INTRODUCTION

When Betsy Hearne invited me to speak at this conference, I couldn’t quite believe my ears. A chance to review the reviewers. What an opportunity! In preparing to make the most of this golden moment, I’ve given a lot of thought to reviews, reviewing, and reviewers. In the almost 30 years that I’ve been involved in publishing children’s books, my work has been focused on preparing 25 to 30 books for publication each spring and fall. Each of those 60-odd books a year was begun with the acquisition of an idea or manuscript many months ahead of publication, and was cosseted word by word, line by line, illustration by illustration through the editing and production processes. Each book has had an author (and sometimes an illustrator too) whose hand was held and ego stroked. All that done, seasonal catalog prepared, sales conference held, finished books ordered, and then WHOOSH! in a flash materials were out to reviewers who would decide their fate. All that work involving the expertise of so many—author, editor, copy editor, art director, production staff, sales and marketing departments—willingly offered up to the gods for judgment.

One of the more interesting features of some review journals in which the gods speak is the letters that take exception to opinions expressed in reviews. The letters that interest me most are those from librarians who think the reviewer got it wrong, because in them we have second opinions from professionals who have felt compelled to try to set the record straight. The reviewer, of course, usually gets the last word, but the exchange often causes me to wonder if there is room
in the process to make certain that all books get the reviews they deserve. Or does the quality of review that a book receives depend simply on the luck of the draw?

There was a time some years ago when my name and home address were on our mailing list of reviewers so that I could get the books at the same time as the reviewers and know when to start biting my nails. I no longer have this arrangement. That the mails became unreliable is one reason, but also somewhere along the way I stopped holding my breath until the reviews were in. It’s not that I stopped caring, but that I find it less wearing to react to reviews in hand than to those anticipated. I liken this bit of personal insight to the epiphany of discovering that there is no point to worrying about the weather. Both reviews and weather are best dealt with when they arrive.

REVIEWS AND THE CHILDREN’S BOOK INDUSTRY

Traditionally, there have been five major influences on the market for children’s books. For the record, I list them here alphabetically. ALA Booklist, The Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books, The Horn Book Magazine, Kirkus Reviews, and School Library Journal. That tradition has its roots in the fact that librarians have always been the major purchasers of children’s books. It used to be that the children’s book industry was the best-kept secret in the universe. No one knew about us or the books except school and public librarians and the children who borrowed books from those institutions. Apparently, children who did not grow up to be librarians wiped their memories of us completely sometime before leaving high school, never to think of children’s books again. We were a tight circle of authors, illustrators, editors, reviewers, and children’s librarians.

The circle widened about 15 years ago when a new breed of booksellers began to establish bookstores that sold only children’s books. Many of these brave bookselling pioneers were former children’s librarians, and they stocked their shelves with their favorite books—the ones they knew from personal experience would appeal to children. Through these stores, the general public became aware that Dr. Seuss was not the only person in the United States writing children’s books. For the first time, publishers of hardcover trade books had a sizeable market for some books that did not depend on reviews as a guide to purchase. Booksellers do not use reviews because reviews are not available when publishers’ sales representatives call on booksellers. Some booksellers would tell you they wouldn’t use reviews if they had them because they know their customers and how to serve them. The result is that
some books are already in second printings before reviews begin to appear.

This was the case with *Tuesday* by David Wiesner (1991). The book was published in April, but sales reps had been selling it since mid-December. By March, a month before publication, orders exceeded the first printing of 20,000 copies, and a second printing of the same size was ordered. Then the reviews began arriving. *Publishers Weekly* was first, ending with, “Perhaps because this fantasy never coalesces around a human figure, it is less accessible and less resonant than [Wiesner’s] tales that center on a child protagonist” (Roback & Donahue, 1991, p. 73). *Kirkus* gave it a pointer and called it “nifty,” but was a little worried about the phase of the moon when it was the pigs’ turn to fly (Long, 1991, p. 325). The ABA *Bookseller* declared it a “Pick of the Lists.” *School Library Journal* gave it a star and said, “It may not be immortal, but kids will love its lighthearted, meticulously imagined fun-without-a-moral fantasy. *Tuesday* is bound to take off” (Dooley, 1991, p. 86). *The Horn Book* did not review it (silence speaks louder than words) and later ranked it “three” (which means satisfactory) in *The Horn Book Guide to Children’s and Young Adult Books* (reviews of books published January through June 1991). *Booklist* didn’t give it a star, but its entirely positive review admired it for “allowing for unexpected magic in everyday, modern settings” (Phelan, 1991, p. 1723). *The Bulletin*, after describing the art and story in glowing detail, said, “What saves this book from simply being a gorgeous gallery of paintings is warmth and humor. These frogs are having a lot of fun” (Sutton, 1991, p. 231). The last word was a second thought from *Publishers Weekly*, who apparently liked it better in December than in March, because it was on their list of “Best Books of 1991.”

The opinion makers who made the significant impact on sales, needless to say, were the members of the Caldecott committee. We had sold 35,000 copies by the end of 1991 and had ordered a third printing, worrying a little as we did so because it was entirely possible that a good portion of the books sold to bookstores would be shipped back to us in January. That didn’t happen. *School Library Journal* got it right. Those frogs took off, and they are still flying.

*Tuesday* was a sales success prior to the Caldecott Medal. But its sales looked modest when measured against the performance of best-sellers. The reviews were good, but mixed with small cautions. David Wiesner was still in the up-and-coming category. And he wasn’t yet a favorite of another category of bookstore that only recently has decided to pay more attention to children’s books—the chains.

The selection policies of stores run by Barnes & Noble, Walden, Dalton, and the like are different from those of independent children’s-only stores. Up to now, the chains have played it safe and have seldom
taken chances on a book by an unknown author. Susan Jeffers’ (1991) *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky* was on the *New York Times* and *Publishers Weekly* best-seller lists several weeks before reviewers began to question the book’s veracity and authenticity. The number of copies necessary to make the best-seller lists varies from week to week but is always substantial enough to suspect that the chains played a big role in placing *Brother Eagle* there. The reviews critical of the book set off a healthy exchange of opinions that played itself out in the pages of *School Library Journal* for several months and eventually spread to the *New York Times, Newsweek,* and *Time Magazine.* The exchange had an important impact. It taught the *New York Times Book Review* to be careful about what it labels nonfiction, but more importantly it heightened awareness of the portrayal of Native Americans in the media in general as well as in children’s books. I doubt, though, that it diminished sales. If anything, it may have done just the opposite.

Even before there were retailers buying books without help from reviews, there were always a few books that became popular despite disapproval from professional reviewers. E. B. White’s *Stuart Little,* Kay Thompson’s *Eloise,* and Robert Cormier’s *The Chocolate War* overcame strong, persuasive objections to their use with children years before there were enough booksellers serious enough about children’s books to matter much. Helen Bannerman’s *Little Black Sambo,* first published in 1906 and well established through the following decades as a “classic,” was declared racist by virtually every critic in the field of children’s literature during the 1960s. The campaign against its use with children was unrelenting and went on for a number of years. Yet the sales of *Little Black Sambo* never wavered. The book went right along selling 14,000 copies a year throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, and continues to do so two years into the 1990s. It has done this without any help from its publishers. For approximately a quarter of a century, *Little Black Sambo* has received no advertising or promotion beyond its listings in *Books in Print* and the publisher’s backlist catalog.

It would seem that some books refuse to die, despite all odds. Perhaps this is a healthy sign of a free society, in which there are people who make up their own minds about controversial books regardless of what anyone else has to say. My deep suspicion, though, is that the answer is not as idealistic as all that. I doubt many people beyond the children’s book community were ever aware of the controversies. Even though children’s books have caught the attention of the general public, the body of professional criticism that has been long associated with them may still be one of the world’s best-kept secrets.

Does this mean, then, that reviews don’t count—don’t have an impact on what gets published, what sells, and what stays in print? I’ll admit that there have been a few times in my publishing life when
I wished that were true, but I’ve lived through those times and probably will again. Most of the time, I happily admit that reviewers are important and essential influences on shaping the books and getting them into children’s hands. No publisher of hardcover trade books could survive on its sales to bookstores alone. Out of a list of 30 books, I never expect to see more than 10 titles in bookstores. And out of those 10 titles, several will be what we call “two&watch” orders. This means a bookseller is uncertain and stocks two copies with the intent of ordering more if they get snapped up immediately. “Two&watch” orders are not an expression of vast interest and tend not to be pushed with enthusiasm to customers. Most of them come back to our warehouse as returns.

In my experience, approximately two-thirds of hardcover titles are bought solely by institutions; the majority of sales of the other third, despite trade bookstore distribution, is also institutional. You all know this, but I’ll say it anyway: Librarians who buy books for school and public libraries need two to three recommendations from respected review sources to justify their purchases. The news isn’t entirely in yet on what the rules will be for classroom teachers when and if they receive funds for books needed to comply with the demand for literature-based curricula. I suspect the rules will be similar to, if not the same as, those for librarians. Even without rules universally in place, the traditional review media already have an impact on classroom purchases. ALA’s Booklinks is one example of critics already in the field reaching out to teachers and suggesting ways to use the books in curricula contexts. The rapid rise of Booklinks subscriptions clearly indicates that it is successfully filling a need in this new marketplace.

Opinions expressed in reviews have influenced how books are put together in a number of ways. Many years ago, I questioned the need for an index in a 32-page nonfiction book with a very short text. I was told that librarians want indexes, period. I was later to learn that illustrations in certain kinds of nonfiction should always be labeled. I learned this from a conversation with the reviewer of a book I hadn’t thought needed labels. The practice of attributing the sources of folktales became the rule when reviewers pointed out the need for it. These and many other details, small and large, have added up to a body of publishing do’s and don’ts that has raised the standards of creating books for children. The impact of reviews is felt throughout the publishing process, from the editor’s desk and even beyond it to the area of subsidiary rights.

Prices that book clubs and paperback reprinters will pay for books, or even whether or not they will buy a book, can be affected by reviews. This is especially true of books by unestablished authors but can also be true of books by some of our best writers. A case in point is Nina Bawden’s (1992) new novel, Humbug. For various reasons, which I won’t
go into because they would only be speculation, reprinters responded coolly when *Humbug* was first offered to them. "Too British," said one, though she admitted she hadn't actually read it. So we sat back puzzled for a while. As the reviews came in, gloriously wearing their stars, the reprinters began to call us.

I said I wouldn't speculate on why the reprinters' response to *Humbug* was cool at first, but I've changed my mind. If I'm right, and I think I am, this is something for us all to keep in mind. It is about recognizing the effects that change can have. The moral here is that timing is everything. Paperback editions of Nina Bawden's books have always been published by George Nicholson at Dell. Her books were never shown to other reprinters because George had an option on any Lothrop book that Nina published. I changed jobs three years ago, and *Humbug* is Nina's first new novel with Clarion. Since Dell has no option with Clarion, the book was sent to all the reprinters with the thought that George should have first refusal because of his long-standing interest in the author's work. George left Dell in August, and true to form, the new broom was too busy sweeping to get excited about a book by an author associated with the old regime.

Paperback editors are busy people and have young editors who read and report on submissions. The houses we were submitting to had no previous experience with Nina Bawden, and as much as we'd like to think that a young person working in a publishing house grew up reading the likes of Nina Bawden, there's no guarantee that this is the case. The starred reviews caught the attention of the editors in charge, the book was read, and an auction is taking place the day after tomorrow. Because all aspects of our industry are constantly in a state of change, we must never assume that any writer's reputation is so firmly established that he or she cannot be overlooked.

**POSITIVE REVIEWS**

Most review journals have some way of indicating the best of the best—the cream of the crop—and, of course, every publisher covets stars. We brag about them, we shout them from the rooftops, we advertise them. We'll even advertise a star from *Booklist* in *School Library Journal* to help counteract the lukewarm review the book received in *School Library Journal*. Give a book a star and the publisher will do its darndest to turn it into a meteor. In looking through the past year's review journals, though, I was struck by how few ads there were for good books, superior books, with good solid reviews. If you judge the scope and diversity of publishers' lists by their advertising, you'd be hard pressed to find some of the best, most important books
published—because they didn't get starred reviews and so were not advertised. This phenomenon stems from publishers feeling the squeeze of tight advertising budgets. The state of the economy touches us all. Often after the ads we are obliged to run are paid for, there is not much left for discretionary spending. What reviewers need to realize is that their reviews may be the major support some books receive. If a book is important, but not of star quality, its review becomes all the more instrumental in how well the book sells. Today, more than ever, a great deal of power is in the hands of a very few people.

The journals with the most power are those with the widest distribution. The top five journals I listed alphabetically earlier rank in influence according to the number of subscribers each has. A bad review in one journal can cancel out excellent reviews in all the others. It is usually the unique, adventurous book that falls victim to the extreme influence of one review over all the others—the times when a new voice is trying to deliver a message in a way not heard before. In tight economic times, without enough money to purchase all the books with starred recommendations, it is understandable that even positive reviews are sometimes being combed for an excuse not to purchase a book.

NEGATIVE REVIEWS

An unfair negative review carries an enormous amount of weight. By an unfair review, I mean one with an agenda other than assessing a book on its merits as literature. Paula Fox (1993) cited a perfect example of an unfair review in her 1988 Zena Sutherland Lecture. She says:

I hope you will bear with me while I read a few scraps from an evaluation of a book I wrote called The Moonlight Man. My intention is to illustrate the murder of language, and therefore of meaning, not to complain about an unsympathetic response. The reviewer writes, "The father . . . is an alcoholic and an interesting, fairly productive person . . . the daughter acts as a facilitator for his alcoholism which is not a healthy role model for students who may face this problem. The book is about her separation from her parents as individuals, but it closes with her father abandoning her. The task of final separation from parents does not belong to junior high students and I do not think this age needs to face parental abandonment. Furthermore, if a child is dealing with an alcoholic parent, this book does not give acceptable guidance to work on that problem." (p. 116)

Paula Fox (1993) then goes on to expand on that review with these words:

I believe this report to contain a basic perversion of what literature and stories are concerned with—the condition of being human. It is written in the jargon of social science. The writer does not like the book and is unable to say so. Instead, she evokes a contemporary vision of virtue and

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sin: productivity and unproductivity. The father should be the daughter's client—or patient. The story is not acceptable because it does not give "guidance."

What I am concerned with here is the deadening of language, an extreme form of alienation expressed in words that have no resonance, and absolutely no inner reference to living people. "This age does not need to face parental abandonment," the reviewer writes. Leaving aside the question of whether or not abandonment is involved, what on earth is "this age?" Who need not face what? Which boys? Which girls? What human beings? (pp. 116-117)

The perversion of what literature and stories are concerned with, which Paula has so ably put forth, is not uncommon. Even reviewers who do not distance themselves with social science jargon too many times get caught up with wanting writers to give them stories that will mold the character of the reader into whatever is thought to be the "right" shape. It is admirable to want to give children guidance on ways to protect themselves when they are caught up in unfortunate circumstances. But storytelling concerns itself with the way people actually behave, not how they should behave or even how they would behave if they had the benefit of the best guidance society can provide. In fact, the very story that Paula Fox wrote could lead a child reader living in a similar circumstance to recognize his or her situation—recognition being the key step toward seeking help.

Another example of well-meaned but wrong-headed reviewing was of Russell Freedman's (1992) An Indian Winter. After giving a fine, succinct description of the book's content, the reviewer added this zinger at the end: "The book is generously... illustrated, chiefly with works by Bodmer, whose watercolors of individuals are direct and immediate. However, engravings later produced in Europe seem stereotyped... Readers of Freedman's other titles on Native American topics will find much of interest here, though some may question the reliability of two European dilettantes concerning a culture they visited only briefly" (Roback & Donahue, 1992, p. 58). Where did these comments come from? Were they prompted by the book that Russell Freedman wrote? Or is this reviewer, to quote Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. (1992), one of those "self styled 'multiculturalists' [who] are very often ethnocentric separatists who see little in the Western heritage beyond Western crimes" (p. 123)? In our zeal to recognize and give fair representation to American cultural diversity, are we now promoting the idea that, in Schlesinger's words again, "The Western tradition... is inherently racist, sexist, 'classist', hegemonic; irredeemably repressive, irredeemably oppressive" (p. 123)?

Consider this, from a review of Andersen's The Nightingale, retold by Michael Bedard (1991) with illustrations by Regolo Ricci: "The pictures are detailed, delicate watercolors in a westernized Chinese style. Costumes and settings are extravagant: conventional imperial clutter and color abound (and the jacket notes attest to the authenticity of some
of the motifs). All of the faces, alas, appear to be caricatures, wizened and jaundiced, mottled and sickly, with exaggeratedly ‘oriental’ eyes. These unappealing portraits... make the book a poor competitor against the edition illustrated by Lisbeth Zwerger” (Dooley, 1992, p. 85).

Whether one agrees that Ricci’s illustrations do not compete well with Zwerger’s (she is also a Westerner, and so was Hans Christian Andersen, by the way) is not the point. Why is “westernized” now a negative adjective? What is being said? Is Ricci being accused of “westernizing” Chinese style? If so, has he? What are “exaggeratedly ‘oriental’ eyes?” While it is true that the Emperor is portrayed as “wizened and jaundiced, mottled and sickly,” he does spend much of the book on his deathbed. The point is whether or not “political correctness” is rearing its head in children’s book reviewing. If so, we may be in danger of contributing to the unfortunate trend toward a divisive culture, which is very different from accepting and celebrating cultural diversity.

**PROBLEMATIC REVIEWS**

Good reviews can sometimes be as problematic as unfair reviews, particularly in times when book selectors are trying to winnow down the numbers of titles to choose from for economic reasons. An example of positive reviews that recommend a book for purchase and use with children, but that unwittingly gave book selectors ammunition to reject it, is from this spring’s reviews of Long Spikes by Jim Arnosky (1992). One review reads, “*National Geographic* specials will have prepared animal lovers for the kind of blunt, tooth-and-claw hunting action here, and readers who are not generally absorbed by wildlife lore will appreciate the story’s brisk pace.” However, the review also says, “Although the text once or twice slips into slightly anthropomorphic terms (Long Spikes is once ‘entranced’ by mayflies and again ‘enthralled’ by his reflection), the story is generally as clear-headed as it is clearly written” (Hearne, 1992, p. 198). Another reviewer in another journal says that “Arnosky offers a story brimming with reality... a true glimpse into the natural world, a world that is getting smaller all the time,” but also says, “There are only the barest hints of anthropomorphism, but these are made plausible by the details that could only come from careful observation” (Oliver, 1992, p. 111).

Now, anthropomorphism is a subject I have long wanted to discuss with opinion makers in the children’s literature field. I first became interested in how children’s book reviewers treat this subject many years ago on reading a review of one of Hope Ryden’s children’s books, in which the reviewer chastised Ryden severely for committing anthropomorphism. I was familiar with Ryden’s books for adults, particularly
her then recently published *God's Dog* (Ryden, 1975), and admired her ability to report her observations in the field without prejudice—scientific or otherwise. Her work was a refreshing antidote to the pronouncements of animal behaviorists who drew their conclusions from studies of animals in captivity. I found her observations exciting and was delighted that she was willing to share them with children, but here was a reviewer who thought children should be protected from them.

I do not wish to challenge the universally held notion that anthropomorphism in natural history books for children is a literary crime, but I would like to challenge what is considered to be anthropomorphic. As for Jim Arnosky's book, to my knowledge the states of mind implied by the words "entranced" and "enthralled" are not restricted to human beings. If anthropomorphism is a crime, shouldn't anthropocentrism be a crime of equal measure? Are we so far removed from the natural world that we do not recognize how much we have in common with other animals with whom we share this world that is "getting smaller all the time?" In the words of the second reviewer, the behaviors Jim Arnosky described were "made plausible by the details that could only come from careful observation" (Oliver, 1992, p. 111).

Now for the effect of the Arnosky reviews: Last week I received two more reviews of *Long Spikes*. These are from an independent school district in Texas. Both reviewers indicate on the forms sent to us that they have seen the reviews I just read. The first review rates the book Not Recommended, and says: "Long Spikes, a deer who is orphaned as a yearling when his mother is killed, grows to maturity. The animal is given human feelings making it too unrealistic." Period. Apparently, this media center must have two opinions to kill a book; the second reviewer writes, "Long Spikes and his sister are orphaned as yearlings. Their challenges to survival are chronicled from the animals' point of view. This story is really packed with information on the life cycle and behavioral traits of the white-tailed deer. Because it is brief and clearly presented, the book could be used in research." At this point, I thought there was a glimmer of hope for Long Spikes, but the reviewer goes on, "There is no index, however. One would have to be highly motivated for information or be a very serious animal lover because the story is not sufficient to keep the average middle schooler reading" (Round Rock Independent School District, Austin, Texas). Here's something else: Has anyone ever seen an average middle schooler? What does an average child look like? There are a lot of books that aren't bought in his name. I've never seen a review that said, "average children will love this." But back to anthropomorphism. My point is only to demonstrate the power the major reviews have. My personal quibble
over what anthropomorphism is and isn't is another discussion. I just want everyone to know that the A-word is a guaranteed deterrent to sales, no matter how it is used in a review.

DOCUMENTATION IN NONFICTION

Most children's book editors were brought up on Walter de la Mare's words, "Only the very best is good enough for children," and work diligently to apply this philosophy to all the books they publish. It came as a great surprise to discover in an article that appeared in the May 1991 issue of School Library Journal (Broadway & Howland, 1991) that publishers and writers of nonfiction, science books in particular, are viewed with almost paranoid suspicion. The authors of the article reported the results of a survey they had made of nonfiction writers, which revealed that few were specialists in subjects they write about, and concluded that "Librarians, library media specialists, and selectors of informational books for children . . . must insist that publishers require authors to demonstrate their authority in the subject areas in which they write." "Certainly," they go on to say, "education, experience, and interest in a topic are three manifestations of authority. Well-documented research is another barometer of authority that is needed in children's books" (p. 38).

There is much that I could say about the method and scope of the survey that Broadway and Howland conducted, as well as their apparent lack of understanding of how to produce good nonfiction children's books. However, it is their last sentence that is pertinent to this discussion. To repeat, "Well-documented research is another barometer of authority that is needed in children's books." No responsible publisher or writer would argue with this point, but why is it phrased to suggest that children's books in general are remiss in this respect? Attribution of quotations and paraphrasings within the text, plus a bibliography of sources, has been common practice for many years. Have the rules been changed? Must documentation be in a certain form in order to be acceptable? The reviews of the past two years have been very confusing about this. Books with exactly the same form of documentation pass muster with some reviewers and not with others—sometimes within the pages of the same journal. It is important to get to the bottom of this for two reasons: Reviews are beginning to appear that spend almost as much space reviewing the documentation as is given to the book, and a negative review of the bibliography or the words "No documentation" can be a deciding factor when the book is considered for purchase. This is unfair to writers who have made an effort to identify their sources.
A clear statement on what constitutes acceptable documentation that all reviewers subscribe to would be very useful. It's possible that many writers of informational books would be willing and able to comply with whatever form the opinion makers dictate. Those writers not willing to comply would at least know what they are up against. This entire matter is between writers and their audience. Publishers have no stake in this one way or the other, except when confusion results in loss of book sales.

In the event editors of the review journals take me seriously and try to formulate such a statement, I feel obligated to offer a few warnings. First, many highly respected writers of nonfiction books view their bibliographies and/or notes as further communication with their child readers, and it will come as a great shock to them that reviewers are looking at these sections to determine whether or not authors have done their homework. Two, footnotes referenced to superscripts within the text would not be a welcome suggestion to those writers who justifiably take great pride in having perfected the craft of writing responsibly and informatively without having to resort to the conventions of academia. Three, the argument that writers should at the very least conform to the conventions expected of students when writing term papers could possibly lead to serious bloodshed. The more controlled writers would simply end all discussion with the statement, "I don't do term papers," but others would probably attack with whatever weapon is handy. I don't have a solution to this problem, but I do have a wish. I wish there were more stress on how important it is to encourage children to read nonfiction.

CONCLUSION

The answer to the question I posed at the beginning, "Is there room in the process to make certain that all books get the reviews they deserve?" is, of course, no. This is no more possible than the expectation that all books be properly written, edited, and published. The writers, illustrators, publishers, reviewers, librarians, and booksellers who make up the children's book community are after all imperfect humans. Though difficult economic times may exacerbate our differences, the miracle of it is that we are all focused on accomplishing the same goal—placing good books into the hands of children. I don't know of any other group that undergoes as much constant self-examination in the name of doing our individual jobs better than the children's book community. This Allerton Institute is of course a prime example of that ongoing process. Though these remarks have been largely critical, they are meant to be constructive, and I now willingly offer them up to the gods for review. Thank you for this golden moment.
REFERENCES