

HOME COMING: Little Art Theater, March 9, 2017

Chris Tebbetts

I'll start by saying that I spent a lot of my creative energy growing up pursuing things that would put me in front of an audience, one way or another — theater, primarily, but also chorus, band, orchestra, that kind of thing. I'm guessing that in high school, I would have been described as (and maybe I just plain was) an extrovert. And anyone who knew my father knows that I have some amount clown blood running in my veins. But somewhere along the way, as I moved from the public, face out spectacle of theater and into the private, stay at home, usually unkempt realm of writing, my extrovert seems to have been replaced with a more introverted version.

You're never supposed to tell an audience if you're nervous — my husband says that's like saying "the turkey is dry" as you set it on the Thanksgiving table... but then I found this quote a few years ago, and it felt too spot on for me NOT to include it in my presentations. It also explains why I work from notes.....

SLIDE: "The human brain starts working the moment you are born and never stops until you stand up to speak in public." – George Jessel.

And in fact, this does touch on a certain tension that exists for me, as a stereotypical writer—which is also to say, as an introvert in search of an audience.

That said, if I'm going to push myself out of my comfort zone, Yellow Springs is a pretty comfortable place to do it. And I'm really very grateful to Jenny and Brian and the board of the Little Art for inviting me. What a fun idea and I hope this is the first of many events like it.

SLIDE: YSO

I do have a palpable kind of pride, being from YS, one that I probably don't have to explain to this room full of people. On the list of things I'd never trade in my life, getting to grow up here is right near the top. It's as close as I get to that "we're #1" feeling, whenever the subject comes up, or if I tell people where I'm from — whether it's because I have some kind of secret from the half of the world that says, "Where?" when you mention YS.... or because I'm in on the secret with the other half of the world that says, "Ooh, Yellow Springs."

I was at a retreat on the campus of the Highlights Foundation last year. Highlights, as in the magazine so many of us read in so many doctors' offices growing up, but also the home of Boyds Mills Press and a retreat center and teaching campus in Honesdale, PA, that hosts an amazing array of events for people who write and illustrate for young readers.

When I was there, an editor and author by the name of Patty Gauch was giving a class. I knew her by reputation but we'd never met before, so I was happy when she struck up a conversation with my group.

We got to talking about what a great organization Highlights is, and how special that campus seems to be. And as Patty was agreeing with us on that point, she said, "Yes, there are just certain places in the world like this, with an almost magical quality in the air, where things happen that don't happen in other places. Like for instance, Yellow Springs, Ohio is this wonderful little town..."

I'm not even sure what else she said just then, because I was too busy being pleased with the coincidence of it — and then even more when she mentioned Virginia Hamilton as the kind of creative soul this little town turns out. In my profession, getting to say you grew up with the kids of the most decorated person in our field of children's literature makes for a great little

bit of unearned shine. I try not to name drop my connection to Virginia and Arnold too hard or too frequently, but it's a fun thing to have in my pocket.

And Patty was right. This town is a place where things happen that don't happen elsewhere—whether that's made true by all of us saying it's so, if it's more about some inherent quality the town has, or more likely, a combination of those things.

So, my general topic tonight is at the intersection of creativity, and what I do for a living, and whatever part growing up in Yellow Springs might have played in all that — as well as what I've been up to since.

Good writing is meant to be as specific as possible, and I'm going to try to do that here, and distill some of the places and characters that shaped me along the way. Good writing also bridges those specific places and situations in our stories to some larger idea or meaning—so I've tried to do that as well, with the benefit of hindsight, looking back on what it meant to grow up here, and what it's come to mean to me since then.

When I do school presentations I usually start by talking about my mom, with this slide

In the beginning...



I tell them that Mom is the biggest reader I've ever known and also the one who took me to the library ...



week after week to pick out a stack of books to bring home. Another way I've put it, when I'm talking about beginnings, is to say that I was creatively born right there, at the Yellow Springs Public Library (as it was called back then).

It began with picture books of course. These were some of my favorites



And for me, the one I remember most specifically, most viscerally is *The Snowy Day*, by Ezra Jack Keats.



A lot of you know this book, no doubt. I don't quite know why this one grabbed me back then, but in retrospect, I can see that it was the first, or at least one of the first times a book really drew me into its own world, and into the experience of another character—Peter here.

And in my own small but also, I suppose, momentous way, I remember this as a first time I felt something for — also from — a character.



At the end of his snowy day outside, Peter comes back to his coat pocket, where he's hoping to find the snowball he was saving—and of course, it's

gone. I never wanted it to be, but it always was. I felt bad for him—I saw his mistake before he did, but I also felt that twang of regret along with him.

This is exactly the way so many of us learn EMPATHY — through story. Empathy, from the Greek for em/into and pathos/feeling—Story takes us into feeling. Into another character's experience, and by proxy, into our own as well. That's the power of story—one of them anyway—the sharing of human experience.

And what does this have to do with YS? One of the inevitable thoughts for me here is about race—about the fact that Peter is an African American kid. And about the fact that to me, at that time, he was something simpler than that. He was just a kid, and that was all there was to the calculus of it.

Today, I can't think about growing up in Yellow Springs without thinking about race, precisely because I didn't think about it then.

When I was about eight or nine, maybe, I had a magazine subscription to something—I don't remember what, but the magazine went out of business, and the company sent us a brochure in the mail, so I could choose from a list of other magazines to run out the remaining issues.

I don't remember what the options were, but I do remember that I picked Ebony Junior. I didn't know what ebony meant; I just knew that that magazine had the most appealing art and format. And it's not that I didn't see a lot of black characters on those pages when the magazine came. It's that I didn't know there was a context in which someone might think that magazine wasn't for me.

Part of that is white privilege. I'm sure that one way or another, any kid of color growing up in YS got an education on race that I never got. Or had to get. But that said, the diversity of the community, and the role that people of color played in my life—principal, soccer coach, dentist, homecoming queen—and (maybe most of all) the matter of fact way in which that happened, is something I'm not at all eager to ignore or forget.

There's a newer, more nuanced school of thought these days around the idea of so-called color blindness—specifically around the possibility it leaves open for being blind to racism as well. Which I would call the 201 of diversity and awareness.

For me, the 101 is about connection: the ways in which we are alike. The very core aspect of having empathy for one another, as human beings.

The 201—the step up from that—for me, is about the other side of the coin—seeing difference; honoring and valuing it. That’s a more recently added aspect of the conversation (certainly since I was a kid) and there have been some good, albeit slow-in-coming strides toward making children’s literature ever more inclusive, and less monolithic in terms of who is telling the stories and who they’re telling the stories about. But at its core, for me, I could not have gotten a better 101, about what it is we share, than I did by growing up in this town.

Moving on....to the second stop on our tour, 155 Miami Drive, in the neighborhood we used to call IGA Land.



This is where I brought all those books home from the library, eventually working my way up to chapter books and novels, which I’d read pretty much wherever I could.

In the little storage room upstairs, where I had the so-called Chris Club—membership of one. I was president, vp, secretary and treasurer, and the entire agenda of the club was to be alone with my books and read as much

as possible.

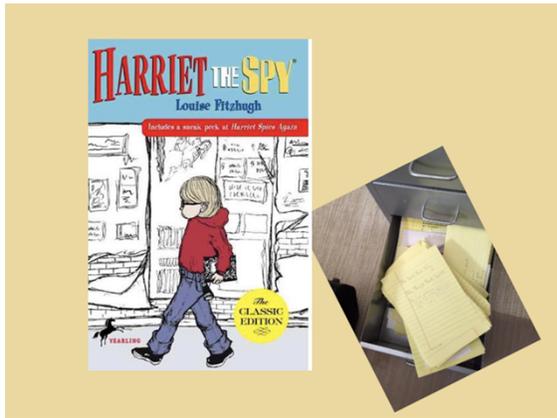
Also in one of the trees in our backyard, where I didn't have a clubhouse, but Dad did nail a leaning board on a limb, so I could spend more time up there—reading.

And in my bedroom (where I read endless comic books as well), or the tv room (where I watched endless television), or under the dining room table, or in the living room, or pretty much anywhere at all.



I've never been a more voracious reader than I was during those middle grade years, so it's probably no coincidence that these are the kinds of books I've spent the bulk of my adult writing time on.

And again, in keeping with the exercise I set for myself with this talk, if I'm to pick an ambassador from all those books, it would have to be Harriet Welsch.



This was the character who made me a writer. I started journaling because of this book. Because of her. Before that, a lot of the first stories I wrote as a kid were based on the kinds of things I saw on tv or in movies. I was a fan of Agatha Christie's "And Then Were None," for instance, and one of the earliest stories I remember writing was about a family of twelve kids, all getting murdered one by one, until we eventually learned which among them was the killer. I still love that kind of story, to be honest, but from Harriet the Spy, I learned that I could use my own voice when I wrote—that it didn't have to come from on high in some way, but by tapping into my own thoughts, my own material, my own strengths and weaknesses.

And again, I can't help noticing the way that, traditionally speaking, I don't look like the character in the book.

There's a fair amount of conversation in children's publishing circles about so-called boy books and girl books, and whether or not those are useful

designations. And I'm not an absolutist about this one either way. I know that there is a generalizable truth about the audience for certain titles, and about the idea that boys generally—very generally—want to read about boys, and that many girls, while more open to variety, will feel some connection to a female character based on gender alone. But it's when that generalization, however true it may be, becomes the rule for all that it becomes a harmful one. I'm the evidence of the reverse. Certainly, if I'd been steered away from this "girl book," I would have missed out on a formative reading experience.

I got to grow up in a place that, I will say, made it as little problem as possible for me to identify with whomever I happened to identify. It didn't hurt, either, to live in a town like Yellow Springs where, among other things, so many of the writers I knew about—Suzanne Clauser, Billie Hotaling, Jean Hudson, Sandy Love, Virginia Hamilton — were prominent accomplished women.

Next stop on the tour....



If I was creatively born at the Yellow Springs Library then it's equally fair to say that I was creatively launched at the Little Art Theater. Specifically, I mean the first time I saw Harold and Maude here.



We are all, on some level, walking through life looking for our (in my case) Chris shaped holes—and I found a big one here—at the movies in general, and in Harold and Maude, specifically.

For the uninitiated, Harold and Maude is about a death-obsessed teenager, Harold, who meets a life-obsessed octogenarian, Maude, at a funeral, and the friendship they strike up, and the ways he learns about living from her.

I came and saw it one night — I don't remember exactly why or with whom — but I know that I came back the next night and stayed through the seven and nine o'clock shows. And again for the seven o'clock show the next night. In all, I probably sat through Harold and Maude a dozen or more times here at the Little Art, over the years. And how cool to grow up in a town where Harold and Maude was a yearly event, just like the Wizard of Oz on tv....

Another thing you hear about in “kid lit” world is the idea of mirrors and windows—the way stories can show readers a reflection of their own experience—the mirrors—or a view into another world, or another person's experience—the windows. I don't know if that's common parlance, or more specific to my own sphere, but it fits with what I've been talking about, in the way that I got—and would wish for anyone—a well-rounded diet of both of those things as I grew up.

Harold and Maude was a mirror AND a window for me. Harold was a mirror for the kid who didn't know he was gay yet, but knew on some level that he was “different.” Not that I was obsessed with death and liked to go to funerals — But, without needing to be a literal duplication of my own experience, he showed me a part of myself, as only story can do. And for

that matter, there's actually something very gay about Harold and Maude, in terms of not knowing where to look for love in this world, and then finding it in an unexpected place. And it was in that alienated starting point where Harold begins the movie, that I found my mirror.

Maude was the window. She stood for all the possibilities Harold wasn't considering—and for permission to be different. Or be the same. Or be whatever we each want to be. Maude would have loved living in Yellow Springs, I have to think.

As a side note — if any of this is particularly interesting for you, I'd recommend my favorite TED Talk ever, with Chimamanda Adichie talking about what she calls The Danger of a Single Story. It's a brilliant sixteen minutes and worth a listen, if you care to.



So...Finally, I can't get by here without mentioning the YS school system. Of course.



There's a reason Becky was the first one I thought of when they asked me about who might introduce me tonight.



Creatively speaking, she impacted me more than any other teacher or person when I was growing up.

It was from Becky that I learned about theater, of course, but more specifically about directing, which is a kind of authorship, and of ownership of a story. Through most of high school, I had thought, I wanted to be an actor. But by the time I graduated, I wanted to be a director.

Becky was what I'd call an agent of the possible. (Which is really an echo of everything I'm talking about, in terms of what Yellow Springs afforded those of us lucky enough to grow up here). She didn't ASK us what we

were capable of. She simply told us what we WERE going to do, and then she showed us how, and then we did it.

The thing I remember most is how Becky got so many of us to do things we didn't think we could—whether that was a full on hip tossing Jitterbug performed by fourth and fifth graders in one of her Mills Lawn Concerts; or the YSHS production of The Wiz that nobody who was there will ever forget.



Not to mention the gallery of creative accomplishment right here: Daniel Jenkins, with his decades long Broadway career; Anne Harris, a goddess of the Chicago blues scene; Tracy Walker, a fixture on the Cincinnati music scene, and Leigh Adoff, who sings as Leigh Hamilton, with a voice from God that's taken her around the world.

I really lucked out, in that doing theater was cool when I went to YSHS. I hope it still is. But the term “theater geek” wasn't ever part of the equation.

Thanks in large part to Becky.



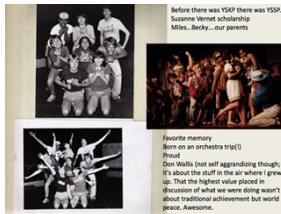
Becky and Suzanne Grote, of course, put on one small and one big musical every year while I was at Yellow Springs High School—neither of them small undertakings, involving I’m not sure how much of the school, but I think as many as sixty out of the two hundred kids who went there in the cast alone for some of the bigger productions.

Besides Becky and Suzanne, I should also mention Kay Corbin, Julia Davis, John Ammerman, Shirley Mullins (and there are many others — including Jean Hooper and all of Center Stage Theater), who collectively made the arts education in this tiny little town a kind of breathtaking thing.

So why wouldn’t we then start our own student-run theater company one summer here? And why wouldn’t it be born as a group brainstorm on a school orchestra trip that Shirley engineered and which put our little school on the national map? And why wouldn’t we get our seed money for that

project from a Suzanne Vernet summer scholarship that was made available to students every year at the time?

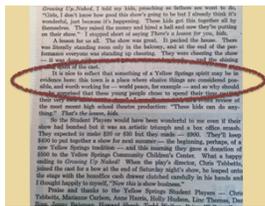
The answer, I guess, was—no reason at all.



This was the summer after my senior year, when we formed Yellow Springs Student Players and put on a play called Growing Up Naked. The other image on that slide is from the following summer, when we put on a production of HAIR, appropriately enough for Yellow Springs. But for Growing Up Naked that first year, we went to the theater at Antioch—now called the Foundry Theater, but at the time, it was a kind of ramshackle warehouse of a place, which we'd somehow secured permission to use without ever being given a key. And in fact, literally, every night, we'd go around the back, shoulder open the back door, lift up the folding chair that was meant to block the crash bars, let ourselves in, and then, when the time came, go let the audience in through the front doors. It's one of my favorite memories of growing up here, and also, in retrospect feels like a kind of culmination of everything this town had to offer us as bored but

willing teenagers.

Don Wallis, who was the Yellow Springs News Editor at the time, wrote an editorial as opposed to a review of Growing Up Naked, where he said, among other things...



“It is nice to reflect that something of a Yellow Springs spirit may be in evidence here. This town is a place where elusive things are considered possible and worth working for...”

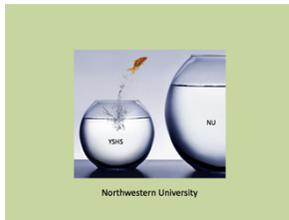
There's that word again: POSSIBLE.



For me, it touches off the idea that any creative pursuit is inherently bound in optimism—in some sense that success can be achieved. That vision can be realized. This isn't the same thing as participation trophies or blind

optimism. This is the energy that sets creative pursuits in motion and feeds them along the way. The kind of optimism that Yellow Springs put in the water, and in the air here. I almost want to say if you weren't there, you can't quite appreciate what we were all given at the time. I don't think we appreciated it fully for that matter— but we certainly benefitted — and I most certainly appreciate it in retrospect. Just having to come up with this talk has filled me with a kind of resurgent gratitude for everything I got from this town, and everything it sent me off into the world carrying as well.

Just briefly now, I was also asked to talk a little about my trajectory from Yellow Springs, so I'll give you the digest version of of what I've been up to since 1982....



First of all, it turns out that the world outside Yellow Springs is a little more competitive than what I was up against here in town. There was a certain culture shock in leaving—which isn't a complaint, so much as it is a description of my experience.

I found myself at a university where nobody was stepping over themselves to put me in their plays and musicals, and where my high school resume wasn't worth quite as much as it had been up to that point.

My major at Northwestern was film, in part because I'd fallen in love with the movies along the way, just like theater—but also because it was a chance for some hands on experience in filmmaking, as compared to theater, which was a lot more widely available as an extracurricular activity.

In any case, I got a good education at NU, made some halfway decent student films, and also, eventually learned that there was a huge difference between my love of going to the movies and my feelings about making them. If anything, for me, the creative process there was too disparate, and too technical.

My professional film career was exactly two days long. My cousin got me a bit of work on a movie called China Girl, and I spent those two days in New York City, standing in the rain in Chinatown, trying to tell New Yorkers where they could and could not park. It was about as fun as it sounds.

After that, I quickly turned my attention back to theater. A friend had brought me to New York initially for five weeks of work as an assistant

director on an off-Broadway showcase.... I'd arrived in the city, still a little naive, and a little green, and feeling kind of like this.... (SLIDE)



But New York being what it is, and the way that city can take hold of you, one thing led to another, and somehow those five weeks stretched into eight years.

I took theater jobs as a carpenter, lighting assistant, stage hand... then as a stage manager, and eventually as a director and producer.

It felt like I was getting closer to what I really wanted to do. BUT the problem for me was, I didn't love the business of theater, or even like it enough to ever become truly serious in that world. ... Which in my mind turned city living from a necessary evil into an unnecessary one.

That's when I moved to Vermont and also turned my attention back to books, and writing—not even realizing at the time that I'd come full circle, to my first love. And I don't just mean books. I also mean small town living.



For several years after that, my writing was fairly casual, until I took my first children's writing class. For whatever reasons, I connected with kids' writing in a way that I hadn't with other kinds of writing (or with theater or filmmaking for that matter). And what really surged, and changed for me at that point was my willingness to SHOW UP for the business end of it all—which is to say — studying the markets, submitting my work, dealing with rejection, going to conferences and workshops, networking online, dealing with more rejection, looking for an agent, etc. etc.

Woody Allen says that 90% of success is showing up, and I tend to agree.

The piece of anecdotal advice I always offer on that front — and it goes beyond publishing — is that while I was doing all this, I was haunted by the sense that every step along the way should yield me some tangible gain. I wanted to come away from every conference with the names of three editors who were going to read my stuff; I wanted to find a new cadre of

writing contacts at every workshop....that kind of thing.... But really, in the end, that's not how it worked—at least, not for me.

For me, it all turned out to be about showing up and showing up, over and over again, so that I could eventually be in the one right place at the one right time.

And now I'm going to go into fast forward mode to show you what I mean and bring us up to the present day.

[GO THROUGH SERIES OF SLIDES DESCRIBING PUBLISHING PROGRESSION, FROM FIRST BOOK TO MOST RECENT.]

None of which would have happened if I hadn't been both persistent and lucky enough to land in Barbara's workshop that day. Luck is always going to be part of the equation, but I also like the quote that says, "I find the harder I work, the luckier I tend to get."

In any case, that brings me up to today and what I'm working on now....



Which is a solo project — an older young adult novel—something new for me — called *The Weakness of Gravity*, and it comes out next year.

I'm going to end tonight by reading a small section from that work in progress. This isn't an autobiographical piece, but there is a lot of me in it, and there's a lot of Yellow Springs in it as well.

[SEGUE TO READING]

END.