



# Telling Stories: Richard Peck

Grades 5-8

November 5, 2004 • 11 a.m.-12 p.m. ET

When viewing *Telling Stories: Richard Peck* and participating in this guide's suggested activities, the following language arts standards sponsored by the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association will be addressed: 1-7.

## Students Will See and Hear . . .

Award-winning author Richard Peck talks about writing fiction with students in the studio audience, and those participating via the Distance Learning Network. The discussion is moderated by children's literature expert Maria Salvatore. In addition to sharing parts of a new novel, the conversation with Mr. Peck will focus on his 2001 Newbery Medal-winning book, *A Year Down Yonder*, and *A Long Way from Chicago*, a 2000 Newbery Honor book.

## Curriculum Connections:

**Telling Stories: Richard Peck** correlates with the following curricula: Language Arts, Social Studies/History, Science

## Educational Objectives

- To develop reading, writing, and critical thinking skills
- To explore the role of actual historical events (such as the Great Depression) in fiction
- To look at how technology impacts fiction, as in Peck's description of airplanes in the 1930s and 1940s

## Program Notes

### Richard Peck:

#### From Teacher to Novelist

When does a writer become a writer? Richard Peck began his first work of fiction only after considerable life experience, in his case, teaching seventh grade. "I learned to be a teacher as I was to learn to be a writer," says Peck. Teaching "made me laugh and cry and kept me up at night. Like writing." He was thirty-seven years old when he began to write.

Richard Wayne Peck was born in Decatur, Illinois in 1934. Decatur was a "middle-American town in a time when teenagers were considered guilty until proven innocent, which is fair enough. My mother read to me before I could read to myself, and so I dreamed from the start of being a writer." His college career, begun at DePauw University, included a year at the University of Exeter in England. After serving in the Army, Peck returned to Southern Illinois University where he received a Master of

Arts degree and worked as an English instructor.

Peck then taught high school in Chicago. He later moved to New York City to teach English to junior high and high school students. It was as a teacher that Peck became aware of the unique challenges and strengths of adolescents, and so many of his books are crafted with them in mind. His first piece of fiction was written while he taught seventh grade. In 1972, the year after Peck left teaching, his first novel, *Don't Look and It Won't Hurt*, was published.

#### National Awards and Recognition

Since then, Richard Peck has published more than thirty books for children, young adults, and adults. His books are wide-ranging, but whether their settings are contemporary or historical, mysteries, science fiction, or collections of short stories, essays, or poetry, the themes are

powerfully presented.

Richard Peck has been awarded the prestigious Newbery Medal, a Newbery Honor, the Margaret Edwards Award for lifetime achievement, the Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction, and the Edgar Allan Poe Award from the Mystery Writers of America. His Newbery Honor book, *A Long Way from Chicago*, was a National Book Award finalist in 1998. Additionally, Mr. Peck is the first children's book author to have received the National Humanities Medal.

#### Best-Loved Characters

Characters of all ages come to life in Peck's books. Among the most memorable are the "great, granite elders" that Peck says "stalk through" the pages of his books. One of his best-loved characters is Grandma Dowdel, a tough, complex, and thoroughly memorable presence in *A Long Way from Chicago* (Dial, 1999)

and *A Year Down Yonder* (Dial, 2000). Both novels are set in rural Illinois during the Depression. Though set in the past, Peck is concerned with timeless themes and characterizations. Yet his work is not difficult or obtuse; he knows when “comedy is called for.”

### Richard Peck, In His Own Words

“Stories aren’t real life. They’re comments upon real life, parallel universes of what might be if our ties were stronger and the world a more coherent place.”

From *Invitations to the World*

“The premise of all storytelling is that in the long run you will be held responsible for the consequences of your actions.”

From *Invitations to the World*

“The narrative—language itself—is the gift of the elders.”

From Newbery Medal

Acceptance Speech, June 17, 2001

“Are all my memories true? Every word, and growing truer with the years.”

From *A Long Way from Chicago*

“We finish—only to begin.”

Class motto in

*A Year Down Yonder*

## Instructional Activities

### • Reading

Read several books by Richard Peck. Consider what these books have in common, such as the research required to write them, the use of language, or similarities in themes.

### • Writing

Write a review or a column about one of the books you read. Post it on the school web site or publish it in the school newspaper or a class newsletter.

Richard Peck gave a speech when he was awarded the Newbery Medal. Go to the library to find the written speech. (It is published in the July/August 2001 issue of the Horn Book Magazine.) What is your opinion of his speech? What do you think is the most significant point of his speech?

Write your own acceptance speech as though you had just won an important award for a book or another accomplishment.

### • Critical Thinking

Grandma Dowdel was a strong influence on her grandchildren. Interview an older person in your life. Find out what their childhood was like, where they lived, what recreational activities were available to them. Write a story about how you would have interacted with them in the time in which they grew up or how they react in your world today or how they have influenced you.

### • Science

Biplanes figure prominently in *A Long Way from Chicago* since Joey got to ride in one. What was the flying time of the old biplanes? How were they used? How do they compare to 21st century planes? Create a timeline of the history of technological developments since the biplane.

### • History

Find out more about the Great Depression. What caused it? How long did it last? What began to move the United States out of the Depression? What are some of the landmark pieces of legislation that were developed during that era? Explore how lifestyles have changed since that time. If Grandma Dowdel lived today, what changes would she experience?

### • Study Skills/Graphic Arts

Storyboarding is a technique used by many different kinds of artists to organize their ideas visually. It is the process of breaking a scene down into its parts, and making a picture for each section, much like a comic strip. Ask your students to choose a scene from one of Peck’s books, and create a storyboard of it in four to six sections.

## Internet Resources:

For more information, visit:

The Great Depression:

[mirrors.korprios.org/resurgent/THE\\_GREAT\\_DEPRESSION.htm](http://mirrors.korprios.org/resurgent/THE_GREAT_DEPRESSION.htm)

[plainfield.k12.in.us/hschool/webq/webq1/webquest.htm](http://plainfield.k12.in.us/hschool/webq/webq1/webquest.htm)

[memory.loc.gov/ammem/fsowhome.html](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fsowhome.html)

Aviation:

[memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/features/flight/index.html](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/features/flight/index.html)

[boeing.com/history/boeing/growing.html](http://boeing.com/history/boeing/growing.html)

Richard Peck:

[richardpeck.smartwriters.com](http://richardpeck.smartwriters.com)

Other resources related to **Telling Stories: Richard Peck** can be found on page 20.

For additional resources, visit [kennedy-center.org/pwv](http://kennedy-center.org/pwv)

