

# Conversation with Richard Michelson

*by Judy Polan for the Western Massachusetts Jewish Ledger in Amherst in 2006*

Richard Michelson - poet, children's book author, and owner of R. Michelson Galleries in Amherst and Northampton - is on a roll.

His first poetry collection, *Tap Dancing for the Relatives* (University Presses of Florida), was praised by Nobel Laureate Elie Weisel as deeply moving. Of his book *Battles and Lullabies*; (University of Illinois Press), Pulitzer Prize winning poet Richard Wilbur wrote, "The poems of this book ask with urgent eloquence how the sweetness of life can be sheltered from the terrors of our time, and what art can make of such a world as ours. Michelson's poems are artful, humane and true.

Michelson's numerous and exquisitely illustrated children's books have received a New Yorker Best Book Award and a Jewish Book Council Book of the Month citation. The Detroit Jewish News lauded *Too Young for Yiddish*; as one of the top 25 best Jewish children's books ever published. His newest children's book, *Oh No, Not Ghosts!* was published in September.

In the past two years, Michelson has lectured and read from his works throughout the United States as well as in India, Eastern Europe, and Russia.

As owner of R. Michelson Galleries, he represents many of the country's best-known artists, including sculptor Leonard Baskin, photographer Leonard Nimoy (yes, Mr. Spock), illustrator Jules Feiffer, and the estate of Dr. Seuss. The Boston Globe dubbed R. Michelson's the destination gallery of Western Massachusetts, and travel writer John Villani rated the Northampton gallery as the most prominent visual arts space in the No. 1 Arts Town in America.

Michelson lives in Amherst with his wife, Jennifer. Their daughter, Marisa, is a composer and performer living in New York City, and their son, Samuel, is a senior at Skidmore College.

Richard Michelson recently spoke to the Jewish Ledger about his eclectic endeavors.

Q: The themes of despair as well as the hope for redemption are woven throughout your poetry. How do you reconcile the two? Do you believe in the redemptive power of art?

A: I do believe in the redemptive power of art. But no more so than I believe in the redemptive power of a full belly, a well cooked meal, or a good car mechanic; and likely less so than the redemptive power of a hearty laugh (more blessed, if it appears within the poem). As for reconciliation between despair and redemption, I do not believe it possible. We live in a world of despair and yet, our day-to-day life insists on a striving towards redemption, or why go on? The living is in the hard daily struggle and we must recognize the difficult beauty in that.

Q: Your experience of time, as expressed in the poems that appear in *Battles and Lullabies* seems quite fluid - as though past, present, and future all seamlessly merge. Is this the way you actually experience life?

A: Sometimes I do think of myself as living in a Vonnegut universe, where all points in a life exist simultaneously. I can worry about the future, obsess on the past, and screw up the present, all at the same time. Quite remarkable. And yet I think mine is not the only mind that exists in that fluid state. As a writer, however, I have trained myself to be on familiar terms with this triality; I try to render it in words that will hopefully spark recognition in others.

Q: Please tell me a little bit about your interest in writing books for children.

A: Writing for children is an important part of my work, and certainly in terms of book sales, the part that reaches the largest audience. It is very important that we expose our children to good writing and fine illustration. I believe that we are currently in a renaissance of fine children's books, led - in part - by many of our Western Massachusetts writers and artists. Picture books combine the two great passions of my life - literature and art. It seems a shame to me that children outgrow picture books; I love the world of fine press books, which continues to combine art and literature for an adult audience, with no apologies.

Q: How did you go about establishing the destination gallery in Western Massachusetts?

A: My gallery began 30 years ago, out of the back of my van, and gradually grew. It still feels a bit odd to me to be thought of as an institution, or part of the art world establishment. Most of my artists have been with me for 20-plus years, and it has been thrilling to see their careers blossom as they received local, then national and international attention. I have been fortunate to be along for the ride. I had a good eye for talent, and found that I worked a bit harder than many who entered the gallery world by birthright.; For most of my adult life, the gallery has taken up 10 hours a day, six or seven days a week. My family life and sleep take up the remaining time and, as the car talk guys would say, I fit my writing into the third half of my day.

Q: How did you happen to do a book tour in Slovakia? Did you gain any insights traveling in a country that is making the difficult transition from communism to capitalism?

A: I was invited to Slovakia by the State Department for a dual purpose. One was to represent the U.S. at the Bratislava Biennial; the other was to give readings and discuss the positive effects the arts can contribute to a community. As it turned out, I was presented as an artist who - through my pen (my books) and my eye (my galleries) - had managed to rise from an inner city Brooklyn childhood to a higher level of economic success, without the assistance of government grants. In effect, I became a poster boy for the virtues of capitalism (which I admit, has been kind to me).

I met great writers, whose works I revere, imprisoned by the prior regime for their words, and yet willing to speak out, risking everything. I had to think about what I have risked by being an artist in America - what would I risk? One poet said to me: your Reagan and Bush are great men, willing to challenge the communist empire. And how else should he see it? So I was forced to evaluate my own politics when challenged by history, and superior intellects. I also met with other, younger artists, struggling to survive. They are angry with the current system, where artists are no longer respected and have to worry about pandering to a fickle, commercial, lowest common denominator audience.

Q: How did you come to be the agent for Leonard Nimoy's photography? Could you tell us a little bit about your friendship with him?

A: Ah Leonard. Always trying to muscle his way into my interviews ...

Our relationship began with his artwork - he is one of the country's premier photographers - and I am an art dealer. Since we both come from a similar Jewish working class background, enjoy poetry, have an interest in Yiddish (he started in Yiddish Theater; I wrote the book *Too Young for Yiddish*) and art, and we are both married to beautiful, strong women, Leonard and I have become friends.

Leonard is an intelligent, multi-talented, nice regular guy, who takes Amtrak when he visits. Wherever we go, people assume that we are father and son, and - yes - we do look alike, although he actually looks nothing like my father, nor I, his son. I was especially pleased, however, during a recent lunch in NYC, when someone approached our table with that hint of recognition in their eyes, and then walked right past Leonard, and asked me, Are you the guy who owns that gallery in Northampton? I thought you looked familiar!