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Milton Meltzer, Keeper of the Light

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In an education class many years ago, the teacher wrote this sentence on the chalkboard: "History is ________." He then asked us to supply one word which best defined history. As we tossed out our guesses, he listed them on the board in front of us: "dates," "past," "events," "boring," and so on. Keeping the definition to one word was not easy, and none of our answers satisfied him completely.

After we drained ourselves dry, he wrote in the blank a word we had not suggested: "people." Then, in less than a minute of explaining why this was the most accurate definition, he changed my view of history forever. With that one word he showed me not only why I liked certain parts of history and disliked others, but also why some history classes I had taken were boring and forgettable while others opened my eyes and had stayed with me for years. The boring classes ignored the people in the past; the good ones focused upon individuals, revealing their personalities while showing how they affected the times and situations they touched.

Milton Meltzer may as well have been the teacher of that class. After a variety of jobs writing for others (Federal Theatre Project, CBS Radio Network, Henry Wallace’s presidential campaign, Medical and Pharmaceutical Information Bureau, to name a few), Meltzer wrote in 1956, with Langston Hughes, a book for young readers: A Pictorial History of the Negro in America. This focus grew into two more volumes: Black Magic: A Pictorial History of the Negro in Entertainment, and finally the biography of Langston Hughes, nominated for the National Book Award. In those three volumes, as well as in the sixty additional titles, Meltzer never forgot human emotion and its central role in shaping the world.

In the process of showing the path we humans have traveled, Meltzer developed new approaches to explaining and preserving "the public memory." Creating a documentary of black Americans, Meltzer used the original language of the people he was presenting in the three-volume series called In Their Own Words. To give both feeling and flavor to the times, he "drew upon letters, diaries, journals, autobiographies, speeches, resolutions, court and legislative testimony, newspaper reports, pamphlets." The black people of America’s past were allowed to tell their own stories in their own words, revealing the personal experiences so neglected by the textbooks. Slavery, for example, is no secret, but the usual presentation is distant and sanitized when compared to the account of a slave auction recorded by Solomon North, a free Negro of New York kidnapped and sold into slavery in Louisiana. North reported the training and manners slaves must exhibit when being paraded before the buyers, recorded actual conversations between buyer and seller, and described an unforgettable, tearful scene when a mother and her children were sold to different buyers and separated forever.
Another fresh technique was first used by Meltzer in Bread and Roses, a book about the beginning of the labor movement in the fifty bloodiest years of its struggle, 1865-1915. Traditionally, history follows one of two approaches. It is either narrative ("selected facts in a pattern exploring the meaning of that history as the author interprets it") or documentary (the compiling and reporting of existing information). When Meltzer wrote about the birth of labor unions, he combined both approaches to produce a richer and more memorable picture than usual.

Whether writing about individual people — Winnie Mandela, Mark Twain, Mary McLeod Bethune; groups of people — The Chinese Americans, The Terrorists, The American Revolutionaries; democratic principles — The Right to Remain Silent, The Human Rights Book; or snapshots from history — George Washington and the Birth of Our Nation, Poverty in America — Meltzer’s purpose is to "tell my students that recognizing what we have done in the past is a recognition of ourselves. By conducting a dialogue with our past, we are searching how to go forward."

And the best way to bring about this understanding is to remember what history is all about, to follow the path marked by Meltzer, who wants readers to "find out that history is people, people in trouble, people reaching out for something better in life, people struggling against odds, people with fears and doubts and hopes and passions — people like themselves."

Editor’s Note: Milton Meltzer will be a featured speaker, along with Jean Fritz, Byrd Baylor and others, at the Third Conference on Nonfiction Books for Children to be held at Brigham Young University July 12-15, 1988. For information, contact:

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