

Confessions  
*of a*  
BOOK REVIEWER  
The Best of Carte Blanche

MICHAEL CART

*Foreword by Francesca Lia Block*

A BOOKLIST PUBLICATION

ALA  
Editions

An imprint of the  
AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION  
Chicago • 2018

[alastore.ala.org](http://alastore.ala.org)

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ISBNs

978-0-8389-1645-2 (paper)

978-0-8389-1674-2 (PDF)

978-0-8389-1673-5 (ePub)

978-0-8389-1675-9 (Kindle)

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Control Number: 2017050589

Cover design by Kimberly Thornton; imagery © Adobe Stock. Text design and composition by Karen Sheets de Gracia in the Meta Serif and Corki typefaces.

© This paper meets the requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (Permanence of Paper).

Printed in the United States of America

22 21 20 19 18     5 4 3 2 1

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# INTRODUCTION

ONE DAY IN the spring of 1994 my telephone rang. To my surprise it was Bill Ott, editor and publisher of *Booklist* magazine, calling. I had met Bill but didn't know him well, so I presumed he wasn't calling just to chat or talk about those Cubs. My presumption was correct: to my amazement he was calling to invite me—out of the blue—to do a monthly column for *Booklist*. I considered his invitation for approximately five seconds before I said “Yes.” I might have added “Try and stop me,” because to do a column was a lifelong dream of mine. It began when I was a boy, a boy who—I'm fond of saying—would read anything that didn't get up and walk away. My reading ranged from cereal boxes to the daily newspaper, from classics to comics. Somewhere in the middle was my mother's monthly copy of the magazine *Better Homes and Gardens*. Mind you, I wasn't that interested in homes and gardens, either better or worse; no, what interested me was a feature that appeared on the final page of each issue: a column called “The Man Next Door” written by Burton Hillis (years later I discovered this was a pseudonym for William E. Vaughan, who also wrote for *The Reader's Digest*). The column was a cheerfully anecdotal report of his family's small adventures in suburbia, accompanied by some homespun aphorisms; for example, “Suburbia is where the developer bulldozes out the trees, then names the streets after them”; “A real patriot is the fellow who gets a parking ticket and rejoices that the system works.” And—well, you get the idea. I enjoyed it so much that I found myself thinking how great it would be to write a column of my own someday. Flash forward forty or so years and I found that my dream had just come true!

Twenty-three years have passed since Bill's phone call and its genesis of the column that has come to be called *Carte Blanche*. During that time I've written more than 250 columns about a great gallimaufry of topics (it's not for nothing that the column is called *Carte Blanche*), though all have, in their respective ways, dealt thematically with sundry aspects of books, reading, writing, and publishing, a fact that lends some unity and coherence to what would otherwise be a ragtag assemblage.

Inevitably, some things about the column have changed over the years. In the early days I was, at most, a shadowy presence in them; I always took

a back seat to whatever topic I was addressing, yet somehow I gradually started to move out of the shadows and onto the page, especially when I was discussing books, and that gave rise to a series of columns in which I wrote about my own collections and more often than not—since I’m a peripatetic person—about the act of moving when you own upwards of 15,000 books. You’ll find a gathering of such columns in the chapter I’m calling—what else?—“Books, Books, Books.” Aside from an infusion of me, me, me, what else has changed in the columns? Well, one thing has been my growing passion for young adult literature. In the early years it wasn’t uncommon for me to devote a column or three to some aspect of children’s literature, which was—after all—my first passion as a reader. But gradually young adult literature has moved center stage, in part because of my love for it but also, more pragmatically, because that field has become so, yes, vast that it’s almost impossible to keep abreast of its every aspect, let alone that of children’s literature. You won’t find evidence of it in this book—except in its title—but in addition to being a columnist, I’m also a reviewer for *Booklist*, specializing in young adult literature and, increasingly, in adult books as well, though this last is a topic for another time. The bottom line is that I’m consumed with young adult literature and my columns reflect that. One thing hasn’t changed, however, and that’s my seeming obsession with my age! I was a mere stripling of 53 when I began the column; over the years people have watched me age until, now, I have reached a spirited 76. No matter my age, however, I’d like to think that over the years I have revealed a sense of humor and I hope, accordingly, that I’ve been able to invest most of my columns with some salutary wit (this is where some wise guy says, “Well, at least he’s half right, har har har”). As for style, thanks to a degree in journalism (I graduated from Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism), I’ve tried to affect an accessible, easygoing expository style, sprinkled with some polysyllables when they have seemed irresistibly apposite (see what I mean?).

Given the parameters I’ve outlined above, I really have had *carte blanche* to write about whatever has excited my interest, though if you’re a regular reader of my home base, *Booklist*, you’ll know that each of its issues focuses on a spotlight topic such as Historical Fiction, Graphic Novels, Mystery, and so on. Most of the time my columns will spotlight the same subject; that is, if the issue’s focus is on Mystery, my column will explore some aspect of Mystery. The words “some aspect” are central here, because they give me lots of latitude in my approach. That’s the good news. The bad news

is that after you've written half-a-dozen columns about—say—Romance, you tend to repeat yourself if you're not careful—especially if, like me, you have about as much romance in your soul as a turnip, and a short memory. That said, my columns doubtless reveal a sentimental streak as wide as the state of Texas. I'm fond of saying that—like former President Clinton—I'll cry at the grand opening of a car wash! Anyway, though it sometimes takes a bit of heavy lifting, I think I've managed to keep my approaches original. You'll be the judge of that when you read the columns this book contains.

About those columns: you'll find fifty of them here. I'd like to think they comprise the best of the best of the more than 250 I've visited on you over the years. For ease of access I've organized them into the eight different categories you'll discover when you take a gander at the Table of Contents. Of course, my columns have explored far more than eight categories over the years, so obviously some didn't make the cut; oftentimes those are ones that seem dated because of their focus on individual titles or topics of the moment. Thus, for example, you won't find any of my Columnist's Choice columns in which I've offered my selections of the best books of the year; nor will you find any of the columns I've written about annual American Library Association (ALA) conferences. No, forget the timely; instead I've striven for the—dare I say it?—timeless.

Have I succeeded? You tell me. Welcome to Carte Blanche.

# FOREWORD

I MET MICHAEL CART soon after my first book *Weetzie Bat* was published by Charlotte Zolotow at Harper Collins (then Harper & Row). I was in my twenties, recently graduated from UC Berkeley, and new to the world of publishing. I didn't even know that I was writing a "young adult" book and had intended *Weetzie* for an older, smaller audience of artists, punk rockers and Los Angelinos, rather than for teens. As I tried to navigate this new world, Michael came to my rescue. He was the elegant, urbane mentor I needed. My beloved artist father, who had always championed my work, had just died and I cast Michael in the role of an avuncular guide. But I also saw Michael as a colleague, a friend, and, dare I admit, a bit of a crush. He was so handsome, charming, and kind! Michael had written the quintessential review that launched my book. He drove me to one library event and, on the way, he talked to me about his mystical experiences with meditation and offered his astute theories on the possible psychology behind my book *The Hanged Man*. Later he interviewed me for his cable author interview show, *In Print*. Though I was sick with anxiety about being on camera, he made me feel at ease. He also wrote a biography about me as part of a series on the lives of various writers, featured my *Weetzie Bat* in one of his *Carte Blanche* columns, and asked me to contribute stories to two anthologies he edited. Later, when I began to focus on my adult work, he supported that as well. I believe he had more than a little to do with my receiving the Margaret A. Edwards Lifetime Achievement Award in 2005, an honor that changed my career and my life.

Michael Cart is a wonderful author, editor, critic, journalist, columnist, historian, librarian, and television star. (And I do mean star.) Most of all, he has been a mentor and friend at the times I needed one most.

*Francesca Lia Block*

Los Angeles, 2017

# PREFACE

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## *In the Beginning: The Column That Started It All*

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I WAS QUICK to accept Bill Ott's invitation to become a *Booklist* columnist without thinking much about consequences. Those were among the things I faced when I sat down to write my first column. What on earth would I write about, and how would I go about actually doing it? It was, after all, my first time out of the gate and I wanted to hit the ground running. Despite my metaphors, I quickly dismissed the idea of writing about race horses, but what else would serve? Serendipity provided the answer, for there at my elbow was a copy of American poet Donald Hall's *Life Work*, a then newly published memoir-cum-meditation about the life of the writer and a love for the past that I shared. It inspired me to seek out other examples of his work, notably such children's books as *Ox-Cart Man*, *The Man Who Lived Alone*, and *The Farm Summer 1942*. Eureka! I would write about Donald Hall. And, readers, so I did. Here's the result, "The Great Cavern of Old Time," my maiden voyage as a writer. Hmmm, perhaps I should write my next column about ships . . .

# The Great Cavern of Old Time

I planned long ago I would live here, somebody's grandfather.

—Donald Hall

THESE WORDS, WHICH I serendipitously discovered while browsing the pages of poet Donald Hall's 1978 book *Kicking the Leaves* (Harper), brought me up short because they say so much about the man I had just gotten to know through the pages of his more recent book, *Life Work* (Beacon, 1993). This engrossing memoir-cum-meditation about the work of writing and the enormous place it occupies in the poet's personal life goes a long way toward explaining why a critic has called Hall "one of the most thorough literary professionals in America."

Anyone who has read *Life Work* will readily understand that the two most important words in that line quoted above are "here" and "grandfather." "Here" is the old farmhouse on Eagle Pond in the shadow of New Hampshire's Ragged Mountain, where Hall and his wife, the poet Jane Kenyon, make their home, while "grandfather" invokes the spirit of Hall's own beloved grandparent, a man with the nicely alliterative name of Wesley Wells, who lived—with his wife, Kate—in that same house when Hall was a boy.

"He was my model," Hall writes, and one supposes he was the shaper of the poet's ear as well, since Wesley was in the habit of telling stories and reciting poetry out loud while he worked at farming as a then-young Donald helped him through a "decade of summers, 1940 to 1950."

The experiences of that decade have now been delightfully encapsulated in Hall's newest children's book, *The Farm Summer 1942*. The book tells the simple but affecting story of the summer that a nine-year-old San Francisco boy named Peter spends on a New Hampshire farm with his grandparents while his father and mother are busy with the war effort. Peter helps with the haying, feeds the chickens, listens to his grandfather tell stories and recite poems, reads his father's boyhood books, and finally—at summer's end—returns home to the city by the bay with the promise of another farm visit the following year.

The art in this quiet book resides in the ginger snaps and rhubarb pie, in the milk toast and the Moxie, in the buggy and the gull rake, in all the closely observed details of daily living that capture, entire, the experience and the era.

That experience is enriched by Barry Moser's sympathetic watercolor illustrations. If some of these have the flat, posed quality of snapshots from an aging family album, that is only appropriate to a story that is itself composed of scenes which have been preserved in the amber of the author's memory.

A similar kind of art informs my own favorite among Hall's growing body of books for children: *The Man Who Lived Alone* (Godine, 1984). This hauntingly understated tale of a solitary man who lives in his camp on Ragged Mountain was inspired—as we learn in *Life Work*—by the real life of Freeman Morrison, a cousin of Hall's grandmother who embodied in his first name and in his habits the persistent American dream of self-sufficiency. His ruggedly independent days are beautifully evoked in Hall's poetic, almost elegiac prose and Mary Azarian's woodcut illustrations.

Hall has been persistently lucky in the illustrators with whom he has worked; indeed, one of them—Barbara Cooney—won the Caldecott Medal for her contributions to his most famous children's book, *Ox-Cart Man* (Viking, 1979).

Meanwhile, Michael McCurdy has executed amazingly apposite, color scratchboard pictures for the hardworking Hall's next two books: *Lucy's Christmas* and *Lucy's Summer*. For their inspiration, the author turned to the long-ago girlhood of his now ninety-year-old mother. The "Lucy" books will be published in fall 1994 and spring 1995 by Browndeer Press, Linda Zuckerman's imprint at Harcourt.

Zuckerman shares my enthusiasm for Donald Hall's work. In fact, this normally serious and reserved professional becomes positively ebullient when she talks about the joys of working with a remarkable writer who is "very clear about who he is and what he wants to do but is, nevertheless, very open to other points of view and who relishes the idea of revisions and of polishing a manuscript."

She will publish a third brightly polished book by Hall in the fall of 1995. To be illustrated by Barry Moser, this book's title, *The Legend of Babe Ruth*, betrays the poet's steadfast devotion to our national pastime. In fact, Zuckerman tells me, Hall will be one of the featured commentators in the forthcoming PBS series about baseball that is being produced by Ken Burns, who gave us last season's memorable series about the Civil War.

It's suitable to share, in closing, one last thing Hall has to say about his late grandfather. He thanks him for being, as he puts it, "my source or entrance into the great cavern of old-time."

Hats off to Donald Hall himself for so generously sharing the treasures he has found in that cavern in the pages of his wonderfully artful books for children.

I don't know what Hall's grandparents looked like, but I wouldn't be surprised if they resembled the people who appear in photographer Archie Lieberman's new book, *Neighbors* (Collins San Francisco, 1993). Lieberman first visited Scales Mound, Illinois, in 1954 on assignment for *This Week* magazine. He was so captivated by the Hammers, one of the farm families he met there, that he decided to make a photographic record of their lives. The result was *Farm Boy*, which was published by Abrams in 1974. Now he continues that record and adds to it pictures of the Hammers' neighbors. These moving black-and-white images haunt the memory and demonstrate the powerful beauty of faces that are no strangers to punishingly hard work and weather. Though published as an adult book, *Neighbors* is a perfect companion to Donald Hall's stories about rural America.

Similarly, the love Hall demonstrates for the landscape and the multi-generational families who work it is wonderfully complemented by Newbery medalist Patty MacLachlan's newest book, *All the Places to Love*, illustrated by Mike Wimmer and published by HarperCollins. It is a sweet-spirited evocation by a boy named Eli of his earliest memories of the family farm, of its meadows and hay fields, its hilltop "where the blackberries grew," its river "where the woods began"—in short, of all the places there to love.

I predict that readers will love them, too.

June 1 and 15, 1994 • *Booklist*

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