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Obituary: Norton Juster

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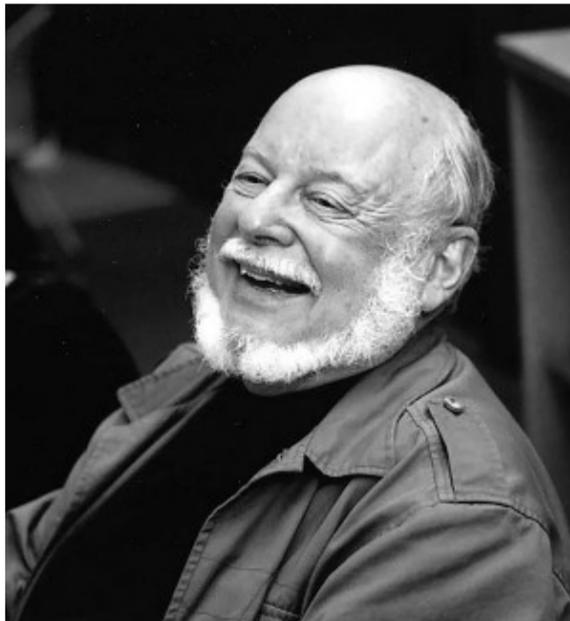


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Children's author Norton Juster, widely praised for the wordplay in his clever and whimsical books for young readers, including the much-loved *The Phantom Tollbooth*, died on March 8 at his home in Northampton, Mass., following complications from a recent stroke. He was 91.



Norton Juster.

Juster was born June 2, 1929 in Brooklyn, N.Y. and grew up there, graduating from James Madison High School. He earned his B.A. in architecture at the University of Pennsylvania in 1952, the same year he won a Fulbright fellowship to pursue graduate study in city planning at the University of Liverpool's School of Architecture in England. Juster served in the U.S. Navy from 1954–1957, where his assignments in the Civil Engineering Corps included building airfields in Morocco and Newfoundland. Following his military service, Juster returned to New York and received a grant from the Ford Foundation to write a book about urban perceptions.

But instead of completing that project, he began writing a story inspired by his own childhood about "a boy named Milo who didn't know what to do with himself—not just sometimes, but always." Juster kept at it, writing in his off hours, while living in an apartment in a Brooklyn Heights brownstone. He showed early drafts of the tale to his friend and housemate, Jules Feiffer, a young *Village Voice* cartoonist who soon produced some sketches to illustrate the story. The project went on to be Juster's first novel, *The Phantom Tollbooth* (Random House, 1961). The colorful backstory of *Tollbooth's* inception is the subject of a 2013 documentary, *The Phantom Tollbooth: Beyond Expectations*, directed by Hannah Jayanti.

The book, which follows Milo as he drives his pedal car past the Tollbooth into the fantasy world known as the Lands Beyond, quickly became a bestseller. It has never gone out of print and has sold more than four million copies since its

release. *The Phantom Tollbooth* was adapted as an animated film in 1970, and a musical adaptation premiered at the John F. Kennedy Center in 2007.

In addition to *The Phantom Tollbooth*, Juster wrote and illustrated *The Dot and the Line: A Romance in Lower Mathematics* (Random House, 1963), which was adapted for film by MGM and renowned animator Chuck Jones and narrated by Robert Morley. It won the 1965 Academy Award for Animated Short Film. In 2017, it was adapted as a musical piece and performed at Carnegie Hall featuring John Lithgow as narrator.

Though he had made an auspicious debut in the children's book world, Juster was simultaneously building his architecture career, having launched his own firm in 1960. During this very busy decade of the 1960s, he also taught environmental design at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn alongside lifelong friend and fellow architect Earl Pope, and in 1964 Juster married graphic designer Jeanne Ray, with whom he welcomed a daughter.



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In 1970 Juster and Pope embarked on a new phase of their professional lives by joining the founding faculty of Hampshire College in Amherst, Mass. With that change, Juster moved with his family to Buckland, Mass., where he and Pope continued their architectural work in the expanded firm, Juster Pope Frazier. The company is still in operation and its featured projects have included buildings on the campuses of Hampshire, Smith, and Amherst Colleges; buildings in Colonial Williamsburg; and the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art in Amherst. Carle was a friend of Juster's and had illustrated Juster's 1982 picture book *Otter Nonsense* (Philomel).

Juster retired from teaching in 1992 and from his architecture practice in 1996, though he continued writing. He wrote two picture books illustrated by Chris Raschka and inspired by his granddaughter: *The Hello, Goodbye Window* (Hyperion/Michael di Capua, 2005), for which Raschka won the 2006 Caldecott Medal, and a sequel, *Sourpuss and Sweetie Pie* (Scholastic/Michael di Capua, 2008). In 2010, Juster and Feiffer reunited for the picture book *The Odious Ogre* (Hyperion/Michael di Capua, 2010). At the time, Juster quipped, "We realized it was such fun working together that we made a pact: we are prepared to do a new book every 50 years." The duo spoke with *PW* then about what it was like teaming up again.

Juster's wife of 54 years, Jeanne, died in 2018. He is survived by his daughter Emily and granddaughter Tori, both of Amherst. A celebration of Juster's life is being planned for a later date.

Juster's friend and collaborator Jules Feiffer shared this remembrance: "Throwing out my garbage one day in the sidewalk garbage can outside the apartment I had just moved into in a Hicks Street brownstone in Brooklyn Heights, I ran into Norton, a ground-floor tenant, who was also throwing out garbage, and we started exchanging wisecracks, which continued nonstop through our later collaborations, his marriage, my marriages, his move to teach at Amherst, and my move to the Upper West Side, and later, the Hamptons and my present little island. We would lose contact and then resume, months later. The wisecracks never improved or diminished. He was my oldest friend, I loved him and he pissed me off, and we managed to concoct a classic together. I miss him badly. Who knew?"

Gail Hochman, Juster's longtime literary agent, reminisced, "What we all remember most was the twinkle in his eye. He would sit very placidly with the beginnings of a smile, and he would say something very straight that was actually very funny. Wordplay, a pun, a joke. The whole delivery made it really charming. I also remember having him come and do a school event at my kids' school in Brooklyn. The kids were falling over each other to talk to him or ask a question or show him their diorama based on his book, all kinds of things. He did his presentation, answered some questions, and the whole event was still going on at full force when he suddenly takes a harmonica out of his pocket and plays a little song. And then he just continued the event answering questions and talking to the kids. It was like they were sitting there with a kind of god in their midst."

Author and children's literature historian Leonard S. Marcus worked on an annotated edition of Juster's most popular book. He offered these words as tribute: "When asked what inspired him to write *The Phantom Tollbooth*, Norton liked to say that he wrote it to avoid having to think about another book for which the Ford Foundation had awarded him a grant. As 1950s Americans flocked to the suburbs in droves, it was to be an essay for teens on the rewards of urban living. The Foundation's money had allowed him to quit his day job as an architect. But the research required for the project soon overwhelmed him—in much the same way that Milo feels overwhelmed by his schoolwork and the world of facts. Norton, too, needed to escape to the Lands Beyond! He never got around to writing the Ford book, and as a result he lived in dread for years afterward—or so he said—that the Foundation would come after him. While researching *The Annotated Phantom Tollbooth*, I stopped by the Foundation's library one day and was able to track down Norton's grant proposal on microfilm. When our *APT* was published, I dropped off a copy for the library's collection. Norton laughed and said, 'Maybe now I'm finally off the hook!'"

Author Suzanne Collins, a true *Tollbooth* devotee, who contributed a celebratory essay for a 50th-anniversary edition of the book, remembered her friend Juster this way: "I first met Norton during elementary school in the brilliant pages of *The Phantom Tollbooth*," she recalled. "Our assignment was to write a new chapter for Milo and Tock, which turned out to be my first and only piece of fan fiction. Thirty-five years later, as we became friends, I realized where all the humor, kindness, sharp commentary, and joyousness in the book came from—straight from his heart. Mine's breaking now, but it's a comfort to know I will always be able to find the Whether Man on page 18. And that he will be there for generations to come."

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