

## An Interview with

## JUDITH VIORST

SARA ANN BEACH

JUDITH VIORST is an author of books for both children and adults. Born in Newark, New Jersey, in 1931, she is a graduate of Rutgers University and the Washington Psychoanalytic Institute. Her first published children's book came after she had established herself as a poet. Her children's books include *Sunday Morning* (1968); *The Tenth Good Thing about Barney* (1971); *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* (1972); *Alexander, Who Used to Be Rich Last Sunday* (1978); *If I Were in Charge of the World and Other Worries: Poems for Children and Their Parents* (1981); *The Alphabet from Z to A* (1994); *Alexander, Who's Not (Do You Hear Me? I Mean It!) Going to Move* (1995); and her most recent release, *Super-Completely and Totally the Messiest* (2000). She has also written adult fiction (*Murdering Mr. Monti*), nonfiction (including *Imperfect Control* and *Grown-Up Marriage*), and poetry. She collaborated with Shelly Markham in turning *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* into a musical for the Kennedy Center and is presently turning *Alexander, Who's Not (Do You Hear Me? I Mean It!) Going to Move* into a Kennedy Center musical to be presented between Thanksgiving and Christmas of 2003.



Judith Viorst

Photo: Milton Viorst. Courtesy: Lescher &amp; Lescher

**Sally Beach** Why did you start writing for children?

**Judith Viorst** I have always loved children's literature. Long before I had children, I tried to get children's books published but was unsuccessful. During my first editing job as a children's-book editor, which I thought was the most wonderful job in the world, I also wrote children's books that were consistently turned down. I continued to love children's books. It was when I finally had children of my own and actually started picking up on what I was experiencing, or what became issues in my own life as a mother, that I started getting things published. Actually, Harper & Row asked me if I was interested in writing a children's book for them, and I said, "You bet!" That's how I got started.

**SB** The subjects that you write about, then, are based upon your own experience?

**JV** Yes. I can take you through a few of them. The first book I wrote was called *Sunday Morning*. It was based on two brothers getting up before their parents wanted to be awakened and then getting into a lot of mischief and trying to be quiet about it, something that was a very familiar issue around our house. I just had Anthony and Nick, my two older boys, and was pregnant with Alexander when I wrote that book. The next children's book I wrote, *I'll Fix Anthony*, was specifically designed because Nick was having a very hard time with his older brother, Anthony. I used to describe Anthony as a practically perfect person except for one thing: he was very mean to his little brother. I wrote that book as a kind of a fantasy of revenge. Just as adults experience some kind of relief, release, consolation in their grandiose or vengeful fantasies, I thought that Nick could get some pleasure out of imagining that he might be able to get revenge if only he were six. So I wrote it for him with that purpose in mind.

**SB** Did you write other books that responded to your children's needs?

**JV** Yes. *The Tenth Good Thing about Barney* was written after a conversation with my son Anthony in which he said to me, "Am I going to die some day?" I said what every good mother is trained to say, in a brisk voice: "Everybody dies, but not for a very, very, very long time."



He responded, "Do I have to die?" and I said, "Yes, everybody dies, but not for a very, very, very long time." And then he got very teary and said, "Mommy, I *really* don't want to die." At which point, in one of my lower moments of motherhood, I said, "Well, maybe they'll invent something." Then I told myself that I was going to have to do better for my son and seize the opportunity to ponder what I really *did* think about death. Maybe then I could have a better conversation with myself and with him about it.

**SB** So you wrote another book to clarify your response to your son?

**JV** Precisely. That book was a representation of my beliefs, which do not include an afterlife, but also the beliefs of those who do believe in an afterlife. I represented my position: immortality through the cycle of nature and through memory. I represented the other position with Annie [a character in the book], who says there is a heaven. I felt that all points of view ought to be represented because of another conversation I had with Anthony in which he had stated that he was one of those millions upon millions of people who believed in heaven. Before I continue, I want to say that, although these issues or events came up in my life as spurs to writing, I am totally opposed to message books. I was inspired by these issues or events, but I did not preach in the books and would consider my books a failure if that is what they had been.

**SB** So you don't think children's books should try to get a message across?

**JV** No, I don't. There are things I care about, ideas, opinions, feelings, things I care about passionately and want to express, but the creativity, the language, the story, the validity of the work as a work has to trump any message.

**SB** Is there a topic that you would never discuss in a children's book, even if you discussed it with your children or grandchildren?

**JV** I can't see myself writing a book about sex. I'm not knocking anybody, though. If someone can do it well, more power to them. I guess [Maurice] Sendak has come close from time to time, and I think he is magnificent.

**SB** Are any topics off limits for children's books?

**JV** I write picture books. I'm not going to introduce very young children to certain types of violence and brutalization, although the Mother Goose books have a lot of brutality and violence in them, as do the fairy tales. I think they are fine. I think that in the right hands there is probably nothing that you can't do.

**SB** You write for adults as well as children. How is writing for children different from writing for adults?

**JV** I would say that I feel some obligation in writing for children always to offer some kind of hope. I tend to write that way for adults too, but I don't feel compelled by such an obligation. If I were writing about something that is absolutely bleak and dark and miserable, I would not feel that I owed it to an adult to provide a promise of hope, although it is in my nature to want to offer it. I once reviewed a children's book, and I can't remember the book now, but it was a very, very bleak children's book, ending in utter despair. When I wrote the review, I said that the reason that I was unhappy with this book for young children was that it was so utterly bleak. I hypothesized that maybe one of the differences between children's books and adult books, young children's books, is that you needed to offer some kind of hope.

**SB** Why is that so important?

**JV** Because I think children are growing organisms who eventually, with good enough luck, will get strong enough to be able to handle a lot of the very hard things life hands out, but not when they are that young.

**SB** Do you think providing hope for them helps prepare them for being able to survive life?

**JV** It helps them put one foot in front of the other, to acquire what they need to go on. I'm not saying what other writers should do; I'm just talking about my own inclination.

**SB** Of your many children's books, do you have a favorite?

**JV** I don't. I guess that is like the old classic about asking which of your children you like best. It depends on the day. And, of course, the proper answer—and the way I feel most of the time—is “all of them.” Whatever I am working on at the moment seems particularly dear to me.

**SB** Do you have a favorite aspect of, let's say, the Alexander books that you like best, as opposed to the other ones you've told me about?

**JV** Well, the Alexander books have this absolutely fierce, specific, resilient kid. I love the full-blownness of [Alexander's] character to the point where, when I would go to rehearsals [for the musical version of *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* at the Kennedy Center] and watch the audition and rehearsals, I could say, “No, no! That isn't right. Alexander wouldn't whine in a corner. He'd take his fist and try to punch it through a wall.” I knew how he would react. I could tell the actors, “He's not a whiner, he's outraged. He's in a state of constant indignation.” I had such a sense of this person, who in a lot of ways was my Alexander (whose thirty-sixth birthday we are going to celebrate tonight) and had many of the characteristics of the boy in the book. He didn't look exactly like the picture that Ray [Cruz, the illustrator] came up with, but the illustrations just captured him so wonderfully.

**SB** What did your children think about being such a big part of your books?

**JV** Well, Alexander was initially very irritated. In fact, I read him the first Alexander book before it went to the publisher, and he really did one of these, “Why are you giving me this bad day? Why don't you give it to Tony? Why don't you give it to Nick? Why me?” I explained to him we could call it *Walter and the Terrible Horrible . . .*, or *Stanley*, et cetera, that we didn't need to call it *Alexander*, because it wasn't printed yet. His name, however, wouldn't be in big letters on the front of the book, I warned him. There was a long pause and he said, “Keep it *Alexander*.”

**SB** What do you think is your greatest achievement as a children's author?

**JV** That's hard to answer. If I could pick one reason why I want to be a writer, it would be connection. In all kinds of ways, I like to be individual and distinct; but when I write, I want to be writing about things that connect me to the people for whom I write. To the extent that I can do that, I feel very satisfied that I've achieved what I want to achieve. From the letters that I get from kids, and I get a lot of them, I feel that I have achieved that with my children's books.

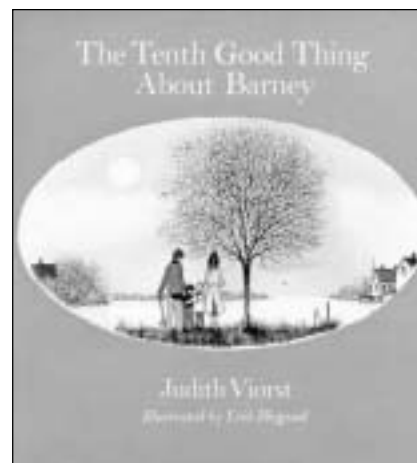
**SB** If you were to offer one crucial suggestion to someone who says, “I want to write books for children,” what would you tell them?

**JV** I would tell them never to patronize children.

Don't limit your vocabulary. Don't offer a bunch of goody-goody sentiments. And to the best of your ability, find the kid in you, the one who is speaking out of your own experience. Try to tap into the kid who lives in you, because that is where your true, authentic voice comes from.

**SB** I know you have grandchildren. What are you reading to them or with them these days?

**JV** Everything. Our seven-year-old has been totally obsessed with the Harry Potter books. I think they are terrific—I like them very much. It is just fun to see people so excited about reading. My littlest one, Nathaniel, is one, and we're really not reading to him yet. We do some things with *Pat the Bunny*, which he likes. Olivia is sort of in the *Go, Dog, Go* mode, but her parents have



said that they are starting to read her some of my books. I don't want to push that on any of my kids. Our three-year-old just likes to be read to. He likes to snuggle up and hear a story.

**SB** You mentioned that Maurice Sendak was one of your favorite authors.

**JV** Yes.

**SB** Do you have other favorite children's authors?

**JV** I love Shel Silverstein's poetry. I just think it's wonderful. I love reading it to kids. I've always been a fan of Dr. Seuss, but I appreciate some of his works more than others. *Horton Hatches an Egg* will always hold a special place in my heart. For older kids, I think Elaine Konigsburg, one of my dear friends, is just magnificent.

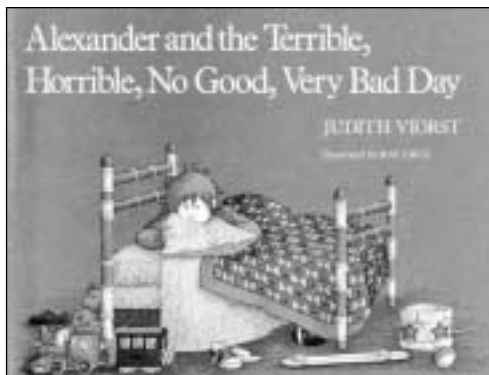
**SB** What is so remarkable about those authors?

**JV** They are wonderful writers. They tell the truth and do it beautifully. I think they have just tremendous insight into a child's heart.

**SB** What are your thoughts on children's literature today in terms of what is popular, what is available, and how it has changed since you started writing?

**JV** Since I was a children's book editor from 1957 to 1960, it has changed so much. My head is spinning. We couldn't say words like *gee* or *golly*. The subjects that were off limits were just unbelievable, and you could still put out some wonderful books despite all that. You aren't going to get any better than *Charlotte's Web* with all the barriers down. I think that, for better or worse, there's just been an "anything goes" feeling about what can be written these days. Some of it is very didactic, and the message drowns out the art or takes the place of the art. I think some of it is probably useful. People always want children's books that will address the particular problems and needs of their children. I think there is a lot of wonderful stuff out there and a lot of junk.

**SB** Do you remember an especially beautiful moment when you were reading with children?



**JV** I have a beautiful moment, one I will never ever forget, of having Alexander sitting on my lap when he was about five. I was reading him *Charlotte's Web*. He was totally into the story. He was beside himself with worry about Wilbur [the main character in the story] and couldn't stand it another minute. Anyway, he was sort of squirming and sighing, and, finally, feeling so overwhelmed with love and concern for Wilbur, he leaned down

and kissed Wilbur's picture, wanting to give him some comfort. I still get tears in my eyes when I think of that. Isn't that your dream of what you want words, a story, to do? Make someone just care so much that they could hardly stand it, that they were beside themselves?

**SB** Is there anything else you'd like to say about children's literature or about your books?

**JV** Writing children's books has made me very happy. It is very satisfying. Some of the letters I get really touch me. I have wanted to be a writer all my life. As a little girl, I wrote little-girl stories. Long before I got published, I had written a couple of poems that, when everything else went into the trash can, I knew I shouldn't throw out. They appeared in my first book of poems for children, *If I Were in Charge of the World*. It made me very happy to be able to take something I had written long before I really believed anybody was ever going to publish me and see it on the printed page. **WLT**

*University of Oklahoma*

*Editorial note:* Judith Viorst visited the University of Oklahoma in April 2003 as the keynote speaker to honor the first recipient of the Thatcher Hoffman Smith Prize, a biennial prize honoring the creative process sponsored by OU's College of Arts & Sciences in collaboration with Jeanne Hoffman Smith. Information about the 2005 prize competition can be found on the Creativity in Motion Web site, [creativityinmotion.org](http://creativityinmotion.org).

SARA ANN BEACH is Associate Professor of Literacy Education at the University of Oklahoma, where she does research on critical literacy in classrooms. She also served on the jury for the inaugural NSK Neustadt Prize for Children's Literature in 2003.

