JPBM Communications Award Presented in Baltimore

Photograph by Sylvia Wiegand.

Constance Reid

The 1998 Communications Award of the Joint Policy Board for Mathematics (JPBM) was presented at the Joint Mathematics Meetings in Baltimore in January 1998. The award was established in 1988 to reward and encourage journalists and other communicators who, on a sustained basis, bring accurate mathematical information to non-mathematical audiences. The award recognizes a significant contribution or accumulated contributions to public understanding of mathematics. The JPBM consists of a small group of leaders from the AMS, the Mathematical Association of America, and the Society for Industrial and Applied Mathematics who work on projects of common interest to the three organizations.

The 1998 JPBM Communications Award was presented to CONSTANCE REID. What follows is the award citation and her response upon receiving the award.

Citation

According to Martin Gardner, "No one today has written about mathematics with more grace, knowledge, skill and clarity than Constance Reid." *From Zero to Infinity*, her first book on mathematics, was published in 1955 and is now in its fourth edition. Turning to geometry, she wrote *A Long Way from Euclid*, the second edition due for publication by the MAA in 1998.

In the late sixties, her sister, Julia Robinson, suggested she do a book of short biographies of mathematicians. Instead of short biographies, she ended up doing several book-length biographies. *Hilbert*, the first of those, was published to great acclaim in 1970.

As a biographer she has always chosen to write about mathematicians whose contributions to mathematics have gone beyond their mathematical research. She followed Hilbert with the lives of Richard Courant, Jerzy Neyman, and E. T. Bell.

Of her Courant biography, Gerald L. Alexanderson, president of the Mathematical Association of America, says: "When *Courant* came out, I read it in one sitting, way into the night. It was as gripping for me as a mystery novel. A good mystery novel. Her ability to grab the attention of both professional and nonprofessional audiences and get them involved in mathematics and mathematical culture is extraordinary."

In collaboration with Donald J. Albers and G. L. Alexanderson, she also edited *More Mathematical People* and an illustrated history of the International Mathematical Congresses.

Her most recent work, *Julia, A Life in Mathematics*, gives us a personal, warm, and inspirational portrait of her sister, Julia Robinson, one of the great mathematicians of the twentieth century. Carol Wood, former president of the Association for Women in Mathematics, calls the book a "small treasure. I can think of no better advice to give a young mathematician than 'Be like Julia'."

She has won many other awards for her writing, including both the Pólya Prize and the Beckenbach Book Prize of the Mathematical Association of America.

John Ewing, executive director of the American Mathematical Society, reflecting on her work, says: "She has a special talent for understanding mathematicians and their culture. She understands us.

She is the Boswell for mathematics—a biographer who has made the mathematical life understandable both to the general public and to mathematicians themselves. Her work has enriched our entire profession."

Response

I am very honored to receive the Communications Award of the Joint Policy Board for Mathematics.

I am also pleased because it gives me an opportunity to acknowledge five individuals who by their interest in communicating mathematics have played a role in my career.

The first of these was Robert L. Crowell, who, reading a housewife's article on perfect numbers in *Scientific American*, invited her to do "a little book on numbers" for his family publishing firm, a kind of firm that unfortunately no longer exists.

The second and the third were my sister and brother-in-law, Julia and Raphael Robinson, who were like most mathematicians eager to communicate the joys of their subject. Their attitude was that if they could interest Julia's nonmathematical sister, Constance, in mathematics, why couldn't she interest others? To a certain extent they risked their professional reputations to back me, first in writing *From Zero to Infinity* and then in writing the life of the incomparable German mathematician David Hilbert—an audacious project.

The fourth is Klaus Peters, now the president of AK Peters Ltd., but at that time the mathematics editor of Springer-Verlag. It was Klaus who dared to take a life of Hilbert written by a woman who was not a mathematician, who was not a German, who had not personally known Hilbert and publish it under the distinguished imprint of Springer.

The fifth is Don Albers, the publications director of the Mathematical Association of America, who is simply indefatigable in his efforts to urge others to communicate the charm and excitement and reality of mathematics. But, in addition, in my own case he has permitted me to essentially design my last two books, *The Search for E. T. Bell* and *Julia, A Life in Mathematics*—for me, another part of the communication process in which I have not been able to participate in the past.

So I accept with great pleasure the Communications Award of the Joint Policy Board, both for myself and for these five who have played such important roles in my own career—and, may I also say, for everyone from research mathematicians to high school teachers—who make the effort to communicate to others the beauty of the subject that a great mathematician called "the Queen of the Sciences" and an unknown poet described as always "fresh as May."