, but not her own. She was incredibly humble. I did ask her why she never wrote a book about what it was like growing up during segregation or marching during the Civil Rights Movement or the stories of our ancestors who were slaves or what it was like growing up during World War II when her brother was in the Army, so many amazing stories. She never felt that it was her place to write those stories and she was deeply respectful of never offending or misrepresenting my siblings and me.

DGE: Your mother's accomplishments are wide and varied. How much pride did she take in her accomplishments as an author? What kind of importance did she place on creating these meaningful stories and finding an audience for them?

LR: My mother (and father) were incredibly humble. She was never prideful about anything in my memories. Even when she received awards for her writing, she always spoke about her gratitude for the support of friends, family, editors, her writing group and the bigger message of learning about history. My mother did not necessarily write to find an audience, she did not write for fame, she did not write for recognition. I remember that my mother, when she wrote an article for *Redbook* magazine, she said something like I am a mother, not a pioneer. I think she would also say the same about writing, she just jotted a few words down in a notebook, loved the process and was pleased that people enjoyed her stories. She was never boastful or a braggart; humility to the extreme.

Donald G. Evans is the author of a novel and story collection, as well as the editor of two anthologies of Chicago literature, most recently Wherever I'm At: An Anthology of Chicago Poetry. He is the Founding Executive Director of the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame.

First You Dream

by Tracy Clark

Writers are interesting people. They're caged birds until they find the courage and confidence to break the bars, take a breath, and claim their voices – to be what and who they were meant to be. Each writer finds their voice in their own time, each one breaks the bars differently, each tentative breath, each song they sing is unique, hard won and ultimately divine.

But first you dream.

I grew up on the South Side of Chicago a little Black kid who loved to read and imagine stories of her own. My family wasn't rich or influential. My mother was a registered nurse, my father worked for the county. I had school and friends, regular trips to the library and church on Sundays. Normal. Family was important, so were *books*. My parents always read, there were always books in the house, so I read, too. I had *Harriet the Spy* and Nancy Drew and Agatha Christie. I had Conan Doyle and Hammett. In my mind, writers were magical people, imagination giants, as far removed from my little house in my little neighborhood, it seemed, as the moon was from the Earth. But I knew they were great.

I could discover whole worlds in books, but what I could rarely find were book people who looked like me. Though I shoehorned myself into Nancy Drew's shoes or climbed on the shoulders of Sam Spade, I vowed, quietly, in a caged bird's voice, to put me on the page one day. I did. I do. But it's true what's said, *You have to see it to be it.*

*First you dream,
Dream about incredible things
Then you look
And suddenly you have wings.
You can fly, you can fly*

I first saw Harriette Gillem Robinet decades ago at one of Mystery Writers of America's annual writers workshop "Dark and Stormy Nights." In a sea of faces attached to people who loved books as much as I did, but did not look like me, there she was sitting quietly at a table. A writer. A *Black* writer. A marvelous sight. Inspiration.

Too shy to approach, I had not yet broken open the cage, I admit I stared in wonder. I may have shadowed her around for a bit, watching, marveling. There. Sitting *there*. I hoped to glean some writerly secret, some magic from this woman who had told her story. She was friendly. I could see that in her smile, but I never worked up the courage to introduce myself. She gave me a nod of acknowledgment across a room once. Maybe in the sea of faces she recognized mine too? That's the extent of our interaction, but it wasn't really. Because just being in the room, knowing there was another in there too, seeing the possibility, sparked a fire, a determination, a crusade. *You have to see it to be it.*

I went home and I committed to the writing, as difficult and as frustratingly *ungettable* as it was at first. Grabbing onto the craft was like trying to catch a bead of mercury betwixt thumb and index finger, but I knew I could do it, if I put in the work. I could be a writer because there were Black writers like Harriette Gillem Robinet, ones I could see, ones I could pick out of a room, ones who looked like me. It was possible. It was an open door. It was a path to follow. And all it took was a friendly smile and a knowing nod.

*Take my hand
I promise that I won't let you fall
Don't look back
The looking back could end it all
Off we go to the sky
Straight ahead
But first you dream*

I learned later that Robinet had been a microbiologist, a teacher, before becoming a writer of children's historical novels. A woman of science. We all come from other worlds, writers do, before we give over to the one meant for us. Harriette Gillem Robinet writes books with purpose—to teach the young, especially those of color, about history and their place in it. To enlighten and edify, to spark a sense of discovery and wonder in all things. To help others see it.

This from her extensive bio:

"She feels that unless we know our history, we have no perspective on life today. How can we know where we're going, or appreciate where we are today, if we don't know where we're coming from? She also discovers that African Americans

have been left out of history. Their stories have been deliberately changed or ignored. ... She tries to have both European and African American characters in stories, to have no villains but the systems, and to thrill as well as uplift her readers."

Writing anything requires a leap of faith. Once beyond the bars of the cage, once the voice is found, the task set, you have to believe the voice you've found is worthy of the air it uses up, that you have something to say that someone out there needs to hear. Sometimes the leap you take is frightening. Every time the leap is necessary.

Back to "Dark and Stormy Nights." I went back several years to learn what I needed to learn, and each time I went back Harriette Gillem Robinet was there. Then something wonderful began to happen. There were more writers who looked like me in that sea of faces. My confidence grew. I began to feel that I was meant to be in the room, that I could have a place at the table if I were only brave enough to claim it. Easier to do when writers like Robinet claimed theirs first.

I did claim it. Today, I am the award-winning author of five, soon to be six, crime novels. I am a writer because I was meant to be one and because I saw the possibilities before me set down by those who came before.

Thankfully, today, I rarely stand out as *other* in a room of writers. When I enter those rooms now and see myself in many faces, not just one or two, I think of Harriette Gillem Robinet and that kind nod and smile.

I have found my people, my writer family. I am a proud member of Sisters in Crime and Mystery Writers of America. Their support and fraternity buoy my spirit. I am also a member of Crime Writers of Color, a group of diverse voices started a few short years ago by writers Kellye Garrett, Gigi Pandian and the legendary Walter Mosley. Their goal then and our goal still today, is to get more diverse voices in the room, to advocate for and support those voices of diversity at every stage of their writing journey. Today, CWOC has more than 350 members. Our work runs the gamut from cozy mysteries all the way up to the grittiest noir. We tell American stories and stories that originate from far away. Our voices are rich and strong and unrepentant. We are here because others were there when our numbers were few. Now we light the way for those who will come after us. Every writer should do the same.

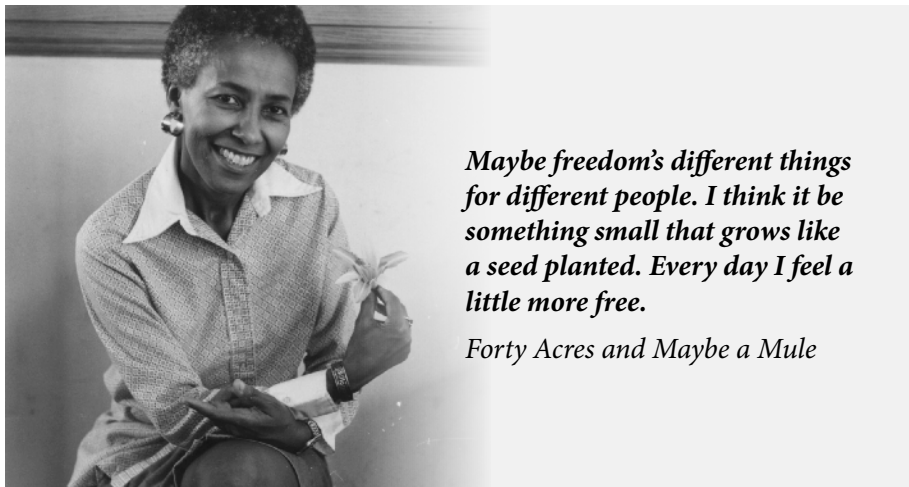
So, I am so very pleased that Harriette Gillem Robinet has been awarded the coveted Fuller Award. Yes, of course. It's a well-deserved honor. It's for the work, but it also for the trailblazing. It's also for walking through the door and holding it open for the ones behind. It's for the smile and the nod. It's for being there to be seen. It's for the representation. It's for the teaching and the history and the expectation of greatness. It's for all that and more. And I, personally, owe her a great debt that I pay by paying it forward.

Thank you, Harriette Gillem Robinet.

*You can soar
Feel the wind
Hear it roar
It's easy now
Imagine that
But first you dream
First you dream*

First You Dream, song by John Kander and Fred Ebb from the Broadway musical Steel Pier.

Tracy Clark, multi-nominated Anthony, Shamus, Edgar, Macavity, and Lefty Award finalist and winner of the 2020 and 2022 G.P. Putnam's Sons Sue Grafton Memorial Award for the Cass Raines Chicago Mystery Series and the 2022 Sara Paretsky Award. She is also the author of the new Det. Harriet Foster series, which debuts in January 2023 with the first entry, Hide.



Maybe freedom's different things for different people. I think it be something small that grows like a seed planted. Every day I feel a little more free.

Forty Acres and Maybe a Mule

A 1960s 'move-in'

by Ken Trainor

History is like a lantern that can light children's paths throughout life. How can we know where we're going, or appreciate where we are, if we don't know where we're coming from? – Harriette Gillem Robinet

The Robinets have lived in their Oak Park home since 1965. They raised six children and housed an assortment of cats and dogs. The house has that lived-in look forged by the trappings of active children and grandchildren.

They represent, in so many ways, all that is best about a community like Oak Park. The fact that they happen to be African American is beside the point.

But it wasn't always beside the point. In the 1960s, when the Robinets were among the first black families to move to town in what is now called "the fair housing era," their race was precisely the point-and potentially a flashpoint.

Straw buyer

Harriette, in fact, never saw their new house until the day they moved in. During an era when real estate firms were part of the problem, and not, as today, part of the solution, a white couple, aka "straw buyer," had to purchase the house for them. But there were no guarantees the neighbors would accept them. It seemed just as likely they would find a burning cross on the lawn or a rock through the window.

A young housewife and aspiring writer in her early 30s at the time, Harriette noticed a series of articles in *Redbook* magazine during her visits to the doctor and dentist. Since 1960, the magazine had been publishing "young mothers' stories." A friend urged Harriette to submit hers. The story was published in the February 1968 issue.

Redbook periodically updated the stories of their young mothers. In fact, the following year, the magazine brought the 10 mothers whose stories generated the most response (in the form of readers' letters) to New York for a three-day, all-expense-paid-trip, which included meeting famed anthropologist Margaret Mead.

When Harriette got to the *Redbook* offices, everyone said, "Oh, so you're Harriette Robinet. We got a lot of mail on you." They never showed her the

letters, so she doesn't know what percentage was hate mail, but she did receive some hate mail herself after the article was published.

Harriette says the publication was her first big payday as a writer. *Redbook* paid \$500 for the piece, a lot of money in 1968, and she used it to buy her first electric typewriter (she hammered the *Redbook* article out on a manual).

In 1991, *Redbook* revisited the series with an update on some of the now-older young mothers, and a photo of the Robinet family appears in it.

Looking back in 2003, with 35 years of hindsight, Harriette said it's important to be reminded about the past from time to time, and especially important for young African Americans.

She talked to a young black couple in Oak Park not long ago, and made a reference to her experiences. They told her, "You must have gone about it the wrong way. We didn't have any problems."

"The younger generation doesn't know," Harriette says. "They can't imagine it." Most young African Americans think, "What's the big deal?" a testament both to the success of the Oak Park fair housing experiment and to the younger generation's lack of historical context.

Harriette believes in the old saw that if you don't learn history's lessons, you're doomed to repeat the mistakes.

"Things reverse very quickly," she said. "People forget. We've forgotten so much."

It bothers her most when young people don't vote. "Women suffered for the right to vote," she said. "Black people went through so much to get the vote. When my daughters don't vote, I grieve. I vote every opportunity. It's essential."

And it's essential for young people, she said, to know how far they've come, and how important it is to stand up for what's right.

"There's an injustice committed every day," she said. The new rights movement involves LGBTQ+ Americans, she noted, "but that's moving, too." Things are better for the disabled as well. The only front that isn't moving, she observed with regret, is poverty.

Once the newcomers who shook up the old guard, the Robinets are now firmly entrenched members of the establishment and have lived on their block longer than everyone.

At one point there were 80 kids on the block, Harriette noted. The Robinets still love the house they bought sight unseen and have no plans to leave. Over the years, they stripped the paint off the woodwork and from the fireplace bricks, put on new roofs and stairway railings. When they repainted the hallway walls, they inserted several "time capsules" so some future owner would know a little about the family that once upon a time defied convention and helped integrate a community.

When that happens, they'll no doubt come across a certain article that appeared in *Redbook* magazine.

Ken Trainor has been a writer, editor and columnist for the Wednesday Journal since 1990. He is the author of We Dare to Say: An Adventure in Journaling (2007) and Unfinished Pentecost: Vatican II and the Altered Lives of Those Who Witnessed It (2013). This column first appeared in the Wednesday Journal on April 22, 2008.

Her father always searched for moments of beauty. He said they happened when what was right and what was good came together. But Dinah realized that not everyone saw it the same.

Missing from Haymarket Square

It was a righteous kind of beauty for the mind. The kind that went with power, glory, truth, and goodness. A beauty that made people's hearts sing.

Missing from Haymarket Square



Harriette Gillem Robinet's Family Home 214 S. Elmwood Ave., Oak Park, IL

by Isabella Lekas and Donald G. Evans

In August, 1965, when this pristine 3,200 square-foot home was more fixer-upper than *Better Homes and Gardens* showcase, McLouis and Harriette Gillem Robinet moved in. There were no other Black homeowners on the 200 block of South Elmwood. In fact, there were hardly any Black homeowners in all of Oak Park. That was by design. Institutional racism, particularly during the real estate industry's "fair housing era," blocked Black families from integrating into an almost all-white, fiercely exclusionary Oak Park. Though its accuracy is disputed, the oft-quoted Ernest Hemingway line, "Oak Park is a neighborhood of wide lawns and narrow minds," still applied.

The Robinets were required to get out written notifications regarding their pending move, essentially warning neighbors that their heretofore all-white neighborhood was being infiltrated. Police informed the Robinets that the move must happen in the middle of the day, during the middle of the week, ostensibly to "protect" the white neighbors and their privilege.

The Robinets had enlisted the help of friends Bob and Lynn Bell, a white couple, in their search for a new home. The search lasted more than two years, during which time several offers fell through. Eventually, Don and Joyce Beisswenger bought the house at 214 S. Elmwood in order to sell it to the Robinets.



Harriette had never seen the house; McLouis, who goes by "Mac," had visited only briefly. Mac's first impression was, "I thought this was it for us." Harriette trusted Mac's judgment. There was really no choice. If a Black couple were seen inspecting a house, the ingrained forces of resistance would mobilize to prevent, yet again, the potential sale.

In February of 1968, Harriette wrote an essay titled "I'm a Mother-Not a Pioneer" published in *Redbook* magazine. It recounted the move-in experience and their four years preceding it. On her first impressions of the house, Harriette wrote "We had lived in a small Chicago apartment for five years, and the house looked like heaven. An avenue of elms and maples formed an arch of brilliant red and gold leaves. The fenced backyard would be a safe place for our boys to play in; large bay windows promised light and air; there was a real fireplace. And I could still plant some tulips before the first frost."



Mac recalled that Oak Park had been a generally welcoming community, aside from one next-door neighbor, who said "My son tells me I'm going to have to leave, it's too dangerous." Mostly, though, the Robinets began a new life in harmony with their new community. Mac recalled "an army of girls wanting to babysit." The Robinets made quick friends with others on the street. Mac admits that he "was kind of in a double world" as he was at work a lot of the time, while Harriette remained home. Harriette interacted with the community and would sometimes experience animosity toward the family. Daughter Linda said Harriette always carried herself with grace and humility despite this, with her "back straight and head held high" and taught her kids to do the same.

Change, not in small part accelerated by the Robinets, came to Oak Park over the decades. The Robinets raised six children in this house. The youngest, Linda, born in 1974, said she benefitted from her parents' pioneering journey, in that she never experienced racially motivated behavior growing up.

The block at one time housed an overwhelming number of young families with school-age children. The Robinets were active at St. Edmund parish and frequented popular local attractions like the Lake Theater, Ridgeland Commons, Tasty Dog, Katie's Country Candy Store, and Woolworth. The house itself was filled with music—every Robinet child played an instrument, including the piano, while recorded songs from folk to rock to metal to alternative played on the home record player. The house bustled with the activities of chores and schoolwork and family meals.

Now known as a diverse and welcoming village, the Oak Park of today is diametrically opposed to its 1965 values that made Black home ownership nearly impossible. In an April 22, 2008 *Wednesday Journal* article, Harriette told Ken Trainor that some of the younger Oak Park Black families were oblivious to the struggle and transformation. “The younger generation doesn’t know,” Harriette was quoted as saying. “They can’t imagine it.”

The house, too, underwent dramatic change, also for the better. Once painted nearly all white, including the brick fireplace, the 1891-built home’s natural beauty was all but hidden. The Robinets put into motion constant restoration projects, big and small. The ugly brown bagasse siding on the exterior came down to expose the original siding. New stairway railings were installed. Paint stripped to reveal glistening warm wood and rosy brick. Fresh paint applied elsewhere. These improvements happened over the course of decades. The scientist Mac and his scientist wife (Harriette had a decade-long career as a bacteriologist for the United States Army) also undertook the challenge of making the house a model for efficiency. They installed geothermal heating, a white steel roof, even put solar panels on the garage. At one point, during a hallway paneling job, the Robinets inserted several “time capsules” in hopes that a future owner would learn a bit about their history as it related to the community’s integration. In 2010, the home received the Landmark Preservation Award from the Oak Park Historic Preservation Commission.

Through all this, Harriette wrote. Her first breakthrough as an author was that 1968 *Redbook* essay, for which she received the then-handsome sum of \$500. She reinvested her earnings in an electric typewriter. Harriette was later inspired to write her first books, *Jay and the Marigold* (1976) and *Ride the Red Cycle* (1980) because she wanted to provide better representation for kids with disabilities in children’s literature.

She wrote at a desk in the corner of the dining room, where neat piles of research notebooks were stacked. She wrote in the den. On fair days, she took her turquoise laptop desk onto the porch. Later, she wrote in a dedicated office that had been her bedroom. All this while raising six children and maintaining a large house.

In all, Harriette wrote 11 books including: *Children of the Fire* (1991, Friends of American Writers Award winner), *Mississippi Chariot* (1994), *If You Please, President Lincoln* (1995), *Washington City is Burning* (1995, Carl Sandburg Award winner), *The Twins, the Pirates, and the Battle of New Orleans* (1997,

Midland Authors Award winner), *Forty Acres and Maybe a Mule* (1998, Scott O’Dell Award for historical fiction for children), *Walking to the Bus-Rider Blues* (2001, Jane Addams Award Honor book), *Missing from Haymarket Square* (2001), and *Twelve Travelers, Twenty Horses* (2003).

The grandchild of a former slave, Harriette stopped writing when Alzheimer’s reduced her memory.

She and Mac continue to live in the house as of March, 2023. The Elmwood Avenue home has three bedrooms and one-and-a-half bathrooms. The basement houses Mac’s workshop and the living room features an abundance of greenery born of Harriette’s green thumb. Photos of their family, art and souvenirs, trinkets, and books all fill the house. Just recently, Harriette declared, “I absolutely love Oak Park!”

Linda added, “214 South Elmwood was more than a home, it was a sanctuary. Not many adult children can say that their parents still live in their childhood home or that they can always go ‘home.’ The house was where my parents taught me how to cook; clean; do well in school; become responsible; love and lose pets; have every ‘first’ that typical childhoods are filled with; and it also was the home that I brought my newborn infant son to for the four weeks of my maternity leave. The 200 block of South Elmwood was extraordinary: at one time its claim to fame was having over 80 children under the age of 18. My best friends since birth grew up there, we stood up in each other’s weddings, welcomed each other’s babies, and grieved when their parents passed away.”

***I’m no worse and no better
than any other child. How we
act often depends on what we
think of ourselves.***

Children of the Fire



I'm a Mother - Not a Pioneer

by Harriette Robinet

A Young Mother's Story - 89th of a series written by Redbook readers, February 1968.

"I know that when my son goes to school in our white neighborhood, sooner or later someone will call him 'nigger.' This is heartbreaking for me."

On a hazy, uncertain afternoon in October, 1965, our family of four drove up to a spacious old house in Oak Park, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago. We had lived in a small Chicago apartment for five years, and the house looked like heaven. An avenue of elms and maples formed an arch of brilliant red and gold leaves. The fenced backyard would be a safe place for our boys to play in; large bay windows promised light and air; there was a real fireplace. And I could still plant some tulips before the first frost.

The house was only seven miles from the campus of the medical center at the University of Illinois, where McLouis, my husband, teaches physics. Many of my husband's colleagues and students live in Oak Park, a community with good schools and nice shopping areas. With its mellow atmosphere, its highly individual, well-kept old houses and its huge trees, Oak Park spelled h-o-m-e to us. And today was the day we'd move in.

But this wasn't an ordinary moving day. We are Negroes. When a Negro family moves into an all-white suburb, it's officially called a "move-in."

A "move-in" involves many precautions. The Illinois Commission on Human Relations suggests that neighbors not see the Negro family near the house before the actual moving day. I hadn't even been inside our new home yet. The moving must be fast and professional, done in the middle of the day, in the middle of the week — no weekend idlers nearby. And the white neighbors must be completely informed before the move-in takes place.

Two hours before we arrived, everyone on the block received a mimeographed notice from the village manager, explaining that a Negro family was buying a house on the street from a Presbyterian minister and his wife. Then, to dispel rumors about us, the notice described our family and our background briefly but thoroughly.

The Presbyterian couple mentioned in the notice were dear white friends of ours. For two years they had suffered with us through our attempts to buy a house. We had tried seven different times, and each time had failed. Real estate firms refused to serve us. One real estate agent bought a house himself — a house stipulated for nondiscriminatory sale — rather than sell it to us; two months later it was back on the market. And homeowners were too frightened to carry through a sale on their own. During that time, when I read to our son, I used to weep when I came to "And this little piggy cried, 'Wee, wee, wee,' all the way home!"

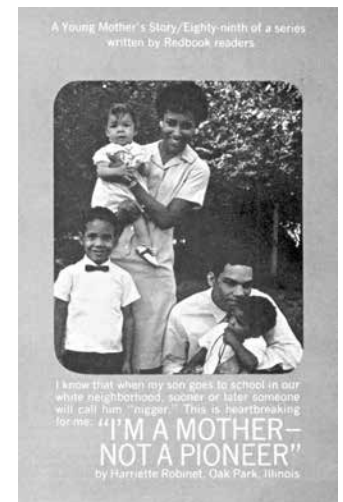
We finally had given up hope when our friends, the minister and his wife, who lived in Oak Park, bought another house there without our knowledge. Once they were sure the sale was final, they sold the place to us. And that is how we were able to buy our house.

But that October day as I stood in front of the home I had so wanted, I had doubts. White and Negro friends had asked us what we were trying to prove. I wondered if the good things my husband wanted to provide, could afford to provide, worked hard to provide, would be worth it. McLouis and I had lived with the ugliness of prejudice, but must our children learn, so young, that some people hated them? Maybe we should have waited for a house on the fringe of a crowded ghetto in a "changing block" to open up to Negroes. Maybe we should have paid the so-called "color tax" for a more expensive home in a deteriorating neighborhood where schools and public services were poor and where, in the large food chains, you would find mold hidden under the extra label on the cheese.

Well, I thought, all that was past now. This was the house we had bought — and we were moving in.

I felt apprehensive, and a chill shook my body. We walked to the door, my husband carrying 2-year-old Stephen over his shoulder while I cuddled our baby, 2-month-old Philip.

As we fumbled with the unfamiliar keys, the street became alive with people. Under the watchful eyes of plain-clothes policemen, neighbors were arriving.



An architect and his wife brought us dinner for moving day — a tuna casserole, salad, rolls and dessert. A young minister lent us a set of fire irons and then made our first cheery fire in the fireplace we had always yearned for. Boys in football uniforms came, carrying a potted green plant with a written note of welcome attached. A doctor's wife brought a package of apples, bananas and rolls for nibbling. The procession gave us heart.

The moving men were rapid workers, and they soon had barrels and corrugated boxes placed in the right rooms throughout the house. While they were unloading the van, three children walked up and recited a formal little greeting. Then they stared with curiosity at our faces. One of them, a little freckled lad, asked, "When your little boy's face is that color, you don't have to wash it often, do you?" I looked at his recently scrubbed red face and I detected envy.

Four teenage girls invited us to their church, and left their names and telephone numbers for future babysitting jobs. The following evening a woman who lived across the street gave us a sheet of paper with names and hilarious descriptions of the other families on the block. She had sensed the embarrassing sting of our knowing no one when everyone knew about us because of the village manager's notice.

For over a month we had daily visitors. Our electric coffeepot was constantly perking. By day mothers and toddlers came bearing gifts — a German chocolate cake, a bouquet of fall roses, oatmeal cookies, homemade rolls, honey-spice cake, brownies, frozen spaghetti sauce with a box of spaghetti.

Many of our visitors were shy. Many were curious. Some were unsure of themselves. Others seemed genuinely delighted to have us in Oak Park. All of them seemed compelled to express something, and our hearts were gratefully listening.

One 7-year-old girl with strawberry-blond hair pulled her mother's sleeve and asked, "If I touch her little boy, will I be brown too? All over? Just my hand?"

At night our visitors were either men or families. They usually stayed to share our abundance of desserts and have a cup of steaming coffee.

At first we were a little suspicious of this drawn-out, overwhelming welcome, and recently I discussed it with a close friend. She explained that initially there had been such a furor on the block over our moving in that some sympathetic neighbors decided to try to make us feel better. (We had never sensed the controversy; this is a sophisticated community where people don't throw rotten eggs.) When our "good guy" visitors told the others about our coffee and conversation, the more hesitant ones felt free to come and meet us.

Soon we began to settle into the community quite comfortably. The priests at St. Edmund Catholic Church welcomed us, without fanfare, as the first non-white members; we found a good local pediatrician, and we enjoyed the shopping and the services of Oak Park. (Deliverymen ask for the lady of the house and don't quite believe my reply.)

On our first Valentine's Day in Oak Park, a handsome walnut Salem rocker, tied with a red bow and decorated with an enormous cardboard heart, was delivered. For years I had yearned for such a chair so I could rock our babies, but our small apartment didn't provide an inch of extra space. Now my husband could give me the chair. Somehow when I saw it, all I could think of was his years of helplessness, his inability to house his wife and children with dignity — not because of a lack of money but because of other people's bigotry. And I wept.

As the winter passed and spring approached, I spent more time outside. I began to notice some unhappy neighbors. There was nothing overt, but they looked miserable and turned the other way when we passed. The woman in the house next to ours moved, saying to a neighbor, "Negroes should prove themselves before moving next door." But three days after the "For Sale" sign went up, a young white couple bought her house.

Sometimes parents jerked their children away when Stephen and Philip went out to play. And they still do. But, hand in hand, the children often steal back.

I really felt established on the block when a new friend who had to go to the hospital asked me to take care of two of her youngsters until she returned. Now if a friend is ill, I take a casserole meal to her family. Or I invite my friends to meet my mother-in-law when she visits. My husband is unofficial adviser for the school science-fair projects. When our son Philip was sick and needed medical tests, my neighbors took care of Stephen and gave me rides to the hospital.

It was at this point — spring and summer of 1966 — that a civil rights movement with fair housing as its theme began to develop in Oak Park. We attended meetings, and found ourselves sold on nonviolence as a way to open decent housing to Negroes, as it earlier had opened the doors of public places. Soon our peaceful Oak Park civil rights marches (95 percent white) gave way to participation in open-occupancy marches led by Dr. Martin Luther King in Chicago. Dodging bricks and cherry bombs, we marched through the city streets, while our wide-eyed little boys waited for us at the church center.

But on our street the neighbors are still friendly with us and in our Catholic parish we are still made to feel welcome. Invitations to backyard barbecues, to dinners and to late coffee-and-dessert sessions continue to be more than we can keep up with. We also are swamped with requests to talk about Negro housing problems to suburban church groups, newly formed human-relations committees and high-school sociology classes. We belong to a couple of interfaith dialogue groups, and we brought friends from Chicago to help “integrate” the Sunday-evening play-reading group when we read *A Raisin in the Sun*.

Although we were remarkably well received, the friends who sold us the house have suffered. Many people congratulated them on their act, but others said it was deceitful. For several months our friends were harassed by phone calls in the night and BB shots through their windows. Worst of all, some youngsters, instructed by their parents, began to snub our friends’ children. Often the same people who welcomed us criticized them.

Again it’s spring. My pink and yellow tulips are blooming. I think the forsythia sprays look pretty against the green trim my husband painted on the house. From a honey locust tree in the backyard, McLouis hung an automobile tire; the old-fashioned swing is a real attraction for neighborhood boys and girls. We now have a cherub daughter, Rita, who is 5 months old. We’ve been in Oak Park more than a year and a half and we’re quite at home.

But we know of two other Negro couples who weren’t so lucky. We have friends who lived as move-ins for two-and-a-half years before anyone spoke to them. Other friends in Oak Park had crosses burned on their lawns. Perhaps one day it will happen to us.

There are now about 11 Negro families who live among the 20,000 white families in Oak Park. At least once a month we get a call from Negro families

who have been transferred to work near Chicago. The men are architects, engineers, business managers — and they are unable to find homes near their jobs. I usually suggest that they try to find white friends (“nominee buyers”) who will buy a house for them. Although three new Negro families have moved into our neighborhood with no disturbance, realtors continue to avoid dealing with Negroes. And many private homeowners are still afraid to sell on their own.

“I’d be glad to welcome you,” one homeowner told friends of ours, “but I couldn’t do that to my neighbors.” One day, I hope, an open-occupancy law will free all of us.

When Stephen goes to school, I’m sure that sooner or later someone will call him “nigger.” Even now he says, “Some people don’t like us.” This is heartbreaking for me. I’m a mother, not a pioneer.

But I think that Oak Park has provided a cushion of understanding. Stephen knows good white people, so he doesn’t respond to prejudice with bitterness or hate. A child from a Negro ghetto who has never known a white friend will learn to be suspicious and hostile. I came from such a ghetto, and we’ve discovered that many of our neighbors have lived their entire lives in white ghettos. It was only when my husband and I attended college and graduate school that we met sincere white friends.

My children accept racial differences very easily. Our daughter Rita has a very fair complexion, and when we brought her home from the orphanage (we adopted our two younger children), Stephen said, “Well, Mommy, we got one Negro baby [his brother Philip] and one white baby [his sister].” I told him that she is Negro, and that people of any color whose families long ago came from Africa are considered Negro. “A family can be Negro or Irish or Italian,” I tried to explain.

“Oh, no, Mommy,” he said. “The family is American, and we all belong.”

I’m convinced that hope lies in our children. Whether they are black or white, our children need to know each other as neighbors to find out that “the family is American, and we all belong.”

The Rest is in Her Stories

(Acceptance Speech)

by Linda Robinet

My name is Linda Robinet and I am Harriette's youngest child, well not so young. It is an honor to accept this remarkable award on her behalf. I struggled to write a speech of gratitude so rather, I would like to share my mother's story before she started writing stories.

My mother's grandfather (on her father's side) Richard A. Gillem, Sr., his wife was Malinda, was an indentured servant owned by Jesuits in Maryland. My mother's great-grandfather (on her mother's side), Thornton Gray, was a slave owned by Mary Custis Lee, the wife of Robert E. Lee. The story goes that just before the beginning of the Civil War, the Lees called all of the slaves to the front yard of the great mansion and told them that there would be a Great War over the issue of slavery. He told his slaves that Lincoln had asked him to stay with the Union Army, but that he could not. He was a Virginian before he was an American. He told them that he was freeing all of them and he gave them plots of land. At that point, her grandfather, Harry Gray, was 12 years old. My mother's great-grandfather, Thornton Gray, received a large plot of land in Arlington, Virginia, the Gray Subdivision. They divided the subdivision into lots and gave or sold them to relatives and friends. Harry Gray married Martha Madison Hoard, who was a slave at Montpelier, James Madison's plantation. The Gray family from Lee's mansion also had relatives owned by Dolly Madison.

On one of the large lots near Rolfe Street, her grandfather did a strange thing: he built a Washington style, brick row house with no windows on either side. He built it with his own hands out of brickbats, which are broken pieces of bricks. That house still stands today and has a plaque naming it a Designated Arlington County Landmark. At some point, her family built a "normal house" on the lot next to the row house. This would become their summer home.

My mother grew up in Washington, DC in an all-Black neighborhood in a large elegant row house on Westminster Street. She had three siblings: Aileen, Richard and Gray. Aileen died as an infant of meningitis and her brother Richard died during first grade of scarlet fever. Because of this, her older and

only living brother Gray never attended his year of first grade. He started school in second grade. My mother was born when her mother was forty, 10 years after her brother Gray. She was always a very thin child and her family was concerned. One summer, her aunt gave her money to buy a scoop of ice cream on a cone every day. She faithfully conceded but she gained no weight.

Her mother, Martha Gray, youngest daughter of Martha and Harry Gray, was a seamstress and also worked at the Treasury Department in the Foreign Funds Division. She filed letters from German Jews pleading for release of their invested funds.

My mother's father, Richard A. Gillem, Jr., son of Richard Avitus Gillem, Sr. and Malinda, was a geography and history teacher in an all-Black middle school in Washington, DC. The school was named in honor of the Grimke sisters, two white women who were leaders in the anti-slavery movement. My mother went to the same school. The best and worst of her school experience was the year she was in her father's class. He expected her to be the perfect student and her classmates teased her about being the teacher's pet.

My mother spent many summer weekends at Highland Beach just south of Annapolis, Maryland along the Chesapeake Bay. Her Uncle Parker, her father's twin, owned a beach house there. Highland Beach was an all-Black resort where the likes of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois owned homes.

Her father, the geography teacher, decided to expand his career. He went to law school at Howard Law School at night, passed the bar, and had many clients, but he did not charge them. He continued teaching. After a long illness, her father died of cancer when my mother was in high school. Her father had arranged that he, a devout Catholic, would not be buried in a Catholic cemetery so his Baptist wife could be buried next to him.

To mourn her father's death, her mother required her to wear only black for an entire year. Her classmates called her the Black Widow. When her brother, Gray, returned from the Navy, he convinced their mother that she should be allowed to wear the normal clothes of a teenager.

At the end of high school, she and her mother moved permanently to their summer home in Arlington. They rented rooms in their Westminster Street house to single men.

Everyone assumed that she would go to Howard University, an all-Black university in Washington, DC and that she would become a teacher.

But, my mother had other ideas. She did not want to go to an all-Black school and she did not want to go to any school in or near Washington. She discovered that there was an organization, The Catholic Interracial Council, at Catholic University, with the mission of placing Black Catholic young women in all-white Catholic universities. She told the agent that she wanted to be far from Washington, but not too far.

She went to the College of New Rochelle, founded by the Ursuline Sisters, in New Rochelle, New York. She was the only Black student in the school. No one wanted her as a roommate, so she was in a room alone. There was a Chinese woman, Helen Wang, who had the same problem, no one wanted her as a roommate. She and Helen petitioned the president of the university to allow them to be roommates. So they would not “disturb” the other students in the dormitory, they were assigned to the tower. It was spacious, bright and airy, except for freezing in the winter; they loved it.

My mother majored in biology, studied very hard and took copious notes, but she did not always get good grades. On one occasion, her classmates asked her to help them prepare for the final exam in bacteriology. All of her classmates received A's or B's but she received the only C in the class. She asked her teacher how that was possible. Her teacher told her that, as usual, she did answer all of the questions correctly, which showed that she had a very good memory, but she knew that she did not have the capacity to comprehend the material. The next semester that same teacher asked her to be her laboratory assistant.

At graduation, she had the highest grade point average in her class, but she received no honors. She was told that honors were given to students whose parents were generous donors. When she applied for her first job, her teachers gave her strong recommendations.

She loved her first job at Children's National Hospital in Washington DC in the bacteriology laboratory. Unfortunately, she was put in the middle of a sad incident. A young boy died because of a wrong sample analysis. Her supervisor said that it was my mother's fault and recommended her dismissal. My mother kept a personal log of every sample analysis she did and had proof that she did not do that sample. It was her word against that of

her supervisor, a highly respected professional with decades of experience. A white co-worker broke rank and reported to Human Resources that she had seen her supervisor dump an entire batch of samples, including the one in question, without doing any analysis. It was called the sink test. My mother was advised by HR to resign with the promise that they would get her a good reference for her next job.

One of her funny/sad daily routines was the bus trip from Washington back to Arlington. When the bus reached the Potomac Bridge, all Black people would move to the back of the bus. If there were no empty seats, she would have to stand.

My mother enrolled in graduate school at Catholic University and also found a new job at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington DC. When she received her master's degree in bacteriology, her supervisor asked her to sign a resignation form because he did not want a Black “girl” to have the highest degree in his group. Human Resources at Walter Reed advised her to resign and they would find her another job in a different department.



She was assigned to the immunology department headed by a woman. She was allowed to use the laboratory after hours to work on her doctoral PhD dissertation.

When my mother saw an ad on a bulletin board for biology teachers at two Catholic universities, one in Minneapolis and another in Louisiana, she requested a sabbatical or leave of absence and applied to both. She was accepted by both, but went to Xavier University in New Orleans, Louisiana. By chance, my dad was there teaching physics.

My mother was a house mother in a girl's dormitory. The girls schemed to connect my mother and father, but nothing worked. The chaplain, Father Sullivan, helped by inviting them individually to an event, without telling them that they were the only invitees. By the end of the school year, they were

betrothed to marry within two-to-three years. My father went to DePaul in Chicago and my mother went back to Walter Reed and Catholic University to complete her doctoral PhD.

They were married in 1960 in my mother's small all-Black Catholic Church in Arlington by the priest, Father Sullivan, who had connected them at Xavier. Her roommate from New Rochelle, Helen Wang, was also there. They drove to Chicago in my mother's new Studebaker American Motors Rambler to the University of Illinois staff apartments in the Medical Center. They had a zero bedroom, small efficiency apartment overlooking Ashland Avenue. They blew bubbles from their sixth-floor window.

My brother Stephen was born there. When my second brother, Philip, joined our family, they moved to a one-bedroom apartment.

They moved to Oak Park in 1965. By 1969, my parents had five children: Stephen, Philip, Rita, Jonathan, and Marsha. To maintain her sanity, raising five children, she began her serious writing. In 1974, when my mother was 42, I was born, 11 years after the birth of my brother Stephen. The rest is history or her stories.



*[Diversity in Oak Park]
didn't just happen on
its own; it happened
because people decided
this was the community
they wanted.*

From many flags, one people

by Ken Trainor

I believe that any people's story is every people's story and that from stories, we can all learn something to enrich our lives.

Harriette Gillem Robinet

From her book, If You Please, President Lincoln

When you enter the Main Branch of the Oak Park Public Library, just inside the library proper, the preceding quote is the first thing encountered, inlaid on the floor before you. Good words. But then Harriette and McLouis Robinet have a good word for everyone.

That word is "home."

Before the Robinets made Oak Park home in 1965, they were part of the Great Migration of African Americans, away from the awful repression of the Jim Crow South to the highly segregated and too often unwelcoming North. Harriette grew up in the Washington DC area. Her maternal grandfather was a slave on Robert E. Lee's plantation. Mac grew up in a small town in Louisiana, a place where Black families couldn't paint their houses or buy a new car because it would make them look too uppity and put the family in danger.

"I grew up," Mac says, "where making trouble was the last thing you wanted to do."

Harriette and Mac both had a scientific bent and met at Xavier University in Louisiana where they were teaching. They fell in love. Harriette got a job in microbiology in Washington. Mac landed a teaching position at the University of Illinois Chicago. Later he worked at Argonne National Laboratory for almost 40 years. They married in 1960 and started a family in 1964 with the birth of Stephen. Their next four children were adopted, Philip, Rita, Jonathan and Marsha. Then Linda was born, completing their family. The growing family needed more room than the tiny, zero-bedroom UIC staff apartment where they lived in the early '60s.

Friends suggested they look for a home in Oak Park. But Oak Park didn't want them. At any rate the local real estate industry didn't want them here.

Happily, that has since changed for people of color but at that time, house-hunting in Oak Park was practically impossible.

To expose the industry's racially motivated practices, the Robinets joined the North Shore Project, which documented the unequal treatment accorded to Black couples and white couples. When a Black couple asked about homes to purchase, nothing was available. When a white couple followed and asked about the same properties, they suddenly became available. Blacks in 1965 needed a white "straw buyer" to purchase a home for them, an unavoidable subterfuge to work around unjust restrictions.

The Robinets, fortunately, were received mostly with open arms ... and even free appliances. Mac says they moved in with little more than a card table and a frying pan. Then one neighbor gave them a washing machine. Another donated a refrigerator. They were even gifted with a piano.

The neighbor next door, however, couldn't handle the change. "Why would you want to live someplace where you're not welcome? Now I have to leave," she told them. She was gone in a month.

Harriette chronicled those early years in an article for *Redbook* magazine, part of their "Young Mothers" series. It was published in February 1968 and titled, "I'm a Mother - Not a Pioneer."

Turns out Harriette was both, as became evident two months later when Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis.

Home alone with three kids, the only Black family on the block, one of the first and few in the village, her husband working seven miles away at UIC, Harriette couldn't help feeling vulnerable as the world around her was about to burst into flames. One can only imagine what it was like for newly arrived Black families.

Here's what it was like: Harriette wanted to do something instead of just feeling helpless, so she brought out their star-spangled banner and put it up outside. A few hours later when she glanced out the window, almost every house on the block was flying the flag.

Harriette used the *Redbook* article as a springboard. She had left the workplace to stay home with the kids, and she obviously had a knack for writing and research. Between 1976 and 2003, she penned 11 books.

Harriette's books won numerous awards, but the greater honor is that her daughter still uses them to teach her students at Beye School. For the last 17 of her 21 years in District 97, Linda has taught fourth grade — in the same classroom where she was a fourth-grader herself.

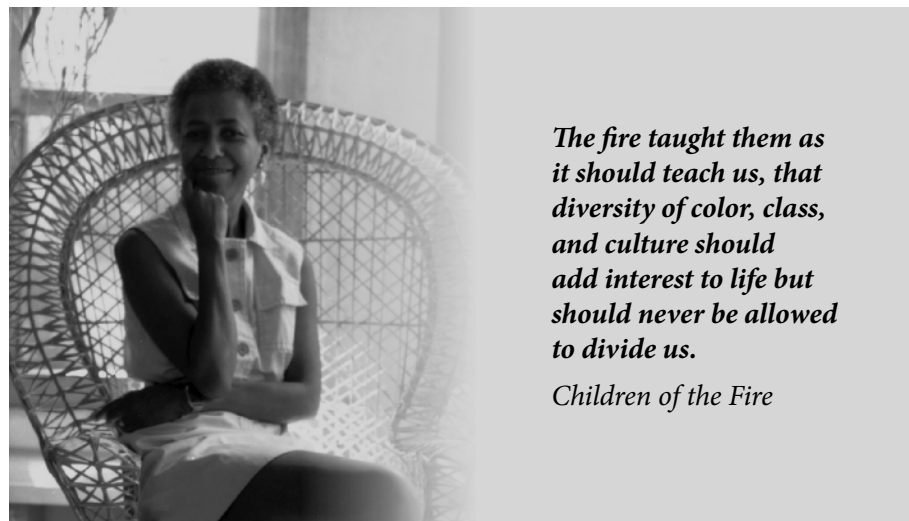
Of her books, Harriette says (on her website), "Unless we know our history, we have no perspective on life today. How can we know where we're going, or appreciate where we are today, if we don't know where we're coming from?"

Fifty-four years after the Robinets helped make Oak Park a better place, they're still here in the same house. And they're still here partly because of that April day in 1968 when their neighbors demonstrated in clear terms that Oak Parkers were capable of rising above their biases and fears to become one people.

From many flags, one people.

Or as Harriette put it when she first told me about that day, "That's when I knew I was home."

Ken Trainor has been a writer, editor and columnist for the Wednesday Journal since 1990. He is the author of We Dare to Say: An Adventure in Journaling (2007) and Unfinished Pentecost: Vatican II and the Altered Lives of Those Who Witnessed It (2013). This column first appeared in the Wednesday Journal on April 3, 2018.



The fire taught them as it should teach us, that diversity of color, class, and culture should add interest to life but should never be allowed to divide us.

Children of the Fire

TRIBUTES

Two of a Kind

Harriet and I met at Children's Reading Round Table of Chicago in the early 1980s when we both had black hair and had published our first books. We were often mistaken for one another as our hair turned white, both wore short natural hair styles, and published books in which 19th century American history was significant.

Kindred Spirit,
Glennette Tilley Turner

An Inspiration

David and I have known Harriette and her family since 1972. Such lovely, intelligent, humble, talented and caring people. We loved spending times with her and her family and then came the wonderful children's books. Wonderful messages for children and families to share and learn from. She is indeed an inspiration and we have been lucky to have crossed paths. This lifetime achievement award is so well deserved.

Sandra and David Sokol

A True Educator

I didn't know Harriette as a writer - I knew her as a kind neighbor and someone clearly interested in engaging and encouraging young people. I saw her most early mornings when my youngest son walked to Gwendolyn Brooks Middle School in Oak Park. Harriette and Mac would be on their way to mass at St. Edmund. She greeted my son and asked him about school and life. Whenever I saw her in later years, she would ask me how Leroy was doing - into high school and college. (He graduated with a major in cinema art and science minor in business and now works in Chicago.) We didn't know she was famous until we went to Village Hall and saw her photo! Subsequently, I discovered what incredible people Harriette and Mac both are and how they helped change our town and country for the better. Harriette was going on protests about fracking, and still taking time every morning to show a young boy that he mattered. We both valued those early morning stops and the loving, enquiring nature of Harriette - a true educator.

Toni Nealie

A Mentor to Young Readers

I was the first bookseller to ask Harriette to do a signing. That was for her first historical fiction for children, *Children of the Fire*. My son fell in love with her (he was about seven or eight years old) and would enjoy talking with her. We let him bring *Children of the Fire* to class with him at school. His teacher was clever. She would read a chapter at the end of each day, but only if the kids had behaved. Harriette would have me sell her books at all her off-site signings (schools, libraries, organizations, etc.) One time she was speaking to a group of Black women. The president of the group, when told I would be selling Harriette's books at the meeting, asked, "Is he Black?" Harriette responded, "Just as good!" It was one of the best compliments I've been given. She dedicated *Walking to the Bus-Rider Blues* to us.

She was such a mentor to young readers. She didn't talk about herself. She'd tell them how they could write their own books. That was before the onslaught of computers. She would advise them to use a spiral binder, writing only on the left side. The right side was left for corrections (e.g. spelling, grammar, and facts). After she got the major portion of *Bus-Rider Blues* done, she and McLouis went to Montgomery, Alabama to see what it actually looked like after Martin Luther King, Jr.'s March. She noticed that there was a particular flower she mentioned in her draft, that would not have bloomed at the time of the March. So, following her own instructions, she went over her notebook on the right-hand blank page and made her correction of what was on the left.

Harriette wrote from the view of the young person and not the adult interpretation. In *Children of the Fire*, the main characters are Hallelujah, a young Black girl, and her new best friend Elizabeth, a white girl living on Lake Shore Drive (or whatever it was then). During the fire, Elizabeth loses contact with her family and Hallelujah welcomes her to be friends and travel together through Chicago, being careful not to get hurt. There is scene when Elizabeth must let go of her beautiful doll Betsy, wearing a wonderful white dress. Hallelujah offers to hold it for her, but Elizabeth refuses. Elizabeth said, "You know what I was thinking when I wouldn't let you hold Betsy? I didn't want you to dirty her. Wasn't that silly? Your color doesn't wash off." Hallelujah said, "Now you're eating our food and sleeping in our barn. What about that?" It's significant, a child saying what she thinks where an older person might keep it to themselves. Honesty is forgiven in youth.

Augie Aleksy, owner Centuries & Sleuths Bookstore

Laudation

Quick question: Number of people who know about Teddy Roosevelt and San Juan Hill?

Answer: Millions.

Quick question: Number of people who know the major role the Buffalo Soldiers played in the success of that uphill battle?

Answer: Yeah, not so many.

And that’s why it’s so important to honor Harriette Gillem Robinet. She sees the holes in history and is determined to fill them. And yet, she doesn’t write with rage. Her commitment is to inform, yes, but also to inspire. And, as she believes, to “have no villains but the systems.”

Hail! Hail! To Harriette and History building with blocks of fact, faith and friendship. Building towards Future.

Nora Brooks Blakely



The city grew... Coal yards and grain elevators still burned. The smell of smoke filled the air constantly. However, buildings sprang up on every street. It was said over ten thousand commercial buildings were rising from the ashes. There was work for everyone... Chicago was lowered by fire, and Chicago's rising by fire. Children of the Fire

PARTNER TRIBUTES

The River Forest Public Library is grateful to join in celebrating Harriette Gillem Robinet and her many achievements in literature, the fair housing movement, and more. Congratulations to Harriette on receiving this year’s Fuller Award, an honor that is richly deserved.



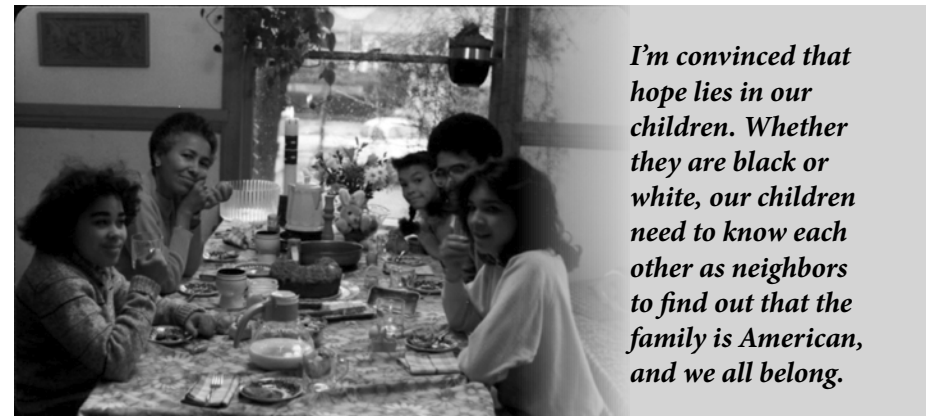
The Oak Park Public Library recognizes, with honor, Harriette Gillem Robinet, an Oak Park resident and prolific author for her literary achievements and tireless advocacy on behalf of the community.



Harriette Gillem Robinet has made essential and enduring contributions to literature for young readers. The Mystery Writers of America - Midwest Chapter congratulates Robinet on this phenomenal and well-deserved honor.



Congratulations Harriette Gillem Robinet on a lifetime of amazing achievement. Your work has made a difference in people’s lives. By including people with disabilities in your literature, you hold a mirror in which many who work at the Happy Apple Pie Shop can see themselves reflected as vital members of society. Thank you from the diverse workforce at Happy Apple Pie Shop, Oak Park.



I’m convinced that hope lies in our children. Whether they are black or white, our children need to know each other as neighbors to find out that the family is American, and we all belong.

OUR HOST: DOMINICAN UNIVERSITY

by Jacob Garza, English major

Dominican University was founded as a women's college, St. Clara College, in Sinsinawa, Wisconsin in 1901. In 1922, the college relocated to River Forest, Illinois and was renamed Rosary College. The college became co-ed in 1970 and expanded to become Dominican University in 1997. Located on the edge of Chicago, Dominican has celebrated, taught, and hosted events that promote Chicago literary heritage and excellence, as well as fostered the writing of its own Chicagoland students, faculty, and staff.

Major Chicago writers have held the position of the Annual Lund-Gill Endowed Chair, a position in which the holder teaches a class and gives a presentation to the university community. Most recently, Chicago playwright and actor Ms. Sandra Delgado held this position in fall 2022. Ms. Delgado taught a class on Writing, Performance, and Social Change that focused on storytelling. Students also studied and participated in Chicagoland artistic organizations that connected writing and live performance to social change. In fall 2014, Dr. Ana Castillo, the 2022 recipient of the Fuller Award for lifetime achievement, held the Lund-Gill Chair, beginning her long and continued relationship with Dominican University. Among the English faculty, Dr. Maggie Andersen, born and raised in Chicago and an ensemble member of the Gift Theatre, has published several creative nonfiction essays that focus on Chicago. Dominican also has many faculty who perform in and organize storytelling events in the Chicago area, including Janice Del Negro, Ada Cheng, Jane Hseu, Clinton Nichols, Cecilia Salvatore, and Mina Duarte.

Dominican is also the host of the Annual Caesar and Patricia Tabet Endowed Poetry Reading, now in its tenth year. The inaugural Tabet Poet in 2014 was Chicago's own Li-Young Lee, and other Chicago poets in the series include Stuart Dybek, Luis Alberto Urrea, and Eve Ewing. The English Department also regularly offers the class, "The Chicago Tradition in Literature", taught by Professor Daniel Anderson.

Dominican is proud to foster and promote its own students' voices and stories as part of the literature of Chicago, creating new works of literature to add

to the city's cultural fabric. Our literary magazine *Stella Veritatis* is edited, created, and designed by students and contains poetry, fiction, drama, non-fiction, and art by students, faculty, and staff. The student editors select and edit literary texts in order to publish and promote literary excellence that can move and transform our communities.

Dominican University and the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame

by Jacob Garza, English major

Dominican University is honored to co-organize this event with the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame. Collaborations among students, faculty, staff, and various offices made this event possible. English professor and chair Jane Hseu was a point person for the organizing, with substantial help from student workers Jacob Garza and Sofia Olvera-Sandoval with publicity and writing articles for the program. Carlie Merola, a triple major in Graphic Design, Photo-Cinema, and Theater, created a wonderful design for the event program and poster; she was recommended and mentored by Graphic Design/ Art Professor Nacho Montiel. Jennifer Clemons, curator of the Butler Children's Literature Center, loaned Robinet's books from its collection for University Librarian Estevan Montaño and Learning Commons Librarian Beronica Avila to create a display of Robinet's books and other artifacts in the Crown Library. Lastly, a warm thank you to the Dominican University Performing Arts Center's staff, including Leslie Rodriguez, Sam Barr, and David Carlson. Dominican University is thrilled to be a partner in this event, especially as celebrating Ms. Robinet's work and legacy also promotes Dominican's mission of intellectual and creative excellence, for the purpose of creating a more just and humane world.

CHICAGO LITERARY HALL OF FAME



The Chicago Literary Hall of Fame (CLHOF) honors, celebrates, preserves, and promotes the development of Chicago's great literary heritage—past, present, and future. CLHOF seeks to realize this purpose by annual inductions of selected great writers from the past; ceremonies honoring living writers whose lifetime contributions to the literary arts warrant the highest recognition; literary awards to young people; classes, panels, and other literary endeavors designed to encourage the development of writers at all ages. CLHOF also creates written materials that record the lives and works of Chicago's most important literary figures and presents these and other materials on its website, in exhibits, author events, public art installations, literary tours, and programming relevant to the organization's goal of promoting Chicago's vibrant literary tradition and culture. CLHOF formed as a project of the Chicago Writers Association in 2010, and splintered into its own nonprofit 501 c(3) entity in 2014.

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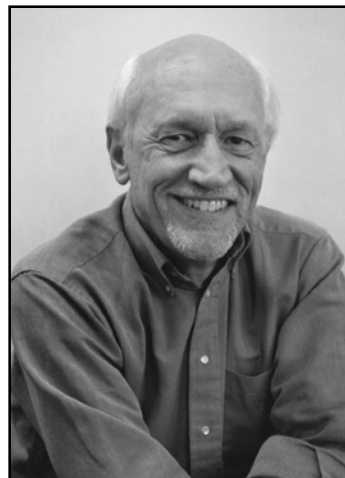
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VISIT US AT CHICAGOLITERARYHOF.ORG

INTRODUCING THE RANDALL ALBERS YOUNG WRITERS AWARD



With the start of the new year, the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame (CHLOF) institutes a new award: the Randall Albers Young Writers Award.

The award has the dual value of both honoring one of Chicago's most beloved literary dignitaries, Randall Albers, as well as recognizing, supporting, highlighting, and celebrating the literary gifts of Chicago's youth.

The Randall Albers Young Writers Award is open to all Chicago-area students currently enrolled in grades 9–12. This year's inaugural awards will honor young writers of fiction and nonfiction.

A \$500 prize will be awarded to the 2023 1st Place winner, with finalists receiving the following amounts:

2nd Place: \$250

3rd Place: \$150

4th Place: \$100

Each winner will also receive a writing consultation with one of the editors for DePaul's Blue Book: Best American High School Writing 2023, and their winning pieces may be eligible for inclusion in the publication. The winner and finalists will be listed on our website and will have the opportunity to read from their entries during the award ceremony.

Visit ChicagoLiteraryHOF.org to learn how to enter

UPCOMING CHICAGO LITERARY HALL OF FAME EVENTS

Opening Day: A Fundraiser to Benefit CLHOF

Friday, March 31, 2023 • 7:30 p.m.

Mrs. Murphy & Sons, 3905 N. Lincoln Ave.

Poetry Month at the Cliff Dwellers

Thursday, April 13, 2023 • 6-8 p.m.

Cliff Dwellers, 200 S. Michigan Ave., Penthouse (22nd Floor), Chicago

Independence Poetry

Thursday, April 20, 2023 • 6-8 p.m.

Independence Branch, Chicago Public Library, 4024 N. Elston Avenue

Adjacent: Oak Park's Place in the Chicago Poetic Landscape

Thursday, April 27, 2023 • 6:30-8 p.m.

Oak Park Public Library, Main Branch, 834 Lake Street, Oak Park

Randall Albers Young Writers Award Ceremony

Saturday, May 13, 2023 • 2pm

Harold Washington Library Center, Multi-Purpose Room (lower level)

400 S. State Street, Chicago

Induction Ceremony: Nella Larsen, Bette Howland, Finley Peter Dunne

Tuesday, July 11, 2023 • 6-8 p.m.

Chopin Theatre, 1543 W. Division Street, Chicago, IL 60642

Backyard Appreciation Party Featuring Anne-Marie Akin

Sunday, August 6 • 2 p.m.

Personal invitations with details will be sent to all CLHOF volunteers, board members, donors, and supporters

Printers Row Lit Fest

Saturday, September 9 & Sunday, September 10, 9 a.m.-6 p.m.

Dearborn between Ida B. Wells and Polk

Scott Turow Fuller Award Ceremony

Thursday, October 5, 2023 • 6 p.m.

Chicago Public Library's Cindy Pritzker Auditorium

Chicago Literary Hall of Fame Year-End Fundraiser Party

Saturday, December 2, 2023 • TBA

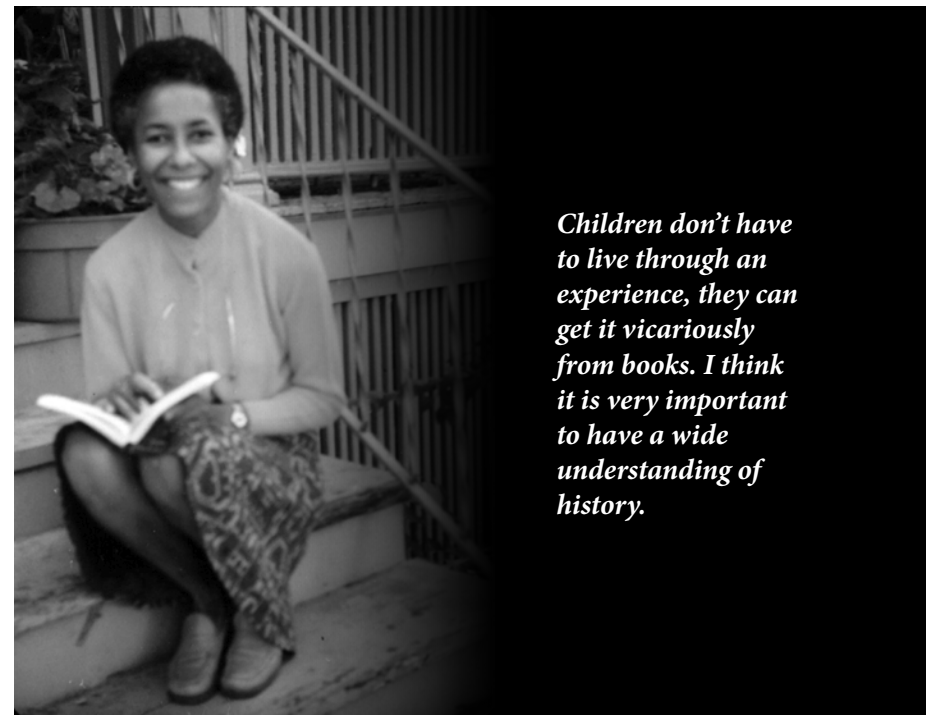
Beat Kitchen in Roscoe Village, 2100 West Belmont Avenue, Chicago

Cover: \$15

For additional details about any event visit chicagoliteraryhof.org/events

ACCEPTING BOOK AND ART DONATIONS

The Chicago Literary Hall of Fame needs your donations of used books, especially Chicago titles, for our Book and Art Sale early this fall. We also need donations of original art and prints, especially Chicago related. To make a donation, contact Donald G. Evans at dgevens@chicagoliteraryhof.org



Children don't have to live through an experience, they can get it vicariously from books. I think it is very important to have a wide understanding of history.

SPECIAL THANKS TO

Jane Hseu, for mobilizing Dominican University’s incredible staff, including David Carlson, Samantha Barr, Carlie Merola, Estevan Montaña, Beronica Avila, Nacho (Theresa) Montiel, and Jennifer Clemons; DePaul interns Anna Hyslop, Adrian Hernandez, and Isabella Lekas, for everything from writing to editing to shuffling around chairs; John Freyer, for once again making the reception delicious and wet; Rana Segal, for phenomenal videography work; Don Seeley, for precious photographic work; Barbara Egel, for taking care of the food logistics; Kelci Dean and Kylie Knur, for their help promoting this event; Ken Trainor, for insight and incredible program content, and the *Wednesday Journal* for sharing its resources (including photo archives) and promoting the event; Diana Park for creating the lovely slideshow; Barry Jung, for heroic acts of proofreading, organizing and just plain getting done what needed to be done; and Linda and Mac Robinet, for going above and beyond in assisting with this and the staged program.

ONGOING SUPPORT PROVIDED BY

Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation, Chicago Community Trust, and Illinois Arts Council Agency.



GENEROUS SUPPORT GIVEN BY

Sayed and Elise Darwish, as well as the Robinet family.

*Unless we know our history, we have no perspective on life today.
How can we know where we’re going, or appreciate where we are today,
if we don’t know where we’re coming from?*



PARTNER TRIBUTES

For Harriette Gillem Robinet: **Dominican University** is honored to have your books in the Crown Library/Butler Children's



Literature Center, and to celebrate your work alongside the many community organizations you have touched. Congratulations!

The American Writers Museum joins the other partners in congratulating Harriette Gillem Robinet on this well-deserved honor. Her writing has allowed all young people to see themselves in books and her work on behalf of the Civil Rights Movement was a gift to all Americans.



The **Hemingway Foundation** is proud to celebrate Ms. Gillem Robinet's award winning contributions to American literature in historical fiction, as well as the influential community activism both she and McLouis Robinet contributed to the civil rights and fair housing movements.



Housing Forward celebrates Oak Park's very own Harriette Robinet. Her, and her family's, decades of service and contributions to helping others in our community is inspiring. Congratulations on this most deserving honor.



Harriette Robinet is not only a Hall of Fame author, she and her husband Mac and her family are already in Oak Park's Hall of Fame because of their love of neighbor and community. Since 1965, they have made Oak Park a better place and have never stopped giving back to their hometown.



Oak Park Regional Housing Center congratulates Harriette on this much-deserved and important honor.

