

The BiblioFiles: Norton Juster

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DR. DANA: The Cotsen Children's Library at Princeton University Library presents The BiblioFiles. I'm Dr. Dana. Today my guest is Norton Juster, author of the legendary book, The Phantom Tollbooth. Milo is a boy who doesn't know what to do with himself, isn't interested in much, and doesn't see the point in anything. But when a mysterious package containing a toy tollbooth arrives in his room, everything changes.

Past the tollbooth are the lands beyond, which house places like Digitopolis, the Valley of Sounds, the Doldrums, Dictionopolis, and the Mountains of Ignorance. Milo is soon joined by a pair of unusual traveling companions, Tock and Humbug, as he attempts to bring princesses Rhyme and Reason back to settle the warring kingdoms of words and numbers.

First published in 1961, the Phantom Tollbooth is wacky, smart, odd, fun, strange, and completely captivating. It is often compared to Alice's Adventures in Wonderland in terms of its intelligence, wordplay, and impact on children's literature. Now in over 50 years of publication, the Phantom Tollbooth, with its iconic illustrations by Jules Feiffer, has been analyzed in scholarly papers, quoted in dissertations, included in graduate classes, documented on film, read aloud in elementary school classrooms, passed along through generations of families, and newly discovered by young readers. It is, and will always be, a seminal book in the history of children's literature.

In addition to the Phantom Tollbooth, Norton Juster has written The Dot and the Line, a Romance in Lower Mathematics, Alberic the Wise and Other Journeys, As, a Surfeit of Similes, The Hello Goodbye Window, Sourpuss and Sweetie Pie, The Odious Ogre, and Neville. In 2011, the annotated Phantom Tollbooth with introduction and notes by scholar Leonard Marcus was released. Norton Juster, welcome to The BiblioFiles.

NORTON JUSTER: Thank you very much. I thought you'd never finish [LAUGHTER] -- I'm really happy to be here. I haven't been back at Princeton since I was a student at the University of Pennsylvania, and came here for a football game that we were favored to win, and Princeton beat the hell out of us. So you can realize how happy I am to be here again.

I don't know how to begin here. I am very pleased, first of all, that they've managed to put all my notes up on the wall back there.[LAUGHTER]

DR. DANA: There will be a quiz afterwards. [LAUGHTER]

NORTON JUSTER: Yeah, there is. I will hand out exams, and just remember one thing. Penmanship is going to be one of the marking criteria. So take it easy with it. OK, ask away.

DR. DANA: You've remarked that when you were a child, there were no inanimate objects in your house. Everything from tubes of toothpaste to pairs of shoes had their own personality and life.

NORTON JUSTER: Yes, that's perfectly accurate. It drove my parents crazy. I had marbles, those little glass things that I guess nobody uses anymore. And each one of them had a different personality, and I played with them on the floor, and there'd be all kinds of little personal things going on between them that even I didn't know about. But everything I had had a personality. I don't like these things. [LAUGHTER, then humorously referring to dropped microphone]

And it helped me a great deal, because as a child I seem to have one great failing, is I never understood things the way anybody else seemed to understand things. It was very difficult on my parents, who were very helpful, and loving, and whatever you want to call it. But they never knew what I was talking about. And so that became a big part of my growing up.

They would say something to me, I would say something back, that'd go back and forth for a while. And finally, someone would get exasperated, mostly my mother. And she would say to me, when I disagreed with something consistently, how can you be right and the rest of the world wrong? And it took me almost a week before I realized that was possible. [LAUGHTER]

But I think animating inanimate things is one of the things that helps you cope with the world better and understand it better. Because there is, in a way, that kind of input and output between not just you and other people, but you and the things in the rest of the world. And if you think about them that way, it's a great help to understanding, or at least beginning to think about alternative ways of understanding where you are and who you are. And that, I think, is probably the most I can say about that right now, anyway.

DR. DANA: Also when you were a kid, you struggled with math. Can you tell us about that experience?

NORTON JUSTER: Well, I like math, because I like any subject that has a lot of humor in it. [LAUGHTER] I mean, as a kid, you start out and somebody tells you a little bit about something called negative numbers. Now, that's not serious. [LAUGHTER] They can't tell you there are negative numbers, it just doesn't work that way. So I kind of shut off on math in the beginning.

And then, of course, wanting to be an architect when I grew up later, math becomes very important. And I had to really knuckle down to it, and I began to do very well without any real understanding of what I was doing. And there are mathematicians who love it and understand it at a level that I understand certain other things, but I never managed to get to that level very much. But math always for me, when I used it not as math, was always very funny and very inspiring for me.

DR. DANA: You joined the Navy in 1954, and were eventually stationed in Newfoundland. While in the service, you started writing and illustrating stories for children, and you were asked by the commanding officer to stop hanging your watercolors in the ship's corridor. Why were you compelled to write an illustrated children's story at that time, especially since it wasn't quite in keeping with a military environment?

NORTON JUSTER: Well, I always used to carry a watercolor box with me, because I like drawing, and sketching, and water coloring. And there's a lot of time in service when there's

really nothing to do. Nobody will tell you that officially, but you waste a lot of time in service. And I had to do something to keep me sane, really. I went into the service not out of any eagerness to be in the service, but it was in the early '50s, 1954, I think it was, when I went in. And there was absolutely required military training at that time. You couldn't get out of it unless you were very wealthy or your father was a senator.

But I simply knew I was going to go in, and I said, well, I have two choices. I can go into the Army for 21 months, or I can possibly enlist in the Navy, and do something that might be related to my architectural studies. I had just graduated. So I enlisted in the Navy, and into Officer's Training, and became a CB. I don't know whether any of you remember those days when the glorious CBs were around, we weren't much glorious, but it was OK. And luckily, I was in service after all the fighting had stopped. I think the South Korea thing had just-- the truce had come through with North Korea.

And so I went in, and without a great deal of enthusiasm, because I had things to do with my life, as many people talk about. But I'll tell you it was probably one of the most formative times of my life, going into service. I met people I never would have met, I saw places, I became involved in situations and things that I never would have confronted. Still probably to this day wouldn't have if I hadn't gone in the service.

It was something that really helped me a great deal. It's that old game you always play with your life. It's a way of opening yourself to other things that you never expect to experience. And being open to that means that you begin to see yourself and the world in a different way, and that's what's called growing up. So I ultimately was very pleased that I had done it. It was three years-- a little more than three, actually-- out of my life, but it was time well spent, I think.

DR. DANA: And the children's story?

NORTON JUSTER: What? Oh.

DR. DANA: The children's story.

NORTON JUSTER: I started to write in the Navy. I started because I was doing watercolors. And I was doing things, and the stuff I remember from when I was a child, children's books and things in the house. And I would-- [LAUGHTER, then humorously referring to dropped microphone] Anybody laughs gets this in the head! I started to draw castles, palaces, princesses, knights in armor. All the traditional children's kind of illustrations you found.

And the watercolors dry slowly, so I'd tack them up on the walls. We were living on what's called a barrack ship. Very unpleasant kind of accommodations. But they were all over the place until the commanding officer called me in one day and announced that Naval officers do not do drawings of princesses, and castles, and things like. [LAUGHTER] And he went on and on. I finally got what he was talking about.

And so I had to stop, so I started writing a little bit. Those I didn't have to tack up. And I wrote my first book. It never got published, but it was just me testing my wings. And it was a story

called *The Passing of Irving*. And it was about a real creature who didn't know he was mythological. And it was great fun to do. And when I came back, I showed it to a few people who gave me the usual, it shows a lot of promise, keep working.

But it really got me started on thinking about books. Everybody says I'm a children's book author, I don't remember ever writing a book only for children. I write for myself, and a lot of them I'm delighted that children enjoy them. But I think a lot of adults enjoy them, too. And I think, in most cases, if you're writing, it's much better to write what you want to write about without targeting an audience. It'll find its audience.

And I go crazy with publishers, what age group was this for? Four to eight, eight to 12, 12 to 14? Whatever it is, they always talk about that. And I can't think of it that way. Because you could do the same thing in terms of human development by saying, OK, this book is for ages 28 to 34, 34 to 40, 40 to 45, it makes the same kind of sense. So I bring them in now, finally after writing several of them, nobody asks me anymore. They just said, well, I think I can sell this, or I don't think this will sell very well. And that's their only way of judging these things.

DR. DANA: Tell us about the beginnings of *The Phantom Tollbooth*.

NORTON JUSTER: Oh, yes, well, when I got out of service, I was looking for a job, I had trained as an architect. My father was an architect, my brother was an architect. My playthings when I grew up were all the extra samples, and bits, and pieces that my father would bring home from the office. And I would cover the floor in the entire house we lived in with those bits and pieces. It's what we call stuff. [LAUGHTER]

No seriously, parents do that. They come into your room, they look around and say, it's a mess. What is this stuff? And it is, that's exactly what it is. It's stuff, and very important in your life. So it's a thing parents will learn after a while, I think. Anyway, where was I?

DR. DANA: The beginnings of *The Phantom Tollbooth*. You know, *that* book.

NORTON JUSTER: I got a job in an architectural office. And I was very excited, except I was not very sure after those years in the Navy that that's what I really want to do. And I was very in and out of what I thought. And one day I noticed in the paper that the Ford Foundation was giving grants to do books on almost any subject you wanted. And prior to going into the Navy, I had gone to school in England for about a year and a half on a Fulbright scholarship.

And while I was there, I got very interested in urban planning. This was right after the Second World War, so the British Isles were rebuilding themselves. And they were doing these new cities, and new places to live, and repairing the damages, and everything. And I began thinking about how important that was to these whole new generations that were coming in, and how important the environment of a place is that you live in.

So I thought it might be fun to do a book for kids on urban planning, and the effects of cities on how you live, and how they get built, and the influence they have on your life, and all those

kinds of things. And Without any second thought, I applied to the Ford Foundation for the grant, never expecting to get it. And I got informed a couple of weeks later that I'd received the award.

And there's an old saying, when God wants to punish you, he grants your wishes [LAUGHTER] Because this is what happened to me. I got started, I worked for several months. I was up to my neck in these four by six little file cards that you make notes on when you go to the library or find information anywhere. And I realized I was lost. I didn't really want to do that at that time of my life.

Several things that I had come across and made notes of in my note cards were things that ultimately got into *The Phantom Tollbooth*. There's a whole section on the two cities called *Delusions* and *Reality* that came right from that, and there were a few other things in there.

So that's how my real writing got started. I visited some friends who had a house on the beach in Fire Island, New York, and I just spent long days on the beach trying to figure out who I was, and what I wanted to do. And I began thinking about my own life as a kid, which relates to the business of my parents not understanding me, the teacher not understanding me.

They were all trying to teach me good things, but they weren't the things that I was interested in learning. I liked learning things, I just didn't like school very much. And I like my parents very much, but they were so serious about everything. And my life was really a chaos of crazy kinds of things. I loved wordplay, I loved all sorts of things that way.

My father was a wordplay-- I don't know what you call it. He was a freak in that sense. He was a wonderful, gentle man. But I'd come in some days and he'd look at me and say, ah-ha. I see you're coming early since lately. You used to be behind before, but now you're first, at last. I had no idea what he was talking about [LAUGHTER] So he'd get up from where he was sitting, come over put his arm around my shoulder and say, you're a good kid and I'd like to see you get ahead. You need one.

And then every day I'd come in, and it wouldn't be the same thing, there'd be something like that. A little word play thing. and if you remember your own childhood, there's one response that's appropriate for a pun when you're young, and that is, ugh. But after a while I began to say, I can do that, and I understand it now. And I'd slowly grow into it, and I began throwing it back at him.

I remember, he always took us to the beach in the summer, and he never would go in the water very far, probably up to about his knees, because he didn't know how to swim. Finally, one day, my brother and I were out in the deeper water, and he was standing about, oh, a little more than ankle deep in the water. And I kept yelling at him to come on in, come on in, come on in, be in the water, and he wouldn't come. And finally I said to him, OK, Pop, he also surfs who only stands and wades. [LAUGHTER]

That was my start. Because I love puns now, and they just keep popping into my head. Every time I'm reading something or thinking about something, another pun will appear. And I think

wordplay is one of the wonderful ways you get to both understand your own language and ways of thinking about things, it's just a very enriching kind of thing to do.

DR. DANA: In *The Phantom Tollbooth*, the Kingdom of Words is in conflict with the Kingdom of Numbers. Do you feel this reflects a universal division between words and numbers, many people almost see words and numbers as a spectrum? Where if you get closer to words, you move away from being able to comprehend numbers, like the artist who is hopeless with numbers, or the opposite, the scientists who simply can't express themselves with words? Do you feel that you were reflecting that in the book?

NORTON JUSTER: Yes. [LAUGHTER] No, I'll talk about that a little. It's a very old problem and conflict, and it's been around for ages and ages, and will be around a very long time, I think. The way I got interested in that, and I thought it would be a wonderful piece of a subject to talk about in the book. Because they never present to anything like that to you in school.

So the book has Digitopolis and Dictionopolis, and they have this fight all the way through. And I don't know whether any of you remember this, at the end of the book, where the princesses have been rescued and they're all going off stage in various directions because you know the book is coming to a conclusion, the mathemagician and King Azaz are exiting also, and they start the argument again., right at the end. And I just wanted to get that in. I didn't care if anybody understood it or picked it up, it was just my way of saying, this is not going to end, and be careful.

DR. DANA: So where do you fit on the words-number spectrum?

NORTON JUSTER: Well, I don't take sides in this [LAUGHTER] Of course, I really do think numbers and words are just part of the richness of our culture, that we need them both. But you come across it not only in life, but and in schools, too in the majors that people take and things. I think we limit things.

One of the reasons I didn't like going to school is they never seemed to teach me anything that widened or enriched just factual information. You learned things, and you learned how to give back things as it was given to you from the teacher. And that's not a learning process. The learning process, for me, is beginning to think, beginning to put things together.

I had one very interesting thing that happened. I was talking at a school one day, I think it was a middle school. And that the end, of course, we asked for questions. And some boy got up, he was quite small, but he seemed very bright. He said, I don't understand what education is, why do we learn these things? And he went on and on. And I was quite upset by it, because that question hadn't come up even to me. I knew there was something wrong, but I hadn't defined it quite that way for myself.

And I started to tell him, I said, look, think about this in your learning. Everything you learn initially is a piece of information that you pick up by yourself, or by being at home, or ultimately being in school where they tell you in the history classes this happened in 1679, this happened in 1834. But none of it helps you think, or helps you understand why, or how, or what it affected, or

anything like that very much. And it was very difficult for me to begin telling myself you have to understand all of this kind of stuff.

So I said, look, think of it this way. You learn something, you put it up here. You learn something else, you put it up here. And that goes on and on with all this factual information. And then at a certain point in your life, you begin to notice, hey, this over here connects to this over here, and this over here connects-- and if you look up, you see, all of these little dots which are information being connected with lines. And all of that, that product, if you begin to understand it and how to think about it, is your education.

And this little boy looked at me very seriously and said, what happens next? And I said something really terrible because I was trying to explain something where I was a little bit out of my own depth there. A lot out of my own depth. I said, and then you die. [LAUGHTER]

DR. DANA: Oh no!

NORTON JUSTER: This process was what you do your whole life. And I didn't mean to say that's when you die, I meant that is the completeness of your life.

DR. DANA: I got to stop learning right now, so I can live forever! [LAUGHTER]

NORTON JUSTER: And that's really true, that's what you do. And that's what too many people don't do. Certainly teachers. Are there any teachers here? Oh, stick around, I'm going to get you. [LAUGHTER]

DR. DANA: Was there pressure to write a sequel after the success of *The Phantom Tollbooth*?

NORTON JUSTER: Yes. And I never want to write a sequel, so I didn't. And when I wrote my second book, *The Dot and the Line*, I tried to write something so far away from *The Phantom Tollbooth* that no one would think that one had anything to do with the other. And somehow, it didn't feel right. There was, to me at least, a uniqueness to that that I didn't want to stretch it into another format, or son of Milo, or anything like that. [LAUGHTER]

DR. DANA: Are you ever surprised by the connections readers have with one of your *Phantom Tollbooth* characters, or with a particular scene in the book?

NORTON JUSTER: Well I get a lot of different questions about that. The standard questions I get usually are where do you get your ideas from? Which means all the different people in these situations.

DR. DANA: The characters.

NORTON JUSTER: Yeah, characters, too. And that, if you've written, is the difficult thing. One of the questions is always, how do you invent your characters? Well, you don't invent them. They're there, you think about them, and you have to bring them to life in the sense that they are real people. When they're out of the book, they're also alive, and also people. So you have to

think in their whole life span. And you have to think of them when they're not in the book, and you have to think of them when they go off and come back on. They're not just hung on a hook in the closet, they're doing things.

And the other thing that's really important, and people ask about characters too, is that if they should be consistent with who they are. In other words, I've run into situations myself where I have thought about characters, and always one of the ways I get to know them is I make up conversations between myself and the character that go on endlessly. They never get in the book, but at least I begin to know something about those people. How they think, what they would do, what they wouldn't do.

And I've found myself on occasions in books where I've written myself into a situation where I want to use one of the characters to do something that that character would probably never do. And now I have to say to myself, OK, you've got to go all the way back and bring it back again the other way, because you have to be consistent. The character has to be credible and real. And if there are bad traits or good traits, they don't exchange so easily. So you have to be very careful with what you want to do with them.

DR. DANA: Was there a particular character in the book that you were continually having to go back and rewrite?

NORTON JUSTER: Well, it happened in different ways. I did a book right in the middle of my writing thing called *The Hello Goodbye Window*, I don't know that any of you have ever read it. And it was about my granddaughter. And her mother, for a long time, was a single mother.

And so her grandparents, my wife and I, would pitch in a lot in where she was in her upbringing. And she spent a lot of time in our house, and after a while it became fascinating for me to observe this little girl, and what she saw, and what she commented on, and what she did, and how she got into trouble, and all kinds of things like that. And I said, that might be an interesting book, but I'd have to write it from her point of view, and with her voice. And I have to be consistent with her character, also.

Well, I started writing, and it went well for a while. And I thought, gee, I really have this, and I put it away, which I tend to do, for a couple of weeks. And then took it out again, and I said, gee this is awfully nice writing, except for one thing, it's not *Tori*. It's not her voice, and it's not the way she reacts to things. So I took it all the way and started at the beginning again. And I think I finally got it, but it wasn't easy to do.

Because she really, what you're saying to yourself, you're crawling inside the body of this person and becoming them. And for a while, that's what you really have to do. And you have to keep them consistent, you have to keep them real. And many times, in books that you read, the character suddenly will emerge for you as being not real, and not a valid kind of character. And you have to face that. And if you do that, tear it up and start again.

DR. DANA: Just out of curiosity, do you find it easier to write on a typewriter, a computer, in longhand?

NORTON JUSTER: Oh, I wouldn't know what to do with a typewriter. I never learned to type, I don't use any machines. I'm from another century. If you give me two sticks, I'll make a fire for you. [LAUGHTER] So I write everything, and write notes, thousands of bits and pieces of paper, which are all over the place. And I told a story before, but it's interesting. At one point, my wife, who's an expert typist, and uses a computer and all those things, said to me, how can you read all this stuff? I can't read any of it on that page. Let me type up your notes, and they'll be easier to read.

So I said, OK, let's try it. And she typed up some, and I put him away for a week or so, took it out, and I couldn't understand any of them. And I realized that my scribbling, which consisted of about four or five different colors to write with, all kinds of diagrams, arrows that ran in places, pictures of things. Things that went all over the place, and that most anybody picking up one of those sheets would not know what they were about. But for me, they brought back exactly where I was in my thinking, so it worked better that way.

And now, after many years of asking me to get rid of all that junk, they are now sitting in the Lily Library in the University of Indiana. And it's funny, because they find what they're interested in most was the process of writing. And the thing that surprised me most, I had a friend who deals in manuscripts, so he brought it to them. Is that the thing that interested them most were the stories I did not finish. The stories that stopped me dead in their tracks. And there are a number of those, and my own notes about my problems I was having, and this and that. They said, that's the most valuable stuff for someone who's interested in writing to read. So I'm very pleased that they're all and now in one place, and people do use them, they tell me.

DR. DANA: How do you feel about editors?

NORTON JUSTER: Am I allowed to use those words? [LAUGHTER]

DR. DANA: Probably not.

NORTON JUSTER: There are some wonderful editors. The first editor for *The Phantom Tollbooth*, it turned out quite luckily for us, was not a children's book editor. Jules Feiffer, the Illustrator at that time, was going out with a girl who worked in writing and literature, both children's and otherwise. She came to me and said, let me take this to a publisher, to an editor I know, and I said, fine. So I had about 50 pages of it, and I don't write sequentially, I do bits and pieces all over the place and finally figure out a way to put them all together.

So she took it and mistakenly, I think-- because I don't think she quite knew what the book was about-- she took it to probably the best literary editor in New York, a man named Jason Epstein that worked for Random House. And he was busy at the time trying to put out a line of his own books for children, which were going to be reprints of classic children's books mostly from other countries. From Great Britain, primarily.

And it was a time in our lives in this country when they were very upset, because Russia and China were scoring better, the children, scoring better on tests in schools than our children are. So the big emphasis was, our children have to read better. How do you make them read better?

You make it easier, which is kind of crazy. But anyway, his books came out, Jason's books. And nobody would buy them, because they were all thought to be too difficult.

And so when he got my book, he liked it. He brought it out as the first and only original from his new imprint at Random House called the looking-glass library. And before they sent it out, I remember, before they released it to stores and everything, they sent copies to writers, to critics, to teachers, to librarians, all to get a kind of reaction to it, what they thought it was going to be or how it would do.

And they all came back with the same answer. One, this is not a children's book. The vocabulary is much too difficult, they wouldn't do it, and they wouldn't be able to. The plot was much too complicated and sophisticated for them. The wordplay, and jokes, and everything, they would never get. And then finally, and it's a fantasy, which is bad for children cause it disorients them. [LAUGHTER] And they're going to go out in boxes to bookstores, the bookstores will go in the basement, bye-bye Norton Juster.

But it didn't quite happen that way. [LAUGHTER]

DR. DANA: No, it did not.

NORTON JUSTER: I was lucky. And it was lucky I didn't get a children's book editor, I think, at that time. Because their idea was, they had to get books, they sent out these lists of usable vocabulary, very simple words, very simple concepts. And the kids would read those and buy them, but it wouldn't do anything for them. They wouldn't read any better, really, than that. So they were being shortchanged again, as they had been for a long time.

DR. DANA: All right, ladies and gentlemen, I am going to take questions from the audience. I'm going to walk around Oprah style, so you'll have to wait for me to get there with the microphone, so we can get your question for Norton.

NORTON JUSTER: Can I say one thing first?

DR. DANA: Sure.

NORTON JUSTER: One question I don't want you to ask is, how much money do you make? Which always comes up, and I have an answer for it, though, I'll tell you. It's more than I expected, and less than I deserved. [LAUGHTER]

DR. DANA: All right. So if you have a question, let me see over here. I'll start over here.

AUDIENCE: This is actually two questions, one for my daughter, and one for me. Her question is the first question that occurs to any reader, which is, what entity, organization, or person gave the tollbooths to Milo? And my question is, this comparison with Alice. It's certainly been important, sounds like it was important to your editor, and it's been important to readers in kind of making sense of what they have here. What do you think of that comparison, and the relationship between your book and-- Lewis Carrol?

NORTON JUSTER: I'll start with the second one, and then go back to the first one. I had never read Alice in Wonderland when I wrote The Phantom Tollbooth. So I had read it afterwards when I began—[LAUGHTER – jokingly referring to the dropped microphone] I think I'll just swallow this. After the book had come out, and this thing came up as an issue at times, and I loved it. It's a wonderful book. It's set in that different time, and a different way, and largely different attitudes. But the machinery of it is very much the same, I think. And he was, of course, a wonderful writer. So I don't mind being in that company. Now the other question from your daughter.

DR. DANA: Who sent Milo the tollbooth?

NORTON JUSTER: Oh, well I have had that kind of a question, but from the other end, and I'll tell you a little bit. Those questions I can't answer, because I don't know. They came largely from my own discontent, unhappiness, and unsureness of who I was and where I stood in the world. So they were unnamed things, I can't name you the source.

But one question that comes up, and it relates to that, is people ask me, OK, Milo goes through the whole adventure. He comes back, he's home, who gets the tollbooth next? Who is responsible for that? And I thought about it, because it would come up when I visited schools a lot, and the last thing you want is to be caught with a blank face when that question is asked.

And it seemed to me that it wasn't so much the tollbooth that was important. The tollbooth was, to me, a device for getting Milo from the real world to this fantasy world, so he could try to unravel, unknown to him, what was happening in the world, and why he was not happy with a lot of it.

So it seemed to me that it was a problem that a lot of people have. And it wasn't so much a matter of getting a formal tollbooth to make that trip, but it was to get yourself into a situation where perhaps without a formal tollbooth, you and your life began to move in a direction where you accepted the idea that there were alternative ways to think about things. There are ways to understand them, there are ways to enhance your own feeling about what was going on in your world, or what would be your world in a few years.

And it's, oh, what's the word I'm looking for? It's a religious term.

AUDIENCE: Epiphany?

NORTON JUSTER: Epiphany, yes, I'm sorry. Who said that? You get an A. [LAUGHTER]

DR. DANA: You get a free signed book! [LAUGHTER]

NORTON JUSTER: But that is the right word for that, because the opportunity for that to happen, I think, happens very much in life. Something will happen, somebody will tell you something, you'll read something, you'll have an experience. And suddenly you realize there's a whole area of your understanding that you don't understand. And this is the opportunity to do something about that, and not everybody picks up that opportunity.

When something happens in your world that forces you to do something, or to increase your understanding, or improve your attitude about things, or accept the idea that there are a lot of different ways to think about things. And that's the real change. This is afterward now, this is not what I set out to do. I don't know what I was said to do in the book. But that's the most important thing that I think happens in the book, for someone, to help them understand that that is part of their world, that's what they can do.

DR. DANA: Another question for Norton? Yes?

AUDIENCE: Who or what is your favorite character or situation in the book? Or this might be a slightly different question, which was the most fun to write?

NORTON JUSTER: In the book? Well, the characters and the situations that were most interesting and fun for me to write, almost all of them had to do with the demons. Because these were my demons when I was a kid. I had to cope with all of those things. Filling in the O's in a book became very important in my life to avoid doing things I was supposed to be doing.

And so I enjoyed those, and I enjoyed the dirty bird near the end of the book, and taking things completely out of context all the way. To me, one of the great villains in our society is context. When someone says, oh, they've said that because they were out of context. That, to me, is a good thing. And as much as your time is you can spend out of context, you will begin to understand more about things. [LAUGHTER]

But you could go on forever about that in there. But in terms of fun, I'll tell you a little bit. When I had Milo as a character, I could deal with Milo, because he was me at that age. And I had a very good memory from my early childhood. But then at a certain point, I said to myself, OK, Milo should have a mentor, should have someone in his life who is looking for his benefit, is protective, a whole range of things you can talk about.

And when I used to go home from elementary school at about 3 o'clock in the afternoon, there was a string of programs 15 minutes long, for children. Jack Armstrong the All-American boy. You name them, they were there. And in one of the stories, there was, who was the character? I can't remember. Just one of the children's stories was a character who did just that. And so for me, a model, that's the character I used for the dog, Tock. Who is--

DR. DANA: I love Tock.

NORTON JUSTER: Yeah, I like him, too, but you don't have to clean up after him. [LAUGHTER] So we had our mentor. Then I said to myself, well, he can't just have that. There are other influences on your life, I have to have the opposed character. Someone who never tells the truth, is only looking out for himself, can't be trusted, all of that. And there you have the Humbug.

AUDIENCE: Did you incorporate any of your personality into any of the characters?

NORTON JUSTER: Oh, dear, I hope so. Because in the beginning, that was my problem, and my difficulty with the world. I had an older brother, he's 4 and 1/2 years older. And he was everything at that time I wasn't. He was very bright, very successful, very good looking, a terrific athlete, all the things that you would want to be in your lifetime. And I was quiet, withdrawn, looked like a badly carved Halloween pumpkin. [LAUGHTER] Anything you could think of. And we liked each other, but we were just very, very different.

And everybody would say, oh, Howard is the hope of the family. Howard was going to do something wonderful. And they would stop there. They wouldn't attack me in any way, but I knew where I stood. Except my parents were very loving, Howard was very helpful, that was just the way of the world.

And so I was left alone a lot. Not abandoned, but they gave me a lot of room. Because if my parents asked me a question about anything, they were sure to get something back that they didn't understand, or they would get angry about, or something like that. So I had the great advantage of being left alone, and living a large part of my early life right in here. [POINTS TO HIS HEAD] And so I would fantasize about a lot of things, I'd think about a lot of things. I wouldn't communicate them very much to them.

Even in school, the teachers would be very kind of puzzled by how I responded to things. I would come in very excited one day about reading something, and they'd say, oh, we're not up to that yet, as if I'd committed a great crime by reading a little bit ahead. And there are all kinds of things like that. And all, they were pieces of who I was. So I guess the answer to your question is, yes, I think I'm in there. But not in a way, hopefully, that people can look at me and say, oh, you were in there. You try to keep it as part of the fabric of the story, yeah.

AUDIENCE: So I have two questions. One, how old were you when you started writing it? And two, what did you think of when the movie came out?

NORTON JUSTER: OK, how old was when I started to write it? Probably about six. Not serious about that, but in a way it's true, because I was living the part that later I would use. So that's part of preparing and so forth. I wrote it in the late 1950s. It took me about a year, and it was hard work, but interesting and good work. And I'll talk a little bit about the problems you have while writing. Now, what was the second part of that?

DR. DANA: What did you think of the movie?

NORTON JUSTER: The movie was a strange thing, because they made a movie first of my book called A Dot and the Line. This was MGM. And it went very well, and a wonderful man named Chuck Jones, who was a great pioneer in what do you call it?

DR. DANA: Animation?

NORTON JUSTER: Animation, thank you. And the movie was terrific, and won an Academy Award in 1968 for an animated short, which the producer and director got. I got nothing, but it was OK. I love the movie of The Dot and the Line. But usually, with a feature length movie like

this was, it is the author who always wants the book presented exactly as it is, and the producer or director will always say, no, no, we have a big opportunity here to open it up, because we have the wonderful visual world to work with here and we can do a lot more things. And this movie was exactly the opposite.

The director, again, was Chuck Jones.

DR. DANA: For the The Phantom Tollbooth movie?

NORTON JUSTER: Yeah. We want to do it exactly like the book. And go, no, no, Chuck, you got to take advantage of the things we can do here visually that you couldn't do in the book. And it came out, and I didn't like it much. I didn't see it for years, and years, and years. And then finally, one day we live in Amherst, and the University of Massachusetts is there. And I read a thing in the paper that they were showing it that night at the University of Massachusetts with a third rate horror film. [LAUGHTER] I forget the name of it.

So I went and I sat through this terrible horror film. And then my movie came on, and I just didn't like it at all. And there's a possibility now that they may be doing another one, so I never believe those things till they actually happen, but that would be very nice. And the way I would do it is I would not do any part of it animated. I would do the whole thing with a real cast, real people. Because there are so many wonderful opportunities with the characters in the book to do them with real people.

DR. DANA: Another question?

AUDIENCE: I'm curious about the title. Was it inspiration, desperation, hard work? How did you choose it?

NORTON JUSTER: The answer is yes to all of.

AUDIENCE: When did you know it was going to be the title?

NORTON JUSTER: I didn't know it right away, because, A, I didn't know it was going to be a book right away. It was just me musing about things. But then I thought, OK, what you need is someone to get this character from one world into the other. Well, Alice, of course goes down the rabbit hole, and in what's his name's books--

DR. DANA: The children go through the wardrobe to Narnia?

NORTON JUSTER: Yeah.

DR. DANA: C.S. Lewis.

NORTON JUSTER: God, I'm losing my memory. Yeah, I can't remember the name of the book.

DR. DANA: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.

NORTON JUSTER: Yes, OK, thank you. You should do this talking. [LAUGHTER]

DR. DANA: I should do this for a living. [LAUGHTER]

NORTON JUSTER: And I said to myself, OK, what are ways-- I could go and look in the mirror and go through the mirror. But people have done that, and I didn't think it was really appropriate. Anyway, so I said, OK, what's a situation that almost everybody knows, especially kids? That's going on a trip going, and going through a toll booth. And what is completely incongruous with the idea of a toll booth? A phantom tollbooth. Makes no sense at all, and it seemed to me to be the perfect title.

DR. DANA: Excellent. How about another question?

AUDIENCE: I've read this book probably more than two dozen times. All-time favorite book. And on page 199, when the Mathemagician has that letter that he's written to Azaz, my students, for years, have tried to figure it out. We've tried every conceivable method of-- does it mean anything?

NORTON JUSTER: I have the same problem, so. No, really, I was just looking. I shouldn't have done, that's a boo-boo on my part. But I was just looking for something that nobody reading the book could fathom. And so I said to myself, why should I mess around with having a real-- the idea of it is that it couldn't be read.

AUDIENCE: In the beginning, it looks like it should be dear Azaz, and then you try and look at it, it's...

DR. DANA: He's a tricky one, Norton Juster.

NORTON JUSTER: Sorry about that. [LAUGHTER]

DR. DANA: I'm going to take one more question.

AUDIENCE: Why does the Humbug and the Spelling Bee kind of have problems like King Azaz and the Mathemagician?

NORTON JUSTER: The Humbug and who else was it?

DR. DANA: The Humbug and the Spelling Bee, the conflicts between the two.

NORTON JUSTER: Because they're both that kind of person. [LAUGHTER] The Humbug is a pain in the you-know-what, and the Spelling Bee, his only concern in life is spelling, and they're very sensitive about their positions in the world. So they would get into a fight on almost anything. Because that's the way they are. I can't explain it any other way. But I love the idea of that tension in the book. Because things happen because of that.

DR. DANA: I think we actually can do one more.

AUDIENCE: All right, so what do you do if you have writer's block, or have you ever had writer's block?

NORTON JUSTER: Oh, yes, only always. Writer's block is a real problem. Let me tell you something about writing, though. There are three important things about writing. One is the anticipation of writing. That's really the nicest, because you sit there, you're thinking about writing a book, you know it's going to be successful, you know it's going to make a lot of money, you know you're going to get the Nobel Prize. [LAUGHTER]

DR. DANA: Yeah, absolutely.

NORTON JUSTER: Because you haven't done it yet, so anything is possible, right? And the third thing is when you've just finished, and that's terrific. You know, you're out of it, the work is done. The really difficult part of writing is writing. And it's an anxiety-making, terrible situation where you're always afraid. You wake up in the morning, and nothing's going to come today. You go to bed at night knowing that what you wrote all day is a bunch of garbage. Just everything sucks energy out of you, and frightens you, and makes your life very difficult.

And then you finish. And you don't know what's going to happen. And the thing that always amazes me is about six to eight months later, it usually is, you think back, and that's one of the happiest times of your life. Why that happens, I don't know. But it possibly is that you've faced a problem, you've gone all the way through, and didn't let yourself get scared out of it. You don't know whether it's going to be a success or not, but that's not important. What you've done is the real success. Even if it's a failure, and that's the thing everybody tells you in life, and it's true, is that you can learn more from failures if you stick with them and if you do the best you can. And then you can go back and look at it and say, whoa, I know what I can do next time.

So either way, it works. So I don't have any magic formulas for writing. I don't know whether that answers your question. But it's what always amazes me you know about the writing, and it used to be perfectly valid when I was doing architecture, too. You get an idea, you try to make it the best you can to make it work doing a lot of different things. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't, but the experience of it is what's important.

DR. DANA: Norton Juster, thank you so much for coming on The BiblioFiles today.

NORTON JUSTER: Would anyone like to buy a microphone? [LAUGHTER]

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