Samuel Torrey Orton Award
To Jack M. Fletcher: Citation

Presented to
Jack M. Fletcher, Ph.D.
Professor of Pediatrics,
Department of Pediatrics
& Center for Academic and Reading Skills
University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston
Houston, Texas

In recognition of your commitment to
effective reading instruction
through your dedicated research into
language development
and other cognitive skills in children and adults
with learning and attention difficulties.
November 14, 2003

Acceptance of the Samuel Torrey Orton Award
November 14, 2003, San Diego, California

Jack M. Fletcher

It is a true honor to receive the Samuel Torrey Orton Award from the oldest professional organization on reading and learning disabilities. I thank the International Dyslexia Association and its president, Nancy Hennessy, and the Board of Directors for this distinction. Many of you undoubtedly know that the award was first given in 1966 to Lauretta Bender, and I mention this because she was the first on a long list of true Hall of
Famers on dyslexia research, instruction, and advocacy. I really wondered why I had been selected—I’m not that old—but then I noticed that my partner in crime, Reid Lyon—who is grayer and a little older—was selected in 2000, and that one of the other three balding North Floridians who has engaged in dyslexia research, Bruce Pennington, was selected last year. So I felt more at home and accept the award with great personal pleasure, recognizing it for the distinction that it represents. I am truly honored!

The price we all have to pay is that I have to speak for a few minutes, which makes me terribly nervous without any of my usual props: lots of data and too little time. Those of you who have attended my presentations in the past will be relieved to know that taking notes will not be difficult, that I am speaking slowly, and won’t be presenting what my colleague, Maureen Dennis, describes as my terrible text only, left hemisphere slides. Of course, this means that you can’t e-mail later and ask for the PowerPoints! But I was able to think of a few things to say, thanks to a dream I had.

It was an anxiety dream after I learned I had to speak without slides. I dreamed of a meeting in Heaven among Samuel Orton’s first patient with dyslexia, MP, and Dr. Orton, Norman Geschwind, Alvin and Isabelle Liberman, and Reid Lyon. This assumes that the whole language types finally got to Reid and blew him up with a loaded e-mail before he could get to the colleges of education. Either that or he gave me more bad news about my last grant submission and I blew him up. At any rate, MP convenes a truly heavenly meeting of these distinguished scientists. In opening the meeting—I have a pad by my bed for really good quotes—MP said “Dr. Orton described my dyslexia when I was 16 in 1925. At the time, no one seemed to understand the problem I had, just what problems I didn’t have. What is this dyslexia that everyone still talks about at the IDA meetings every year?” Dr. Orton said that he was still “convinced that dyslexia, or strephosymbolia, was a language-based disability, representing a problem with cerebral dominance; a failure of illusion of the images from the nondominant visual sensory cortex and, therefore, confusion between the visually presented stimulus and its remembered concept.” Geschwind said, “I still think Orton was right, but dyslexia is best understood as a disconnection syndrome where areas of the brain that work in isolation are not connected, so that there is a disconnection between the area of the brain that can process the form of the word and the area of the brain that makes it a linguistic