

# A Welcome to the New York Society Library

by Richard Peck

These remarks were given at the New Members Party on May 28, 2014.

Ladies and Gentlemen, new friends and old, welcome to this Library that was forced to suspend operations for the War of Independence in 1774, but is, as you see, up and running again.

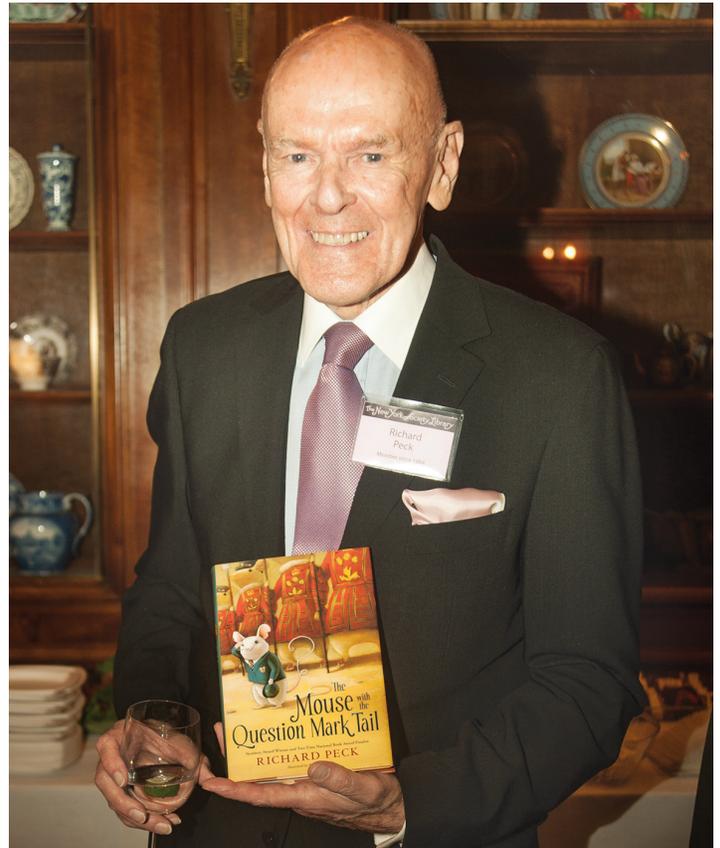
We gather in this house heavy with history and built of books to welcome our newest members in the clear recollection that we were new members once, that on one happy day we walked for the first time through that paneled portico and those mildly malfunctioning doors into this magical, highly unlikely, slightly eccentric, clearly anachronistic alternate universe...this oasis of full sentences in an arid desert of text messages.

In a city that regularly knocks down beautiful old buildings to make way for ugly new ones, in a city that regularly forgets its past, this place remembers every moment. These walls rose right at the end of a grand tradition of fine family homes that had begun as this Library began in the step-gabled red brick of Dutch downtown New York and ended with a flourish of limestone two hundred years later in this neighborhood.

A way of life too proud to persist, but pinned to the page just in time by Edith Wharton, whose father was a member of this Library, and by William Dean Howells and by Henry James. One wouldn't be greatly surprised to come face-to-face with Daisy Miller languishing along these stacks. And since real life is too neatly arranged for fiction, Henry James lay dying as this house was being built.

Its beating heart lies below—the card catalog with its burnished wood cabinetry, its drawers rolling out like invitations, the often enigmatic notations on the cards written by hands long folded and still. As long as there is a card catalog, our side has not lost, because card catalogs never crash.

This is a place with its face to the future and so, in a small miracle, space was found where no space was to expand the area devoted to children and young readers, because the most important members of this Library were born in the twenty-first century. They are New Yorkers born after 9/11.



And it's harder to be young now than anything we can remember: harder as the video game and its culture of death reach the very young before books can. Harder to be young in the home where screens glow hot into the night long after parents are fast asleep. Harder because when you can text from the dinner table, you're too far from everybody.

Our most important members are the youngest among us because it will be up to them to defend books and the ideas in books and the privacy to read them after we are gone. And they will be tested as we haven't been because this is a family library, and governments expand at the expense of families.

I came to this Library as a writer, one whose favorite readers are young, though I don't believe in separate books for separate generations. In all my books aimed at the young, there's an old person reaching across a lifetime to touch a young hand, and the older I get, the stronger that old person becomes. In my newest book, *The Mouse With the Question*

*Mark Tail*, I've gone about as far as I can go in that direction because the strong old character is Queen Victoria.

Many a book has been born in this Library. Books are still being born here. Listen carefully and you'll hear the cries of pain. Many of my books have been born in these stacks because nobody but a reader ever became a writer. We write from observation, not experience. We write from research, not recollection. The sacred secret of writing all fiction is this: a story is always about something that never happened to the author.

Beatrix Potter was never a rabbit.

J.K. Rowling did not attend Hogwarts School.

Stephen Crane was born after the Civil War.

And the author of *1984* died in 1950.

And so every book begins in the library in the hope that it will end there. I will spare you autobiography except to share with you how I found my way to this Library. A long time ago I was commissioned to write a big, thick historical novel, and I could choose the topic. That was no problem. I'd write about everybody's favorite disaster, the sinking of the *Titanic*. And so with exquisite slowness the *Titanic* took four years to sink in my writing room, with its deck plans pinned up around the walls the whole time.

This was so long ago that there were survivors of the *Titanic* among us. I spent four years with my heart in my mouth, fearing I'd get something wrong and do violence to their memories. And so when I had a readable manuscript—and for me that's always the sixth revision—I plucked up the courage to approach Walter Lord, the author of *A Night to Remember*. Actually that's not quite what happened. I had no courage to pluck up and so I plucked up my editor's courage, and she approached him.

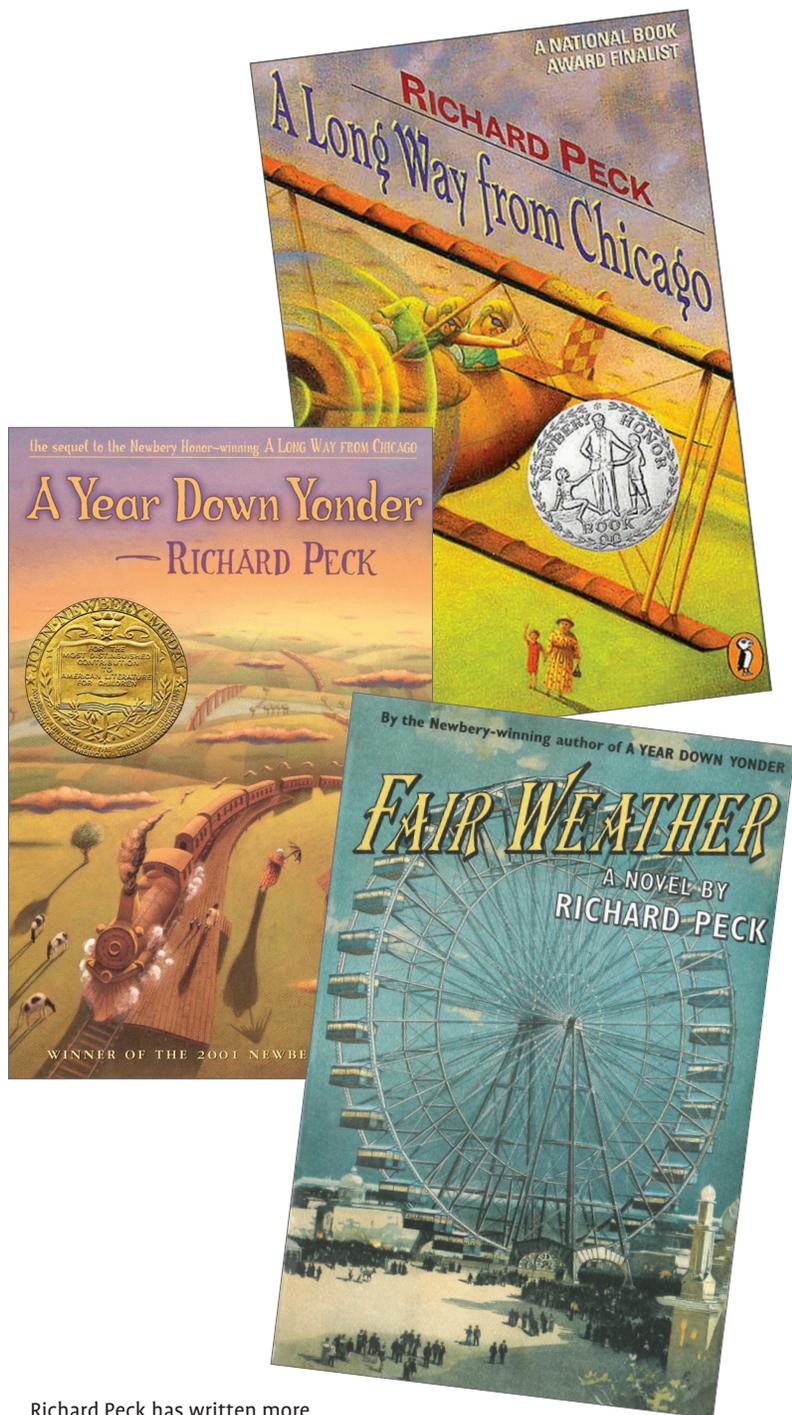
With the generosity that characterized him, Walter Lord read my manuscript and gave it a clean bill of health, and a couple of suggestions. And the book became *Amanda Miranda*.

Walter Lord was a luminary of this Library, and it was through him I found my way here—to this Library which is what all libraries would be in a perfect world in its stacks and its staffing and the leadership of Mark Bartlett.

This community of writers—present and past,  
This community of readers—present and future,  
This community of people young and old who believe in our hearts that nothing is real until it's written down, that the story unites what the computer divides, and that wherever you're going, every journey begins in the library.

Welcome to this feast.

Richard Peck  
May 28, 2014



Richard Peck has written more than thirty novels, and in the process has become one of the country's most highly respected writers for children. In fact the *Washington Post* called him "America's best living author for young adults." A versatile writer, he is beloved by middle-graders as well as young adults for his historical and contemporary comedies and coming-of-age novels. He lives in New York City and spends a great deal of time traveling around the country to speaking engagements at conferences, schools, and libraries.

Mr. Peck is the first children's book author to have received a National Humanities Medal. He is a Newbery Medal winner (for *A Year Down Yonder*), a Newbery Honor winner (for *A Long Way from Chicago*), a two-time National Book Award finalist, and a two-time Edgar Award winner. In addition, he has won a number of major honors for the body of his work, including the Margaret A. Edwards Award, the ALAN Award, and the Medallion from the University of Southern Mississippi.