



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
May 16, 2008

“Long before multicultural characters and themes were fashionable, Ezra Jack Keats crossed social boundaries by being the first American picture-book maker to give the black child a central place in children’s literature.”

[-www.ezra-jack-keats.org](http://www.ezra-jack-keats.org)

It is the time of year for graduations and this year I attended my step-daughter’s at Hiram College, in Hiram, Ohio. For 45 minutes before it started, hundreds of us sat waiting in folding chairs outside. As I read through the graduation program, one of the nine people receiving a master’s degree caught my eye - a woman named Wilhelmena F. Holmes, who had written a thesis called: *Profile of an Imagemaker: Ezra Jack Keats - Exploring the Power of Images in Picture Books*.

Even the title of this paper sounds appealing to me, since Ezra Jack Keats is one of my favorite children’s book authors and illustrators. His work, which is done in collage blended with gouache, is bright, colorful and beautiful, and the characters in his charming picture books are grappling with simple yet universal struggles. Examples are *Peter’s Chair*, which tells the story of a boy who isn’t quite ready to out-grow his small chair; *Whistle for Willy*, a sweet book about the

pleasure of being a boy with a dog; and, the 1963 Caldecott Medal winner *Snowy Day*, in which a delighted Peter finds it has snowed during the night.

The graduation started right on time and, as the clouds came and went, we listened to a line-up of speakers. The hotter it got, the longer the speeches seemed to be. Halfway through the commencement address, I decided the length of a speech should be in inverse proportion to the temperature: the higher the temperature, the shorter the speech. Unfortunately, Philip Lader - former U.S. Ambassador and assistant to President Clinton - didn’t know of my new rule and he took his time making his points.

He had three questions for the graduates to ponder, and after a few jokes and a long introduction, he asked and elaborated on them. First, he said, what is a life well lived? Next, how have you used the gifts you’ve been given? And third, how have you honored your relationships?

continued on page 2

These are all excellent questions and his speech was well written, carefully thought out and sincere. Under any other circumstances I might have enjoyed it more, but instead I found myself remembering a graduation speaker from years ago who began his speech by saying "I know that no matter what I say, you won't remember my speech." I think that is a universal truth and I'm not even sure graduates are looking for words to live by, as they sit and anticipate that final step up onto the stage - they are probably just glad they're almost done.

It was interesting to be in the audience waiting for someone at the beginning of the alphabet to graduate. Years of waiting for W's has made me irritable and perplexed as to

I always remember my high school friend, Daniel Zwick, who claimed people at the end of the alphabet die earlier, because they spend so much time waiting

why names at ceremonies like this continue to be listed in alphabetical order. I can't think of one good reason not to have them listed randomly and I always remember my high school friend, Daniel Zwick, who claimed people at the end of the alphabet die earlier, because they spend so much time waiting. And alone, I could add, since by the time we graduate many of the audience members have left.

This time, however - feeling only vaguely guilty - I got to do it myself. After the D's, I made my way over to the shade and drank two cups of iced water, while the remainder of the alphabet was still seated in the sun. It felt great.