

National Humanities Medals

2003

President Bush awarded ten individuals the 2003 National Humanities Medal for their outstanding efforts to deepen public awareness of the humanities.

Robert Ballard

When deep sea archaeologist Robert D. Ballard discovered the RMS *Titanic* in 1985, a flood of letters poured in from schoolchildren, prompting the Kansas-born oceanographer to found the Jason Project in 1989. Today this multidisciplinary program enables more than 1.5 million fourth-through ninth-graders to participate in real-time scientific expeditions that teach them about the planet. Using satellite and distance-learning methods, students examine biological and geological developments of the earth, from its oceans and rain forests to its polar regions and volcanoes. Science, however, is just part of the equation.

“I’ve always had a passion for history. I think all humans do . . . history is a moving target. We don’t know where it’s going to be next,” he says. Ballard holds a PhD in marine geology and geophysics from the University of Rhode Island, where he is on faculty.



—Dan Spillane/JASON Foundation for Education



—Courtesy of Sesame Workshop

Joan Ganz Cooney

Joan Ganz Cooney believes that children can learn from television. “The aim of the show is really to foster mutual respect for one another,” says Cooney about *Sesame Street*, the children’s educational television show she started in the late sixties. Cooney spent three months interviewing teachers, children’s television producers, child psychologists, and child development experts before launching the pilot show in 1969. Today *Sesame Street*, along with Cooney’s Children’s Television Workshop, has ninety-one Emmys to its credit. The show remains innovative while retaining its mission of education and inclusiveness. “Now there are some excellent programs for children not only on public television but on commercial TV,” says Cooney. “I’m happy we—I’m just one of a team—made a contribution.”

National Humanities Medals (continued)

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Midge Decter

Author, essayist, and social critic Midge Decter has spent a lifetime crusading against communism, feminism, and liberalism. “In the end you cannot defend American democracy without defending the economic system that is its necessary underpinning,” Decter writes in *An Old Wife’s Tale: My Seven Decades in Love and War*. Early in her career, Decter became secretary to the editor of *Commentary*, a magazine published by the American Jewish Committee. She then became assistant editor at *Midstream* magazine, managing editor at *Commentary*, and an editor at *Harper’s Magazine*, Legacy Books, and Basic Books. From 1980 to 1990 she was executive director of the Committee for a Free World, an organization that promoted democracy. “By going to cultural war and taking no prisoners,” she writes, “we seem to have made far more noise in the world than our sheer numbers would have suggested.”



Joseph Epstein

Essayist and short story writer Joseph Epstein was first captivated by the written word when he was a University of Chicago student fifty years ago. “The personal essay is, in my experience, a form of discovery,” he writes. “What one discovers . . . is where one stands on complex issues, problems, questions, subjects.” Epstein has seven collections of essays to his credit, with his 1992 *Goldin Boys* named a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year. He was editor of *The American Scholar* from 1975 to 1997, for which he wrote essays under the pseudonym Aristides. Epstein taught writing and literature at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, from 1974 to 2002. After more than twenty years of essay-writing, Epstein tackled fiction. “I’ve now written thirty-five stories,” he says. “If I could write another twenty during the rest of my life, I’d be happy.”

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese

“Women’s studies can unearth a good deal of information about women that would not emerge from a general course,” says the Harvard-educated Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, today the Eléonore Raoul Professor of the Humanities and professor of history at Emory University. Fox-Genovese started Emory University’s Institute of Women’s Studies in 1968, equipped with “nothing but boxes of my own books and a telephone I didn’t know how to use.” Within three to four years the institute had a graduate program with stipends, a distinguished lecture series, and a Fellows program. “My goal was to develop a program that was intellectually rigorous and ideologically open,” she says. Fox-Genovese’s 1988 *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women in the Old South* explores relationships between southern women and slaves in the antebellum era. She and her husband, historian Eugene Genovese, started The Historical Society, based at Boston University, and co-authored *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders’ Worldview*.



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—Courtesy Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

Jean Fritz

George Washington, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Benjamin Franklin, and Teddy Roosevelt; these are just some of the people whom children’s author Jean Fritz has written about. “The question I am most often asked is how do I find my ideas?” Fritz writes. “The answer is: I don’t.... A character in history will suddenly step right out of the past and demand a book.” Fritz spent her first thirteen years in China with missionary parents. Often lonely as a child, she turned to books for refuge. “When I finally got to America, I wanted to put down roots and did it through history,” she says. Fritz published her first book in 1954 and has garnered awards and honors throughout her fifty-year career. Her books impart her conviction that children need to feel history in addition to learning facts. *Shh, We’re Writing the Constitution* details the frustrations the Founding Fathers experienced; *And Then What Happened, Paul Revere?* takes readers back to Boston in 1775. “It’s important to learn the ideals of the country and not forget them,” she says.

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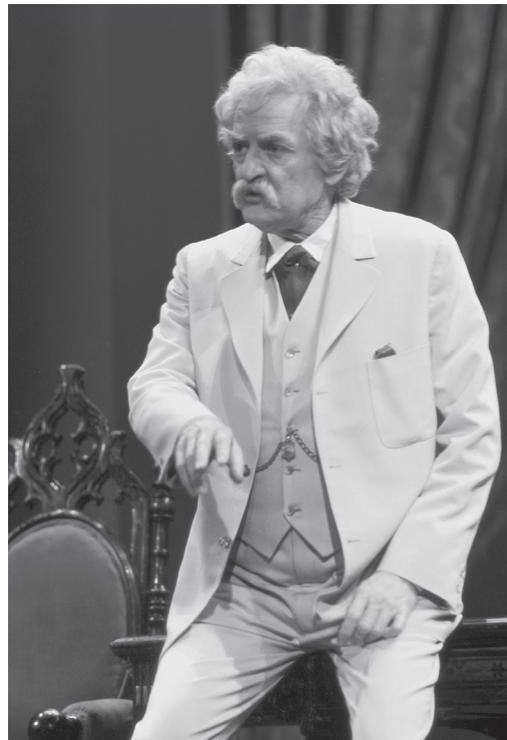
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Edith Kurzweil

When the Viennese-born Edith Kurzweil arrived in the United States as a fourteen-year-old refugee, she didn't speak a word of English. Today the Rutgers University and Delphi College professor looks back on thirty years of interdisciplinary scholarship, including a decade of editing the *Partisan Review*, which her late husband started in 1937. Kurzweil describes the magazine, which closed in 2003, as a Marxist hold-out featuring the best of modernism. She encourages the rigorous thinking its pages stimulated to her students. "What students don't know about history is appalling," she says. "You really have to spark people, and it's very hard. Consumer culture is overwhelming them. The humanities aren't something we can give up on."

Hal Holbrook

Hal Holbrook has been performing as Mark Twain for almost fifty years. "Mark Twain speaks to people," he says, "and they continue to find insights today. He defined the rhythms of our prose and the contours of our moral map ... he said things that were smart, wise, and incomparably well put." Holbrook first performed as Mark Twain in 1955 when he was a theater major at Denison University. Then he and his wife hit the road, performing more than three hundred shows in thirty weeks and logging thirty thousand miles onto their station wagon. A member of the Lincoln Center Repertory Company, Holbrook has fifty television movies and miniseries and more than thirty films to his credit. He has won five Emmys, and a 1966 performance of *Mark Twain Tonight!* received a Tony and a Drama Critic's Circle Award.



-Chuck Stewart



-Fraserphoto.com

Frank Snowden Jr.

Frank Snowden, one of the foremost authorities on blacks in classical antiquity, has taught at Georgetown University, Vassar College, and Mary Washington College in addition to being dean of the College of Liberal Arts at Howard University and the first honoree in the Howard University Libraries' "Excellence at Howard" program. Snowden's *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience* received the Charles G. Godwin Award of Merit from the American Philological Association. *Before Color Prejudice: The Ancient View of Blacks* and *Naples in the Time of Cholera* examines blacks' roles in the ancient world. Citing Herodotus and Pliny the Elder, the Harvard-educated Snowden argues that Africans were valued in the Roman Empire as artisans, athletes, scholars, and military leaders. "The experiences of those Africans who reached the alien shores of Greece and Italy constituted an important chapter in the history of classical antiquity," he writes, adding, "the onus of intense color prejudice cannot be placed upon the shoulders of the ancients."

John Updike

Two-time Pulitzer Prize winner John Updike has published more than forty books, essays, and works of verse during the past fifty years. Updike started his career as a reporter but found fiction more amenable. He sold his first short story to *The New Yorker* in 1954 and joined the magazine staff the following year. His first novel, *The Poorhouse Fair*, published in 1958, secured him a Guggenheim Fellowship, which he used to write his bestseller *Rabbit Run*, published in 1960. "The books are not loved by everybody and may be deeply flawed . . . but the Pennsylvania setting helps make me feel like I'm full of material in some odd way," says Updike, who was born and bred in Reading, Pennsylvania. "All of us writers, whether it's Roth's Newark or Bellow's Chicago, or whatever, it's where you somehow feel warmest and seem to have the most to say."



-Martha Updike