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

generation to another, they transcend whatever they started out as and become, in her words, folk tale. Or in my words, they simply become Story. And that's what I was hearing at that supper table. And I don't think I've stopped listening ever since.

KL: People are losing that now, that sitting around the table, the whole family, and telling stories.

MH: It's worrisome. One of the things I like to tell parents and teachers both is that, with that table gone from the lives of so many of our children - and I say children in the larger sense - then it becomes our responsibility, isn't it, as teachers and educators, as artists, to recreate that story table, I like to call it. To recreate that story table wherever we can, be it in our schools, our community centers, our synagogues and churches, wherever.

And when I say that, I don't mean that we have to become storytellers ourselves, as some sort of professional thing. No, no, what I mean is simply that we recreate that time when we're simply sitting together. And not just us talking to them, but allowing our children to talk to us, to let them tell us their fledgling stories. It's just so, so crucial.

4 Thomas Merton once said, describing a Shaker chair, he said - quote - "The peculiar grace of a Shaker chair is due to the fact that it was made by someone capable of believing that an angel might come and sit upon it."

When we come into a classroom, or come into any kind of assembly where there are children gathered, we have no idea what potential rests with these little bodies here before us. And the responsibility that places on us, therefore, to nurture in them a love of that magic and that humanity that we call stories.

5 KL: Marc's stories make their way into his brain in different ways.

MH: I suppose the most common source is the story of our own lives.

My very first book, *A Little Excitement*, is built, in large part, around one real incident that happened to me. I think before I describe that incident, though, I'd rather give you a sense of the book itself. *A Little Excitement* begins with a boy in the country. In fact, I rather like the words of the opening page. It says:

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"Winter on Pleasant Ridge had gone on long enough. Sure, I loved sledding and snowballs, snowballs and snow forts. But even they can become boring, especially when you live so far in the country that your only companions are a pair of older sisters. Half the time, they didn't even want to play, and the other half, when they did, they were always too bossy.

Mom said maybe I was too fussy. Anyway, I was tired of winter and tired of being bossed. And what else was there? Not much. Get up, go out in the dark and carry hay while Dad milked. Eat, go to school, go home and carry hay again. Eat, study and put up with Annie and Sara. Not much fun, I can tell you.

Well. It wasn't the best of times for the boy. But one day, he found himself at his Grandmother's. And they were talking. And she told him about her winters as a girl.

... of going to school on a sleigh driven by two black mares. Of blizzards that topped the roof of the old porch. Of her school being closed for weeks at a time. And he said to his Grandma, "Oh, if I could just have a little bit of excitement, something like what you had!"

And she said back to him, "Be careful what you wish for! You might just get it."

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 ther 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 story is a simple one. School was let out early. My brother and I had come me home. We hadn't been home very long, and there was a knock at the door. (He knocks.) Mom, my brother and I looked at each other, and said, "Well, who'd be coming to visit in the middle of a blizzard?"

So I went, and here's this man, and his truck's gotten stuck in the snow drift in the old country crossroads. And he wants to come in and get warm. Mother says, "Sure, let him in."

He hasn't been in the house ten minutes when (knock, knock, knock) there's another knock at the door. And this time it's a woman. Same problem. She's gotten stuck in the drifts and wants to get warm. She comes on in, and seems like there are more knocks (knock knock knock), and before long, we have a house full of strangers. My mother puts a big pot of chili on the stove, and we eventually sit down to supper with these strangers What a wonderful event it was.

For a boy, it was absolutely magical. And of course, everybody's got a story to tell! You get adults together during snow weather. Blizzards! And oh, I remember the storm of 1939, or I remember the one of 1950! And off they're going! And there I am, as a boy, sitting there listening. It was wonderful! Just great.

KL: And he put some of the actual stories people told into the storybook...

MH: The temperature fell so quickly that the pet duck got frozen in the horse trough. I had to go chop him free with an ax. It's all gravy! It's all gravy.

9 KL: Could we hear a little bit from *Snow Country*?

MH: Sure. I'll do the ending. I think you've got the story.

Of course, the storm just gets worse and worse, and these people are not going to be able to go home. The electricity goes out, which just makes the storytelling all that much better, because Mother has to light candlelight. And eventually, she begins to make pallets for them on the floor and beds them down in the old living room next to the stove. And we go off to bed.

"I remember waking up at night and seeing the moon slipping in and out of the clouds. Knowing the storm is breaking up. Very quiet, as deep snow often is. And I tiptoe out to the living room and see all these people sleeping there, these strangers sleeping there who are now our friends. And I think to myself how glad I am to see them, glad for it all. The snowy night, our house, the quiet. Glad I'll have my own story to tell, next time company comes.

10 KL: You went to Yale Divinity School.

MH: Yes, I did.

KL: That is bound to attach itself to your children's books.

MH: I'm sure it has, in rather unconscious ways, throughout my career. Of course, when I was in divinity school, I wasn't there to become a pastor. I was caught up in the whole creative mythology discussion, all the Joseph Campbell materials that were so popular in the sixties.

KL: So you were caught up in the storytelling.

MH: Yes, I was caught up in the storytelling, just in love with those ancient stories.

11 KL: Some of Marc's stories don't have much to do with his own life - on the surface, anyhow. He's always got his ears wide open, listening for stories.

Mh: *Rocks in my Pockets,* my third book, came to me by listening. Only in this case, I was very lucky, listening to one of America's premier storytellers, Bonnie Colllins, an old, old friend.

KL: In that case, the editor of a heritage magazine asked Marc and his wife Cheryl Ryan - a fine children's book writer herself - to go interview Bonnie Collins at her home.

MH: A little log cabin there on the banks on Mackelroy Creek down in Doddridge County. We went down, had a quick lunch, turned on the tape recorder and I said, "Bonnie, tell us a story." And she told us a story. And when she had finished, we said, "Tell us another, please." And she told us another. And another. And another. And another. And we did not turn off the tape recorder till supper time. And a more wonderful, magical afternoon, I don't believe I've ever spent. And one of the stories she told us was *Rocks in My Pockets*.

As I recall, the story was maybe a third of the length it is now. More of a bright, snappy joke. Wonderful. And the moment I heard it, I knew this would make a terrific picture book in its own right. I went home and began to work on it.

12 KL: *Rocks in My Pockets*, by Marc Harshman and Bonnie Collins. He wrote up the story she told in the first part of the book, then he just kept going! Made up some more! Here's the first part.

MH: "To start at the beginning, the Woods family lived on top of the top of the highest mountain in these parts, way up where the wind is your neighbor all year round. The farm was on old rocky soil, but it was the best the family could afford. And so they worked out a living any way they could. They'd raise knee-high corn and walnut-sized potatoes and call them a good crop. You'd hear no complaints.

Their house was drafty, their animals skinny, and their clothes patched out of what was at hand. But one thing they all did have was pockets. And that was mighty important. From the pockets, they carried the rocks. Yes, rocks.

Every morning when they'd set out to work, Father and Mother, Grandpa and Tommy and Jenny, Father would always say, "Be sure you put them rocks in your pockets, now. Be sure you put them rocks in your pocket, or the wind will be likely to blow you away."

And he was right. For the wind did blow fierce across their mountaintop fields. So father and mother, Grandpa, Tommy, and Jenny would pick up some of those rocks, carry them off in their pockets off into the fields. And not a one of them was ever blown away.

KL: So this is where Marc starts adding to the story.

13 *MH*: In the evenings after supper, Grandpa or Mother or Father would often tell a story they remembered from the early days. As the tales were told, you might see one or the other of them rubbing those rocks in their hands. In the cold of winter, those same rocks would be set into the fireplace, then taken out and wrapped in heavy socks to lay between the cold covers to warm up the beds. They were, as any of the family could have told you, mighty handy rocks.

KL: Mighty polished rocks too, after all that handling. In his addition to the story, Marc made up a couple of city women who come to the farm looking for antiques. They go crazy over the polished rocks. And they insist on buying them. Gotta have them.

MH: And were those ladies thrilled! The way they talked, there wouldn't be anybody in all of Pittsburgh or New York of wherever they came from who had stones like these. And so they went back to their homes, put their stones on display and bragged all over them.

KL: And their city friends go crazy over the rocks too. And pretty soon, people are beating a path to the Woods house, wanting to buy some of those rocks. And of course, a few people don't want to spend the money, and they think it'll be just as good if they pick a few up in a field.

MH: And they'd tell Father Woods that those there by the chimney corner weren't quite right and ask him if he knew where they might find some similar ones. And Father Woods, being an honest man, would tell them. And those folks, eyes as big as slab-sided sandstones, would go gather up a heap of field rocks. They thought they were mighty clever, not having to pay Father Woods that way. Cheating him, don't you know.

KL: They don't see the difference between rocks polished by all that loving handling and plain old field rocks.

MH: And nobody back in the city was ever impressed with them either. And those folks that took them will never, ever figure out why. I guess they never lived on the top of the top of the highest mountain. Never carried those rocks in their pockets all day long, hoeing, stooping, spraying, summer, fall and winter. Never played pass with them. Never curled under a blanket with those rocks nestled between their feet. Never sat around a fire rubbing those rocks while the old stories of the hard work and patience filled their heads. No. No, I bet they never did. But I have. I have. And these rocks in my pockets still keep my feet on the ground in even the windiest weather.

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14 KL: Your story works on a lot of levels. I was just talking with a fiddler who was talking about people who come in for a few weeks to get some West Virginia culture. They will learn a few things and take it back like the people bringing the rocks back. And not really know what went into making that tune, the generations of people who polished the tune.

MH: I wouldn't want to castigate everyone who's taken a stone home. I pick up stones myself. And stories. I think some people can come in, and if they've done their own kind of work before arriving, those folks have a better chance of taking home a stone and knowing and appreciating its value.

KL: Well, they never would've asked Mr. Woods where they could find some other rocks. They would have known that his were the real rocks.

MH: That's right! That's it, in a nutshell. They would have known that they had to have one of Mr. Woods' or not at all.

So. Some of my stories come from real life. Sometimes I've tinkered with that real life more than others. Some stories come from listening, as I say, whether it's listening to a real voice such as Bonnie Collins, or listening to that inheritance of voices we see when we find a printed folk or fairy tale. And some stories however, as I say with a wink to the children, (whisper) I don't know where they came from. It's as if they came by magic.

15 My book, *Only One*. First, before I come to the magic, you know that, to be good at anything in this life, you have to practice. You can't be a great ball player, simply by watching the games on the tube. You've got to get out and run and throw and pass and dribble, whatever the sport is.

You can't become a great musician simply by listening to the music. You have to practice your instrument, your flute, your piano, your fiddle. The same's true for a writer. I can't simply read, wonderful and enriching and feeding and nurturing as that is. I do need to do the practice, the actual writing. So I try to make sure that there I am at my desk, scribbling away on those days. Seeing what will happen.

Well, one afternoon in Moundsville, many years ago, I was sitting at our home on Fifth Street then, scribbling away, trying to make one word go together with another one here, make some spark happen. And all of the sudden, the magic descended. And I wrote down these words: *There may be a million stars*. *But there is only one sky. (sound of scribbling)*

There may be a million stars, but there is only one sky.

I didn't know what that meant nor where it was going, not for sure. I didn't know if that was going to be the first sentence of the great American novel, or if it was going to be a poem or a song. I really didn't! But I liked the sound of those words. So I began to play with them. And here's what happened.

There may be a million stars. But there is only one sky. There may be fifty thousand bees, but there is only one hive. There may be five hundred seeds, but there is only one pumpkin. There may be one hundred patches, but there is only one quilt. There may be twelve eggs, but there is only one dozen.. There may be eleven cows, but there is only one herd.. There may be ten cents, but there is only one dime...

KL: He keeps counting down until he gets to ...

MH: But the best thing, the best thing of all is that there's only one me. And there's only one you.

16 MH: When I come into a school, so many schools have given me their own versions of *Only One*. And they've put in a whole different set of words. A boy just today said, "There may be sixty guests, but only one haunted house." And I've had others say, "There may be ten thousand trees, but only one forest." And on and on! And it's so wonderful. It's a great little formula to play with, and I'm glad that so many children have enjoyed it.

17 KL: So you went through all this religious training, but you didn't intend to be a priest, and you ended up writing children's books. Well, that seems like good preparation for writing children's books.

MH: I suppose there's worse. That's right, yes. It's funny how it's come around.

But that value system that we talked about earlier, being raised as I was in rural America and still spending most of my life in rural and small-town America, it's certainly a large part of me.

And certainly church was part of that. That was the radicalizing agent in my life in the sixties, you know. What turned me on first was a church youth trip to Indianapolis where I spent a couple of days living with an African-American family. My heavens! You can't imagine what - for this lilly-white farm boy who'd never seen anything in the world, this was transformation.

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 Childrens' 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."

20 The narrator, the boy who tells the story is a boy in a wheelchair. Some children had told me my earlier childrens books were largely a recreation of myself. And perhaps somewhere in my mind, I was thinking, "If this boy's in a wheelchair, that's enough different from who I am and who I have been that it will demand a different sort of voice. And mind you, one of the schools where I was a grade school teacher, we had a wheelchair-bound population, so it wasn't unfamiliar to me. And hopefully that worked. Because I've never lived in a wheelchair.

21 KL: A reading from that book, *The Storm*

Jonathan stuck in his wheelchair is what he means, Jonathan muttered to himself. This was what he hated. Just this. Being singled out, different. And of all things, a storm. There were things he was scared of. But storms weren't one of them. He loved storms. He loved those evenings when he and Dad would watch a thunder storm and its spidery lightening boom and flash the darkness into daylight.

What he was scared of was much more more common and everyday. Cars, trucks, the squealing of tires on pavement. He could still see as as if in a freeze frame the red truck before it blindsided him crossing US 40 under the flashing light. And he was scared of moments like these around others, when he realized that everyone was thinking about him. Or not really him, but his condition, his legs, his inability to use them, his wheelchair.

He hated those moments when he felt everyone looking at him. He dreaded this as much as the flashbacks because this happened more often.

KL: School lets out, and he rides the schoolbus home.

What I really hate is this heat, Jonathan complained to no one in particular as he wheeled himself away from the bus and down a long drive to the house. Everything sticks to me in this chair. He was happy though, to see his mom on the porch, knowing that she now understood now about not meeting him at the bus.

"Jonathan, this car's giving me fits again. Dale said he'd take a look at it if I brought it in right away. I should be right back in plenty of time. But supper's made if I'm not. Just put it in the oven. Your dad's still at Reynolds' working on that roof. I got the cows in the barn and chickens fed. Storm's coming, Martha told me, she's never wrong. Oh, and if I run late, could you get the horses?"

"Sure, Mom." He smiled. "Don't worry. I'll take care of them."

Ducking into the car, she yelled, "Thanks!" and drove off.

22 Ever since the accident, Jonathan had done everything he could - and his therapist as well - to make the rest of his body as strong as possible. Mom and Dad had helped a lot too, making changes in the house, adding ramps outside, putting rope handles on the barn doors, low enough to reach. They'd even adjusted the horse halter, so it was easier for him to snap on a lead rope. It all helped.

Since he was already out, he decided to go ahead and whistle the horses into the lot. It wasn't easy, but a short while later, he was rolling himself back out of the root cellar towards the horse trough, carrots laying carefully across his lap.

Back in the barn, he turned on Dad's milking radio. "A line of thunderstorms approaching east central Indiana have severe hail and lightning and a tornado watch has been issued for Wayne, Randolph, Jay, and Delaware counties..."

23 KL: Jonathan knows that "tornado watch" isn't a real warning of a tornado. It just means one is possible.

But that rising wind. He wasn't sure he liked the low wail of the wind that began moving through the farm yard, nor the green-yellow tint of the sky. They were signs the oldtimers said meant twister. "Better get to seeing about closing things up," he said to himself. "Who knows?"

The radio was still running the same advisory. Wind, hail, tornado watch. He called to the horses, reached up from his chair and undid the latch, backing away as the gate swung open. Buster nuzzled his ear as he wheeled along beside them into the barn. Once inside, he gave them each a scoop of oats. Usually, he liked to linger here, thinking and talking. But as he felt the barn creak and moan under the wind, he turned himself back out to take another look.

He could hear now a continuous rumble of thunder, and to the southwest, the sky had turned a deep, deep blue. Here and there it was fractured by lightning. For a moment, the wind stopped. The cackling of the hens, the snorting of the hogs, the chittering of the birds, all went silent.

Then a sharp whistling rose up from somewhere. There was a worried nicker from Henry. Jonathan looked again at the sky. And there he saw it, saw the strange black thumb press itself down out of the bulging mass of clouds and stretch into a narrow tongue, just licking over the surface of the ground. Tornado.

It was so incredible that, for a moment, he simply stared. From the rise of the farmyard, he watched the snakelike funnel slowly twist across the distant fields and broaden into a larger blackness. Before his eyes, it become a black wall headed straight for the farm.

Fear replaced amazement. He hurried back across the lot. The wind was shrieking. But before he could get to the house, he heard horses. Looking back, there were Buster and Henry, tearing madly about the inner lot.

How could they have gotten out?

24 KL: And then Jonathan does something very brave. And after the tornado passes, he goes outside. Lots of destruction. And pretty soon, his parents come driving right through the field in his dad's truck.

"Thank heavens, you're all right!" his mom said, climbing out, running to him, hugging him. His dad was dead quiet for a long time while as he looked slowly around. Then he said, "Have a little bit of a storm here, son?" and put his hand on Jonathan's shoulder.

As Jonathan told him his story, he could see it all again, the blackness, the roaring of the wind, the funnel cry, the cries of the animals, how he'd had to bring the horses in and stay, the battering of the barn itself.

They listened. They didn't scold or baby him. He felt better than he had felt for a long time. He knew he had done a thing he could feel good about. He wouldn't care so much now when people looked at him. He knew they still would. They would still see his condition. But when they knew this story, they just might begin to see a lot more. They might just begin to see him, Jonathan.

KL: Jonathan. There's only one. You!

MH: That's right! There's only one. There's only one of you, Jonathan.

25 KL: How do kids react when you read that story?

MH: It is amazing. If they know the story ahead of time, when I put that first slide up of *The Storm*, they all inhale at the same moment and go, Yes, yes! I mean, I don't think I was aware of the kind of emotional power that's in that story when I first wrote it. I really don't think I was. And I think it's been children's reactions to that story that have told me, gosh, I must have gotten this one just about right. (laughs)

KL: Once again, I know that you weren't starting with a statement of values, then writing a story to match it. But in *The Storm* - look past the outward appearances. Don't be deceived by the wheelchair. Don't make snap judgements about people.

MH: I think it's a temptation for us all. That's who we are as people. We want to judge somehow. Maybe it comes from an over-sense of self-righteousness. I dunno.

And who knows? I've just now this very moment thought of this in our talking, but there's more of me in that boy in the wheelchair than I thought. I mean, despite having a pretty comfortable life, nonetheless I remember as a boy being haunted by feelings of inferiority and lack of confidence. You know, I got picked on. Of course, everybody got picked on. But in your own mind, you blow that up to be, oh gosh, you're really low on the totem pole here, aren't you?

And maybe *The Storm* is just another way of getting back some of that. Reminding folks that we've got to go way beyond surface, we've got to go way beyond what outward circumstances might lead us to believe about a particular person.

26 KL: That's another magic thing about writing, isn't it? You can revisit things that were uncomfortable and make them come out different.

MH: Yes, yes. I mean, it does, it helps us to revisit our past in a lovely way. And I think there's no harm in reinventing it. (laughs)

KL: That's what he did in his book, Uncle James. He modeled Uncle James on his great-grandfather.

MH: Great-Granddad, was sort of the black sheep of the family. My children's book, *Uncle James*, is in fact, is actually the real prose telling of that story in many ways.

The story of Great-granddad begins with my memories of him as a little boy. By that time he was kept in a back room at Grandma and Grandpa's house. He was a drunk. And they'd take him to town to get his drink once a week. But he was very wonderful to us as children when he was sober. He would read books to us, and I would crawl up on his lap.

Lots of things. He was a gardener, and he read books. And I didn't know about the drinking until it was too late to have tarnished the image. You know?

27 KL: From his book, Uncle James.

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

by somehow. Mom said that she agreed that we would get by somehow. She said the important question was, whether Uncle James would get by.

"Uncle James? Why should we care? He didn't care about us. All he did was lie to us and lead us on and take money from you and Dad. He's just an old drunk!"

KL His mom tries to help him understand alcoholism. And Uncle James tries to quit drinking.

MH: Mom says it's an ache like a sickness that hangs on a man a long time, and that it will be a long time before he's well. But he's getting better, and he's a big help to us. He can scythe twice as fast as Mom or I. He already has all the winter wood cut. And even if he is sometimes awful quiet, he can be cheerful and funny. And he sure makes the work go faster with all his jokes and memories of life out West.

After supper, he sits down and tells us wonderful tales. He tells us the real true stories of life in the West, not just about rattlesnakes and mountain lions. Before bedtime, he'll tell us the stories we know aren't exactly true, the tall tales men told him around the campfires about men named Paul Bunyan and Pecos Bill.

I still remember how much the disappointment hurt when those stories in his letters turned out to be untrue. I guess that's just the way some people are, making up stories to make real life seem better than it is. Mom says that's OK, as long as he remembers that he's the teller of the story and not the story itself. She says he knows again what's a true story now and what's a story story.

KL: Uncle James ... a story story.

29 MH: I recall, at some point, going back home and the family beginning to understand that I really was envisioning myself as an author, as a writer. And Grandmother going off somewhere and coming back and giving to me this old cigar box. And it was stuffed with all of her father's - stuffed with all his memorabilia. There were a couple of photographs. There was a slew of postcards which come into the story, Uncle James. And all this stuff. So I began to recreate and ask questions about this man, who had indeed been a drunk, who had not been faithful to the family. At one point, he had deserted and gone West for three years. What the drive was to do that, none of us are quite sure. Maybe it was that he wanted to make money. Didn't pan out.

But this man just grew and grew in my imagination, a man who I had known, in fact. I had a real clear picture of greatgranddad Andy.

KL: The same themes run through many of your books. Look past the surface. Value people. Give people another chance. People are special.

MH: We are! (laughs)

30 KL: What does your writing owe to West Virginia?

MH: It owes a lot. It's enabled me to continue that profound fascination I have with the earth, with the landscape, with the way people make a living from the land. Although my father lost his farm when I was ten or eleven, we were still in the country, and my work was with the other farm boys, you know, putting up hay and all the stuff that went with farm work.

And here in West Virginia, that's been allowed to continue. All those years on Sally's Backbone, I was really quite blessed. They were wonderful people, my neighbors there. Most, if not all, of their young people had left, if not West Virginia, left the ridge. And here was somebody in that generation.

And so, people ask me, was it hard to fit in? When you come from outside to any rural location, there's always that, oh, but will you ever be accepted?

I always felt accepted, because I wasn't afraid to work with my hands. Putting up hay, butchering hogs, whatever it was that was going on. I was willing to do what I could.

And I say that and would be the first to say that, I'm no farmer. I couldn't do what these men and women have done, day in and day out. I mean, I've not had that responsibility, yet, I have a profound respect for it. I think that they sensed that. I feel absolutely blessed that I've been taken into this part of the world. And it's certainly enriched me in ways that I can just barely articulate.

KL: Marc wrote about Sally's Backbone in poetry.

MH: I suppose the poetry is a constant reworking of one's life. Who one is, within that life.

31 KL: And here's one of Marc's poems. The title is "Them." As is true in much of his writing, his respect for individual people laces through these lines.

MH: The rain is hurled in gusts, whipped across the lot, the cold like salt in the wound of their breathing. Husband and wife forty years, more bad times than good and little to show but their thin-skinned trailer on its half acre of steep ground. Photographs on shelves below counters. Colored lights in windows once lit for Christmas. The coop of chickens is rocked by the storm's battering. They wade toward it, one shadow over frozen mud, dimming light. It must be ritual or habit, pain deep in the why of it all that carries them forward. Reasons? I don't know any that can be found. There are simply things that must be done, repeated necessarily. They repeat a pattern of a labor that maintains a living. Now is the time to feed the chickens. The shed is glazed with ice in the morning. Twenty degrees colder since yesterday. Even more difficult on such a day to understand what is there beyond what is enough to keep them going, their arms linked, helping each other over the slippery path. There is that, each other's arms in the hard times. There is that knowing how to find each other without looking. Knowing that where they are going, they are going together.

But where now, this day? Familiar places. They return from henhouse to table, its chrome and linoleum, cracked and dull, piled with cereal boxes and mail. egg cartons and tools and dishes and coffee that burns at, but not through their cold, stiffened limbs. They sit quietly a moment, touch at memories with only the barest of words, familiar talismans of shared identity. And the going on of the day itself? The most of it requires not even this. Only gestures, independent of memory. No language, only endurance. Persistence. No charity, no welfare. No creed, no church.

As for where they are going, why, they are going to town for groceries. They are going to the henhouse for eggs. They are going to sleep in the same bed. They are going to all the familiar places and someday beyond and going each without looking to the other.

32 KL: You've spent a lot of time in WV now. What do you think should be preserved here? What is valuable in this place.

MH: Every square inch of it. Including those beautiful green mountains, which they should leave well enough alone! (laughs)

I can't imagine another state that needs preservation more. I mean its people, its culture, its heritage, its landscape. It's so, so rich. There are certain old ways - and I say old in the best sense - old ways that are still occurring here!

I'm not the one to speak best about it. But uh -

KL: Well, but aren't you speaking about it when you write about a family taking people in in a snowstorm or neighbors helping a family whose roof is on fire? Aren't you talking about what should be preserved?

MH: Yes, of course, I guess I am. And a story like *Uncle James*. That we preserve the integrity of every individual, even those broken individuals in our midst. I know WV is a place that will do that. How many times I've seen my own neighbors take in the strays and the homeless.

It's something that can be lost out there in that false world we see bombarding us from the TV set. There's an older, truer way of life. And it goes on here. Although it is under dire threat, I would be the first to say as well.

33 KL: In the late 1990s, Marc and Cheryl had to leave their beloved Sally's backbone community and home, where they had enjoyed that older, truer way of life. As he was feeling the pain of moving, Marc got an idea for another book.

It was the summer we were leaving Sally's Backbone, which really was a heart-wrenching experience. Cheryl and I had lived almost a decade in this rural part of Marshall County, but there it was. As we were gathered things, I remember cleaning out the old shed and finding a snakeskin in there and remembering two giant black snakes that lived in there one year and how they'd made me a little uneasy when they were on top of the rafters above my head.

By then, I had been teaching in the grade schools for many years. And I was always just dumbfounded by how many of my children had moved so many times in their young lives. And it had impressed upon me, more than ever, what a mobile society we live in, even in rural West Virginia.

So I took my memories of that move, then tried to imagine, What's it like for a kid? I'll read the beginning of the book, which captures that particular image I mentioned.

MH: A snakeskin, white and light as air, tangled in old socks and rags. I found it under the rocking chair in the shed. Dad smiled and said he was glad I 'd found only that.

A month ago, Mom and Dad told me we were moving. I said, "Sure. That's OK." But it wasn't. Not only were we moving, but we were moving far away and to a town. No more woods across the road. No more Jimmy Tolson just down the road. But today there was this great snakeskin. I tried to forget the rest.

And the book will go on and show the various kinds of things the boy will uncover for his memories.

KL: It's interesting. Marc still has his own Uncle Jack's tools, and the dad in this book has his Uncle Jack's tools.

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 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.

37 KL: You live in Wheeling now. And I think you've probably covered a good deal of West Virginia, just going around to grade schools and talking to kids, reading your stories, and so forth, haven't you?

MH: Oh yes. I have. It's been wonderful: all kinds of out-of-the-way places, inner city schools, and everything inbetween.

And I feel very fortunate to have so much of my life spent with children. I never dreamed that this was what would happen to me when I first started down that road to being a poet. It's funny that poetry was a good training for becoming a children's writer, because in both arts, you have to employ succinctness in your use of language.

KL: I picture you at a WV grade school in the country somewhere, with kids swarming around you. They can't believe you're real.

MH: (laughs) Yes, that's funny. I'm treated like royalty in so many of these schools I visit. They have a carnation for my collar. They hung banners outside the school, and the hallways and classrooms are just plastered with pictures they've made in response to my books. The teachers will throw a wonderful buffet dinner for me sometimes or else take me out to some exotic restaurant they've found. Or else had a party in the evening for me. It's really quite humbling. And humbling means I should shut up.

KL: I bet you these kids, when they meet you, think, Well, maybe I could write too!

MH: I hope that's what they think. When I tell them background, my life story, I like to think that it's a fairly humble background. We were just farming people in the Midwest, nothing special about us other than those things that are special to all of us: a loving family that wanted the best for their children.

KL: A loving family that wanted the best for their children. Well, that's richness isn't it?

MH: Yes, indeed, it is richness.

KL: Right. And that's a visit with children's book writer and poet, Marc Harshman. I'm Kate Long. And this is *In Their Own Country*. Thanks for listening.

In Their Own Country is produced and edited by Kate Long. Music was performed by John Blissard, Bob Webb, and Ron Sowell. Bob Webb recorded the music and supplied production assistance. Francis Fisher provided technical mentoring and production assistance.

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