

# RICHARD PECK

“Everything was leading me to be a writer. I just didn’t know it.”

What does it take to be a successful children’s author? For multi-award-winning Richard Peck, it took many years of teaching junior high students. Through his interactions with that volatile age group, he learned three rules of writing that he follows to this day—rules that have helped him write to an audience now four generations behind him. Here, Mackin’s Lori Tracy chats with Richard, now 77 years old, about how he keeps up with young readers’ lives today, his new book that is different than anything he’s ever done, and how he writes novels without using a computer or pen.

## A DREAM COME TRUE

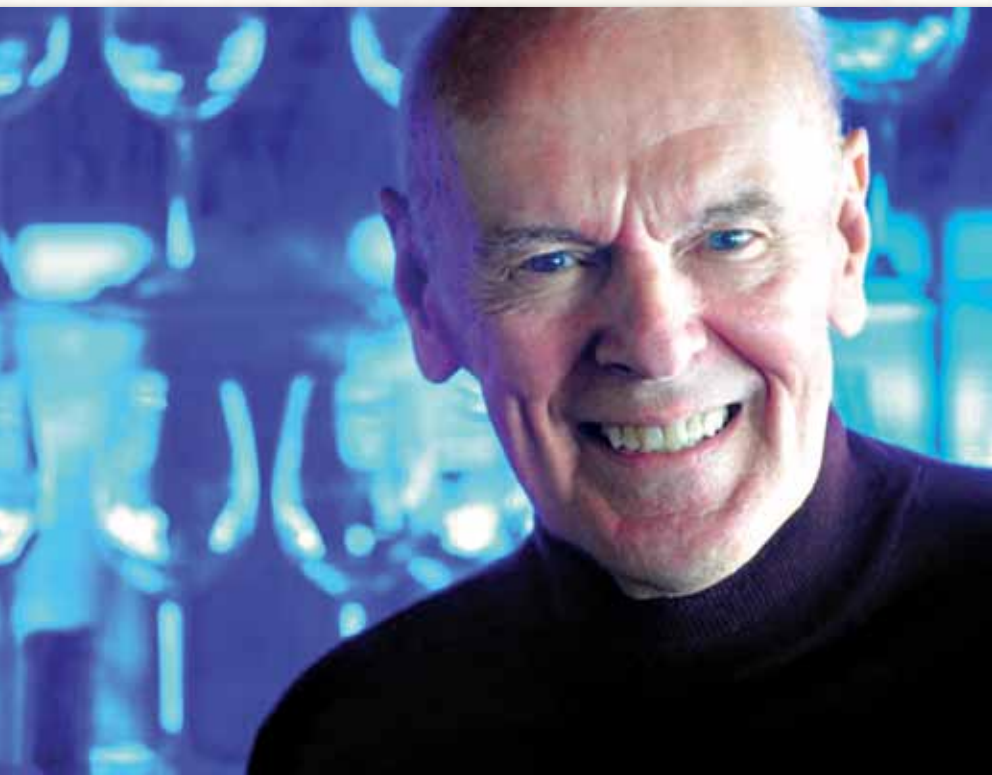
**Lori:** You were born and raised in Decatur, Illinois, but have lived in New York a long time now. How have your Midwestern roots affected your writing?

**Richard:** The older I get the more Midwestern I become. **The Midwest was a great beginning for a writer because the town I grew up in was the most thoroughly integrated place I was ever to live.** We all went to the same high school regardless of race or religion. Our neighborhoods were all next to each other. It wasn’t ghettoized like New York is; it wasn’t suburbanized, like where most of my readers live. It was a whole community mixed together, and people were careful of each other’s sensitivities. It was a town that got along. I didn’t value that then; I thought that was just America. Now it seems vanished to me, but I have to be aware of big cities and suburbs because that’s where most of my readers live now. I look at the postmarks on their letters; that’s important to me.

A lot of my novels are set in the Midwest because I think it’s underrepresented in our books. The editors are New Yorkers, and they don’t know where the Midwest is. But to me it will always be the essential America. So I have set many characters there — Grandma Dowdel in 3 books, my Blossom Culp character in 4 books — and the Midwest is featured strongly.

**L:** So what made you want to go to New York?

**R:** I grew up in the Midwest dreaming of New York. I must’ve seen it in the movies — nobody told me those movies were made in California. My dream came true, but once I got here I valued my roots even more.



Richard Peck, 2011

I wanted the excitement, doing all the fun things. When I got to New York I taught at Hunter College. Suddenly I had access to publishers that I wouldn't have had access to in the Midwest. I could carry a manuscript down the street in those days, sit in an outer office, and ask for an editor to read my work. So that's how I got started, and **I don't believe I would've become a writer had I not come to New York.**

**L:** What really sparked your interest in reading and writing as a child?

**R:** My mother read to me before I could read to myself. Parents never know what they're doing — she wasn't trying to make a published writer out of me. She just simply had no intention of sending an ignoramus to 1st grade. So she filled me up with stories and the words that build them. The result was **I wanted to be a writer before I could read.** I think most of who we are is determined in that first five fleeting years of life. My mother read to me, and when I marched into 1st grade I was ready to learn to read.

**L:** Is/was anyone else in your family a writer?

**R:** No, my parents came from generations of farmers. They were the first generation to move to town, after WWI, so they were uprooted country people. They didn't write much, but they were haunted by stories of childhood. My mother was very nostalgic about her girlhood; my father was badly wounded in WWI, so he thought that anything that happened before WWI was paradise lost. I equated his memories with Huckleberry Finn, and I became a writer. **A boy needs to make clear connections between life and the page.** I got that with my father's memories. I took that for granted then, but today I notice many children don't know their parents' stories.

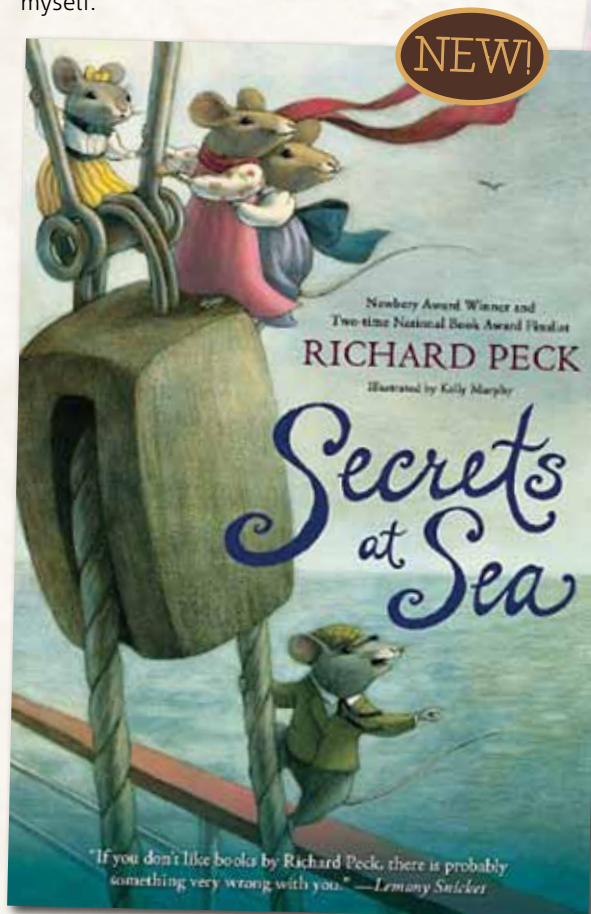
**L:** You were drafted into the Army after college and served two years in Germany ghost-writing sermons for chaplains and listening to confessions. How did that experience change you and did you consider writing a book about it?

**R:** No, I don't write about it, because kids now don't understand the concept of the draft. Sometimes they see in my biography that I went into the Army and they ask, "Why did you go?" I say, "Because I was drafted." And they say, "But why did you go?" If you cannot grasp the mandatory you can't grasp the situation. But it was a



Richard in the Army, Germany, 1958

wonderful experience for me. You learn things in the Army that you don't learn in college. I had been through college first, which was helpful. I had skills the Army could use, like literacy skills. It was interesting to be in Germany in the post-war era, because when I was a child Germany was the enemy. Suddenly I was there, and things are always different when you get there. I believe in military training. As far as I know, there are only two of us in my field that have military experience — Walter Dean Myers and myself.



## GENERATIONS OF CHANGE

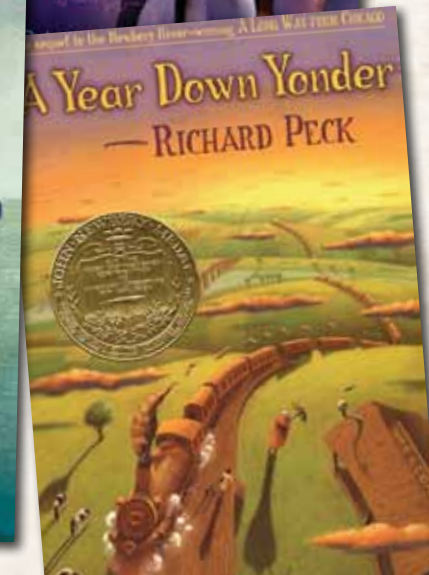
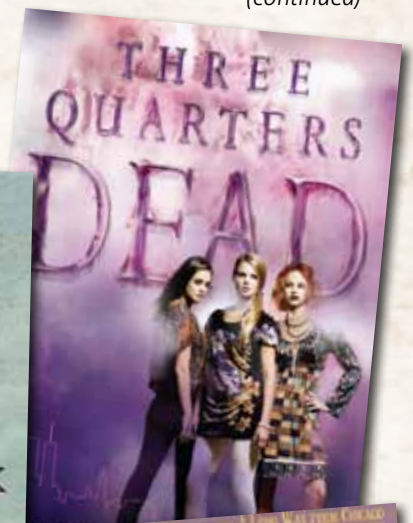
**L:** How do you think students growing up in suburban America today are different from how you were as a young lad?

**R:** The great change is: There are no old people in the suburbs to learn from. I grew up with a lot of overlapping older people — old folks and their stories. Our teachers taught until they were 65. I was surrounded by elders; I was near grandparents. Our ties were strong, and I write to people now who don't know anybody old. It's very sad, but of course they don't realize they will be old, too.

All I can do is write my stories with elders in them and hope for the best. **That's one of my missions in all my stories — an elder person reaching across a lifetime to touch a young person's hand.** And there always will be.

Another thing I've learned about the young is they're younger than they used to be. They're taking more time growing up. They feel perfectly free to move back

(continued)



## AWARDS

- 1974:** Edgar Allan Poe Award nominee, Best Juvenile, *Dreamland Lake*
- 1977:** Edgar Allan Poe Award, Best Juvenile, *Are You in the House Alone?*
- 1990:** Margaret A. Edwards Award
- 1990:** ALAN Award
- 1991:** University of Southern Mississippi Medallion
- 1999:** National Book Award finalist: Newbery Honor, *A Long Way from Chicago*
- 2001:** Newbery Medal, *A Year Down Yonder*
- 2001:** National Humanities Medal
- 2004:** Jeremiah Ludington Memorial Award
- 2004:** Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction *The River Between Us*
- 2005:** ALAN Award

home after college. Adolescence is too painful a period to go on as long as it's going. And I think to myself, "Be careful. You have to write a little younger now."

**L:** Why do you think that's happening with kids today?

**R:** You were not protected from failure back then. If you can't get an "F," then an "A" doesn't mean much. The other thing I notice now is that school and college are not the center of their lives. They were for me. What are the young doing now that

they're self-governing? That's really what **"Three Quarters Dead"** is about — when your only authority figure is somebody also young, what happens? How long do you allow that to happen?

After 12 years of teaching I realized the kids weren't interested in my life; they were interested in their lives. And that to me is what a story is today: the biography of the reader, not the writer.

I was so much under the influence of elders. I write in curiosity about what it's like today. The older I get the more traditional my storytelling gets. **Comedy is my favorite technique because it keeps me from preaching.** And I don't hear enough comedy from the young. I think a lot of readers don't get my jokes, but I still put them in. I get a lot of letters that say, "We're reading your book in class and the teacher is laughing and laughing." They don't say, "We're laughing and laughing." They need some training in humor. You can be more serious in comedy than you can in tragedy. It's harder to make people laugh.

Notice what kids love today — vampire stories, dystopias — no laughter there.

## BEING TAUGHT BY YOUR STUDENTS

**L:** You started out as an English teacher. How did that career path affect your

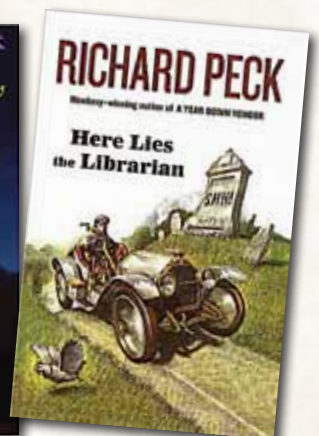
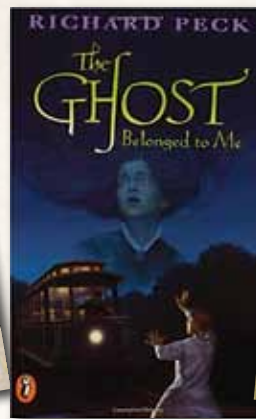
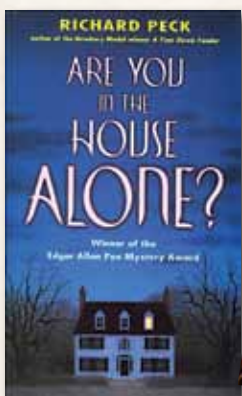
transformation into a successful children's author?

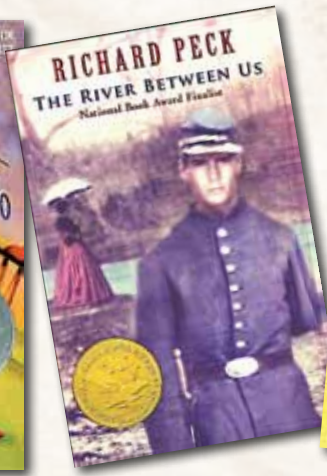
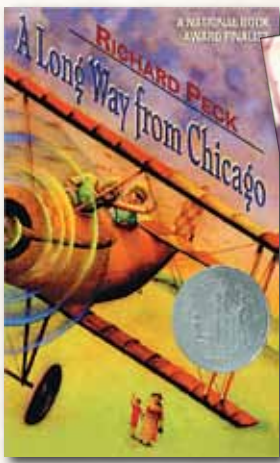
**R:** I went to college, then taught high school, then got re-assigned to junior high. It was the shock of my life, but there I found the people I wanted to write for. I wouldn't have chosen to teach that age group, but then **you learn the most from the experience you would've avoided if you could — which is true of all my stories.** My characters always find themselves in situations they don't want to be in. I thought junior high was the neediest group; they were too old for childhood stories, too young for anything else. The YA novel was just being born in those days. My first novel was "Don't Look and It Won't Hurt." I wrote it not about my former students but for them.

They taught me three very, very important rules. First, I knew they wanted to read about someone older than they. Second, there has to be hope in the end of the story or they are completely alienated. And last, write in the voice of a young person — I saw how well they listened to each other versus me. So they taught me to write in first person. Those were 3 important rules, and who else could've taught me that. Not a creative writing class — my own students did. And so I was off writing. My first book was accepted overnight. That was 40 years and 40 books ago.

**L:** Your first book was accepted overnight? That's amazing.

**R:** Yes it was. But it wouldn't have been accepted overnight if I didn't follow the rules laid down by my students. And it wouldn't have been accepted overnight if I was trying to write a fictionalized version of me. Most beginning writers think they have to write about themselves. But after 12 years of teaching I realized the kids weren't interested in my life; they were interested in their lives. And that to me is what a story is today: the biography of the





reader, not the writer. **Everything in my 20s was leading me to be a writer, but I just didn't know it.**

**L:** How hard is it to keep up with what kids are thinking and feeling today? What do you do?

**R:** I read the letters they send me with great care — with the full knowledge that few write to me, so when they do, I notice. Some letters get terribly caught up in social networking and such, but there are others that are about the characters they like in the story and how lonely they are. Well that helps to ground me in this confusing time. I don't do as many school visits as I used to, but when I'm in a classroom I learn a lot in a day or even a period. I come to it with fresh eyes.

**L:** You have said, "There is no such thing as a 'grade reading level'; a young person's 'reading level' and attention span will rise and fall according to his degree of interest." Can you expound on that?

**R:** When I was a teacher I could see that everyone in the room was reading at a different rate, for all kinds of complicated reasons. We also noticed that on the day kids had to take the written part of the driver's license exam, nobody was remedial. It's a bit scary. If you give children the choice of to learn or not to learn, most will choose the wrong option. I'm glad I was protected from that decision.

## SECRETS AT SEA

**L:** Your new book, "**Secrets at Sea**," comes out in the fall. Is this your first book without people as the main characters?

**R:** Yes. It's my first anthropomorphic novel — it's told by a mouse. That was fun

because it sort of diffused a lot of hard-edged issues. On the other hand, it's really an older sister with a great many human traits; in fact, her major trait is she has control issues. She's trying to control her younger siblings and of course I'm not going to let her, and I'm going to do it as a comedy.

In fact, I had written the novel with humans and it didn't work. I couldn't get it to float and be lively. It kept bogging down. The editor said to try this and that, but everything I tried just didn't work. So I put it aside for awhile. It sat on my shelf for 2 years, and then one day I thought, "Try it from a completely different viewpoint. Try it from the viewpoint of a mouse in the wall." And it completely took off. It already has a starred review. Here I thought I didn't do that kind of thing [writing with animals as main characters]. But I think that's what a writer is — somebody who will try a new approach just to see if it will work. I don't want to do the same book over and over, even though it's worked so well for Stephenie Meyer. I want to start fresh every time. After all, when you've written 40 books, you're looking for something fresh.

**L:** So when you first wrote "Secrets at Sea," it was from the human's perspective?

**R:** The human characters were different though. It was a realistic novel about American heiresses going to Europe to marry foreign titles, which is a piece of American history I wanted to tell. In part because an American heiress who went to marry a foreign title produced Winston Churchill, who's the great man of the 20th century. I was moved by his story; his mother was a teenager when this all happened to her. But I couldn't make the book work because it just got into too many adult issues. When you drift too far

Richard and his mother. This was about the age his mom started reading to him.

into the adult world it's not a book for the young anymore. Until maybe you add a mouse. If people are marrying for money and status, that's very serious. And that just didn't work for me.

## NO COMPUTER NECESSARY

**L:** Tell me a bit about your writing process; what things do you do with every book?

**R:** I end up writing every page six times. I love the individual line and how it scans. So I have to rewrite every line. **I also have to use an electric typewriter because I like the way it sounds. I need for it to be a page, not a printout.**

**L:** Does it typically take you about a year to write a book?

*(continued)*



**R:** Yes, I don't plan it that way, but it seems to turn out that way. I give a great many speeches, write articles and travel. So with all that it does take a year.

**L:** Share with us the place where you write, and your home in New York City.

**R:** I live in an apartment on the Upper East Side. My front yard is Central Park. I live high up in a building that looks out on the skyline, and it glitters at night. It's where I dreamed of being as a kid, and here I am. I write in the same spot at the same desk with the same view and the same typewriter.

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## CHILDREN'S BOOK INDUSTRY

**L:** I'd love to hear your thoughts on how the children's book industry has changed over the years.

**R:** It's a field that's gotten much, much bigger. Publishers are cutting back on their lists now, but they're still publishing way more books than when I began in 1972. When I began, we were in the

afterglow of the young adult novel, made suddenly famous by S.E. Hinton's "The Outsiders" and Judy Blume's "Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret." That alerted the publishers to this overlooked, younger teen audience. I plunged into that because I knew all these things about my students that their own parents didn't know. The YA novel grew and grew. It began being used in classrooms. Now all these years later, the realistic YA novel is overlooked in favor of the series novels, the dystopias, the swords and sorcery, the dragons and vampires. Stephenie Meyer and all the J.K. Rowling wanna-bes. We're going through that phase now. So someone writing a realistic novel without all the gimmicks such as Laurie Halse Anderson's "Wintergirls," it's overlooked, in ways I think it shouldn't be.

But publishers want to publish what another publisher succeeded with. **I think if publishing were centered in Chicago or somewhere else in the Midwest we'd be publishing a whole different list of books.** It would be more varied. I think the publishing industry is the last one that will leave New York.

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## LEAVE 'EM THINKING

**L:** In your bio you say, "A novel, whatever its era or its issues, is never an answer, always a question. A novel for the 21st century young asks the questions teachers and parents are no longer empowered to ask." What do you mean by that? What questions can't teachers and parents ask?

**R:** My novels are always: "Hmm. When are you going to make your stand and grow up? When are you going to declare your independence from your peers? When are you going to wonder who you are?" My novels are about self-discovery. It's not because someone is giving you the answer. It's because life is asking you the question. Now in real life we avoid those questions. Moving back home after college is a massive avoidance of asking any questions, such as, "Can I make a living? Do I owe other people anything? What do I have to offer?" I like to ask questions in a light, fun way rather than a tragic way.

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## WORKS ADAPTED INTO MOVIES

**1976:** The Ghost Belonged to Me

**1980:** Father Figure

**1977:** Are You in the House Alone?

**1991:** Gas Food Lodging  
(Don't Look and It Won't Hurt)

**1978:** Child of Glass (The Ghost Belonged to Me)

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## QUICK QUOTES FROM RICHARD PECK

"The fact that novelists need to live in the worlds of our characters and readers as if we ourselves didn't exist may be the central secret of our craft."

"Fiction is eavesdropping on the conversations of strangers, and writing depends upon snooping, though we call it 'research.'"

"If you can text at the dinner table on Christmas Day, you're an orphan."

**L:** If you were able to say something to every teenager in America and had just a few minutes, what would you say?

**R:** 1) You will never grow up until you declare your independence from your peers. 2) Get acquainted with the old person you will be one day. 3) No, it isn't your mother's fault. And that's under a few minutes. "15 Seconds to Change Your Life."



## LOOK INSIDE:

Richard Peck's new novel, **Secrets at Sea**, is on page 42.



## NOVELS

- 1973:** Dreamland Lake  
**1973:** Through a Brief Darkness  
**1974:** Representing Super Doll  
**1976:** Are You in the House Alone?  
**1976:** The Ghost Belonged to Me  
**1977:** Ghosts I Have Been  
**1977:** Monster Night at Grandma's House  
**1978:** Father Figure  
**1979:** Secrets of the Shopping Mall  
**1980:** Amanda/Miranda  
**1981:** New York Time  
**1983:** The Dreadful Future of Blossom Culp  
**1983:** This Family of Women  
**1985:** Remembering the Good Times  
**1986:** Blossom Culp and the Sleep of Death  
**1987:** Princess Ashley  
**1987:** Write a Tale of Terror  
**1987:** Those Summer Girls I Never Met  
**1989:** Voices After Midnight  
**1991:** Unfinished Portrait of Jessica  
**1993:** Bel-Air Bambi and the Mall Rats  
**1995:** Lost in Cyberspace!  
**1995:** The Last Safe Place on Earth  
**1996:** The Great Interactive Dream Machine: Another Adventure in Cyberspace  
**1998:** London Holiday  
**1998:** A Long Way from Chicago  
**1998:** Strays Like Us  
**2000:** A Year Down Yonder  
**2001:** Fair Weather  
**2003:** The River Between Us  
**2004:** The Teacher's Funeral: A Comedy in Three Parts  
**2006:** Here Lies The Librarian  
**2007:** On the Wings of Heroes  
**2009:** A Season of Gifts  
**2010:** Three Quarters Dead  
**2011:** Secrets at Sea

# FUN FACTS

**I have one sibling** who just retired as Assistant Chancellor for the University of Illinois. A younger sister, and you will notice the portraits of younger sisters throughout my books are strong, because my relationship with my younger sister is strong. I was several years older than she, so we didn't have sibling rivalry. I just sort of thought she was mine. We're nine years apart, so we didn't have a lot of childhood together; we make up for it now.

**I'm an adjunct professor** at Louisiana State University. I do short workshop courses in the summer. But it's a real commitment — Louisiana in the summer!

**I'm trying another mouse book.** I won't call it a sequel because I don't know how it's shaping up yet. But I'm hearing mice in my head. It'll have to be entirely different.

**I love to travel.** But I get to travel a lot since I'm a writer so that works out well. As a writer you're always thinking about writing though. I love England and go there 2-3 times/year. I think everybody needs two countries. A writer's a writer. We don't play golf. We don't retire — we don't have pensions. I have to make myself exercise and go to the trainer. But that's nice in New York because you can always get out and walk. I don't have to go to the mall or the golf course to get exercise. But you have to make a date with yourself to do that.

**I was the first children's writer to receive a National Humanities Medal (2001).** They are given annually to people in the arts and sciences and conferred by the President. I was invited to a dinner at the White House with President Bush and allowed to bring 13 guests. It was a very hospitable White House and one of the most exciting days of my life. I was on the stage with other recipients who included Yo Yo Ma, Kirk Douglas, Mike Nichols, and lots of exciting people I never expected to be with. It was an acknowledgement that children's writers are on par with adult writers. And it came about I think because of **Laura Bush**, who used to be a librarian, and she brought the **Texas Library Association** up to a national scale starting in 2001 with the National Book Festival that continues today with 150,000 people coming last year. She was the first First Lady to give children's books some real recognition.



*Richard at the White House*