



Norton Juster, author of the classic *The Phantom Tollbooth*, is a slightly rotund, 82-year-old veteran of the Brilliant Brooklyn Jewish Writer Tradition. *The Phantom Tollbooth*—published in 1961 and illustrated by a young Jules Feiffer—tells the tale of an always-bored boy named Milo who receives an enormous, oddly shaped package containing one “genuine turnpike tollbooth.” He deposits a coin and drives through the tollbooth in a toy car only to find himself stranded in The Kingdom of Wisdom, a confusing land where daily life has been rendered meaningless by feuding between the kings of Digitopolis and Dictionopolis. It falls upon Milo—no longer bored in the least—to find the banished princesses, Rhyme and Reason, and reunite the worlds of numbers and words. Juster talks with *Moment* about his life, his love of words, the virtues of boredom and much more.—*Nadine Epstein*

#### On Being Jewish

I define myself as a culinary Jew. I am a great cook. I make chopped liver, pickled salmon. One of my favorite breakfasts is matzoh brei. I take great pleasure in making chicken soup.

#### On Childhood

I was a goopy kid. I was strange and introverted. Adults didn't know how I would respond when they talked to me. So they left me alone, and I spent a lot of time fantasizing in my own head. That was a great gift.

#### On Adults

I always had the feeling that I didn't understand adults and they didn't understand me. We spent a lot of time avoiding conflict with each other. When I grew up I realized that everything I thought about adults was true.

#### On Life in the Pre-Computer Age

I grew up when there was no TV and no computers. Radio was treasured; we all sat around on Saturday night and listened to the radio. You didn't have all the diversions kids have today. I had a precious commodity: boredom.

#### On Puns and Playing with Words

Puns I got almost directly from my father. He was a small man, an architect, and he made himself out of nothing and became a good architect. He had a quiet, sly sense of humor. I'd sometimes walk into a room and he'd say, “Aha! I see you're coming early since lately. You used to be behind before but now you're first at last.” Day after day he spoke this way. As a kid you don't get it but later you do and you learn to control language in a very creative way. Another influence when I was growing up in the 1930s was the great Marx Brothers. Their films might not make sense the first time you watch, but if you watch four or five times you begin to get it.

#### On Tollbooths

I was looking for a way into a different world, like a rabbit hole or the back of the wardrobe, something that every kid was familiar with. It was a time of highway building, and it seemed to me that almost every kid had been in a car going through a tollbooth. I loved the idea of calling it a “phantom” tollbooth, the juxtaposition of those two words.

#### On Numbers versus Words

What got me so interested was a book by C.P. Snow in the 1950s about the conflict between humanities and science. At the time, some people studied humanities and others studied science. If you took science, you were considered narrow, but you could take humanities and be considered a well-rounded person; it was very one-sided. It interested me that this had been a conflict all through history. [With *Phantom Tollbooth*] I was trying to have some fun because each was correct but not right. When things finally get partially resolved and Milo is going back through the tollbooth, the whole argument starts again between the kings, leaving the message that the conflict is endless.

#### Favorite Childhood Books

The Oz books by Frank Baum, and later ones by Ruth Plumly Thompson. They were the first real fantasy, wonderfully imaginative. Also, my family had a shelf of English translations of Russian and Yiddish novels, and when I was 11 or 12, I read I.J. Singer's (the brother of Isaac Bashevis Singer) *The Brothers Ashkenazi*. It was almost 1,200 pages. I didn't understand a word of what I read, but I read it all the way through. I had never heard language used like this.

#### Biggest Gripe

I hate it when teachers say, “That vocabulary is too difficult for children.” There are no hard words; there are only words that you don't know yet.



**I always had the feeling that I didn't understand adults and they didn't understand me. When I grew up I realized that everything I thought about adults was true.**

—Norton Juster

