

Interview with Sid Fleischman by Jennifer Crow, March 12, 2009 for podcast

JENNIFER: This is Jennifer Crow with the Arne Nixon Center and I am honored today to be speaking with Newbery Award winner Sid Fleischman. Sid has written over 50 books. Most of these are for children, but he's also written adult novels, and at least one book on magic, and numerous screenplays. Several of his books have been made into movies, including his Newbery award-winning book *The Whipping Boy*. His latest book is a biography on Mark Twain and it is entitled *The Trouble Begins at 8: A Life of Mark Twain in the Wild, Wild West*. So, Sid I'd like to welcome you to the Arne Nixon Center and we're so glad to have you today.

SID: Thank you so much.

JENNIFER: I have a few questions for you. First of all is, we've been saying you have written adult novels, and screenplays, and children's fiction, and a biography about Houdini entitled *Escape: The Story of the Great Houdini*. And your website calls *The Trouble Begins at 8* a companion piece to that Houdini biography and I've looked at them together and I can see they're both formatted the same; and I was wondering: first of all, what inspired you to write the biography of Mark Twain? And why do you consider those companion pieces?

SID: Well, a thought came along: there are going to be three. And I thought I'll deal with three geniuses. And that was the kind of the connecting tissue between them. Plus my style is going to be pretty much the same in all three. The book design on the first one, the Houdini book, was so successful that my editor decided we would even hold to the same book design. So that's how that happened. However, I've only written two of those three genius books.

JENNIFER: Oh? Are you going to reveal to us who the third design was?

SID: Actually I have written it, but it's in a very primitive stage. It's a biography of Charlie Chaplin, the first really world class comedian, and genius.

JENNIFER: Well, you state in *The Trouble Begins at 8* that Mark Twain wasn't very fond of formal education. And you had also mentioned in your [auto]biography *The Abracadabra Kid* that you had, at the beginning, a little bit of difficulty with reading and that you might have even been considered, in these a days, a reluctant reader because you read so much on magic books and not really on fiction. And I was just wondering if you had any thoughts or anything you'd like to share your thoughts on the education system and children's reading in today's world?

SID: There are different worlds. I think the problem I had was not with reading, but was with subject matter. I was so distracted by my fascination, obsession with learning to be a magician, learning slight of hand, that I was reading all the time, but I was reading adult books on slight of hand and I taught myself slight of hand entirely out of books. So I was ignoring—I did read *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* later on. But a lot of the books I've been catching up on through the years that I just didn't get around—, like *Alice in Wonderland*, which is a wonderful book. I must have been fifty years old before I finally got to it, which I should have read when I was younger, boy or girl, you know, that's for all genders. So a lot of that I did not read, and it was such a different world than, for example, I was in my twenties before I

ever saw a live author, or for that matter, a dead author. I wasn't entirely sure that there were real people behind all those books I saw on the shelves; they all had names, but, you know, who were they? I'd never seen one, it never occurred to me that anybody could make a career out of writing books, it was just too foreign. I was in New York; this was during the Second World War, I go back that far; and I was in the Navy and I was walking down Madison Avenue, I'm sorry, yes I was at Madison Avenue; I came down an elevator, and Carl Sandburg, the poet, was in this elevator. And I so shocked to see a live author, a real author; I recognized him because he was so characteristic in his appearance. I couldn't even say hello, I was just stunned, and that was the first author I saw and I was in my twenties. Now, it's a totally different thing, because efforts are made by librarians and teachers, schools [unintelligible], to bring authors to schools, which is a tremendous advantage to those kids, who get to see that authors are flesh and blood like everybody else, and I think that's important, and also to have affairs such as you're having here in Fresno. This immense read celebration of Tom Sawyer, which gets everybody excited about reading and about a book; I think those are huge, huge pluses, and that sort of thing, I think which will make kids realize that there's more to life than sports and TV games, that there are great riches to be found and great entertainment in books. There always have been and always will be.

JENNIFER: Yeah, yeah, it's so important that they do read.

SID: I'm sorry?

JENNIFER: It's so important that they do read, and that they do have, you know, something to stimulate them.

SID: Yes, and now there's such a—so many subjects are dealt with, particularly in children's' fiction. That there's no subject you can't go to and find, which was not always true in the past, so it was much more difficult to find something that would interest a child, whereas today no matter what it is that child can find something. Let me just mention that whole subject, too long, but when I wanted to learn to become a magician I didn't know how to become a magician, and nobody—I grew up in San Diego, so nobody in those days, nobody gave lessons in magic, there were no magic shops, and I did have the wit to ask myself: Well, I wonder if the library would have books on magic? And behold, there were a couple of books for boys and girls on magic, and that's how I started. So, even then in those kind of primitive times the library served its functions. To many of us it saved my life, in a career sense, there, because the magic led to my becoming a writer. So the library was essential to my development.

JENNIFER: Well, we certainly hope libraries will continue to be essential.

SID: They will.

JENNIFER: I read your autobiography and I found it really inspiring. And it seemed like you had done so many interesting and really impressive things, but you seem so down to earth still. And I think you must have had a very charmed life. I wanted to know: what is the real magic for you?

SID: [Laughs] You know, I don't know. I've just been terribly lucky. But I plan a lot, I mean things just didn't happen; I was prepared for them when they did happen. For example, take screenwriting. By time a famous actor bought one of my books to make a movie, I was skilled enough that when I was offered the opportunity to write the screenplay, I could do it. You know, if that had come ten or fifteen years earlier, I might not—I might have flopped as a screenwriter. But I was quite ready. So I've always been ready for

these changes in my life, and I would say that my coming to biography late in life, has—I'm writing different biographies than I would have early on. I have new skills that I wouldn't have had, had I done this thirty years ago, and I'm having more fun, because I'm much more confident. But—so I don't know if that's being charmed or not. I do think there's a lot of luck involved and good timing and the rest of it is just being prepared, having skills.

JENNIFER: So what can we, your fans, expect next from you?

SID: Well, if I had just common grace, I'd retire and quit. [Laughs] But as I say, I'm just too lazy to quit. I have so much fun writing that I will still be at that typewriter when doom arrives. I'm either writing—generally I'm a novelist; I've now written these three biographies and one autobiography. My next book will be a novel. Now, most kids wonder: well, where do you get your ideas? Don't you run out of ideas? Yes I run out of ideas; I've been at it so long I've scraped the bottom of the barrel a dozen different times, but I always find something there. Or if I'm writing as I am now, I have no idea what the next novel is going to be. But I can assure you, when I am able to sit down to that project—I'm still finishing up the Charlie Chaplin book—but when I'm ready to start the next novel I will scratch around, sit at my desk with a pencil, a pen, and a piece of paper, and make a few ideas, and within a week I'll have something and I'll be off to the races.

JENNIFER: Yeah. Well, you're quite talented, you can do that.

SID: Thank you.

JENNIFER: So, is there a question that I haven't asked that you would have liked me to have asked?

SID: Well, we're generally asked for advice for kids who want to write, and I'm delighted when I visit schools to see so many kids who want to write. Unfortunately that gets kind of lost in their lives because they don't know how to approach it. They start a story and they get lost—remember I have three kids and when they were young they'd start a story and get lost and never go back to it. So I think you have to do a lot of extra reading, I think that's obvious. But the answer I give is not the one authors generally give, which is to do a lot of reading. My answer is much more practical: writing has to be practiced. It's one of the arts. It's like anyone playing the violin or the piano. You know if you want to be good you got to practice. Now those—you kids who can draw: you're practicing all the time. You think you're just sketching all the time, but you're really practicing. Which you must do. People don't realize that writing, too, must be practiced. And once you get that—once you understand that, you won't mind starting a story that you can't finish, because the next one you may be able to find the answer to. And you'll discover things from your reading, how to do it, how to do it. You make your mistakes, you correct your mistakes, and eventually, you will learn to write stories, whether short stories or novels. At least, that's the way it happened for me. But I'd say practice is the real secret

JENNIFER: So just keep persevering then.

SID: Exactly. You can't really give up. Because the reason that there are opportunities for those of us who persevere, is that so many people give up, and give up too soon. You've just got to hang in there; if that's your dream, follow it right there to the end. Good luck, all of you.

JENNIFER: Well, thank you Sid. I'd really like to thank you for coming and talking to us and sharing your thoughts, and I hope you come back and visit the Arne Nixon Center. You're welcome any time.

SID: Thank you so much. I'll be back.

JENNIFER: Alright, bye bye.

SID: Thank you.