Miracle on my home computer

It is easy to complain about how technology has ruined our lives: allowed us to substitute electronic relationships for personal ones, vanquished the fine art of letter writing, relegated us to the couch where we grow fat and slothful, and obviated the need to learn practical skills, like reading maps, that could actually come in handy in remote parts of the world where the Hertz NeverLost System is unavailable. (On the other hand, if God had not wanted us to text on our PDAs all day long, then why did he give us opposable thumbs? Or was it Darwin who did that? Confusing.)

Anyway, what I’m getting at is that just when you feel you’ve had enough with the kilobytes and the microchips, the pinpoint marketing and the pop-up ads, not to mention the 5-inch-thick user manual badly translated from Korean explaining how to program your toaster when all you really want is a half bagel with a bit of cream cheese and you feel so desperate that you might actually go out and do something real, such as go on a 3-mile power walk without wearing your iPod — that is the very moment when you should be most open to miracles. For example, when you first hear the joke, “I tend to be the butt of anxious giver of unsolicited advice.” “I tend to be the butt of the joke,” she said in a recent interview. “... the most annoying... impossible and sometimes foolish person in my tales is me.”

The book starts with lengthy discussions of her fears pre-90-day visit: disorder to her highly scheduled existence, clashes with Alexander over unsolicited motherly advice and, most important, sticky fingers on her adult-appropriate furnishings. (No. 1 on her list of house rules: “Of all the places to put your dirt in, allow me to suggest our living room (there are four in the house), where you would sit down on the floor inquiring, ‘When is it my turn — I want to use your potty.’”)

But she goes on to describe the joys of spending so much time with Toby (4 months), Isaac (almost 2 years) and Olivia (5 years). The moments with Olivia (known as O in the book) are some of the book’s highlights. O spends the summer following her grandmother everywhere — bedroom, kitchen, office, even bathroom (there are four in the house), where she would “sit down on the floor inquiring, ‘When is it my turn — I want to use your potty.’” Viorst wrote."

Courtesy of Free Press

Writer Judith Viorst is best known for depicting her son Alexander as a child in a beloved storybook. Her latest tome considers him from her new position: grandparent.

Alexander returns

Cleveland Park’s Judith Viorst pens new book

By BETH COPE
Current Staff Writer

Cleveland Park resident Judith Viorst is best known for her children’s bestseller “Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day.” But in fact she’s written nearly three-dozen books, only a third of them for children. The other two-thirds are largely wry accounts of her climb from twentysomething bohemian to seventysomething grandmother of seven (“When Did I Stop Being Twenty and Other Injustices,” “How Did I Get to Be Forty and Other Atrocities,” etc.). Her latest volume, published two weeks ago, returns to an old subject matter — her son Alexander — but presents it from a new perspective.

“Alexander and the Wonderful, Marvelous, Excellent, Terrific Ninety Days” is about the three months when Viorst and her husband, Milton, opened their doors to their son, his wife and their three small children while their house was renovated. And no, the title isn’t a fabrication (though perhaps hyperbole); Viorst did find it an excellent experience — though certainly not incident-free.

As with much of Viorst’s work, this new book centers on a character: a “super-scheduled, overanxious giver of unsolicited advice.” “I tend to be the butt of the joke,” she said in a recent interview. “... the most annoying, sometimes impossible and sometimes foolish person in my tales is me.”

The book starts with lengthy discussions of her fears pre-90-day visit: disorder to her highly scheduled existence, clashes with Alexander over unsolicited motherly advice and, most important, sticky fingers on her adult-appropriate furnishings. (No. 1 on her list of house rules: “Of all the places that chocolate shouldn’t be eaten, the number-one place is the wine-velvet chair in the library.”)

But she goes on to describe the joys of spending so much time with Toby (4 months), Isaac (almost 2 years) and Olivia (5 years). The moments with Olivia (known as O in the book) are some of the book’s highlights. O spends the summer following her grandmother everywhere — bedroom, kitchen, office, even bathroom (there are four in the house), where she would “sit down on the floor inquiring, ‘When is it my turn — I want to use your potty.’” Viorst wrote.

By JESSICA GOULD
Current Correspondent

Someday in South Korea, a dog poops on a crowded subway, and its owner refuses to clean it up. A fellow passenger snaps a photograph, posts it on a blog, and the “Dog Poop Girl” is instantly famous.

In Canada, a teenager films himself twirling a makeshift light saber. He deposits the video on a dusty shelf and forgets about it. Several months later, someone finds it and posts it on the Internet. The “Star Wars Kid” is a YouTube smash.

And in Washington, D.C., a Capitol Hill staffer begins blogging about her steamy sexcapades. A popular blog discovers the site, and within days, the sex lives of “The Washingtonienne” and her beaux are broadcast to thousands.

For years, the Internet has been synonymous with freedom — of information and of speech. At the click of a mouse, we can access seemingly infinite amounts of data, connect...
Viorst
From Page 19

And there are certain matters
Olivia can’t stop wondering about. “I
announce my age every decade or so in the
titles of my books,” Viorst wrote, “... I con-
announce my age every decade or so in the
titles of my books.”

First, there was the question of grand-
parental intrusion. “I don’t think Alexander
and [his wife] Marla worry as much as they
should,” Viorst said during a talk Friday at
the Jewish Community Center of Greater
Washington, where she spoke to sympathetic
ears. “Having them live under my roof
seemed a golden opportunity to raise their
anxiety level.

And then there were the changes in par-
enting over the past 30 or 40 years, includ-
ing “the disappearance, the banishment of
the playpen,” which Viorst “cannot fathom.”

“We need a national Bring Back the
Playpen movement,” she wrote. “I’ve already
written lyrics for a ‘Where Have All the
Playpens Gone?’ national song. ... I’d
like to recommend as the motto of this
Bring Back the Playpens movement, a stir-
ing Free to Pee — Not You, Just Me.”

But by the end of the book, Viorst is
writing of her achievements in suppressing
the urge to over(grand)parent, partly by
repeating mantras like “Don’t judge, advise,
or criticize. Respect their boundaries and
choices. Accept who they are.” And she’s
discussing the joys of being a grandmother.
“It’s delicious being a grandma — I love
being a grandma,” she told the crowd
Friday. “People say it’s parenthood one step
removed. I say it’s parenthood one blissful
step removed.”

In the interview, Viorst said she’s finding
that readers relate to her tales of searching
for one’s role with respect to the grandchildren.
“I think people really are into this whole
business of restraint and respect for their
children’s rights to carve their own lives and
raise their grandchildren as they choose,”
she said. “The issue of keeping your mouth
shut seems to not just be an issue for me.”

Readers who appreciate the wit in this
book might enjoy some of Viorst’s poetry
collections, particularly the 1987 “When Did
I Stop Being Twenty,” which includes poems
from four of her other books. Chapters
2 and 3 are “Married Life” and “Mid-Life.”

Right in between the first two, Viorst
moved to Washington. “I had been living in
Greenwich Village, and I wanted something
like that here, because I was very grumpy
about leaving Greenwich Village,” she
explained. “So we lived in Dupont Circle in a
brownstone, and we took in boarders.
They actually bought several houses —
all on Q Street — and rented them out,
because they were practically giving them
away back then,” she said. “It was pretty
interesting, because remember, we were
there during the beginning of the ‘60s, and
every strange, weird, complicated person ... 
found their way to our rooming house.
... We were much more proactive to ask
people if they have any references or if they
were employed, so someone would say,
‘Well, we just want to live here and make a
little home,’ and then 18 other people would move in,”

The Cleveland Park house now plays
host to an extended Viorst clan, which
includes three daughters-in-law and seven
grandchildren. The whole crowd will
descend for Thanksgiving, which the
Viorsts combine with Hanukkah in an
effort to celebrate both holidays together.
This year, they will add a new tradition,
after Olivia suggested adding an additional
element to the festivities. “On the Friday
after Thanksgiving, we will be lighting the
menorah in our Halloween costumes,” said
Viorst.

internet
From Page 19

Solove, who began contemplat-
ing privacy in the context of the
Internet in the 1990s, compares it
to the Star Wars phenomenon, which included
“very intimate information about [someone’s] sex life,” the law
she said in his book.

According to Solove, the
Internet threatens to trample the
very freedoms it once enhanced.
“This is a book about how the free
flow of information on the Internet
can make us less free,” he states in
the introduction to his new book,
“The Future of Reputation: Gossip,
Rumor and Privacy on the
Internet.” It’s also a book about
what we can do about it.

Solove, a West End resident, is
an associate professor at George
Washington University Law
School. His previous book, “The
Digital Person: Technology and
Privacy in the Information Age,”
described how bank statements
and credit cards create digital
dossiers detailing our lives. That
book, he says, is about what other
entities do to us. “This one talks
about what we’re doing to our-
selves,” he says.

According to Solove, the
Internet can make our fleeting rev-
elations permanent and dig up
once-buried history. In addition to
the Dog Poop Girl, the Star Wars
Kid and The Washingtonienne, he
mentions a man who spent time in
prison, wrote about it and now
finds himself dogged by the experi-
ence on dates. “All this information
about what we have done on the
Internet stays there,” Solove says.

“So the ability to start anew, to
have a second chance, to find
redemption, goes away.” That’s
especially problematic when we
aren’t the ones publicizing our
Kid, whether he likes it or not, is
always going to be the Star Wars
Kid,” he says. “Apparently, it had a
really horrible impact on his life.”

For that reason, Solove argues,
the law must be expanded to “mod-
ernize” our concept of privacy.

Historically privacy law stayed
away from public spaces, but, now,
he says, it’s time for that change.

As the dog-poop incident demon-
strates, isolated events can reach far
beyond their immediate audi-
ence. “The laws should begin to
recognize some degree of privacy
in public,” he says in his book.

Plus, in cases like The
Washingtonienne, which included
“very intimate information about
[someone’s] sex life,” the law
should provide incentives to keep
that information out of the public
domain. “An incentive could be the
threat of being sued,” he says.

Broaderening privacy law to suit
the Information Age won’t be easy,
though, and any expansion must
not restrict First Amendment rights.
After all, he says, “if we go too far
in the privacy department, it chills
free speech.”

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ing privacy in the context of the
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And unfortunately, there are no easy answers. “The privacy and
free speech are great values, and
dealing with situations when they
clash is difficult because one clear-
ly doesn’t outweigh the other,” he
says in the e-mail. “A delicate bal-
ance must be struck.”

To learn more about Solove’s
book, visit futureofreputation.com.