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In Memoriam Mitzi Myers (1939–2001)

News that Mitzi Myers, the distinguished UCLA scholar and teacher, had died at home November 5, 2001, came as a shock to many, who had only then heard the tragic story of how, fifteen months before, a fire had destroyed her home and extensive library. The colleagues who posted tributes to Myers on the major list-serves for children's literature and eighteenth-century studies attested to her influence when they expressed dismay at the premature loss of one of her generation's most far-ranging and rigorous scholars. First and foremost a student of the late eighteenth century, Mitzi's command of the texts, cultural context, and literary theory relating to her areas of interest was unparalleled. After finishing her dissertation on the philosopher William Godwin, she began studying Mary Wollstonecraft, which led her to reconsider the literary importance of other Georgian women writers such as Sarah Fielding, Hannah More, Lady Fenn, Mrs. Barbauld, and Sarah Trimmer, whose works had been largely neglected. In spirited polemic essays published in a wide variety of journals and monographs, Mitzi defended the contributions of those late Enlightenment "impeccable governesses, rational dames, and moral mothers" by recontextualizing their works. When she demonstrated that they were hardly as unreadable, unenjoyable, or insignificant as their detractors had insisted, she challenged the prevalent Whiggish view that insisted on a movement from dry, colorless instruction to the open-ended delights of fantasy. Of all the women writers whose reputations Mitzi recovered, Maria Edgeworth was her favorite. Some of Mitzi's finest essays argued for Edgeworth's readmission to the canon: the "wee-wee stories" for young readers were central to Edgeworth's achievement, which Mitzi brilliantly revalidated by demonstrating their rich allusiveness, autobiographical underpinnings, their engagement with contemporary sociopolitical debates, and their shrewd but sympathetic awareness of actual children's psychology, language, and behavior.

The range of Mitzi Myers's interests not only staked out important new directions for scholarship in children's literature but also equipped her as

a major promulgator of new talent. As a voracious and discriminating reader and listener, always attuned to fresh ideas, she encouraged prospective authors, sent supportive postcards to fledgling writers upon the publication of their first efforts, and, above all, became noted for her judicious reports for journals, presses, and scholarly institutions. When the chair of the “Prose Fiction” division asked her to head a session devoted to “Cross-Writing” (a term she had coined) at the 1993 MLA meeting at Toronto, she drafted the “Call for Papers” and helped him sift each proposal and select the final panelists. In the process, however, Mitzi also kept refining the parameters of the topic itself: “Do we want to talk about genre, the construction of audiences, why people chose a hypothetical child audience, how ‘cross-writing’ relates to historical audiences in different ways at different times, what this choice means for an individual author, whether it’s ever possible from textual evidence alone to determine an audience, what being a ‘children’s writer’ does for one’s reputation, or what? What would be most likely to generate discussion? What do you find most interesting? Obviously many other things might also fit this rubric” (29 March 1993). The widening scope of those “other things” and her awareness of contributors excluded from the Toronto session led to the co-editing of the 1997 special issue of *Children’s Literature*, “Cross-Writing the Child and the Adult.” Mitzi’s superb editorial skills were instrumental: she brought in newcomers and established scholars, worked with individual authors, and honed the issue into a unified whole. The co-editors harmonized perfectly. The only discord occurred when a new copyeditor at the Yale University Press arbitrarily dismantled the unified system of notations that Mitzi had so carefully implanted. Mitzi’s angry Post-its suggested that her patience with contributors whose work she had helped perfect did not extend to someone who had failed to grasp her logical perfection.

This feisty and generous Texan who claimed she was born “with car keys in my mouth” delighted in silver jewelry, fast driving, and an absolute accuracy of annotation. Her footnotes gained verve accelerating down the page, daring her readers’ eyes not to brake. Her zest for argumentation, always growing on the edge of lively erudition, turned in recent years to the “multiply toxic environment” she saw proliferating around her. Confronting “the commodified and media-dominated way we live now which normalizes violence and turns kids into sophisticated consumers,” she co-edited the 2000 issue of *The Lion and the Unicorn* on “Violence and Children’s Literature.” Completed just before the catastrophic fire, this volume included an award-winning article on the Holocaust, Mitzi’s elegant and exhaustive “Storying War: A Capsule

Overview” and her interview with Robert Cormier, conducted ingeniously just months before he died. Cormier indicated that his remarkable conversations with Mitzi, extending over weeks by fax and phone, constituted the finest interview of his career.

Although Mitzi finally could not recover from the physical and emotional losses of library and home, which followed hard on the deaths of her mother, brother and her beloved husband Dennis, Mitzi gained through tragedy a clarity which galvanized her will to live. She struggled mightily with ill health and impaired scholarly resources, yet never desisted from formulating new projects and advancing her ideas. Even as she craved books and redesigned courses—on fathers and daughters, multiethnic children’s literature, waging war and peace, and revisionist pedagogy—she was determined to make her mark. Mitzi never gave up her professional passion. As her sister and sole survivor Patsy put it, “I’ve never known anyone who loved her work better.” What Mitzi forged in the private sanctuary of her study enabled her to become clear, a word the fullest dictionaries define as “able to serve perfectly in the passage of light.”

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