

**Keeping the Balance**  
**Robin Fidler Brancato**  
**Hagan 1946-53; 1955-56; 1961**



Looking back on my fairly long life—will I make it into my mid-nineties, like Hagan Director, Sis Wenrich. I'm pleased to think that I've usually found a good balance between physical and mental activity. As a young kid growing up in Wyomissing, Pennsylvania, I loved baseball almost as much as books. My mother, having suffered the loss by drowning of an older brother, took me for daily swimming lessons, starting when I was five. The plan succeeded so well that I still swim every day, June through September. And even earlier than those lessons, when I was three, I supposedly picked up the local newspaper and pretended to read it to my parents. The point being that, from early on, I loved switching from body to mind.

Starting at age ten, when I first came to Hagan (in 1948), my range of physical activities widened. Not only was I introduced to the Olympic challenge of swimming across the Delaware and canoeing down from Dingmans Ferry, but I also discovered archery, soccer, and *deck tennis*. I don't remember curling up to read books in those camp summers, but our imaginations were certainly stimulated in the creation of all those slogans, song lyrics, and skits.



**Robin canoeing with Inge Woermann Rau Coleman at the 2017 Hagan Reunion**

In high school (for me that was high *schools*, plural--I went to three because of family moves) and in college (the University of Pennsylvania), adjusting came more easily, I'm sure, because of playing on women's field hockey, basketball, and tennis teams. I kept up the balance by focusing on reading and writing in those years, including contributing to school publications and majoring in Creative Writing. Tennis was the only sport I continued beyond college, but books, both reading them and writing them, became my main interest.

After graduation I came to New York City, where I shared an apartment with college friends, worked for a publisher, took graduate courses, met my husband in Philosophy of Education, and went on to teach literature and writing for many years. (Even now I teach courses in the short story in a program for retired people. In the most recent one I used stories from *The New Yorker* magazine's fiction podcasts.)

When my two sons were pre-school age, my husband got a Fulbright Grant, and we were delighted to spend two years living in Modena, Italy. On our return I went back to teaching. I figured I'd write during summers, but while the boys were young it was impossible. Eventually they went to Camp Miller, at which point I began writing my first novel for young readers.



**Robin with son, Chris, and actor Forest Whitaker,  
at shooting of Chris's TV series, *Godfather of Harlem***

That one, *Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree*, published in 1975, was followed by nine others, seven more novels and two nonfiction books. My kids and my students provided inspiration and good material. I was mostly able to juggle writing and teaching, with some physical activity thrown in. In those years, when I wasn't writing, or teaching, or visiting schools and libraries to talk about my books, I was spending time with my family, often traveling with them. Along the way we made a multi-week return to Italy, spent some time in St. Ives, Cornwall, England, and had shorter visits to Cape Cod and Sag Harbor, New York.



**Robin at the top of Mount Etna, Sicily**

So how is the balancing act functioning at this point? Pretty well, considering. I'm sitting here in Sag Harbor, surrounded by books, many of which I'm trying to force myself to donate to library sales. I swam my half hour today, and I'm waiting for six members of my New Jersey book club to come tomorrow, so that we can discuss a novel by talented Nigerian writer Oyinkan Braithwaite called *My Sister the Serial Killer*. My writing continues in journals I've been keeping since 1996, a commentary of every book I read or film or play I see—so useful to keep memory problems at bay.