

Marc Harshman

***In Their Own Country* transcript**

1 *Marc Harshman: To start at the beginning, the Woods family lived on top of the top of the highest mountain in these parts, away up where the wind is your neighbor all year round.*

Kat Long: That's Marc Harshman, whose thought-provoking children's books entertain kids - and adults - all over this country. I'm Kate Long, and this is *In Their Own Country*, a special series that lets you visit with some of West Virginia's most compelling writers.

Marc Harshman's down-to-earth stories are packed with humor and humanity. As Booklist Magazine said, "powerfully written." As a Kirkus reviewer said, "perceptive, well-told stories." He taught for years in small rural West Virginia schools, and he works as a writer and traveling storyteller. He is the only writer in this series who was not born into a West Virginia family. So for this series, Marc represents the many fine writers who have adopted West Virginia as their home.

2 MH: I have been here a long time. I arrived at Bethany College in the fall of 1969. And except for graduate school, I've been here ever since.

KL: His upbringing on a family farm in Indiana was a great start for a writer.

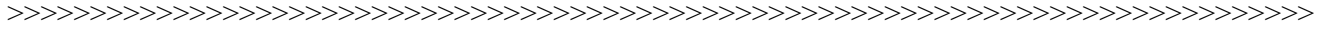
MH: Even though we lived in the country and only got to town once a week for groceries, Mom and Dad always made that trip to town a trip to the local library as well. So as far back as I can remember, when I try to imagine who I was as a little boy, I see the old farmhouse, and I see the living room. And I see the braided rug in the middle of it. And myself sitting there with a pile of picture books beside me that we had brought home from the library. And my daddy sitting in another chair, a pile of books beside him, and my mother in yet another chair, a pile of books beside her.

And that was just part of life, to hear my father read stories and poems and my mother as well, and to gather at my grandparents' supper table. It was around that table that we would sit for what seemed to me hours at a time, just talking and telling stories. Of course, if you were to go to my grandparents and said, "I hear you're storytellers," they wouldn't have known what you were talking about. It was very natural. It was that place where, after the supper dishes were red up, we didn't all go a hundred million directions at once, but simply sat there.

Now, us kids wouldn't have put up with just sitting there. I remember Grandma kept a box of games in the bedroom behind that tiny little kitchen, and she'd bring those out. But nonetheless, there we were, young and old, small, tall, family, neighbors, people who'd just drift in, and the air was filled with talking. And of course, in the midst of that talking, the gossip: who was dead, who was dying, whose cattle were sick, what went on at Wednesday night prayer meeting. Intermixed in all that, we might hear a story.

Maybe I'd hear Granddad tell about how his dad had hunted the last wildcat ever to be hunted in that very woods, behind that very house where we sat at that very table. Or maybe I'd hear Grandmama tell how her daddy had killed a black snake so long that when you strung it up over the telephone wires, it would touch the ground on either side. Ah, we loved stories like that.

3 Virginia Hamilton - my vote as America's finest writer of children's books - Virginia Hamilton says that - quote - all people are storytellers. And the most fundamental form of tale-telling is gossip, the delicious story of our everyday lives. And when those tales are shaped and polished, passed from one hand to another, from one



And that, of course, is exactly what happens.

6 As we turn the pages, we see this old wood stove glowing red-hot. And what has happened is that the father has overstoked the old wood stove one night, and it's glowing hot, and it ignites a chimney fire. Catches all that old tar and soot inside the chimney and it explodes into this raging fire. And, as many good folks in West Virginia know, it's a very dangerous thing. You can lose your whole house in that way.

Well, the story goes on from that point to show how the boy learns to work with those sisters, the three of them with their parents, and the parents with the neighbors. All of them gather round to try and save the house. And as we turn to the final page of the book, we see the house has not burned down. It's a sunny morning, all's in place, a beautiful snowfall, and the state bird of West Virginia, a cardinal, is there on the branch of the tree outside the house. It has a happy ending.

7 The real story is that - one winter, my wife Cheryl and I were living on Sally's Backbone in southern Marshall County, a rather rural road. And it was after midnight. There was two feet of snow on the ground, and the telephone rang. Never good when the phone rings after midnight. And it was my neighbor. And he said, "Marc," he said, "you got a fire down at your place?" I sniffed the air. I didn't smell any smoke, and I said, "No, I don't think so."

He said, "Well, look out your window." And I looked out my window. And there, in front of our house was our car in a big ball of flames. It was really scary. I went racing down the stairs in my bare feet, out into the snow, and I stood, and I stopped, and I stared, and there wasn't a thing I could do. But it was, as I say, truly frightening.

The car was next to the house, underneath some trees. I thought the trees would catch fire, fall on the house, the house would burn down. Well, that didn't happen. As luck would have it, another neighbor coming home from the mine late, he and I put a chain to the back and drug the car out from under the trees, and the car burned up, but the house didn't.

But a couple of months later, thinking back on that event, I began to create the story, *A Little Excitement*, my first book. And you can see, of course, as I say to the children, you can see that what I did was take the snow, the fire, the isolation of living so far in the country that the fire truck couldn't get there. I took my memories of being a boy on the farm. I took that ice cube feeling in my stomach from having been truly frightened. And I took the fact that, although I had not had a chimney fire, I did heat my house with wood, so I knew exactly how a chimney fire could happen. So I took all those real things, let my imagination play with them a little bit and created the story, *A Little Excitement*.

8 KL: So you can take a couple of details - or a whole bunch of details - from your own life, and then just make up some things and put it together in a story. Lot of times, people think they've got to stick to the truth.

MH: No, no, as you can see there, you can take the truth and fictionalize it. I have to admit, I do have one story where I didn't stray very much. My second book, *Snow Company*, is the story of a blizzard that occurred when I was about ten or eleven years old. And although my mother says, "Well, it didn't really happen that way," it is the way it happened to me in my memory.

When I wrote the story out, I can't say that I fictionalized much. Whatever fictionalization had gone on had begun when I was ten and eleven years old, and I'd been building it ever since. But as an author, I wasn't aware of doing it. This is how the story had finally crystalized in my own mind.

The church also was leading me to protest the war in Vietnam. It was leading me in all those directions. It's a lesson I've never forgotten. And although I had my probably predictable drift away from the church, it's had a handhold on me nonetheless, that sense that there's something more important out there than just ourselves. And that this green world out there is a gift of creation.

music

18 KL: You're retired from teaching school, but you taught for a long time. Could you tell just a little bit about your school?

MH: Oh, the last school I taught in, Sand Hill Grade School, wonderful school, was a little three-room school on top of a ridge in Marshall County. I taught fifth and sixth grades there. And it was what one wants think of a school. It was a real community school. The janitor and the cook were every bit as much a part of that place as the teachers and principal were. Everybody knew everybody else's names, all the students. Nobody had to worry about being a number in that school. And it was so rich. I mean, neighbor ladies would come in and help me teach my math class, and you know, there were always snacks around. And we were just, it was a wonderful environment.

And there's a lot to be said for these small schools that we seem to be in such a hurry to close. And the intimacy that existed in that little place created a learning atmosphere in which the kids could learn in a way that will stick to their bones and never leave them the rest of their lives.

music

19 KL: Marc Harshman's book, *The Storm*, piled up a lot of awards. It was a Junior Library Guild Selection, a Smithsonian Notable Book for Children, a Children's Book Council notable Book for Social Studies and a Parents Choice Award recipient.

MH: *The Storm* is a result of a couple of sources coming together. The magic of *Only One*, which we can also call imagination. And the real-life background. I grew up in tornado country, in Tornado Alley. I remember as a little boy, Mom and Dad taking me to a second story of the old farmhouse and pointing towards town and seeing our little farm town all on fire because a tornado had gone roaring through an hour earlier.

I remember, a few years later, after my father lost the farm, we still lived in the country though, my brother and I were out playing in the field, a fallow field out behind the house, and Mother came to the back stoop and screamed at us to come to the house. We ran to the house, maybe noticing the sky was black off to the West and green and yellow. And got us inside. She took us to her bedroom and said, "If we see the funnel cloud, we'll crawl under my bed."

I remember that, even though it was noon, it became as black as midnight. And the house began to shake. I don't remember crawling under the bed, although, saying that, I think perhaps we should have crawled under the bed! But that kind of storm passes very quickly. Although we were scared, in a few minutes, it was gone. An hour, couple of hours later, we learned that farms just north of us had just disappeared off the face of the earth. So somewhere, tucked inside that blackness had been a real funnel cloud, tornado.

KL: One of his old Indiana friends - who figured that Marc had defected to West Virginia - challenged him to write a story set in Indiana.

MH: And Jeb said, "Marc," he said, "when are you going to write a Hoosier story?" And he went home, and that idea stuck. And I thought, "You know, I should write a tornado story."

He was my uncle, my mother's brother who had moved out West, "high in the western mountains," wrote Uncle James. We lived in Indiana where it is flat. We raised chickens and wheat and our father is dead. It took awhile before I could say that, but growing up this past year, I've learned to.

Uncle James wrote that he was going to help. We needed it that winter. We were hungry. The baby was sick and all of us tired from trying to keep the farm going. And of course, we all missed Father. Finally, I had to quit school to help out. Mother said, with the baby to look after, Ann and Elizabeth might have to leave school too. But I told her that, no Uncle James would be here soon and everything would be fine. We looked forward to his letters. He wrote that he was making real good money in the logging camps. He also told us great stories about life out West. "Listen to what this letter says today, children," Mom said.

"I got done early today. I had to kill two rattlesnakes outside my cabin, but that didn't take long. Then I got a bear with my old shotgun and brought it back to camp for supper." Another day we got a postcard. "The canyon in this picture was filled to the top with water yesterday, a real raging river, it was. We've had thirty inches of rain. I had to row to camp. But now I'm doing fine and still making money. I'll send some soon. Love, Uncle James."

Oh, is he the best uncle ever," Elizabeth said. We all nodded our heads, imagining a world so different than our own. It seemed like just yesterday a letter had said, "Great day in the morning! After I cut and stacked fifty giant pine trees, I started walking back, and what should greet me but a mountain lion! I only had my ax, but I aimed real good as he leaped, and oh, you should see the pretty rug I'm bringing you home, Sister. And a cap for Jimmy too. And tell the girls not to worry, I've got surprises for them too.

Such stories and promises of help sure helped brighten our evenings. I could hardly wait for Uncle James to come.

KL: Meanwhile, things didn't look so bright. And times got tougher for them. But the postcards and stories keep on coming.

MH: One shows a picture of a man on top of a forty-foot spruce with its limbs all cut off. Uncle James said it was him in the photo. He also said he better not send money through the mail, after all, because it might get lost. He'd bring it himself. Which wouldn't be long now.

KL: Summer came, and they worked harder than ever. But things got worse.

MH: And we keep hoping and praying that Uncle James would indeed come soon. And he did, knocking at the door late one September night.

Before we could get downstairs, Mom yelled up the stairs, "Y'all stay in bed. Everything's OK." But we had heard his voice and heard Mom say, "James Goodman, you're drunk!" I think we all tried not to hear that last part.

"But Mom, we want to see Uncle James. We've waited so long."

"No! Do as I say. Your uncle's tired and wants to rest. Now, hush!"

28 KL: Turns out Uncle James made it all up. he didn't have any money, and his promises were phony. Mom tries to help the kids cope with their anger.

MH: Mom also said that we still could use help. It would be up to Uncle James whether he was to be that help or not. I told Mom I hated him, and I wished he would leave and Ann and Elizabeth felt the same, and we'd get

MH: And I still have some of those tools. I had them out to help me do something in the garden. I have a bunch of old files that he would have had when we had horses on the farm.

34 KL: Can you paint a picture of yourself when you're writing? What do you DO?

MH: If it's summer, I'm out under that shade tree with that legal pad on my lap, just daydreaming, and whatever comes to me comes to me. I love the sound of language, so from the get-go, I'm trying to make the lines sing and have color and brightness.

I'm often inspired by whatever I've been reading recently. And it's always funny, I'm not aware of it at the moment, but if I go back and look at it a day later, I'll say, "Oh I could tell I was reading Thomas Merton yesterday. Or I'd been reading this adventure novel. Whatever. That influence carries over to me pretty quickly.

KL: All right. Let's have some advice to writers. Let's start with young writers, little kids. We've already said, Listen to stories. Tell stories. What else?

MH: Read. Read and read and read, as much as you can, anything and everything, as often as possible. And if the kid has to read comic books, great! More power to him.

35 KL: Cynthia Rylant said she read mostly comic books when she was a kid.

MH: My introduction to the classics was Classics Illustrated, God bless them. I know people raised under different circumstances who had the real classics in their hands, full length, from young ages, and I think that probably is better. But, having said that, the Classics Illustrated didn't mean I wouldn't get to them. It whetted my appetite to get to the real things, I think.

Classics Illustrated were always on a movable stand in the old McClintock's General Store in Union City, Indiana. McClintocks that made homemade potato chips that came in brown paper sacks, and you could see the grease stains on the sacks! And nothing tasted like them. So that, and a Classics Illustrated, and a nickel candy bar, and I was on my way!

36 MH: Thoreau said, if you want to be a writer, go chop wood. And it's still very sound advice, inasmuch as I think, what he means is: Make sure you're living. Don't worry about becoming some thing called a writer. Worry about living the most engaged, rich, committed life that you can. And then if you want to be a writer, well, you're going to have to read, just like the children. And then you're going to have to write. And write and write and write. And practice that writing. And never be satisfied with it.

And that may involve going to school. It may not, given your disposition. It's going to mean reading all those people who have blazed this path before you, going way back into time. You're going to need to know your Shakespeare. You're going to need to know writers that have written in other cultures than your own. In other languages than your own.

Just like a great ball player. I tell the children, and it's good advice for the adults. You need to know every move you can. The more you would imitate Micheal Jordan, the greater you would be as a basketball player. Would you be a Micheal Jordan? No, no matter how hard you tried, you would never be that person. You would have incorporated his moves into that unique mystery that is yourself.

We take on the best moves. And I think that's what can happen in imitation, which is an old medieval way of studying and learning things. And I think that's good advice.

