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Byrd Baylor Is Coming!

Thomas K. Hinckley

Byrd Baylor is coming to the Third International Children's Nonfiction Conference. I started to write a slick review of her work, but she would see through that in less than a paragraph. That she may know that we have seen and heard and felt the real world as she taught, let us explore that world — that unseen, forgotten world.

We were going down the lane on a cool Sunday morning three weeks ago, when we were suddenly enveloped in an exaltation of larks. In spring they come in pairs — but here, in November, were hundreds of south-flecing larks, still singing of spring in the face of winter. When I was a child, the larks sang, "This is a pretty little town." Latterly they have been singing "Green jeans and jelly beans." Then one summer, in a prairie sunset on a Canadian wheatfield, I heard a lark singing the old song, and I knew that larks (at least, Canadian ones) could keep the faith.

Last week I tried to talk to my geography class about where to go when your soul is jangled. (There must be *some* utility in studying geography, as the Little Prince said.) My friend Patty goes to the desert. Half the universe in a 360-degree, unobstructed view. Alone under the eye of God. I have had that experience. But I prefer the Maine woods. Can't see more than thirty yards in any direction for the ancient trees. Womb-security in the forest. Then, with leaf-fall, we climb the hill to the village green and stare out at vistas long unseen. We harvest and take stock.

My favorite rock is a gastrolith. Obsolete in my own age, I prize the obsolete of another age. Lost my trilobite. And I still look for lucky stones. Hard to find. Freshmen are both too old and not old enough to fathom any of this. They would be squeamish about licking an unpolished piece of coprolite to bring out the colour. They have neither seen the corn grow nor heard it. And they can't speak skunk.

One winter morning I went out at 4:00 a.m. to get coal and kindling (yes, I know when sensible people do it). Never have I seen such stars. I went in and woke my wife and told her that even if she thought me mad, she had to come see. Had I stood on tiptoe, I could have touched the nebula of Orion.

Or the night we took fledgling flyboys into the alfalfa field and shot three-star fixes — and raw beginners came within seven nautical miles of true position, using a World War II sextant. Who can measure the precision of the dancing stars without celebration? I remember now why I do coal after dark: as a child, I wanted to see the evening star, and wish. Now they are planets. Red Mars! I greet thee and send my awe-struck love. Last night I saw haloed rainbows by moonlight. This morning the sky was red and lowering. (Storms are never as precise as are the stars.)

If you have never read any Byrd Baylor, all this will seem inane and insane to you. But then you don't "read" her books; you likely experience them and probably live them. Children's books are life-conforming? Byrd Baylor's are. In *I'm in Charge of Celebrations*, she chronicles 108 heart-pounding celebrations. Won't tell you what they are. You must discover them for yourself. When your own celebrations begin to push back the unreal, man-made dross, you'll life-conform.

Everybody needs a rock. But how do you find your particular rock? Baylor gives ten rules. Won't tell you what they are, either. Your adamantine soul will have whispered most of them to you before you were old enough to be corrupted, but there is one special rule that MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE, which I learned from reading Baylor: Rule Number Three. She alludes to it again in *If You Are a Hunter of Fossils*. Baylor opens our minds to what even Merlin could not teach the young King Arthur about the ichthoid world. And *The Other Way to Listen* is the only way. To listen. To hear. If you have never communed with Mother Earth, why not learn how?

So why is she coming to a nonfiction conference? The most used word in reviews of her work is "lyrical." Not a word that describes nonfiction. Usually. Nonfiction is teen suicide, AIDS, incest, Star Wars, the Dallas Cowboys, submarines, tanks, terrorists, infantry in World War II, fighter planes, while Byrd Baylor is only sun, stars, sand, seeds, sacred smoke, stone, salt flats, signs of the sea, and stuff like that. So what's really real?

Any one of Baylor's books is the ideal voyage of discovery. I've been using some of them in the university classroom. Read. Experience. Live them. Then come. Byrd Baylor will lead the celebration of what is good and beautiful. And survivable.

Byrd Baylor's Books in Print

The Best Town in the World
The Desert Is Theirs
Desert Voices
Everybody Needs a Rock
Guess Who My Favorite Person Is
Hawk, I'm Your Brother
If You Are a Hunter of Fossils
I'm in Charge of Celebrations
Moon Song
The Other Way to Listen
Sometimes I Dance Mountains
The Way to Start a Day
When Clay Sings
Your Own Best Secret Place