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## Children's Authors Sparkle at MBA

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By Claire Kirch – Publishers Weekly, 10/1/2009 10:08:00 AM

The children's book and author breakfast, which traditionally kicks off the trade show portion of the Midwest Booksellers Association's annual gathering, is usually a literary-star studded affair, and this year was no exception. Nearly 200 groggy booksellers straggled into St. Paul's RiverCentre at 7:30 a.m. last Saturday morning to eat bagels, drink coffee and prepare for the long day ahead with an A-list of children's authors: Loren Long (*Otis*, Philomel), M.T. Anderson (*Jasper Dash and the Flame-Pits of Delaware*, S&S/Beach Lane), Catherine Gilbert Murdock (*Front and Center*, Houghton), and Newbery Medalist Neil Gaiman (*Odd and the Frost Giants*, HarperCollins). It was a doubleheader for Gaiman fans: he'd just spoken to booksellers at the previous evening's Midwest Booksellers Choice Awards celebration, when he'd accepted the children's literature award for *The Graveyard Book*.



Neil Gaiman (l.) and M.T. Anderson at the MBA children's breakfast.

Loren Long, known best as a children's illustrator, started the morning off by introducing the subject of the second children's book he has both written and illustrated: *Otis*, "a special tractor." Reading selections from *Otis* while projecting some of the book's black-and-white illustrations splattered with color, Long adlibbed, "He's a Midwestern tractor. He likes to work hard and play hard."

Displaying up a stark image on the screen—that of the old tractor and the young calf he'd befriended, sitting under a tree against a desolate landscape—Long said simply, "This illustration is a homage to one of my favorite books, *The Story of Ferdinand*." Murmurs of recognition were heard from the audience, who appreciated the reference to the iconic image in the 1936 classic children's book.

Disclosing his own family's contribution to the creation of *Otis*, Long recalled how his two teenage sons had, seven years ago, woven a story about a tractor and farm animals they'd called "Little Green Samuel Story." *Otis* was directly inspired by "Little Green Samuel," Long added, to such an extent that his 12-year-old had asked him recently if he was going to "take any more of our stories, tweak them and call them your own."

Quoting from *PW*, which described *Otis* as a "love letter to classic picture books," Long mentioned how moved he was to read the prepub response to his book. "My heart melted. Maybe my life is complete," he said.

The next speaker, M.T. Anderson, followed up on the theme of his life now being complete, by saying, "How great it is to be here at 7:30 in the morning, about to speak before a charming Newbery Award winner. Sweet."

Telling his audience that he was going to regale them with real-life tales of "travel, adventure, and Delaware"—though he grew up in Massachusetts—Anderson took booksellers along on a fast-paced trip back through his life and times, as he recalled a quiet and safe childhood in his "resolutely all-American" suburb, reading fantasy books and dreaming of "lost worlds and hidden valleys" and "vast untamed landscapes."

"I thought I'd grow up and travel the world and have adventures," Anderson said, before launching into a few stories about his misadventures while traveling. "But the problem is people in other countries speak other languages. I'm horrible with languages."

Recalling an awkward incident during a trip to Nepal, which involved gnawing on a chicken-bone local delicacy in a hole-in-the-wall café while simultaneously trying to stave off stray cats trying to get at the bones, Anderson had the audience in stitches, concluding his story by saying he remembered thinking, "There's got to be a better way."

"I decided to write a novel about exotic adventure from the safety of my own home," he added. And despite the fact he'd never been to Delaware, he used Mapquest.com to research its geography. "When I actually went to Delaware," he admitted, "I discovered there are no mountains in Delaware, and there are no jungles in Delaware. I apologize to the residents of Delaware."

Catherine Gilbert Murdock, the next speaker, also writes of a world far away from her own. Murdock, who grew up in Connecticut, attended a Seven Sisters college, and now lives in suburban Philadelphia, writes of Midwestern farm girls, rather than, as the morning's m.c., Ellen Scott of the Bookworm in Omaha, pointed out, "the rich boarding school preppy girl or the fantasy girl."

Displaying photographs of her family on the overhead projector, Murdock explained how she came to write about teenaged farm girls, though she herself has never lived west of the Mississippi. Her mother's family is from Brainard, Minn., where they operated a farm, she said, and she spent summers there. She said she grew up in rural Connecticut, which was like "growing up like Puritans without the promise of salvation."

As she described her family's small dairy farm and its impact upon her writing, Murdock explained, "Your existence is defined by the fact that you have to milk the cows twice a day."

Today, instead of cows, her existence is defined by her writing from home while raising a young child. "She's very supportive of the writing process," Murdock said, "But not very patient. She's always asking, 'Are you done yet? When are you going to be done?'"

Gaiman, the fourth speaker, drew laughs when he pointed out it was "probably a good thing" that he was the last author to speak. "It gave the tea time to work. If I'd gone on earlier, I might have glared at you all and said, 'Yeah, the book's good.'"

Gaiman then put in a plug for last year's *The Graveyard Book*, telling booksellers that his editor at HarperCollins had promised to bake him a pie if *The Graveyard Book* topped the *New York Times* bestseller list for a whole year. "I suggest, tell all your bookseller friends to sell this book as hard as they can, as a public service. I may get pie," he said, only half-joking.

Explaining that *Odd and the Frost Giants*, a 15,000-word novella, was originally written as his contribution to World Book Day, an annual celebration of books and reading in the U.K., Gaiman, a native of England, disclosed how his adopted home in the Upper Midwest—a region with a large Scandinavian-American population—had inspired him to write a magical tale of a ninth-century Norwegian boy and some animals who are actually the Norse gods under a spell.

Promising more tales about Odd and his adventures, including one explaining how the best Norse swords actually came from Afghanistan, Gaiman promised, "When you have a character like Odd and a world like Viking Norway, there are always more stories. I still have more books to write."

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