

COUNTDOWN TO BOSTON

3 DAYS



## "D" is for Denckla

I have previously noted in this countdown series the iconic status achieved by two women in the CNS: Isabelle Rapin and Nina Schor, or simply "Isabelle" and "Nina," icons needing only one name. There are likely several others who currently are, or very soon may be considered icons, although naming them might spark a more heated argument than you would think, with one notable exception: no one would dispute Martha Bridge Denckla's qualifications.

I don't really know Dr. Denckla personally, other than in passing, but child neurology is a small community, so I know many people who do, of course; many of them are, in fact, members of the child neurology community and the CNS primarily *because* of Martha (we'll go with the iconic first name designation from here on). Ask any of them about her and you'd better take a seat; you're going to be there for a while. Those who know her well, who were mentored by her and charted a career course inspired by her don't merely speak highly of her; their voice quickly rises and their speech comes out in a mixed rush of reverence and enthusiasm. And then, a moment later, they relax, having communicated the first thing that comes to mind – her lofty professional stature – before unspooling a steady stream of warm praise about her generous gift for being both a wise and caring friend and mentor, always leavened by disarming ease and easy laughter.



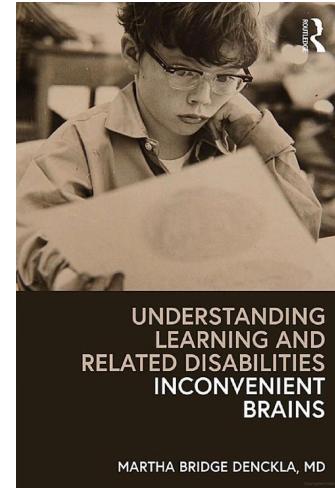
At first blush all those qualifying as friends and mentees might blanch at the suggestion that we should maybe sell t-shirts at this year's CNS meeting with Martha's image hovering over the well-known quote, "Well-behaved women seldom make history." While no one would suggest she is ill-mannered, no one would dispute she has made history. In a year that finds us both celebrating the founders and rueing their still, too-freshly felt absence, it's wonderful to be able to not only celebrate Martha's continued vital presence and active influence, but to recognize her role as, quite literally, a founder, having founded the field of child behavioral neurology. She is also making history of a sort by being the first woman to have an individual award named after her; this year's meeting will be highlighted on Thursday by presentation of the inaugural Martha B. Denckla Award Lecture by Elizabeth-Berry Kravis.



Let's go back for a moment to that notion that "well-behaved women seldom make history." I mean that only in a playful, suggestive sense. Most of our parents--most of us who are parents, for that matter -- harbor doubts at one point or another about the sort of people we or our kids hang out with, worried that we or they will grow up to be "the wrong kind of person". Hang out with giants and you might end up being a giant yourself. Which is precisely what happened. Hanging out with the likes of Norman Geschwind early in her career, was no guarantee that Martha would find herself becoming later in life a giant in the field of child behavioral neurology, but it also shouldn't have surprised her, or anyone around her. Following Sid Carter's advice at the College of Physicians and Surgeons, Columbia University was not the best or surest way to settle into a comfortable life of clinical routine unruffled by breakthroughs in research or leading to challenging collaborations, like Martha's with neuropsychologist, Rita Rudel, exploring dyslexia and ADHD. But, what did she expect?

Our parents also tell us and we tell our kids to stay inside the fence and don't go wandering off. But Martha has climbed fences and wandered off in multiple directions throughout her career, spending what some might consider an inordinate amount of time with parents, educators and policymakers. Parental common sense says that kind of profligate wayfaring and indiscriminate boundary-crossing can only end badly, right? And how, one must ask, can dumbing things down or making complex scientific concepts and arguments seem simple be a good thing or model "good behavior"?

In a golden age of marketing monomania, where the value of everything is measured by money, where did she get the idea, who did she hang out with that told her it was OK to develop something as crude, simple, effective and non-lucrative as the Rapid Automatized Naming (RAN) test? Would a good scientist – would a well behaved woman scientist, no less – write a useful, approachable guide for parents like *Understanding Learning and Related Disabilities: Inconvenient Brains* when there are monographs to be published in peer reviewed journals? Of course not. (Her CV amply suggests one can do both).



In the end, it's a good thing Martha Denckla chose early on not to be a "good girl" or a "well behaved woman." She made history by making it possible through her pioneering work for generations of so-called under-achieving, slow learning children to come out of hiding and get the help they need to perhaps, in time, make some history themselves.



*Elizabeth Berry-Kravis, MD, PhD is the winner of the first (2021) Martha B. Denckla Award.*

Until tomorrow (the letter C),  
Roger

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### On-line Registration is Open!

Registration is now open for the long awaited 50th Golden Anniversary Meeting of the Child Neurology Society in Boston. Registrants attending this milestone meeting live and in-person in Boston will want to register early (some sessions are limited and reservation-only). You may also use this link to modify your registration as needed, including switching from live in-person to Virtual, or vice versa.

[Click to Register](#)

### 2021 CNS 50th Annual Meeting

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