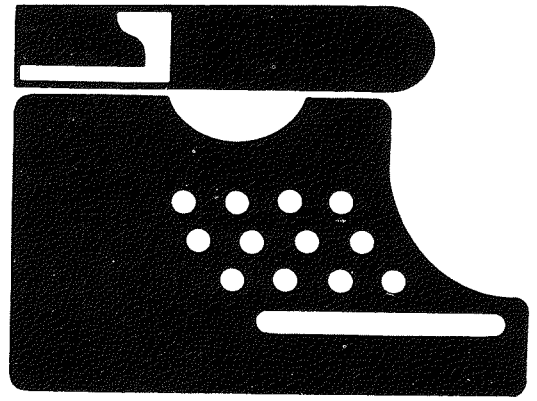


Teachers & Writers



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FROM ABBOTT SCHOOL TO DEEP SPACE

Teaching Writing in a Special Education Setting

by Wendy Salinger

The real feature of this issue of *Teachers & Writers* magazine is Michael Lamb's story *The Adventures of Space Ace*. But before you read it, I want you to know something about what life is like at Abbott School, where I met Michael. And I want to pose questions about the teaching of creative writing in a "special education" setting. Does it require a set of special assumptions on the part of the visiting writer? Are there modified or new teaching techniques that work best under these circumstances? Is the presence of a writer in such a school merely a frill? I don't answer all these questions here, but I feel they're important ones to ask.

Abbott School and Abbott House

Abbott School, where I've taught writing for two years, is in Irvington, New York, a forty-minute train ride north from Manhattan along the glinting Hudson. Its full title is Abbott Union Free School of the Abbott Union Free School District of Greenburg, a special act public school district supervised by the New York State Commissioner of Education and the District Superintendent of Schools. The school serves students in grades six through twelve in its program for neglected or traumatized adolescents. They are special edu-

cation students with learning disabilities or emotional handicaps or both. They live in "group homes" or in Abbott House, an institution on the same grounds as the school, which is described as "a private volunteer non-sectarian agency serving dependent, neglected boys and girls." (Abbott School also enrolls day students from the Westchester and Rockland County public school district, but I've never met any of these students while working there.)

All but two of my Abbott School students have been black or Hispanic and very few of them girls: one the first year who dropped out after a few months, and four this year—out of an average of thirty students. (I was told by a teacher that fewer girls are accepted by the school because as adolescents they are much harder to work with in this kind of situation—

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Wendy Salinger's *Folly River* (Dutton) won the 1980 National Poetry Series Open Competition. In 1981 she received a Guggenheim Fellowship in poetry. She has taught in the T&W program for six years.

though as writers they haven't confirmed that for me yet.) Classes are small—nine to twelve students per teacher—and the school's program therapeutic as well as academic. The students see counselors, psychologists, learning disability specialists, and remedial reading and math teachers. The goal is to return students to the communities and "conventional" schools from which they came.

The homes my students originally come from are in Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx. Often the family is a single-parent family and the child who enrolls at Abbott School is the one who was one too many to handle. Some families have more than one child in Abbott School; or they have a child at Abbott and others in foster homes. Kids end up at Abbott School because of problems at home or because they hung out "chilling in the park" for a couple of years instead of going to school. Or they got in trouble a lot. One boy told me that every time he set foot in the cafeteria of his conventional school a food fight of intergalactic proportions erupted. And there are other kinds of trouble.

But to a man, they want to go back; they want to go home. There are places you're sent to—group homes, Abbott House—and there's home. When I stupidly asked one of my students where he'd really like to live, he said, with some scorn, "With my family, of course." But when I come back for my second year at Abbott School, many of my old students are still there; many have been there for years.

Abbott School has all the features of a conventional school and the added advantage of a small student-teacher ratio (something that would be a gift from God for the kids I teach at a public school in the Bronx, for example, where the average class has thirty to forty students). True, all the doors to classrooms, bathrooms, and counselors' offices lock when closed, but many conventional public schools have locked bathrooms these days. The classrooms at Abbott also have telephones—which can be a real distraction when a call comes through at just the wrong time; but I assume the phones are there in anticipation of any physical emergency that might occur between students and teachers. Nothing like that has happened to me at Abbott School, but I'm protected—both by the presence of the teaching assistant (every class has one—most often, a strong, black male) and by what I think is a kind of shyness bordering on chivalry that adolescent black males have toward young-looking, white females. However, distractions in one classroom did convince me early in my first year at Abbott School to substitute conferences for that classroom period. It turned out to be a good idea. I got to know the students better and they did more work in conferences than they ever could have done in that class.

The school looks conventional too. It's a low-set, red brick building that contains a library, a video art room, and a computer room, as well as a gym, classrooms, and offices. Behind some of the locked office doors you can hear the earnest voices of reading and speech specialists sounding out a phrase, then the student's voice repeating or answering, then the whole process beginning again. The best teachers' classrooms are alive with spinning mobiles, guinea pigs, aquariums—"twilight rooms," one of my students named them, where an enchanted and expectant life goes on that's not part of the rest of these students' lives.

Some classes, however, are held across the driveway, at Abbott House, which also contains the cafeteria and the auditorium. Abbott House is a different story. My students rank

it third on their list of preferred places to live: first, home; second, group home; third, Abbott House. I've never been to one of the group homes—an omission I hope to correct this year. I've telephoned group homes—been answered by the harassed male voice of someone who sounds as if he's in his early twenties, heard my student's name yelled out over the blasting music. The kids tell me they prefer a group home to Abbott House because there they can have a real room (though shared with a roommate), mix more freely with the community, and come closer to the sense of what a home really is. There are usually about twelve children to each group home and several adult counselors in residence.

A student took me to his "room" in Abbott House to get some papers. His room was a corner, his bed and chest of drawers positioned at an angle to section them off slightly from the rest of the large room filled with other boys' corners. There's also a TV area where several small boys sat staring at cartoons. One boy was lying on a sofa, bare-chested, covered with a sheet, having reported in sick that day. It was a hot day and there was no air conditioning, only a single fan making more of a noisy protest against the heat than anything else. I might have been in the day room of a mental hospital.

Abbott House is a tall, brick building in the classic, foreboding style of schools build in the 1920s.

Long hallways but narrow like
New York streets—
Noisy like Grand Central—

a student wrote for me. Offices, classrooms, the cafeteria, and auditorium are on the first floor. The students live upstairs. Upstairs there's also the "isolation room"—described to me by one of my students as having one small window—where kids are put when they create too much of a disturbance. The halls, the waiting room outside the offices downstairs, the auditorium—everything has the flat, stale smell of *use*. It's a subway station smell, one that has no resonance, no pockets for memory to grow in and transform these materials even into the myth of a troubled childhood. More than anything it smells to me of the word *stupid*—a word that also gives nothing back, that says, "return to your place."

Outside, the grounds that Abbott House and Abbott School share with an insurance company are green and rolling. "A beautiful campus setting," as the brochure says. Some of the boys have jobs tending the grounds. Others work in the cafeteria. Not infrequently a boy goes AWOL. Many weeks I come to school to find my class rolls have changed: students just sent up to Abbott, old ones AWOL or arrested. The AWOLs usually end up back at school. But one boy—I call him Raphael here—kept running away. One week I asked him where he'd been in the month since I'd last seen him. "I went AWOL," he said, "to see my mother." He was a beautiful, introspective, chiding boy who finally disappeared altogether from Abbott School. I often think of him as the other boys said they last saw him: walking down the long driveway from Abbott House and Abbott School past the thick lawns. He seems representative in my memory and, perhaps because of his disappearances and appearances and his thoughtful nature, like a mysterious messenger.

Dr. LaRuth Gray, the Superintendent of the Abbott Union Free School District, whose quick intelligence and driving ambition on behalf of the school are, I think, the reason for many of its successes, once told me not to get too attached to these kids, because circumstances are fixed so that it's hard

for them to succeed. I'd just had a particularly fascinating conversation with one boy during his conference, so I was taken aback. But I think she's right—both in her analysis and in her ambition for the school.

The Homeboys

Kevin*

Kevin is fifteen. He's light-skinned, has a fine compact body and a wide face with a high forehead and prominent cheekbones. The lift of his brow and the way he always lowers his eyelids give him a particular kind of dignity and disdain. Often his eyes are half closed because he's falling asleep in class. He looks as if he needs the sleep. He has no time for writing poetry—or for any other foolishness for that matter. The only time he really comes alive in class that year is during the weeks we're developing and performing for videotape a play about a student who comes home with a bad report card. The students have chosen the play's subject, and it develops into a series of confrontation scenes: between the boy and his parents, the boy and his teacher, the teacher and the parents, the boy and his counselor. Kevin unexpectedly volunteers to be the father and takes on the role with fury. He's an unrelenting father: there's no excuse the boy can make to him that will wash. He excoriates him for his bad performance, warns him that there's no future for anyone without a high school diploma, grounds him for two weeks. Kevin's words and phrases have a familiar, true ring, but what he says is too passionate and elaborate to sound clichéd. Then, in the scene with the teacher, he turns around and devastates her with an equal scorn. (Raphael has volunteered for the role of the teacher.) How can she expect them to come meet with her at the school? They're working people; he comes home every day exhausted. She's picking on his boy. (He puts forth his son's excuses as evidence now.) She's singling him out and giving him a hard time, that's why the boy acts up in class. He wants his son transferred to another classroom. How do they expect someone to do well under these circumstances?

When we're done with the play, Kevin lapses into his old wariness. He writes what he's asked to in class but often leaves it unfinished, choosing sleep at the end. Propped in his seat, regarding me through closing lids, he seems to be both asking and assuming my permission to rest.

After we've had a few conferences together, Kevin begins to tell me a little about his life and to write about it. He lives in Abbott House; this is his second year. He says this school is okay. He's been to a number of schools and they were all too huge, not enough teachers. He grew up in the Bronx; there's an older brother, nineteen, and several younger ones. "I'm the bad one," he says, the one who's always been in trouble—getting high, robbing people. But he'd never leave home for days without calling to tell his mother where he is, the way his brother does. He understands how it must be for her. Just over Christmas, when he was there, a whole bunch of people got killed. A man fell from a window in the Projects—no one knows if he jumped or was pushed; an old woman got shot. . . .

He says he wants to live in California when he grows up—

*"Kevin," "Raphael," and "Trey" are not the students' real names, and in some cases the portraits are composites containing details from conferences with several different students.

but it's clear from the vague way he indicates the place that what he wants is *space*. He also says he wants to be a lawyer but later tells me there's no particular reason for his choice. He just wants a good profession. He wants two things: that, and to *fix* something. He's very emphatic about this. He used to watch his father fix cars.

"I started wandering," Kevin tells me. "I was wandering when I was nine or ten." He hooked up with another boy, sixteen. They used to ride the subway to the end of the line or until they got lost and had to ask a policeman how to get back to the Bronx. They never paid. They way Kevin sees it, it's impossible not to get killed or go to jail at some point if you live in the city. Once he thought he was going to die, was sure he would. He and two friends were getting high together in an abandoned building, and three other guys approached them with sawed-off shotguns. They put one to Kevin's belly. They wanted to know the whereabouts of a third friend of Kevin, who owed them money. So one of Kevin's companions started "dropping dime" on the missing friend. That made Kevin mad, even though it saved his life. "You don't tell on your homeboy. If you and me were like this," he says, crossing his middle finger over his index finger, "I wouldn't be dropping dime on you." The guys with the guns were going to shoot them anyway but decided they didn't want four bodies on their hands. "If I go to jail," Kevin tells me, "I want to go to jail *for* something. Not just pull a gun on these people and *not* shoot them."

He says he's robbed a lot of people. Once he made about \$250 and was feeling pretty good about having that much money, so he bragged to a friend. Then the friend got a guy Kevin didn't know to rob Kevin and the friend took a cut. "You got to do something back or they'll know they can do it to you again and again. They'll come back and get you over and over if they know they can get away with it."

But nothing's worse than losing your life, I object. Kevin says sure, you can lock your apartment and stay inside all the time, and that's okay for older people like me but kids like to get out. But he's cooled down some recently, he says, because there's nowhere he could go—home, Bronxville where his aunt lives—where the police couldn't find him. "They have my whole life story."

He once had a dream about being shot. A dude he knows pulled a gun on him and said, "You just killed yourself." Kevin repeats the line with a weird, far-off smile. And later in our conversation he mentions the dream again, smiles that smile. "I felt like it really happened. I knew what it felt like to be dead."

The city's a terrible place to grow up, Kevin thinks, terrible. He's used to it, but "I don't want my kids to have to, that's what I'm thinking of. It's a slump out there," he says, growing excited, "a slump!" His eyes fill up.

Raphael

His nickname is Majesty. "It's a good way to get girls to kiss your hand," he says, laughing. His eyes are hazel and they shine in his brown face. I'm not the one conducting our conferences, he is. It's as if I'm talking to his counselor; he's gently putting out the word on himself. Several times his sentences begin with: "I'm the kind of person who. . . ."

He says he's been spoiled, that he's a follower. "Bad influences." He lives in Abbott House, hopes he'll be transferred to a group home. This is the first time he's ever been "placed," and "it's confusing me. I get confused." He's just

turned sixteen, but they've put him in the eighth grade. He wants to go back to a regular school, but he's afraid if he does they'll put him in a special class and that would be like going into another institution. The trouble with institutions, he says, is they pay attention to you only when you're in trouble.

Everyone in his family has succeeded—like his uncle who's a dentist, married to a nurse. His parents are divorced, but sometimes he still sees his father, who runs a hardware store. Raphael's older sister lives in the city with his grandmother, and the little kids live with his mother in Queens. Raphael is the first one ever to get in trouble. He says he's the kind of person who wants it all at once, doesn't want to wait for it. He wants to finish high school so he can get a house and everything. Maybe he should go into the Air Force and learn a skill—he knows he wouldn't choose the Marines. He has another uncle who was in the Marines for ten years, and he came back "so sad." He shakes his head. "So sad."

He likes to write. He likes to use rhyme because "you can feel more with it." He's been keeping a diary and tells me a sample entry. "It was a good day. Started out crummy but ended good. I was with my girlfriend. We was just like an adult couple."

When people succeed in Raphael's family, they move away from the city. All you get there, he says, is a drink and a bench. It's like a lot of people trying to climb up out of a bottle. But that's where he goes for his home visits because he's asked to stay with his grandmother; the two of them used to be able to talk—"you know, the way we're talking now." He says it's hard to find that. "You let down your guard and let people know more about you than you know about them and they'll take advantage of you."

The last time he went to the city he saw a guy get shot. "Did you ever see that? No, you probably never saw that."

He thinks he needs a better environment.

The last time Raphael went AWOL he was gone for two weeks, but a counselor caught him when he came back into town to get something for a friend. He was hurt and amazed when he came back to Abbott House and found other people had started wearing his clothes and using his things.

There's a teacher (from one of the "twilight rooms") who could get him a guinea pig if he were transferred to a group home. The idea excites him. He'd have to check first, though, he says, to find out how the other kids felt about guinea pigs so he could make sure the ones that didn't like them would leave it alone. He wants to make some money over the summer and buy a dove rabbit—they get along with guinea pigs. He saw a rabbit and a parrot and a guinea pig together in a pet shop window once.

He has amazing dream stories, which pour out of him. A chandelier hypnotized him, and he went into a trance. He kept cursing the chandelier and trying to escape the room, but every time he cursed it, it pulled him back. Things—forks, knives, scissors—flew to him as if he were a magnet, and then he woke up in the dream to find the severed head of a dog under his bed.

He dreamed his father went out to the store, leaving the rest of them alone, and they heard a noise outside. He told his brothers and sisters to hold tight together while he went to investigate in the pitch black dark. He started feeling things on him. Sliced bananas and people wielding hypods started chasing him. He jumped over trash cans, ran to the roof, flew off. Then he dreamed he was being shot with pin-

pricks of light, but he couldn't hear the sounds.

Every time he's moved, he's dreamed about the items in his next home and been right.

In the middle of writing for me, Raphael looks up and says if he had three wishes it would be to have his PhD and all his degrees out of the way.

Trey

Trey uses his graffiti name on his papers—a name that can't be revealed and that I can't find an adequate substitute for. He tells me he's thinking about becoming a Muslim. He wants to write about black people and the Muslim faith, but then he changes his mind. What he knows about the Muslims is sacred; it's okay for white people to *ask*, but they can't be told anything. He's never had any reason to trust white people. Black people made everything—"We taught you people how to use forks!" Once a bunch of white boys smashed his face in when he didn't apologize for brushing up against one of them.

Small for sixteen, Trey lives in a group home. He says he gets in trouble a lot because he hits adults when they hit him. He doesn't think it's fair that adults can disrespect you and hurt you but you can't do it to them. He got transferred from one teacher to another because he hit the first one for grabbing him and hauling him across the room. "I don't like people grabbing at me." In conference he writes a poem about big men hitting little kids.

Trey is very good at turning flips and he does one for me.

He expects to transfer back to his old high school at the end of the month. He thinks his mother will take him out of the group home; she took his sister back from a foster home last month, so he'll probably be next. He's anxious to get back. He knows a lot of people in Brooklyn, has a lot of girlfriends. He's going into business there selling cheeba (marijuana) with a friend. They've already sold for his cousin. They cousin's told them how they can double their money, and they've already got a storefront picked out. Trey says he needs to make only about \$1,000 so his mother can cover bail if he gets busted. When I point out this is self-defeating, he says he can make much more. He was making \$350 a week at his old spot. Two of his brothers wanted him to sell with them, but he wants his own business; no one's messing with *his* money.

He writes about his old selling spot and about girls. He was shot at once, when he was walking with a girlfriend, and he's been stabbed.

Both his brothers have been busted several times and Trey himself once. He was all but on the bus for prison at Rikers Island when his mother came to get him. He described the scene for me: "First they take you in a room—about like this but no carpet. Then they beat you up, strip you, fingerprint you, and throw you in the holding pen. Then someone tries to approach you. If you get by till you're on the bus, you're okay."

"My mother's had a lot of heartache," Trey says. She was sick for a long time, even had a tube in her throat, but now she's okay. "She can yell at me and everything."

He doesn't have any patience for the small earnings of legitimate business, he says, and he's not afraid of the cops. "They only bother people who kill people or steal old ladies' purses. That's an entirely different thing."

This school's been okay according to Trey, and the group home, too. But he's heard of other schools where they buy the kids clothes with designer labels and take them on trips

on Greyhound buses. Greyhound's the best, he says, because they have the best bathrooms and dimmer light. Here they just put you on rotty old buses. One thing he knows, though—they have to give you 1,000 calories a day. He read it somewhere. Every child in the state is entitled to 1,000 calories a day. "It doesn't matter how they give it to you—peanut butter or what—they have to give it to you."

One week when I come to school, Trey's absent. One of his friends tells me he was arrested over the weekend for armed robbery and is in jail.

Teaching Writing at Abbott School

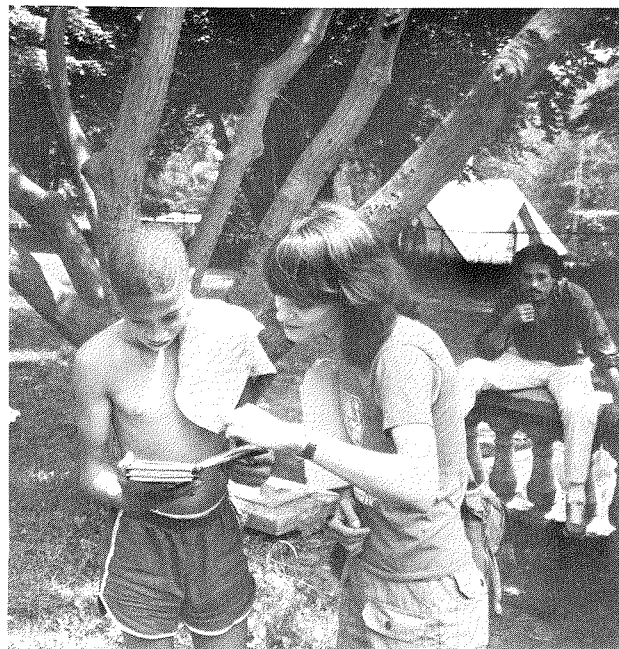
Are there important differences between teaching creative writing in a conventional setting and teaching it at a place like Abbott School? The answer depends, of course, on your approach to teaching at a conventional school. My own feeling has always been that if my students aren't writing out of feelings and ideas inspired by their own experiences, I'm not contributing the special element that the presence of a writer in the school should bring. I want to show them that language isn't a foreign thing, to be studied in textbooks, but something that rises from the personal imagination. Whatever formal exercises we do, whatever word games we play, my object is to have the students make language their own, to see its forms—in metaphor and symbol—as organic creations of their own minds.

This means that I ask them to write from dreams and memories, to find as a starting point the images that have emotional significance and power for them. For me the most important thing I do as a writing teacher, especially at Abbott School, is to let the students know that they are worthy. More than that, they are compelling. And the most compelling writing they can do comes, even when it takes the form of fantasy, not from anywhere outside them but from who and what they are.

I don't deviate from these assumptions at Abbott School, but sometimes the emphasis shifts in my approach. Just as the boys show a kind of touching delicacy toward me, I feel I must honor the difficulties of their lives. I learned this only through blundering, of course. When I pressed one boy to take an image from a vivid memory and use it as the basis for a poem, he resisted. Finally he told me, "I don't like to think about the old days." It turned out that his strongest memory was of the day he went to court with his mother to hear his father sentenced to prison for murder. So although I don't abandon my basic feelings about language and the individual imagination, I don't want to be brutal.

At the same time, I've always felt that assignments that are games rarely produce anything but diversions. I thought of titling a sub-section of this discussion "The Acrostic That Ate Irvington." I've used acrostics in both conventional and "special" schools as an introduction to the idea that poems can be shaped by things other than end-rhyme. I now finally admit that to introduce acrostic form to students is to create a monster (a literary monster, not a human one). Students become so enchanted with the puzzle aspect of the acrostic that it simply replaces the Hallmark card end-rhyme that they recognized before as poetry. Nothing has to be thought or felt (not to mention *visualized* or *heard*), only solved.

This isn't to say I haven't used acrostics at Abbott School; I have. I think you have to be careful with this assignment,



*Michael Lamb and Wendy Salinger
looking at the special edition of Space Ace*

but it has its uses. Particularly when I'm working with students whose lives are bleak, I do want to delight. I can't avoid bringing to the classroom some of the breathless spirit that *writing can be fun!* I use the private conference periods, rather than class, as opportunities to find out as much about my students as decency allows. (I mean by this their thoughts, fears, and hopes as much as, if not more than, their experiences.) In conference, it's not hard to turn from what we're talking about and say, "Write something about that for me." And from conferences I learn what preoccupations my students have in common.

My first year at Abbott School, one class assignment that came as a direct result of student conferences was *The Case of Mr. Enigma*. Not only had students told me of violence in their own lives, but several of them had written blood-curdling tales of murder for me. For example, I had a student who kept his head down on his desk all during class. I was told, "Forget him. He's schizophrenic." When we had a conference together it was hard to get him to talk about anything. We ended up discussing movies we'd seen. What kind did he like best? Horror, murder. Would he like to write such a story? Yes. My original thought was that he would start out by dictating to me and then take over the job himself. But he had no patience for that. He grabbed his pencil and began writing. In one paragraph two victims were done away with. In later conferences we slowed the process down, began to describe the murderer's motives (mainly, the murder of his best friend he'd witnessed as a child), make revisions. My "schizophrenic" student never slept at his desk during conferences.

Thus was born *Mr. Enigma*. Perhaps feeling guilty that I wasn't being enough of a cop with my students, I devised a murder-suspense scenario and asked them to continue it, writing from the point of view of the detective who's out to solve the case. *Mr. Enigma* is a Citibank executive who dis-

appears mysteriously. The day after his disappearance his wife receives a note from a group calling itself the Workers Liberation Party, denouncing Citibank as a fascist institution and threatening to kill Mr. Enigma if a certain Julio Sanchez, serving a life sentence at Attica for armed robbery at a Citibank branch, isn't released. Sanchez isn't released, and a second note is received from the WLP announcing the execution of Mr. Enigma.

There are reasons, however, not to take the facts at face value—as the detective muses. No organization called the Workers Liberation Party has ever been heard of, even by Mr. Sanchez. Mr. Enigma was last seen getting into a cab with a mysterious blonde woman. Mr. Enigma has a great deal of life insurance. His wife has recently been seeing a psychiatrist for severe depression.

As detectives, my students pursued these clues and solved the case in a variety of ways—most, I was interested to see, involving a romantic triangle. Game playing? Yes. But not without premeditation.

“By indirection find direction out.” This is in my mind wherever I teach. I don't say, for example, “Today we're going to talk about anger.” We talk about images, similes, and metaphors, which automatically serve as passages to feeling. I want to honor the desire for privacy with *all* my students. At Abbott School I feel the differences between my experiences and theirs require even greater respect. The play we produced in class, which Kevin contributed to so forcefully, is another example of how the (this time, slightly) indirect approach worked with these students. Even the shyest members of the class wanted their turns creating the characters of parent, teacher, counselor, and student.

I've asked myself at times what the distinction is between what I do for my Abbott School students and what their counselors and remedial reading and writing teachers do for them. I think there is one—and it's noticeable in the work they produce. They do write about themselves for these other teachers (and obviously improve their writing skills through that work). What our classes and conferences add to their writing is, I think, a certain amount of color and chaos—which I interpret as vitality. Michael Lamb's *Space Ace* is a good example of the kind of liveliness I'm talking about. When told that fidelity to their own imaginations comes first, students are freed, and their writing shows this.

Again, there's a belief behind this that applies to all my teaching but even more so to my work at Abbott School. I encourage my students not to worry about misspellings when that slows down or stops their thoughts (as it usually does). I've seen too many little hands trembling over the paper, afraid that any mark they make will be the wrong one—as if the written word were an adult code they couldn't master and not something that had anything to do with their own experiences or any use in their real lives. Spelling, I tell them, is part of rewriting. And I believe this in my work in the schools. I believe the revision process is of minimal importance at least until high school and perhaps until even later than that. For young writers, I think revising should involve only correcting spelling, checking for inconsistency in the plot of a story, adding details they meant to include but forgot. In a “special education” setting, I often begin conference sessions by having a student dictate his stories and poems to me. Then, once the written word has become less intimidating to him and the excitement of his own ideas so strong that he can't resist, he takes over the writing.

Mystery and horror stories weren't the only way my Abbott School students exorcised or exercised their devils. They wrote adventures and romances. Stories in which they woke up to find themselves kidnapped and had to unravel bizarre plots, travel through strange territory to find the way home. Stories about girlfriends who fail to show up at weddings, parents who disapprove of their daughter's choice (*you*).

We also did preliminary exercises in taking apart a story to concentrate on its elements—description, dialogue, characterization, plot. Students wrote down scraps of conversation they heard in the halls, the lunchroom, Abbott House, the classroom. They wrote profiles of people they'd known and monologues in the voices of a host of invented characters, from seedy street people to beloved grandmothers. They worked on descriptions of places they'd been and places they dreamed of. They wrote one-line plots and had their classmates guess the other elements of the story.

During the weeks they wrote poetry we talked about images, similes, sound, rhythm, line breaks—things we discuss in all schools where I teach. I brought in poems by modern and contemporary writers as well as some by students from other schools. We talked about the vivid images and the music of everyday language in poems by William Carlos Williams and Frank O'Hara, the power of association and metaphor that images from the unconscious mind have in the work of Mayakovsky and Voznesensky, mysticism in some poems of Rilke, political visions in Ginsberg, Bly, and other poets.

I mimeographed the students' own work throughout the year, gave them copies, and discussed the work in class. Though the authors often asked to remain anonymous, I think this kind of “publication” was even more important to these students than it is to students in conventional schools where I've taught. To see their writing in *type* is always exciting for young writers. To see that they'd written something that had a completed shape as well as its own logic and interest was particularly pleasing to these students. (“My students wrote these?” a teacher asked me.)

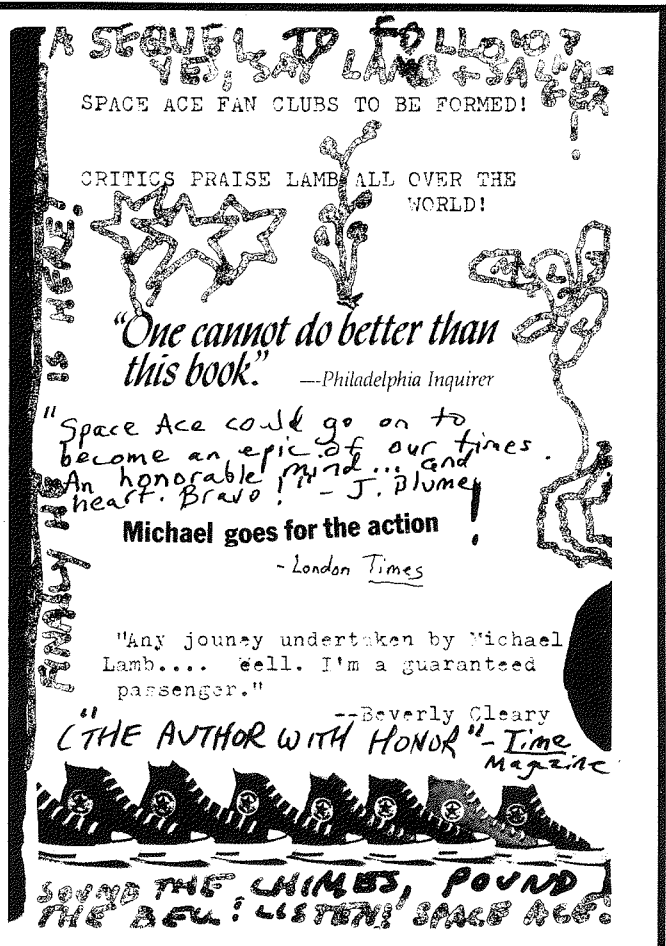
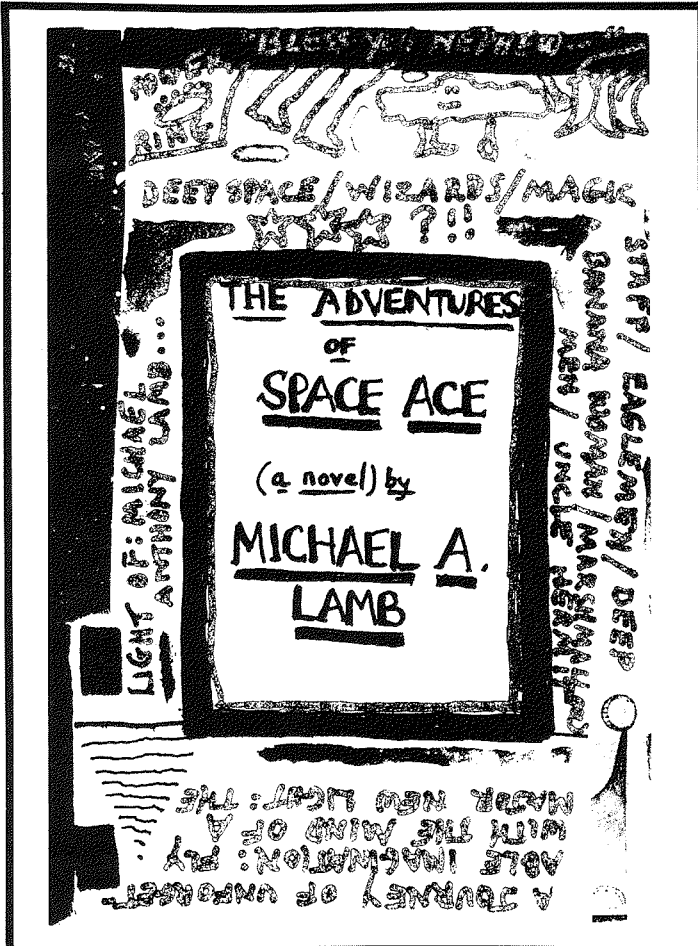
One thing that my time at Abbott School has taught me that I hadn't been able to accept since I first began teaching schoolchildren in 1978 is to be ready at any moment to abandon my plan for the day and to follow the real interests of the class, whatever they may be at any particular moment. I think I began to learn this as I began to learn, in my conferences with students, to listen.

The “special” student is the “conventional” student only more so. He needs more because he's been deprived of more—and, I think, in some ways, he has more to give.

But when I look at my experiences at Abbott School, the fundamental issues for me are not about teaching techniques; they're political. Why are things fixed so that my students can't succeed? Food and shelter have been provided for these boys, but what about “quality of life”? While workers for social change await the dawn of some larger justice, couldn't the immediate, achievable improvements be made for Kevin, Raphael, Trey, and all the boys with real names living real lives right now?

It was very hot the day I visited the partitioned cubicles where the students live at Abbott House. The boy who felt sick lay sweltering. The little boys watching television were sweltering. The older boys who came in sweating from bas-

Continued on page 12



THE ADVENTURES OF SPACE ACE

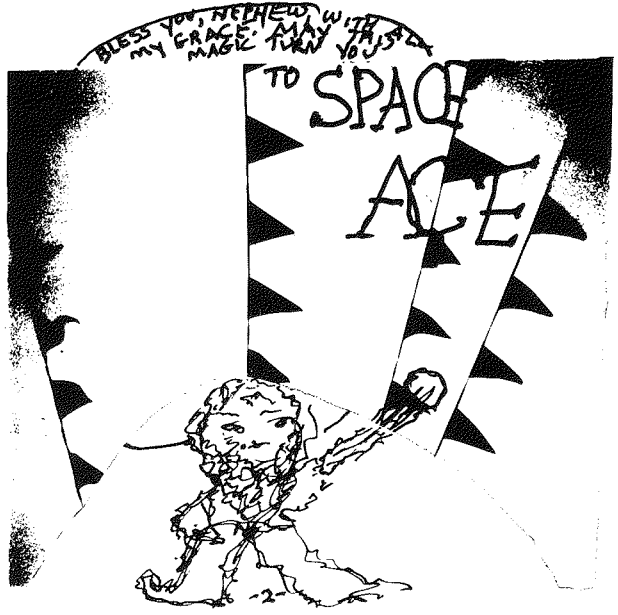
Chapter One

Alan and Marcy are in their house making peanut butter sandwiches. It's nighttime. A UFO comes down and lands on their lawn. Marcy is curious: she wants to find out what are all these blinking lights. She goes outside and a tractor beam from the UFO pulls her in. It flies away, leaving a clue. A piece of paper drops from the UFO onto the ground.

Alan comes out of the house, looking for Marcy. He spots the piece of paper that was left by the UFO. He reads it to himself. The paper says, "Call Uncle Hermit."

Uncle Hermit is a hermit that lives in the swamps. He is a sorcerer. Alan explains the problem to Uncle Hermit. Uncle Hermit and Alan decide what they have to do. Uncle Hermit looks in his trunk of surprises and pulls out a crystal ball. He chants to himself: "Abracadabra, presto parcy, crystal ball, where is my niece Marcy?" The crystal reveals the space ship taking his niece away. Alan breaks down in tears. Uncle Hermit turns around and looks in his

trunk of surprises and pulls out a magic wand and waves it around Alan three times and chants: "Bless you, nephew, with all my grace. May this magic turn you to Space Ace." All of a sudden Alan has a cape and a holster with a small ray gun. He can feel himself levitating in the air, and Uncle Hermit tells Alan(or Space Ace) the way he'll have to rescue his sister.



Chapter Two:
Space Ace Meets the Marshmallow Men

Uncle Hermit is still explaining the mission to Space Ace. Space Ace listens and does as he's told. He flies out the window. He flies back home and packs a whole bunch of food in a little sack, such as three bags of marshmallows, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, fruits and vegetables, a quart of milk and orange juice and toothbrush and toothpaste. He leaves a note on his bedroom door that he's going to spend the night at Tommy's house for the weekend. He goes back to Uncle Hermit to find out which way to go.

Uncle Hermit chants to him:
"Twinkle, twinkle, little star, take my nephew afar."

So Space Ace follows the star into deep space. Out in space it looks to Space Ace like cartoons he watches on television, such as The Jetsons. While he follows the star, he pulls out a carrot and starts chomping nervously and says to himself, "I don't like

-3-

being out here. I'm homesick. But I have to do it for Marcy's sake." He continues to follow the star southeast, near the Milky Way. The star stops suddenly and chants to Space Ace: "Go straight two miles then turn to your left, fight the marshmallow men--don't waste your breath."

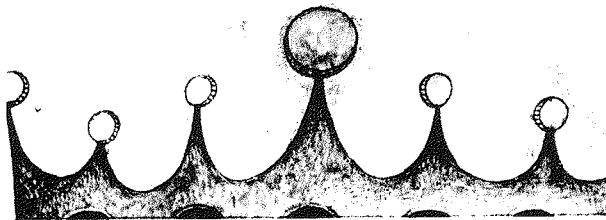
Space Ace takes his sack and does as he's told.

Space Ace sees the marshmallow men and thinks that defeating them will be easy. He sees the marshmallow men as five foot eleven and white all over. Space Ace tries to knock down a marshmallow man when he turns around. To Space Ace's astonishment, he is bounced back to where he started from. Then all of a sudden all the marshmallow men are chasing him and, one at a time, they say he must fight each one to get through. Then they all laugh in his face.

Without even thinking, he pulls his ray gun out of the holster and shoots one of the men. Again, to his amazement, the shot goes right through the marshmallow man. Then the man laughs in his face. Space Ace

-4-

was almost about to cry when he thought of what the star told him-- "Don't waste your breath." He looked in his knapsack and pulled out three bags of marshmallows and threw one bag to each man. One of the men tasted the marshmallow and said, "Umm, umm good." Then the rest of the men ate some of the marshmallows. When they finished all three bags, they asked Space Ace if he had any more. Space Ace said to eat your big toes, and the marshmallow man did as he was told. Then all the other men did what the first marshmallow man did. Then they started eating their way up to their knees. The next thing you know, there were no more marshmallow men standing in Space Ace's way. Space Ace looked in his knapsack again and pulled out an American flag and sang the national anthem. After he finished, he flew to the castle.



-5-

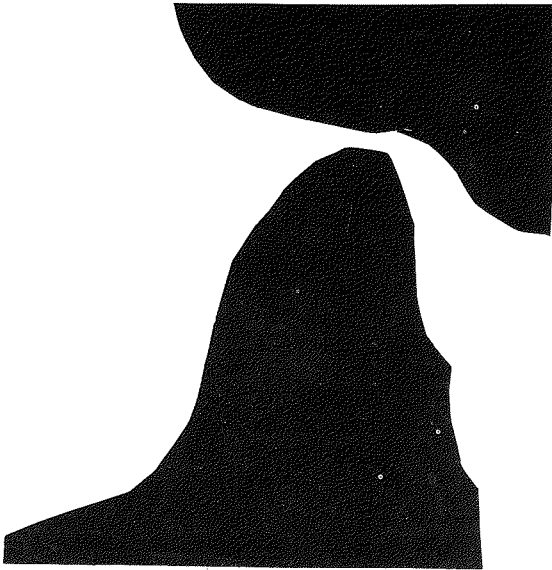
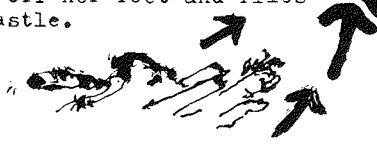
Chapter Three:
Space Ace Meets the Banana Woman

When Space Ace gets in the castle, he says to himself, "This is a beautiful place." He sees something he never thought he would ever see. He saw a whole bunch of bananas hanging in the ceiling and three women that looked like bananas. One of the banana women says, "What are you doing in the castle of our lord and sorcerer Crystar?" Space Ace answers nervously, "I'm looking for my sister."

The banana women had curved bodies and blonde hair and their arms were made out of banana peels. One of the banana women sneaks in the back and gets a magic potion and they ask Space Ace if he would like something to drink. Of course, Space Ace says yes because he is very thirsty. As Space Ace drinks the potion, the banana woman chants: "Oranges like oranges, a dove likes a dove, the first woman you see, you will fall in love." Space Ace opens his eyes and all the banana women try to

-6-

jump in his eyesight. He sees one, picks her up off her feet and flies out of the castle.



-7-

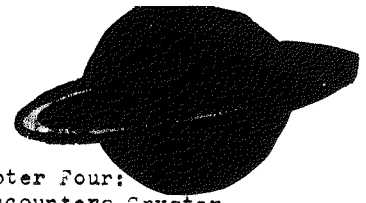
into a gallop. As Space Ace rides, Susie explains what he must do. She tells Space Ace that a fire will flare up every fifteen seconds, and you must ride the opposite direction. Space Ace sees the flame and does as he's told. Half an hour passes by. All of a sudden, Susie says, "Stop right here," and tells him that door leads to Crystar's room.

Space Ace gets off the horse and walks into the room and sees two robot guards in the room and asks one of them to see Crystar. The robot says no and also says, "You must fight me to see the King." Without hesitating, Space Ace pulls out his ray gun and shoots the guard. The guard falls, stumped by the ray. Space Ace walks over the guard and sees the King.

He sees a man made of nothing but crystal. He tells the King, "Do you know where my sister is?" The King says, "Marcy? Why, sure." Space Ace says, "Will you release her?" The King says, "You must pass my two tests." Crystar, the King, says, "You will start in the morning. My guard will show you and your banana woman to your room for the night."



-9-

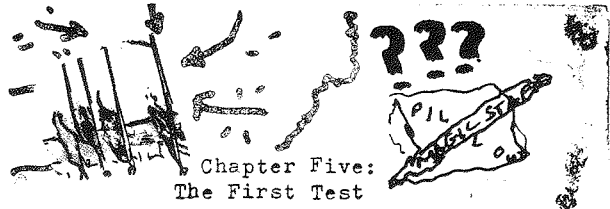


Chapter Four: Space Ace Encounters Crystar

When Space Ace gets out of the castle, he asks the banana woman what is her name, and she says her name is Susie. Space Ace asks Susie, does she know who Crystar is? Susie says, "Of course I know Crystar; he is our King." Space Ace asks her, "Have you seen a little girl about four feet eleven inches, blonde hair, and star-like earrings?" Susie replies, "Why yes, I've seen a little girl!" Space Ace asks, "Where is she?" Susie tells him that she's being held captive in Crystar's dungeon. Space Ace asks Susie, "Can you lead me to him?" Susie says yes.

So Susie takes him to re-enter the castle. He sees a metal horse in the castle with a glowing ball on top of its head. Susie says, "Hop on the horse and touch the magic ball." Space Ace does as he's told. As soon as he touches the ball, the horse breaks

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Chapter Five: The First Test

First thing in the morning, the King's guards come to wake Space Ace. Space Ace wakes up Susie. Space Ace walks to where the King's throne is and asks what is his first test? The King says, "You must go through the Hall of Danger and get a magic staff which lies on a satin pillow."

Space Ace starts the journey toward the Hall of Danger. He calls Susie. Susie and Space Ace get a magic rug that carries them to where they must start. Then they're off on their journey.

Space Ace tells Susie, "This is going to be an easy test." When he gets to the Hall of Danger, he steps on a stone that presses against the ground. All of a sudden, the walls on the side open and shoot out daggers. Space Ace tells Susie to do a forward roll. They get past the daggers and then all of a sudden they hear eagles. What

-10-



Space Ace sees ~~are~~ not eagles, but eagle-men. The way Space Ace sees them they have the head of an eagle, the wings and the feet of eagles. One of the eagle-men swoops down to grab Susie, but Space Ace shoots him right between the eyes with his ray gun. The eagle-man falls and starts to cry. Then he says to Space Ace, sobbing, "Why did you do that? You hurt me and you might scare the rest of my tribe off." Space Ace is surprised to see men with such features so cowardly. Space Ace explains to the eagle-men that he must get the magic staff, and they understand.

Just then a messenger comes to see the King and whispers in his ear. The King nods his head a couple of times and starts to tell Space Ace the sad story. The King tells Space Ace that the evil sorcerer Morlock has stolen the staff, and Space Ace asks for two of the King's eagle-men to help him defeat the evil Morlock. One of the warriors is a wizard and the other a supreme warrior with lots of medals and merit badges.

So they're off on their journey. Space Ace and Susie start to get hungry and they tell the wizard. The wizard

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chants: "Space Ace is hungry and so am I, bring us some food and don't forget the apple pie." Then all of a sudden a table and a pink cloth on top are filled with so many goodies, such as: turkey, roast beef, mashed potatoes, and apple pie. Soon Space Ace gets thirsty and tells the wizard and the wizard chants: "Oh heavenly stars of the sky divine, bring us your finest red wine." The wine appears on the table. Sometime later, they all get tired and fall asleep.

In the morning, they find themselves in Morlock's dungeon. They are surprised to see Morlock chained next to them. They try to break loose, but Morlock tells them it's no use. The chains are too strong. Morlock then begins to tell them the story of why he was chained there.

"I was in my castle counting all my gold, when a beggar came up to me and asked me for one of my gold coins. Little did I know that Cynthia the sorceress was disguised as the bum. When I told her no, she cast a spell on me that no one could break. But there is only one way you can defeat her: that is, get her magic

-12-

ring that lies on top of the pink pillow with the magic staff on it. If you can get the ring of power from her, I will reward you with the magic staff."

Space Ace hears a little squeak and sees a mouse nibbling on his cheese. The wizard also sees the mouse and chants: "Grow little mouse, we have so many pains; grow little mouse and bite these chains."

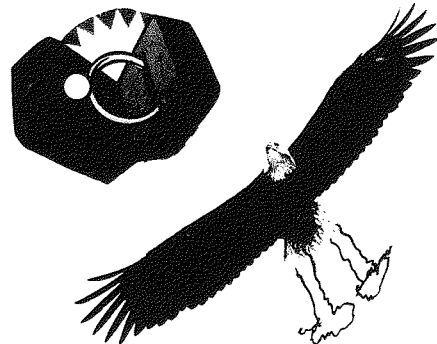
All of a sudden the mouse grows very large and bites the chains of Space Ace, Susie, and the eagle-men, but leaves Morlock chained up. Morlock cries out, "Why are you leaving me here?" And Space Ace replies, "So you won't try any more magic stuff."

Space Ace tells Susie to wait in the dungeon until they get back. Space Ace and the eagle-men sneak past the guards to the sorceress's castle doors. They see the sorceress sleeping. Space Ace tells the Supreme Warrior to fly overhead and get the magic staff and power ring. The Superior Warrior does as he's told. But when he was flying back, the ring dropped and woke the sorceress. She wakes and sees the magic ring on the

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floor and runs to it. But Space Ace was too quick. He pulled out his ray gun, set it on 'stun' and shot the sorceress in her leg. When he did this, she could not feel her legs, so that meant she could not run or walk. Then the Superior Warrior turned around and picked up the ring. Then they headed back to the dungeon and got Susie and freed Morlock. But Space Ace wasn't sure that that was a good idea, so he also shot Morlock with the stun ray.

Then they flew back to the castle. The King said that Space Ace and the eagle-men could work together on the second test because it would be much harder than the first. Next test will be in the morning.



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Him at His Most Impressive

Chapter Six: The Second Test and the Rescue of Marcy

Space Ace and Susie rise early in the morning, and they wake two eagle-men. Space Ace tells Susie to awaken the King. When Susie leaves to wake the King, Space Ace asks the eagle-men what do they think the second test will be. And the Wizard replies, "I think I know what the second test will be. You must fight the demons of the square table and remove all of their belts and bring them to the King." Ten minutes later the King's guards escort Space Ace and the eagle-men to the King's quarters. The King says exactly what the wizard told Space Ace. Space Ace tells Susie to wait until he returns. Space Ace packs a lot of food and blankets and water. They walk through the Hall of Danger, and Space Ace tells the eagle-men that he has a plan. He tells the eagle-women to sew together a large

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net, and tells the eagle-men to tie hooks on their backs. The whole process takes three days. When they finally finish, they send a messenger to Space Ace's cabin. Then Space Ace energizes his ray gun and tells the eagle wizard to put a protective shield over all three: Space Ace, himself, and the Superior Warrior. And the wizard chants: "Cherries are on a cherry tree, place a protective shield around us three."

Then they start their journey. While they are walking, they see a lot of signs that say: Keep Out. Demons Only--No Salesmen Allowed. Space Ace and the eagle-men have two whistles apiece in their pockets. When they see the big square door, they burst through it. When the demons see them, they pull out their weapons, but before they can strike either of the three, they blow their whistles and a flock of eagle-men fly in with nets, and drop the nets on top of the demons. When they do this, Space Ace pulls out his ray gun and sets it on "Deep Sleep," and shoots all seven of the demons. When they fall to sleep, Space Ace goes by

-16-

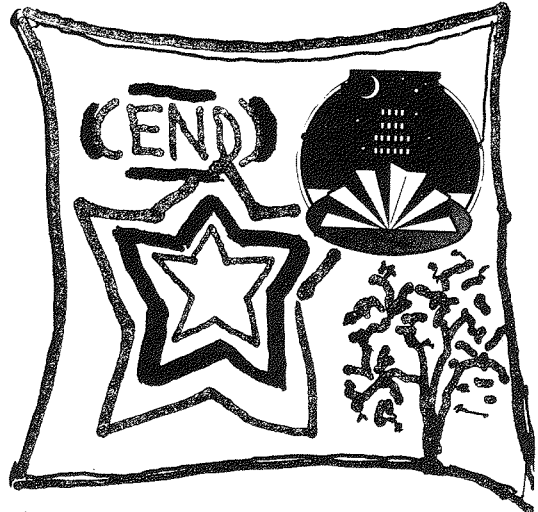
each one and takes their belts and runs back out the door. He goes back to the King and shows him the belts. The king then says, "You are a brave and honorable youngster with a heart of gold, the strength of ten and the mind of a thousand. Take your sister and be joyful, for you have ridden the land of the seven demons of the square table."

Marcy is in a deep sleep when Space Ace comes into the room, so he runs back to the King and asks for a magic carpet to take home. He lays Marcy down on the carpet and flies back through deep space. He sees a hole and knows that it is his home planet, but as soon as he goes through the hole with Marcy, he starts falling and falling and falling until he wakes up and finds himself under his bed. He gets onto his bed and wonders, was it all a dream? He goes to check on Marcy's room; he sees her lying on a carpet that he has never seen before. Then he remembers that it was the magic carpet he brought Marcy back home on. When he goes outside, he sees a moving truck. He sees somebody moving next door.

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It's a girl that he thinks he's seen before.

Before he can say anything, she runs up to him and says, "Space Ace, my hero! Don't you remember me? I'm Susie, the Banana Woman. I followed you through the hole and I'll be with you forever in school."



(Published on Earth, May, 1984 (Special Edition))

Continued from page 6

ketball fanned themselves with whatever they could find. Where is the money to air-condition these rooms where so many hours of such deprivation are lived? It was Friday: the air wasn't exactly teeming with weekend plans. Where is the small amount of money to organize weekend activities—things to do that these boys could look forward to? Why are their teachers and counselors paid so little? Where is the money that would help conventional schools bring my kids out of the park and into the classroom? Social service organizations have helped get these children away from desperate families. Where are the social organizations to help diminish the desperation and bring my boys home?

The Making of *Space Ace*

I first met Michael Lamb in January of 1984 when he'd been at Abbott School for only a week. In getting to know each other, we got to talking about video games—which ones we'd played, which were the hardest. Michael's favorite video game had a character in it named *Space Ace*. We decided that Michael would create his own version of the *Space Ace* character and make up adventures for him.

At first the scope of the project was limited, but Michael's imagination was so prolific that it soon became evident that we were dealing with an extended drama of many chapters. We met week after week. Michael would write a chapter, proofread it, and make changes where he saw they were

needed. One of the structural elements that he took particular care with was the chants, and for me these became charms of possibility—in the world of *Space Ace* as well as in the imagination of Michael Lamb. At any moment a character, or even an object, can stop in his tracks and cast a spell that rhymes us out of present danger into the open spaces of the future.

As work on *Space Ace* progressed, it was clear that Michael hoped to see it in some sort of book form eventually. But the only budget available for publications was for the school anthology. In the meantime, I was showing Michael's work to a friend of mine—Jane Mankiewicz, a fiction writer. Jane felt that Michael should see his work between some sort of covers, so she volunteered to be his illustrator. She typed up the story on large index cards and, using water colors, colored pencils, magic markers (one a glittering silver with red outlines), and cut-outs from magazines and from her own photographs, she produced a magical, hand-designed edition of *The Adventures of Space Ace*. (It's too bad it can't be reproduced in color here.) She xeroxed two copies of it and mounted them in red and black plastic booklets ordinarily used for photographs. When we went out to Abbott School to present Michael with the copies of his book, Jane took her camera and recorded Michael's pride as a published writer and something of life at Abbott School and Abbott House.

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