

Remarks by Ann Close '56

Alumnae Achievement Award Recipient

September 20, 2014

How lovely and how strange to be here. I certainly would never have guessed so many years ago when I graduated that I would be in this spot tonight. I would like to thank my dear friends and classmates Ann Jeter Baldwin, Betsy Casey Metz, and Maggie Baxley Chew for putting my name forward for this honor. And Martha Martin Field for being here tonight. Betsy Casey and I first met on the train coming to college, and since we both live in New York we have remained friends ever since. It would have been impossible to be in our class and not be friends with Maggie Baxley. And Ann Jeter Baldwin and I, together with another Ann, Ann Pownall Brown, had the time of our lives right after college in Cambridge, Mass, where we made up for the four-year lack of men and big city life in an extravagant and lively fashion.

Of course, my thanks also go to the committee who chose me for this honor, and to our wonderful new president Bradley Batemen, who so kindly called to tell me that I had been selected, letting me know at the same time that he was aware of one of my writers—the poet Amy Clampitt, because she had gone to Grinnell College, where he had previously been president. And my most sincere thanks and gratitude go to the many faculty members, starting with Dr. William Quillian, Dean Harriet Hudson, and Carl Stern, and including Herbert Lipscomb, Abraham Kreisler, Kenneth Morland, Eleanor Struppa, and so many others unfortunately no longer with us, who gave me the precious gift of their knowledge and attention.

Tonight I would like to give some sort of response and support to Dr. Bateman's moving inaugural address in defense of a liberal arts education, both because that education gave me an excellent foundation for the career that has sustained me and brought me so much pleasure, and for all else it gave me as well.

Back when we were still Randolph-Macon Women's College, every few years the alumnae association would send out forms asking questions about our opinions of our college now that we had graduated. One of the questions always was, Did the education you got at Randolph-Macon prepare you properly for your years after college? I always replied, Yes. My wonderful liberal arts education, with its two years worth of requirements, two years in two languages, the Greek plays, the modern dance classes, the Correlated Arts course, the first-class art hanging in our dorms and the library where we could enjoy it every day, the psychology professor who used to leap out at us from different areas of the room to test our reactions, the Latin professor, who in his seventies still inspired crushes and a certain degree of awe in his every student-- was perfect preparation for what would become my career as a book editor in New York publishing. Particularly the professors—a preview of authors to come.

I suspect many people have no idea what a book editor or even a publishing house does, so I'll try to give a brief rundown.

First, I work for Alfred A. Knopf, a trade publishing house. In this instance "trade" means that we publish for the book trade--that is bookstores and other retail outlets. It has to do with discounts. College books, for instance, have their own way of doing things. And their own discounts. Next, as I was informed on my first day of work, we publish for someone known as the "General Reader." A very important person at an editorial meeting, although it soon became

apparent to me that he or she was none other than your regular liberal arts graduate, someone acquainted with and interested in a wide variety of subjects and willing to learn more. And it meant that a book editor needed the ability to read in all those subjects that Randolph-Macon required that we take, and that we used to complain about so vociferously. Because most trade editors publish many different types of books. I myself publish fiction, poetry, history, biography, and other nonfiction books.

Now, to what an editor does. First you acquire books, signing up new authors or new books by an old authors. This happens by reading dozens of manuscripts and proposals from authors and agents weekly. All that reading was a skill I realized I also learned at Randolph-Macon, where by sophomore year we were covering up to 2000 pages a week in outside reading alone. I can't say that I learned the next step--how to negotiate a contract--at college, although in a way I did. I'll get to that later.

Next you work with the author on editing the book—both general editing, like “We need to cut a hundred pages,” or “too much (or too little) sex in this scene,” or “that character isn't plausible,” as well as editing on a smaller scale, which we call “line editing.” Going over every sentence in the book to make sure to get the author's best expression of what he or she is trying to say.

Part of an editor's job is to help make a “market” for the book. So from the moment you sign it up—in fact in order to sign it up—you need to think about how to sell it. The jacket design is part of this process, as well as who to ask for blurbs, or where you'll send the author to do publicity by reading at bookstores and appearing on radio or TV. So while the book is off in the production department being copyedited, designed and printed, you're working with marketing and sales people to develop a plan to sell the book.

Not everything you learn at school is course work, and for me one of the most useful experiences was helping to found the Skeller. You probably all know the story, but there was once a drugstore up on the corner of Rivermont Avenue and Norfolk where Mangia is now. You could go there for coffee and ice cream and all sorts of sundries like shampoo and Kleenex. But it was going out of business, and we felt we would be stranded when it closed. The amazing Dr. Stern suggested that perhaps we could set up a little spot in Smith to serve coffee and doughnuts regularly, and that we could raise the capital to start it off by selling cooperative shares. Some of us were interested in trying that. At about the same time a college organizer (the sixties weren't that far off) that I had met at a National Students Association meeting dropped by to see if anything was stirring at Randolph-Macon. We told him about the coop idea, and he got very excited and suggested that we could probably make it a lot larger, that most companies would give us the use of free equipment and we could expand to drug items as well. We made a few calls and discovered that he was right. Before we knew it we had an ice cream freezer, one of those old coke ice boxes, plus several drug companies and bakeries vying to supply us. We took our plans to a general assembly, sold shares for four dollars apiece, found an empty space in the back of Main Hall, and got the college to give us some old tables and chairs that were hanging around unused. The head of maintenance offered to paint everything for us over the summer, and one of the students, who was a terrific caricaturist drew murals of students on the walls, and we were in business. So I did learn something about contracts, and business after all. But perhaps most important to my later career I learned what happens--to quote Senator Everett Dirksen--to an idea whose time has come. I think 95% of the student

body bought shares in the Skeller, and everybody helped to get it up and running. It was a mad success from the moment it opened.

Having a book become a bestseller has very much the same feeling. A certain whoosh into success. The problem is it's hard to predict what the climate will be a year or three years or seven years from the time you buy it. But that's part of the fun of book publishing.

Watching the response you get to a book. And part of the heartbreak too, when things don't go as well as you would like for a brilliant book and a brilliant author.

The other great benefit I received from Randolph-Macon was, of course, the friendships I made here. Dr. Bateman suggested that learning to work purposefully in groups or with others was part of the positive ambience of a small liberal arts college, so I feel that I can speak about how that figured into my working life as well.

Of course, it was with two classmates that I first ventured into book publishing territory, when I moved with the two other Ann's to Boston, and eventually to New York with yet another R-M friend, Caroline Mason Gilham. However the person perhaps most relevant to my publishing career was Virginia (aka Ginger) Price Barber, in the class behind me, who became a book agent about the same time that I became an editor. Trying to find new clients, she went to Canada, and there "discovered" Alice Munro, who at the time wasn't published here. So back there in the 1970's, when we were building our "lists," she sold me Munro's first book to be published in the United States. Thirty-five years and some 14 books later, Alice Munro won the Nobel Prize, and last year Ginger and I, still her agent and editor, went to Stockholm for the festivities, marveling at the good luck of two Southern girls who had first met at Randolph-Macon.

So, Dr. Bateman's Why liberal arts? is a question that I feel I've answered with my entire life. I simply can't imagine where I'd be without the education I had or the career I pursued. Of course, those same people that answer Dr. Batemen's question in the negative, are also naysayers about my industry. Why not publish everything on the web, make it free, end copyright, scrap books. As one of my writers said to me "We went overnight from being barely in "class x," the poor artists category, to being the "elite," a group to be scorned and pilloried by right and left. But I've been in publishing now for fifty years, and the death of the novel and of books has been prophesied regularly, as I am sure they have been almost since Guttenberg. They still survive, and I suspect liberal arts education will as well. It's too essential to every part of our lives.

One of the other questions that survey I mentioned at the beginning always asked, was whether I would come to Randolph-Macon again. And to that I was not so sure what my answer would be. That was because so many schools were becoming coed, which seemed to me a better way of educating people. Now that our college has taken in men, I think I might change my answer, particularly if we stick to the values of a liberal arts education. In the midst of the many changes here, I admit I'm pleased to see that Randolph College has kept the old motto: Vita Abundantior. Because that most certainly has been the result of the time I spent at Randolph-Macon and the wonderful education and friends it offered me.

Thank you.