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### BOOK NEWS AND REVIEWS

#### **BOOKNOTES: AMERICA'S FINEST AUTHORS ON READING, WRITING, AND THE POWER OF IDEAS BY BRIAN LAMB (HOST OF C-SPAN'S BOOKNOTES). TIMES BOOKS. NY. 1997.**

This book concentrates upon asking outstanding storytellers, reporters and public figures why and how they created their finest works. It contains over one-hundred interviews from the C-SPAN public affairs show (also called *Booknotes*) with individuals such as David McCullough (**Truman: A Life and Times**), Shelby Foote (**Stars in Their Courses: The Gettysburg Campaign**), Doris Kearns Goodwin (**Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II**), Nathaniel Branden (**Judgment Day: My Years with Ayn Rand**), Stephen Ambrose (**D-Day, June 6, 1944: The Climatic Battle of World War II**), David Halberstam (**The Fifties**), Elaine Sciolino (**The Outlaw State: Saddam Hussein's Quest for Power and the Gulf Crisis**), Richard Nixon (**Seize the Moment: America's Challenge in a One-Superpower World**), Colin Powell (**My American Journey**), Bill Clinton (**Between Hope and History: Meeting America's Challenges for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**), and Margaret Thatcher (**The Downing Street Years**).

Lessons about writing, the experiences of being an author, their quirks and techniques for producing creative works, and the major influences of teachers and mentors frequently occur in these fascinating two to three page interviews. Here are some examples: Shelby Foote has written 1.5 million words about the Civil War using old-fashioned steel-point pens – “I write with a ‘dip pen,’ which causes all kinds of problems – everything from finding blotters to pen points – but it makes me take my time, and it gives me a feeling of satisfaction. . . .” (p. 9). He wrote his massive three volume history of the Civil War over a twenty-year period from 1954-74. Doris Kearns Goodwin talked about how she learned that Franklin Roosevelt was never shown in the newspapers or newsreels as severely crippled. There was a code of honor among members of the press to maintain the dignity of the presidency by showing Roosevelt as a healthy and vigorous individual. Kearns worked on her book about Franklin and Eleanor for six years. Stephen Ambrose discussed the wonderful interviews and relationship he had with President Eisenhower in preparation for writing a biography of this great military leader and cold war president. “He was wonderfully concerned; he was marvelously concentrated. I was just a kid. I was thirty years old when I was interviewing him. I’d walk in to interview him, and his eyes would lock on mine and I would be there for three hours and they never left my eyes. And he talked about what I wanted to talk about. . . .” (p. 54). Colin Powell described how collaboration with Joseph Persico influenced him to write a humane and inspiring autobiography about his family and experiences of growing up in the Bronx, military training and combat tours in Vietnam, and subsequent career as a military advisor to presidents and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. His book is an inspiring account of the life and advancement of an outstanding figure in modern American history and politics. In regard to the book tour following its publication, he said: “I signed 60,001 signatures during the tour. We did the last one in an independent bookstore in Norfolk late on a Friday night at the end of week five, and I’ll never forget when we did 60,001 they said, ‘One more. One more.’ I made 60,001 as a symbol in the book and then gave it to my publisher, Random House, which they spirited away somewhere. I’d better find out what they did with it. I mean, for all I know they’re auctioning it off or something.” (p. 337).

During the last six and one-half years of publishing *Gifted Education News-Page*, we have reviewed books that present innovative ideas and different ways of viewing the world. We have been particularly concerned with selecting books that can help to expand teachers’ and gifted students’ sensibility to the art of thinking and writing, literature, the humanities and science. **Booknotes** includes many interviews with excellent authors. In these interviews, they have discussed the culture of writing and ideas related to their sensibility and creative production. There are large aesthetic and emotional components associated with being a writer that cannot be learned by studying the mechanics of writing. The basic questions Brian Lamb has posed to his guests have gotten them to explain some of the underlying aesthetic and affective reasons for their life’s work: “Where do you write?” “Do you use a computer?” “What first got you interested in writing about this?” (Introduction, p. xvii). The insightful answers to these questions are what makes **Booknotes** so interesting to read. *f f f f f f*

#### **PRIVILEGED HANDS: A SCIENTIFIC LIFE BY GEERAT VERMEIJ. W.H. FREEMAN. NY. 1997.**

Vermeij is a world renowned evolutionary biologist and expert on seashells. He discusses his personal and intellectual development while a young child in his native country, the Netherlands, and during his life in the United States. This is an astonishing story because he is completely blind as a result of suffering from childhood glaucoma. In 1950, when he was four years old, both eyes were removed by Dutch surgeons to prevent his brain from being damaged by this disease. The didactic value of **Privileged Hands** is that it tells about a family and teachers who would not accept Vermeij’s disability as an impediment to his social and intellectual development. From an early age, he was interested in collecting and classifying seashells – his parents, brother and teachers strongly supported this activity. But his biggest boost came in 1956 when he was enrolled in the Newton, New Jersey Public Schools where his fourth grade teacher let him explore a

collection of shells from Florida's west coast. (The New Jersey Commission for the Blind and the Newton Public Schools deserve high praise for allowing this child to fully participate in the regular school program.) By using his sense of touch, Vermeij could distinguish between the texture and surface characteristics of these shells and the ones he and his family collected on the beaches of the Netherlands. Two years later in 1958 he expanded his collecting interests to pressed leaves and human artifacts such as cigar wrappers. Although his high school academic program was very shallow, the Saturday Science Honors Program (beginning in 1963) at Columbia University stimulated his interests in natural history and the study of evolution. Following his graduation from high school (1965), he attended Princeton University where he studied with authorities on evolutionary biology and marine life. They were astounded by Vermeij's ability to identify the species that inhabited different seashells. In respect to his Princeton experience, he states: "The greatest virtue of Princeton's undergraduate curriculum was its insistence on independent study. In the third year (the second in my case), a student wrote a junior paper, a library-based project on some aspect of his major subject. The senior thesis represented a much more ambitious effort that introduced one to the rigors of original research. The designers of these requirements deeply understood that education must transcend passive spectator status in which lectures and preceptorial discussions are the main tools. Nothing beats firsthand experience for teaching the methods of acquiring and evaluating knowledge." (p. 71). After completing his undergraduate work at Princeton, Vermeij pursued doctoral studies at Yale University where he obtained a Ph.D. in biology with a minor in geology. In 1971 he was employed as an assistant professor at the University of Maryland to teach courses in marine biology. From this position he built up a reputation as an expert in marine biology and ecology based upon his research and teaching. Subsequently, he moved to the University of California, Davis in 1988 where he is currently a professor of biology and paleontology. This remarkable individual has some important lessons to teach educators of the gifted. First, he stresses that independent learning should be at the core of all science education. ("I inherited from my Yale advisors the belief that independence of mind lies at the core of a successful scientific career." p. 245) Second, he abhors special preferences for disabled individuals in academic employment. There are several sections of this book where he emphasizes the point that such preferences are harmful to both the disabled and non-disabled. This great scientist has traveled a heroic path in the development of his life and career. **Privileged Hands** is an inspirational autobiography that can help gifted students to understand how determination and intense curiosity can surmount even the most serious disabilities. k k k k k k

## **YOU SEE WHAT YOU GET: ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE (1805-59) AND C-SPAN'S RECREATION OF HIS GREAT AMERICAN JOURNEY \* BY MICHAEL E. WALTERS CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE HUMANITIES IN THE SCHOOLS**

C-SPAN, the Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network, is sponsoring a recognition of Alexis de Tocqueville's masterpiece, **Democracy in America** (1835-40), which was about the politics, people and culture of the United States. Through this recognition, they are conducting a lengthy educational project on both de Tocqueville and his book. Their educational project is being undertaken by the **Alexis de Tocqueville School Bus Tour**. The bus is a mobile educational unit that, with modern electronic technology, brings the life and writing of de Tocqueville alive in their keenest relevancy for the youth of America, particularly the gifted.

It is crucial that every generation of Americans appreciates the unique qualities of both our culture and its political ideologies. One of the major recent public debates concerns the concept of equality. De Tocqueville understood the positive and negative aspects of equality in America. The negative aspect was the potential for the tyranny of the majority to create a culture of mediocrity. The positive aspect of equality was the creation of voluntary associations which enabled Americans to be egalitarian, creative and vital at the same time. He saw America as a living laboratory for Democracy on a worldwide basis.

His concerns involved issues that are major topics at this moment – for example, slavery (race), the environment and pluralism. After he published his two volume *magnum opus*, **Democracy in America**, he was active in the anti-slavery movement in France. When he visited Niagara Falls, it inspired the need to conserve natural beauty for future generations. However, it is his political philosophy that makes him so engaging. He was a foe of tyranny, a critic of centralization and the dominance of society by bureaucrats.

For the gifted student, what is most significant is the way in which he expressed his views. He did not write in political jargon but in the manner of French Classicism. The language he used was precise, down to earth, poetic, philosophical and metaphorical. I recently studied one of his volumes in French and was impressed by the wonderful manner in which he used this language. Here is a description in English of how he portrayed the political impact of local town meetings in New England. "...The American attaches himself to his little community for the same reason the mountaineer clings to his hills. . . ." (p. 61, Mentor edition).

C-SPAN was created to focus on the daily functions of Congress. It deserves praise for realizing that what we see is what we get, and that American democracy is not to be taken for granted. De Tocqueville was a gifted individual who in only nine months of traveling in the United States saw beyond landscapes and people to a culture with a living philosophy. The C-SPAN Web Site ([www.tocqueville.org](http://www.tocqueville.org)) provides additional information for educators on de Tocqueville and C-SPAN in the Classroom. **REFERENCES** – (1) **Democracy in America** (Edited by Richard Heffner). Mentor, 1984; (2) **Democracy in America** (Edited by Daniel Boorstin). Vintage, 1990; (3) **Tocqueville** by Larry Siedentrop. Oxford University Press, 1994; (4) **De La Démocratie en Amérique**, Vol. I. Gallimard, 1961. ¼ ¼

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