

Richard W. Peck April 5, 1934 – May 23, 2018

Richard W. Peck, award-winning author of historical and contemporary children's books and young adult novels, died May 23, 2018, at his home in New York City after a long battle with cancer.

He was born on April 5, 1934 in Decatur, Illinois, son of Wayne and Virginia Gray Peck. He lived in New York for nearly 50 years, but most of his novels were set in the Midwest. A prolific writer, Mr. Peck's literary career spanned 45 years. It included 35 novels for children and young adults, four novels for adults, a compilation of short stories, a picture book, and two memoirs. His latest book, *The Best Man*, published in 2016, a story of small town life, gay marriage, and everyday heroes, was named to 13 best-of-the-year lists and received a Boston Globe-Horn Book Award Honor.

In 2001, he won the John Newbery Medal, awarded annually to the author of the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children, for his novel *A Year Down Yonder*. The book is set in the Illinois county where his father was born and features his most iconic character, Grandma Dowdel. In 1999, the prequel to *A Year Down Yonder* titled *A Long Way From Chicago* won the Newbery Honor Award. Two of his novels, *The River Between Us* and *A Long Way From Chicago* were finalists for the National Book Award. In 2002, he received a National Humanities Medal from President George W. Bush and First Lady Laura Bush, the first ever to be awarded to a children's author.

Other awards include an Edgar Allan Poe Award from the Mystery Writers of America, the Margaret A. Edwards Award for a significant and lasting contribution to young adult literature from the American Library Association, the Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction, the Anne V. Zarrow Award for Young Readers, the Dorothy Canfield Fisher Children's Book Award, the Jeremiah Ludington Memorial Award from the Educational Paperback Association, the 1990 Council of Teachers of English/ALAN Award for Outstanding Contributions to Young Adult Literature, and the 1991 Medallion from the University of Southern Mississippi for outstanding contributions to the field of children's literature. He was named Illinois Author of the Year in 1977 and, in 2002, was awarded the Chicago Tribune's Prize for Young Adult Fiction for *Fair Weather*. Virtually every publication and association in the field of children's literature has recommended his books.

In 1999, he received an Honorary Doctor of Letters degree from DePauw University, Greencastle, Indiana. And on May 12, 2018, Southern Illinois University - Carbondale awarded him an Honorary Doctor of Literary Arts degree. He was an adjunct professor at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, in the School of Library and Information Sciences. A collection of his work is maintained at the University of Southern Mississippi.

Mr. Peck was an accomplished speaker who traveled extensively to promote his books and the importance of reading. He spoke at conferences, schools and libraries in

nearly every state, gave writing workshops, and visited classrooms to meet the students he wrote for. Many of the ideas for his novels were inspired by them.

Earlier in his life, he traveled the world as a port lecturer on cruise ships. His novel, *Those Summer Girls I Never Met*, was inspired by that experience. He also taught creative writing on a celebrity cruise ship that sailed between New York City and England. In the early 2000s, Mr. Peck was asked to accompany James Billington, head of the Library of Congress, to Moscow for the first conference on children's literature to be held in Russia. He was invited by First Lady Laura Bush to be an author-in-residence at three National Book Festivals held in Washington, D.C.

Mr. Peck graduated from DePauw University in 1956 with a B.A. degree in English Literature. He spent his junior year studying at University of Exeter in England. He was drafted into the U.S. Army as a SPC4 in 1956 and served in Stuttgart, Germany as a chaplain's assistant until 1958. He then earned a master's degree in English from Southern Illinois University in 1959 where he was also a teaching assistant. He pursued further graduate work at Washington University in St. Louis. His teaching career began at Glenbrook North High School in Northbrook, Illinois. After three years, he moved to New York City to teach English at Hunter College High School. In 1971, he left teaching to pursue writing. In his memoir, *Anonymously Yours*, he describes that time: "I turned in my tenure, my hospitalization, my pension plan, and my attendance book, which was in fact the first work of fiction I ever wrote. I went home to write or die, sure I wouldn't teach again, convinced I couldn't do anything else. In those first quiet months, I learned that the only way you can write is by the light of the bridges burning behind you." In 1972, his first young adult novel, *Don't Look and It Won't Hurt*, was published. (That novel was later adapted into the film "Gas Food Lodging"). Other of his novels were adapted into television dramas, and many are available in audio versions. Some were also translated into other languages.

His parents preceded him in death. Surviving is his sister, Cheryl Peck, of Springfield, Illinois.

A memorial service will be held at the New York Society Library on a date to be announced. A private military burial will be held at Graceland Cemetery in Decatur, Illinois.

Memorials may be made to Ellen Ruffin, Curator, de Grummond Children's Literature Collection, Special Collections, The University of Southern Mississippi, 118 College Dr., #5148, Hattiesburg, MS 39406. (A collection of Mr. Peck's work is being maintained there), or University of North Carolina Pediatric Hematology/Oncology, in care of Dr. Stuart Gold, CB#7236, First Floor POB, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-7236.