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Wild Things

The Joy of Reading Children's Literature as an Adult

Bruce Handy

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Contents

Introduction
xiii

1
New Eyes, New Ears: Margaret Wise Brown and *Goodnight Moon*
1

2
Runaways: Family Drama in Picture Books—and Well Beyond
25

Blues2P_Handy_WildThings_EG.indd 7 6/15/17 3:19 PM
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3
Once upon a Time and In and Out of Weeks: Fairy Tales and Maurice Sendak
43

4
Why a Duck? The Uses of Talking Animals from Aesop to Beatrix Potter to Olivia the Pig
77

5
You Have to Know How: Dr. Seuss vs. Dick and Jane
107

6
Kids Being Kids: Ramona Quimby, American Pest
139

7
God and Man in Narnia
161

8
One Nation: Washington's Cherry Tree, Rosa Parks's Bus, and Oz
183

Blues2P_Handy_WildThings_EG.indd 8 6/15/17 3:19 PM
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9

Going on Seventeen (Or Not): *Little Women*, Little Houses, and Peter Pans

205

10

The End: Dead Pets, Dead Grandparents, and the Glory of Everything

239

Afterword

263

Acknowledgments

267

Appendix

271

Bibliography

279

Index

289

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“Remember always that the parents *buy* the books,
and that the children never read them.”

—Samuel Johnson, quoted by Hester Lynch Piozzi,
Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson, LL.D.,
During the Last Twenty Years of His Life

“SOME PIG”

—E. B. White, *Charlotte’s Web*

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look at the world from below and note its less respectable aspects, just as little children playing on the floor can see the chewing gum stuck to the underside of polished mahogany tables and the hems of silk dresses held up with safety pins." Raise the perspective a few feet, to see the soup stains on ties and the sour expressions on faces that think they aren't being watched, and you have a pretty good description of what the better adult novelists do as well.

Lurie is one of a number of astute and lively writers on children's literature who have emerged in recent decades. Two more favorites of mine are Leonard S. Marcus, the critic, biographer, and historian; and the late Maurice Sendak, who was not only the creator of what will surely be some of the most enduring picture books of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but also a knowing, entertaining, and always generous critic. (It is almost unfair how good a critic Sendak was, though it is nice to have him in your pocket as a rejoinder whenever anyone insists that only people who can't make art bother with criticism.) *The New Yorker* has a long history of taking kids' books seriously and in recent years has published terrific essays on the subject by Joan Acocella, Adam Gopnik, Louis Menand, and John Updike. You will see their names cited throughout this book, and I am grateful to them for their insights and inspiration. I am equally indebted to the biographers listed at the back of this book; happily, someone has written at least one good life of nearly every major nonliving figure in children's literature. I hope an ambitious author gets cracking soon on Sendak.

But just as children's books are cordoned off in cozy kiddie sections at libraries and bookstores, and in isolated (though profitable) imprints in publishing houses, so too when it comes to criticism. It's a shame, for instance, that *The Horn Book Magazine*, which has been covering children's literature since 1924, isn't more widely read; it's full of smart, graceful writing. Elsewhere, however, kids' books are

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often written about in one of two limiting ways: either tightly swaddled in academicese, with all the spirit sweated out of them—"Seuss's books share with many others of the 1950s and 1960s an argument for the aesthetic life amid the everyday," *sigh*—or reviewed in strictly utilitarian terms as if books were cars or blenders being tested by *Consumer Reports*: Is this the sort of story that will engage a child? Does it lend itself to reading aloud? Can I give it as a gift without fear of embarrassment? Will it get the kids to go to sleep before the Game Six tip-off?

Not that those aren't legitimate questions. Here is another: Why haven't picture books earned the same pop culture cachet that comics and graphic novels have? Picture books are like poetry to comics' prose, a form every bit as sophisticated if not more so, and no less worthy of adults' attention and enjoyment. In a fairer world, Ferdinand the bull, Olivia the pig and Sam-I-Am the whatever-he-is, would be mentioned right alongside Krazy Kat, Superman, Popeye, Charlie Brown, and Lucy when discussing archetypal American characters. They might even deserve a seat at the table with Huck and Gatsby.

But this book is not an argument—or maybe it is, but only implicitly. One thing I hope to convey is the sheer pleasure of reading children's books, not just to whatever children you have on hand but also for your own enjoyment and enlightenment. As Ursula K. Le Guin has written, "Revisiting a book loved in childhood may be principally an act of nostalgia; I knew a woman who read *The Wizard of Oz* every few years because it 'made her remember being a child.' But returning after a decade or two or three to The Snow Queen or Kim, you may well discover a book far less simple and unambiguous than the one you remembered. That shift and deepening of meaning can be a revelation both about the book and yourself."

I can second that. One of the unexpected joys of parenthood, for me, was reencountering books from my childhood that I had loved

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and that, much to my relief, I found I still loved. Reading bedtime stories to my kids (daughter Zoë, son Isaac; two years apart) was—not always, but often—like revisiting a favorite old neighborhood after many years and finding not only that it hadn't been chain-stored into submission or paved over altogether, but that it was far more interesting and complex than I knew. I had vivid childhood memories of Dr. Seuss, like every American born in the past sixty years, but I was surprised by just how aggressive some of his stories are—to the point that many Seuss characters seem to be sublimating anger or frustration in a way that might strike a parent as very, even too familiar. (We all have those feelings . . . no?) I had vivid memories of Beverly Cleary's suburban comedies, too, but was struck and moved, as I read the books to my kids more or less sequentially, by the deepening emotional richness of her novels; you could sense her growing as an artist on the page, especially as her focus moves from Henry Huggins and his dog, Ribsy, to the sisters Beezus and Ramona. Her masterpiece, *Ramona the Pest*, a psychologically acute study of a girl struggling against social conventions (in her case, kindergarten's), is like Henry James with much shorter sentences. I'm sort of joking, but I'm sort of not, and a few years after I first had this epiphany I discovered that Beatrix Potter had also garnered comparisons to James, and from no less an authority than Graham Greene, so if you find the reference a bit much, blame him too.

Some reunions disappointed. I had loved *Curious George* and its sequels as a kid but, thirty years on, I discovered the books carried with them a stale, colonial aroma. I also wearied of the series' random, and-then-*this*-happened narratives, which reminded me of the long, rambling, frankly boring stories that young children themselves tell. (In my experience, kids' drawings and paintings tend to be far more engaging than kids' narratives.) A few years post–*Curious George*, my children and I took up Madeleine L'Engle. I remembered *A Wrinkle*

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in Time as gripping, mind-expanding, and spooky, and it was still all that, though it also proved preachy and on close inspection harbored within its interplanetary adventure a now dated Cold War fable about collectivism—Ayn Rand for kids. That I could forgive, or even find interesting in an archaeological way; a less forgivable problem is that the novel ends abruptly and unsatisfyingly.

Oh well. Taste is always a mystery, and never more so than with children. At one point when my kids were very young and particularly unfathomable, they couldn't get enough of a series of books based on the Disney Winnie-the-Pooh movies. These were clumsily written, banal little stories about being nice to your friends, taking care of the environment, celebrating differences—the twenty-first-century, middle-class American version of *Serve God / Hate lies*.[1] The illustrations, ham-handed takeoffs on Disney's already watered-down versions of E. H. Shepard's original illustrations, were hopeless; and is there any cultural artifact more dispiriting than a shoddy children's book? Less stories than licensing deals, these were a cheap corporate product in the guise of something nourishing. Eventually I got fed up with reading them over and over and decided to force the kids to listen to the original A. A. Milne books, which I found charming and droll and they, shrugging off the whimsy and irony, found only "OK" (their go-to adjective in those days when damning with faint praise).

But then, in the final chapter of *The House at Pooh Corner*, came this curveball:

> Christopher Robin was going away. Nobody knew why he was going; nobody knew where he was going; indeed, nobody knew

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[1]Again, if any actual children are reading this: being nice to friends, taking care of the environment, and celebrating differences are all good things, but they are not very often the basis for interesting stories.

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> why he knew that Christopher Robin *was* going away. But somehow or other everyone in the Forest felt that it was happening at last.

Milne never explains precisely what is going on here, but I take it to mean that Christopher Robin is being shipped off to boarding school, or maybe some heartless parent or governess has told him that he is getting too grown up to be talking to stuffed animals. Whatever the reason for his leaving, the crux of the story is that Christopher Robin has to break the bad news to Pooh. They go off for a walk together in the Hundred Acre Wood, discussing the special joys of doing "Nothing." They keep walking and talking about this and that, and you start to get the feeling that Christopher Robin is stalling for time, putting off the painful inevitable. Finally, from out of nowhere, he blurts:

> "I'm not going to do Nothing anymore."
> "Never again?" [asks Pooh.]
> "Well not so much. They don't let you."

Pooh, the bear of little brain, doesn't quite understand that, well, Christopher Robin is breaking up with him; he has only an inchoate sense that his world is changing and not for the better. And poor Christopher Robin, like so many males in this position, can't quite get the words out, stammering like a Hugh Grant character. It's a wrenching scene, in its way; Pooh's uncomprehending innocence makes it feel nearly cruel:

> "Pooh," said Christopher Robin earnestly, "if I—if I'm not quite—" he stopped and tried again—"Pooh, *whatever* happens, you will understand, won't you?"
>
> "Understand what?"

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of the complex bond between parent and child. Fairy tales, frightening yet soothing, help older children cope with their sometimes conflicting or unacknowledged emotions, while animal stories often turn the lens in the opposite direction, outward, offering insight into the ways of both the natural and human worlds. Dr. Seuss has taught several generations of children how to read while cheerleading for the anarchic power of imagination (especially his own); one moral of his oeuvre: discipline is not the enemy of creativity. Beverly Cleary's comedies of manners speak to the growing complexities of kids' roles as members of families and neighborhoods—as social creatures. L. Frank Baum used fantasy to create a kind of alternative American myth. C. S. Lewis did the same, and more explicitly, for Christianity. Louisa May Alcott and Laura Ingalls Wilder delineate the more personal passage from girlhood to womanhood; they show children how growing up is done, but from the inside, as story, not prescription. And finally there is E. B. White, who, in *Charlotte's Web*, crafted a masterly novel of ideas about what it means to lead a good life and how then to face death with grace.

So cradle to grave, as they say. One disclaimer: this is not intended to be a comprehensive history or survey or guide. It couldn't be; the ocean of children's books, even if you're trying to chart only its friendliest waters, is way too vast, too deep, too fluid, at least for me. One of the more humbling aspects of writing this book was that nearly all those I told about it asked if I would be including some childhood favorite of theirs I'd never heard of. I regret I didn't have room for those books and series, or for many of my own childhood favorites and more recent enthusiasms. Even the following list of authors and illustrators that I wished I'd had time and space to include—beyond passing mention, if that—is incomplete, but I offer it as a mea culpa: Hans Christian Andersen, Ludwig Bemelmans, Quentin Blake, Sandra Boynton, Andrew Clements, Christopher Paul Curtis, Roald

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Dahl, Ingri and Edgar Parin d'Aulaire, Edward Eager, P. D. Eastman, Kenneth Grahame, Daniel Handler, S. E. Hinton, Maira Kalman, Jon Klassen, Hilary Knight, Suzy Lee, Grace Lin, Betty Bao Lord[4], Robert McCloskey, Christopher Myers, Kadir Nelson, E. Nesbit, Katherine Paterson, Dav Pilkey, Dan Santat, Richard Scarry, William Steig, John Steptoe, J. R. R. Tolkien, P. L. Travers, Chris Van Allsburg, Mo Willems, Jacqueline Woodson. As of this writing, in early 2017, my newest favorite picture book (and current default baby gift) is *They All Saw a Cat* by Brendan Wenzel, published in 2016; it is his first work as both writer and illustrator, and I can't wait to see what he does next.

A special nod to J. K. Rowling, who created a true monument of contemporary children's literature, one I feel privileged to have experienced in "real time" alongside my kids—the closest thing they and I will come to experiencing what it must have been like to await a new Beatles album or the next installment of *David Copperfield.* But the Harry Potter epic has been so widely appreciated and so thoroughly analyzed I feel I have nothing to add to the conversation, except a piece of advice: if you are planning to read the series aloud to someone, and unless you are a professional actor, do not attempt "voices." You will soon be in over your head, and the whole thing, though spectacular, goes on *forever.*

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[4]Lord mostly writes for adults, but her children's novel, *In the Year of the Boar and Jackie Robinson* (2008), is a wonderful middle-grade story about a young Chinese immigrant growing up in Brooklyn who finds her way into American culture with the help of baseball.

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New Eyes, New Ears: Margaret Wise Brown and *Goodnight Moon*

At his daughter Chelsea's high school graduation, in 1997, then-president Bill Clinton addressed the assembled students and parents. "Indulge your folks if we seem a little sad or act a little weird," he told the graduates. "You see, today we are remembering your first day in school and all the triumphs and travails between then and now." Being Bill Clinton, he then went for the emotional jugular. "A part of us longs to hold you once more as we did when you could barely walk, to read to you just one more time from *Goodnight Moon*, or *Curious George*, or *The Little Engine That Could*." Poor Chelsea. She must have died inside, while her classmates likely rolled their eyes, but I bet at least half the parents started sniffling. Bill, so expert at reading crowds and delivering the goods, knew exactly what he was doing in name-dropping those books, all so evocative of bedtime and blankies, sippy cups and night-night. On the other hand, if he was

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trying to imply an artistic equivalence among the three titles, I would argue that the former president is nuts. *Curious George* and *The Little Engine That Could* have their moments, but *Goodnight Moon* is a transcendent masterpiece.

There isn't anything else quite like it in American letters. *Moby-Dick*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *Beloved* might all stake a claim to being the mythical Great American Novel, but *Goodnight Moon* stands alone as the totemic picture book of American babyhood. Here I give it a clear edge over Eric Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, its equally popular and brilliant board book rival, because *Goodnight Moon*, suffused with tenderness, joy, and mystery, is in no small sense *about* babyhood, though kudos to Eric Carle for creating his own transcendent masterpiece about a bug.

For many children, Margaret Wise Brown's deceptively simple little volume, with its illustrations by Clement Hurd, is their first exposure to something approaching narrative, and by dint of its sheer ubiquity, *Goodnight Moon* is surely one of the most formative influences on young American lives, up there with *Sesame Street* and the Disney princesses. More than that: from a parent's point of view, it's essential, like Balmex, Pampers, pacifiers, a stroller; it's gear. As happens with many new parents, my wife and I received multiple copies of *Goodnight Moon* (three, if memory serves) when our daughter was born. First published in 1947 to modest success, the book didn't take off until the 1960s and '70s, when, while no one was looking, its popularity seemingly grew overnight, like kudzu. As of 2016, according to the agent for Brown's estate, it had sold 26 million copies in various editions, which might make it the most popular picture book in America, pushing it past the longtime champion, the inexplicably beloved *The Poky Little Puppy.* Every year *Goodnight Moon* sells another 600,000 to 800,000 copies—which means, in a good year, there is roughly one *Goodnight Moon*

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both in their sense of scale—in the book's spreads the emphasis is on the great green room itself, a place for a child's eye to explore, rather than on the bunny, a small figure tucked away in the corner of most of the drawings—and in the bright, flat, unnatural color scheme, those electric greens and oranges and yellows rubbing against one another on the draperies and walls and floor to almost hallucinatory effect. It's easy to take *Goodnight Moon* for granted—as I said, it's practically gear—but look at it with brand-new eyes and it dazzles.

I had always pictured Margaret Wise Brown as a kindly gray-haired woman with an ample lap; I think I pictured her as my grandmother, or maybe *Goodnight Moon*'s quiet old lady whispering hush. Certainly Margaret Wise Brown, as a name, is the equivalent of a comfy old sweater or a square meal heavy on the potatoes; it *sounds* grandmotherly. In reality, she was less kindly and ample than headstrong and zany, like a madcap heroine in a 1930s screwball comedy, a slender young woman who could have been played by Katharine Hepburn or Carole Lombard, the latter of whom she resembled.

In a 1946 profile—she had forty-odd children's books under her belt by then—*Life* magazine described Brown this way: "She is a tall, green-eyed, ash blonde in her early thirties [she was actually thirty-six] with a fresh outdoors look about her. People who meet her for the first time are likely to think she is extremely sophisticated, which is entirely true. Her striking appearance is usually punctuated by some startling accessory such as a live kitten in a wicker basket or a hat made out of live flowers." Brown was the sort of person who thrived in café society, who was friendly with literary types such as Bennett Cerf, E. J. Kahn, and Leo Lerman; but she was also the sort of person who kept a dog, a cat, a goat, and a flying squirrel in her Greenwich Village apartment. Though she wasn't an heiress or a debutante, she had grown up with money and

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always had enough of it, along with a casual attitude toward finances: as *Life* observed, "Except for clothes, champagne, and flowers, Miss Brown hasn't much interest in spending." (Years earlier, she blew her first advance on an entire cart of flowers that she brought back to the apartment for a celebration; and she took a lowball $150 advance for another book because the fee coincided precisely with the cost of a wolfskin jacket she had decided she couldn't live without.) Full of schoolgirl enthusiasms, she had a deep reservoir of childhood memories and feelings that she drew on for her work. Ideas for books seemed to occur to her with ridiculous ease: "I finish the rough draft in twenty minutes," she told *Life*, "and then spend two years polishing." The magazine added that she was "currently polishing twenty-three books more or less simultaneously." At the same time she worried that her talents denied her a place at the literary world's grown-up table. Yearning to write for adults, she never found homes for her "serious" short stories and poetry.

"Margaret was the most creative person, male or female, that I have ever known," wrote Hurd.

"She was almost overwhelmingly original," the writer Naomi Bliven once told an interviewer. "Never for a moment did you feel she was lackadaisical about *anything.*"

"For ten minutes I was enchanted by what she had to say, and by the eleventh minute I had the need to run away," Bliven's husband, Bruce Bliven Jr., remarked to the same interviewer. The Blivens were friends of Brown's (he had written her *Life* profile), so presumably he was kidding around when he said this, but I'd bet there was more than a grain of truth in it: Brown sounds as if she could be a handful.

Born in 1910, she had grown up on Long Island, where her father was an executive at the American Manufacturing Company, which made rope and twine and sacks, an enterprise so prosaic as to sound

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almost whimsically prosaic, like a business invented by Roald Dahl for the dull part of a book. Brown was herself a dreamer and a storyteller from the get-go, disappearing into "worlds of her own making," as she later put it, and reading fairy tales to her younger sister while altering the plots to serve her own emotional needs. (In Brown's improvisations, cruel older stepsisters transformed into heroines.) By the time she got to college—Hollins, her mother's alma mater—she was bursting with creative energy but not necessarily focus or discipline. An English composition professor simultaneously praised her and damned her as a "genius without talent."

She moved to New York after graduation—and after breaking off her engagement to a southern boy from a "good" family. Settling into the city, she took some writing courses at Columbia and had a one-session flirtation with painting at the Art Students' League. But she was adrift, pessimistic about a future as any kind of artist. Like many single women of her era, she wound up studying to become a teacher, having enrolled, somewhat ambivalently, at the Bureau of Educational Experiments' Cooperative School for Teachers, a temple of the progressive education movement then known informally (and now officially) as Bank Street, after its original address in Greenwich Village. (Full name: Bank Street College of Education.) Though Brown quickly decided she didn't want to teach, she discovered that she found children fascinating. She loved listening to them, to the inventive and unself-conscious ways they used language. "They tell me stories and I write them down. Amazing. And also the pictures they paint. It must be true that children are born creative," she wrote to a favorite literature professor at Hollins. When she took a course on writing for children she stumbled on her calling.

The class was taught by the school's cofounder and chief administrator, Lucy Sprague Mitchell, an author herself, who sensed something unique in Brown—"crazy, penetrating, blind instincts and feeling for language," Mitchell later said—and took her under her wing.

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Like seemingly everything else in the 1930s, the children's book world was riven by absolutist ideologies. Mitchell was the leading proponent of what she called the Here and Now philosophy: the idea that stories drawn from real, everyday settings, informed by careful observations about how children perceive and respond to their environment, were the perfect nourishment for very little kids, for whom, after all, there is no such thing as been there, done that. Here and Now–ists frowned on fantasy, myths, fairy tales, and nursery rhymes, all the stuff of classic children's literature, which they dismissed as inherently unwholesome, more suited to adults' cravings for the sensational and bizarre than to children's simpler needs. For the youngest child especially, the thinking went, a story about a bird or a cup or a truck could be as fascinating as a tale about a fairy or a dragon, if not more so, and had the added benefit of being real and thus, in some sense, instructional. As Mitchell put it in the introduction to the *Here and Now Story Book*, a collection of her own work published in 1921: "It is only the jaded adult mind, *afraid to trust the child's own fresh springs of imagination*, that feels for children the need of the stimulus of magic." (The italics are Mitchell's.) What this meant in practice was stories with titles such as "The Room with the Window Looking Out on the Garden," "Pedro's Feet," "Marni Gets Dressed in the Morning," and "Boris Takes a Walk and Finds Many Kinds of Trains."

Alison Lurie, for one, received a copy of the *Here and Now Story Book* for her fifth birthday and was not impressed:

> [It] was a squat volume, sunny orange in color, with an idealized city scene on the cover. Inside I could read about the Grocery Man ("This is John's Mother. Good morning, Mr. Grocery Man") and How Spot Found a Home. The children and parents in these stories were exactly like the ones I knew, only more boring. They

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> never did anything wrong, and nothing dangerous or surprising ever happened to them—no more than it did to Dick and Jane, whom my friends and I were soon to meet in first grade.[2]

Mitchell wasn't immune to such criticism. As she wrote in the preface to *Another Here and Now Story Book*, published in 1937 (with editing and contributions from Brown): "If the stories in this book are less lovely than Cinderella or Little Red Riding Hood or Pandora's Box, it is because we lack the requisite artistry, not because we do not value loveliness. The great writer for the young children of the 'here and now' period is still to come."

Brown would prove to be that writer. Her first book, *When the Wind Blew*, published in 1937 when she was twenty-seven, was praised by the *New York Times*—in terms that would apply to most of her work—for its "poetic quality, color, and rhythm." From there she was off, editing and writing for W. R. Scott, a small experimental publisher associated with Bank Street, while also selling books to nearly all the major houses with children's divisions. She was astonishingly prolific, publishing five books in 1941, four in 1942, five in 1943, eight in 1944, and three in 1945. "It's getting so you can't turn around blindfolded in a bookstore without catching a new story by Margaret Wise Brown," the *Chicago Sun* noted in 1947. "The surprising thing is that they always seem to fit the bill." At one point she had contracts with six different houses, under her own name as well as three pseudonyms, and by the end of her career she had worked with most of the era's important illustrators (some of whom she had discovered),

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[2]Lurie continues: "After we grew up, of course, we found out how unrealistic these stories had been. The simple, pleasant adult society they had prepared us for did not exist. As we suspected, the fairy tales had been right all along—the world was full of hostile, stupid giants and perilous castles and people who abandoned their children in the forest."

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I also love the eloquent final lines of *The Little Island*, almost a haiku, which express feelings of both aloneness and belonging, of the struggle to define a self, really—a topic of no small interest to any child:

> And it was good to be a little Island.
> A part of the world
> And a world of its own
> All surrounded by the bright blue sea.

On its face, *Goodnight Moon*, as a catalog of the furnishings in an idealized child's room, is steeped in Here and Now ideas, but as Marcus points out, it is "supercharged" with so "freewheeling a sense of the fantastic as an aspect of the everyday" that it also serves as a cheeky, even subversive counterpoint to Lucy Sprague Mitchell's orthodox empiricism. The pictures of the cow jumping over the moon and the three bears might be affectionate nods to the more imaginative world of nursery rhymes and fairy tales, an in-joke for children's book professionals of the 1940s, although the imagery also held personal significance for Brown: there had been decorative tiles of the cow and the three bears in her childhood bedroom. The very act of cataloging a room held private meaning, too: while floundering through her early twenties, Brown once told a friend, she would combat depression every morning by looking around her apartment and making note of the various things that gave her pleasure, an intimate accounting she would then commit to paper.

Brown would say she literally dreamed *Goodnight Moon*, writing it down one morning upon waking and then reading it back to her editor at Harper, Ursula Nordstrom, who was instantly taken with it, though one wonders if she realized she had a masterpiece on

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her hands.[4] (Did Paul McCartney when he dreamed the melody for "Yesterday"?) The anecdote rings true to me because the book has a strange, dreamlike feel in places: for example, the quiet old lady whispering hush who materializes in the middle of the book after we've already been introduced to her empty rocking chair. Again, Brown avoids the obvious choice, which would be having the bunny being put to bed by its mother. But who is this quiet old lady? A nanny? The bunny's grandma? A random caregiver dragged in off the street? Brown doesn't say and it doesn't matter anyway—it's just the kind of odd, open-ended detail, like the red balloon (did the bunny get it at a party? at a shoe store?), that gives *Goodnight Moon* traction with children's imaginations. (Enigma goes a long way: it is one reason we celebrate the *Mona Lisa* over thousands of other very accomplished portraits of pretty young Italian girls.) I think there might be a teasing

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[4]She might well have, since Nordstrom had plenty of experience with masterpieces. As director of Harper's children's book division from 1940 to 1973, she also edited Russell Hoban, Syd Hoff, Crockett Johnson, Ruth Krauss, Else Holmelund Minarik, Maurice Sendak, Shel Silverstein, John Steptoe, E. B. White, and Laura Ingalls Wilder. Leonard S. Marcus, who edited her letters, rightly calls her "children's literature's Maxwell Perkins" and she will turn up repeatedly in these pages. You can get a sense of her exacting yet empathetic editorial mind, and her wit, in this response to a manuscript by the writer Janice May Udry: "The ending seems a little flat to me, but perhaps that's because I'm not four years old."

One reason for Nordstrom's success was that she was constantly on the lookout for accomplished writers and artists—all sorts—whom she might turn to children's books. As she once wrote to Russell Hoban, "[O]n my ceaseless search for new talent I went late one afternoon to a gallery exhibit of drawings. I was terribly tired that day and sort of depressed, but I pushed myself way up on Madison Avenue to try to find someone NEW who can *draw*, just black and white line, that's all I asked for! Across the room I saw the most magnificent black and white drawings, my fatigue vanished, a large smile covered my large face, I catapulted my large self across the room. Henri Matisse. I was so mad, because everyone knows he is tied up with Simon and Schuster."

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little wink in there, too, between Brown and her young audience, an implied dismissal of all adults as old people *always* whispering hush, akin to the offscreen parents and teachers in the animated *Peanuts* cartoons whose voices go *wahwahwahwahwah* like a trumpet played with a plunger. And then there's the book's great overt laugh line, "Goodnight nobody," an absolutely brilliant joke that has served as an introduction to absurdist humor for several generations of toddlers, paving the way for Monty Python and David Letterman. (In our house, "Goodnight mush" usually got a big laugh too, simply on onomatopoetic grounds, my modern children having no idea what mush is.)

The book was originally titled *Goodnight Room* and, by one account, ended with the couplet "Goodnight cucumber / Goodnight fly"—suggesting a daffier, throwaway tone in its initial conception. The finished work takes a beautiful conceptual leap in its final pages. Most night-night books end with the child tucked into a cozy bed, and so does Brown's; but in Hurd's final illustration, with the room darkened and the colors grayed, the focus is not on the comfort and security of bed but rather on the bright, blue, starlit sky outside. This is a response to Brown's final words—"Goodnight stars / Goodnight air / Goodnight noises everywhere"—which take us away from the indoor world of the known and off into the wide world beyond, paralleling the journey into sleep and maybe, for that matter, the journey out of infancy. Or perhaps I'm reading too much into it. But still: lovely. And hmmmm: Would any children's editor today permit a book to end with the potentially unsettling "Goodnight noises everywhere"? What noises? Where? Who's making them? Wolves? Bats? Clumsy monsters? Talkative boogeymen?

There are hints of story here, too, of beginning, middle, and end, enfolded into the bedtime ritual. For some kids, this might be their first encounter with narrative—primitive narrative, perhaps, but

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a step up from books that merely catalog colors or shapes or baby animals or trucks. It's telling that two other of America's most enduringly popular books for very young children, Eric Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* and Ezra Jack Keats's *The Snowy Day*, are each in fundamental ways *about* the passage of time, about giving time shape and meaning, which is one way to define "story." I'm being reductive here—there is so much more to these two great books—but I do think their intro-level narratives are one small reason why they, along with *Goodnight Moon*, continue to resonate with kids.

Eric Carle's book could almost be a sequel to Brown's and Hurd's, taking us through the great green room's window and into the world of "noises everywhere." The very first thing we see is the moon, and the words begin, "In the light of the moon a little egg lay on a leaf." The sun comes up on the next spread—we learn it is Sunday—and a caterpillar pops out of the egg. The rest of the book gives a day-by-day account of its eating habits: one apple on Monday, two pears on Tuesday, and so on through to Saturday, when it gorges on cake, ice cream, a pickle, salami, and more.[5] Now fat and no longer hungry, it makes itself "a small house, called a cocoon," and two weeks later, in one of literature's great twist endings (if you happen to be a very young child and don't yet know your insect biology), the caterpillar emerges as "a beautiful butterfly!" Carle's nearly phosphorescent illustration, a collage using his own hand-colored papers (his signature technique), does justice to both adjective and exclamation point, though as a more

[5]This comic abundance had personal meaning for Carle, a German who had experienced severe deprivation when, at fifteen, he was put to work on the Siegfried Line in the waning days of World War II, digging antitank ditches alongside prisoners of war and slave laborers. In an autobiography included in *The Art of Eric Carle*, he describes subsequently working as a file clerk for the U.S. military during the occupation. The best part of the job was being allowed to eat in an officers' dining hall. "I surreptitiously stuffed peanut butter sandwiches, lumps of butter, cubes of sugar, leftover bits of steak, and desserts into my pockets." He was essentially feeding his entire family.

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scientifically literate friend recently pointed out to me, the butterfly should really be emerging from a chrysalis. (Cocoons are generally reserved for moths.)

The Snowy Day, as the title suggests, confines its action to a single day, with a coda, the following morning. It begins by depicting its young protagonist, a city boy, at another window: "One winter morning Peter woke up and looked out the window. Snow had fallen during the night. It covered everything he could see." The modest story follows Peter's day as he plays in the snow, goes home, is given a bath by his mother, and is put to bed. He has stashed a snowball in his jacket pocket "for tomorrow" and is sad to learn it has melted. He dreams that the sun comes out the next morning and melts all the snow, but he wakes up to—more snow! That's it: a quiet, happy ending to a quiet, simple story. Indeed, its descriptions and details are so homespun and down-to-earth that *The Snowy Day* could itself be a Here and Now text. The magic is in Keats's illustrations, which mix collage and painting: the seemingly offhand dynamism of his horizontal compositions, the poetry of contrast between vast, white, subtly textured snowscapes and Peter's angular, bright red snowsuit—Keats's art transforms his words much the way snow transforms a city. I should note too that Peter is black, a rarity for the hero of a children's book (or most any branch of popular culture) when *The Snowy Day* was published in 1962. Keats, who was white, had been bothered by the absence. "None of the manuscripts [by other authors] I'd been illustrating featured any black kids, except for token blacks in the background," he wrote of Peter's genesis in an unpublished autobiography. "My book would have him there simply because he should have been there all along." *The Snowy Day* took on a life of its own in Keats's mind. Making it, he felt, was a form of play, "different from anything I've ever done. . . . I don't think I will ever experience again a dream of such innocence and awaken to

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which children so often put themselves to sleep, and should prove very effective in the case of a too wide-awake youngster." *The New Yorker* praised it as a "hypnotic bedtime litany," although the magazine's children's books critic, Rosemary C. Benet, seemed more excited by another Brown picture book that she reviewed on the same page: *The First Story*, Brown's retelling of Genesis.

Goodnight Moon sold six thousand copies in its first year—nice, but not remarkable. Like most of Brown's books, it was not bought by the New York Public Library and was left off the library's influential list of recommended titles, a commercial blow. (The children's department was led by Anne Carroll Moore, a powerful figure in the era's juvenile publishing scene and a fierce opponent of Here and Now–ism; you could probably write an amusing book devoted to what became known in the field as the "fairy-tale wars" of the 1920s, '30s, and '40s.) In short, there was nothing to suggest that *Goodnight Moon* would one day become a ubiquitous gift at baby showers. By way of a not totally fair contrast, *Five Little Firemen*, a collaboration between Brown and Edith Hurd—Clement's wife, a writer; the two women used the fragrant joint pen name Juniper Sage[6]—would sell 170,000 copies the following year, when it was published by Golden Books, Random House's pioneering mass-market children's imprint. In 1949, that title's sales reached a cool million.

By 1951, *Goodnight Moon* was moving only 1,300 copies and veering toward slipping out of print. After Brown's death, in 1952, her executors put its value at a scant $200 (not quite $1,900 in 2017 dollars). A turning point may have come the following year, when *Goodnight Moon* was praised in "Child Behavior," a widely syndicated parental

[6]Brown's genius extended to pen names. According to Clement Hurd, an early draft of *Goodnight Moon* was jokingly credited to "Memory Ambrose with pictures by Hurricane Jones."

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advice column, for "captur[ing] the two-year-old so completely that it seems almost unlawful that you can hypnotize a child off to sleep as easily as you can by reading this small classic." By 1955, sales were back up to four thousand copies, and only took off from there. . . .

1960: eight thousand copies.

1966: twenty thousand copies.[7]

1977: 100,000 copies (the year of *Goodnight Moon*'s first paperback edition).

Sales took another leap in 1991, the year of the first board book edition, a now indispensable medium Brown herself had helped pioneer back in 1938 with *Bumble Bugs and Elephants*, her first collaboration with Hurd. And as previously mentioned, *Goodnight Moon* now sells upward of 800,000 copies a year, the numbers periodically goosed by anniversary promotions.

It no doubt aided Brown's work that while she empathized deeply with children she wasn't in the least sentimental about them. Clement Hurd described visiting "Brownie," as friends sometimes called her, in 1951 at her summer home on an island off the coast of Maine with his wife and then two-year-old son, Thacher:

> Very excited at our bringing Thacher, Brownie had made all sorts of preparations for his visit. There was a fur rug on Thacher's bed and a lion skin on the floor, complete with head and bared fangs. Furs were fine in books, but the reality of the furs themselves

[7]The leap was partly fueled by a Great Society education bill that pumped nearly $300 million into school libraries over four years—legislation that suggests a government and a body politic entirely alien to the present day's. If you agree that spending public money on children's books is a good thing, the contrast can prompt only awe, tears, or the gnashing of teeth.

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> was more than Thacher had bargained for, and there was nothing to do but let him share our room during the visit. Seeing that Thacher had a mind of his own and didn't hesitate to show it, Brownie perhaps wasn't so enchanted with him. . . . Maybe it was after his falling from grace that we recognized that Margaret was, in general, not especially fond of children.

"I'm not nice to them like other people," she told an interviewer. "I admire their absolute integrity, their dignity, their strength and individuality. But I am not going to become maudlin about them just because they're little." As she put it on another occasion, "To be a writer for the young, one has to love not children but what children love."

She never married or had kids of her own. Her relationships with men were for the most part haphazard and disappointing. Her steadiest (though not very steady) long-term romantic relationship was with a woman named Michael Strange, a poet, performer, and memoirist who was twenty years older than Brown and is best remembered today for having been John Barrymore's second wife. Strange (neé Blanche Oelrichs) was demanding and condescending—her own daughter once described Strange as "too imperial, too remote" and complained that she "carried herself like a little general"—and the relationship between Brown and Strange was tense and often destructive for the younger woman, very much the emotionally subordinate partner and in both women's eyes the lesser artist. Strange even made fun of Brown's "baby books," though she would herself try her hand at children's books—unsuccessfully. (Reading the passages on this romance in Marcus's and Gary's biographies of Brown is like having drinks with an unhappy friend who doesn't realize the reason for her unhappiness is that she's yoked herself to a miserable, abusive partner; you want to reach through time and shake Brown, tell her to dump Strange and never look back.) Though they spent periods of time apart, the

Blues2P_Handy_WildThings_EG.indd 21 6/15/17 3:19 PM Copyrighted material

relationship ended only with Strange's death in 1950, from leukemia; Brown was at her bedside.

As seriously as she took writing for children, Brown had long felt like a poor sister to the larger literary world, never giving up on her aspiration to write for adults as well. Near the end of her life, according to Hurd, "she became tired of children's books and turned to writing songs." He continued:

> Her great desire was to do an adult work on Virginia Woolf, but she never accomplished it as it required more discipline and stick-at-it quality than she had. Her creative work habits were somehow perfectly suited to her type of books for the very young. She never had certain hours for work but worked only when she felt creative—which might be all the time, night and day. And she was always somewhat skeptical of what she once called "mysterious clock time."

Brown would die an appropriately madcap death at an inappropriately young age. Not long before her forty-second birthday, she met James Stillman Rockefeller Jr., then twenty-six, a passionate sailing enthusiast and a great-nephew of John D. Rockefeller's. (Doubly blessed in his financial bloodlines, he was a descendant of Andrew Carnegie's as well.) Within a few months he and Brown had fallen in love and made plans to marry in the Caribbean, where Rockefeller was sailing in preparation for embarking across the Pacific to the South Seas, a long-planned trip that would now serve as the couple's honeymoon. They arranged to meet in Panama and Brown took a pre-wedding holiday in the south of France, where, felled by abdominal pains, she underwent surgery for the removal of an ovarian cyst and her appendix. This all went perfectly smoothly, absent complications. Two weeks later, however, as she was preparing to leave the hospital, she

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demonstrated her regained robustness for the nurses with an exuberant cancan kick. She lost consciousness almost immediately: the high kick had dislodged a blood clot in one of her legs, which traveled quickly to her brain, and within an hour she was dead. According to Amy Gary's book, her last word, in response to a nurse's asking how she was feeling, just before her cancan kick, was "Grand!"

There are two codas to her story. One, Brown had left behind stacks of finished and unfinished manuscripts, the wellspring for a steady flow of posthumous publications. (Brown was a pioneer in this sense, paving the way for the ongoing careers of the late Shel Silverstein and Dr. Seuss.) Two, in keeping with her freewheeling, impulsive approach to life, she had frequently revised her will, often in whimsical terms. When she died, the will then in effect bequeathed royalties from the lion's share of her books—seventy-nine titles in total, including *Goodnight Moon*—to the middle of three young brothers whose family she had befriended and who had spent many hours hanging out at her writing studio, which was tucked just behind the family's apartment building. Albert Clarke, nine years old when Brown died, was apparently more agreeable than Thacher Hurd. By 2000 he had received nearly $5 million, and by 2016 his earnings would have reached well into eight figures.

As in a folktale, this unexpected and seemingly miraculous gift proved to be an ambiguous blessing. According to a 2000 profile of Clarke in the *Wall Street Journal*, he spent most of his adulthood living aimlessly, almost like a drifter, with bouts of homelessness, back in the days when Brown's royalty checks came to only five figures. By 2000 he had homes on Cape Cod and in Southampton and could afford to buy new clothes rather than wash his old ones. He also told the *Wall Street Journal* he believed that Brown was his biological mother. There is no evidence for this, although some of Brown's friends thought she may have left Clarke her royalties because, as a boy, he had looked like

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> me to give up my delusions, however, the feat merely intensified my respect for her powers.

Sophie Portnoy is not only powerful; like many omnipotent beings she is also easily bruised and vengeful. So she makes a habit of banishing young Alex from the family apartment for transgressions so minor their nature is not apparent to the perpetrator himself. She cannot love him anymore, Sophie says, "not a little boy who behaves like you do."

> Because she is good she will pack a lunch for me to take along, but then out I go, in my coat and galoshes, and what happens is not her business. Okay, I say, if that's how you feel! . . . Who cares! And out I go into the long dim hallway. Who cares! I will sell newspapers on the street in my bare feet. I will ride where I want in freight cars and sleep in open fields, I think—and then it is enough for me to see the empty milk bottles standing by our welcome mat, for the immensity of all I have lost to come breaking over my head. "I hate you!" I holler, kicking a galosh at the door; "You stink!" To this filth, to this heresy booming through the corridors of the apartment building where she is vying with twenty other Jewish women to be the patron saint of self-sacrifice, my mother has no choice but to throw the double-lock on our door. This is when I start to hammer to be let in. I drop to the doormat to beg forgiveness for my sin (which is what again?) and promise her nothing but perfection for the rest of our lives, which at the time I believe will be endless.

Endless. Mother and son will be locked in this dance for eternity. Resistance is futile, escape impossible. Roth doesn't let Alex's figuratively impotent, literally constipated father off the hook. But it is Sophie who dominates both novel and son's psyche, to the point that the

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book reads like an extended, primal scream of a Jewish mother joke. And yet anyone of any ethnicity, religion, or gender should be able to recognize the yin-yang, push-me-pull-you, love-me-let-me-go tension between parent and child that Roth vivisects with such anger and glee. Because just as nearly every culture seems to enjoy some version of a fillable pancake, whether crepe, roti, tortilla, or wonton wrapper, so most of us know Sophie Portnoys, some maybe more neglectful than smothering, others more passive-aggressive than *aggressive*-aggressive, but all, whatever their gender, leaving tire treads back and forth across their offspring. As the British poet Philip Larkin famously put it: "They fuck you up, your mum and dad. / They may not mean to, but they do."

I bring up *Portnoy's Complaint* because it reads like an R-rated antithesis of the work I really want to talk about: *The Runaway Bunny*, which in its own sunny way is as incisive a treatise on the parent-child bond as Roth's novel. I also bring up *Portnoy's Complaint* to highlight the fact that books for very young children occupy a rare literary preserve where mum and dad *don't* fuck you up.

It should take but a minute's thought to compile a list of iconic "bad" or at least "difficult" parents in works for adults. Aside from Mr. and Mrs. Portnoy, I came up with Medea, King Lear, Queen Gertrude (*Hamlet*), Pap Finn (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*), Mary Tyrone (*Long Day's Journey into Night*), Mama Rose (*Gypsy*), Jack Torrance (*The Shining*), Troy Maxson (*Fences*), every single adult in *The Ice Storm*. On the other hand, in trying to conjure an equally extensive list of iconic good parents in adult literature. . . . Well, I came up with Atticus Finch and David Copperfield's mother, though the latter is killed off early and the former lost some of his Gregory Peck shine following the publication in 2015 of *Go Set a Watchman*.

There are plenty of excellent parents in books for older children, including, as we will see, Ma and Pa Ingalls in the Little House series

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and Marmee in *Little Women.* (Speaking for myself, I find Marmee insufferable but I realize that this is a minority opinion.) In Beverly Cleary's novels, middle-grade readers will encounter mothers and fathers who are loving, thoughtful, and, in their occasional shortcomings, recognizably human.[1] But these are mostly counterexamples. As soon as kids are old enough for fairy tales, they are exposed to an endless string of evil stepmothers, enabling fathers, and even more murderous parental stand-ins such as witches, ogres, goblins, and giants. I also think it is noteworthy that two of the most popular modern picture-book heroines, Madeline and Eloise, are functional orphans. Adolescent readers harbor even stronger prejudices against parental judgment, so in YA fiction families often become cesspools of pathology and dysfunction; and what is a teen dystopia but a projection of those pathologies onto society at large? President Snow in the Hunger Games books might as well be just another one of Mom's abusive boyfriends who has somehow come to rule an entire nation.

It is among picture books for the very young where you have to look far and wide for withholding mothers and fathers with anger issues. There are a few characters I might accuse of sloppy parenting, such as the Man in the Yellow Hat, who is so laissez-faire he never realizes that merely admonishing Curious George to be a good monkey, and then abandoning him for hours on end, will never not prove a recipe for disaster. And as we will see, the mother in *The Cat in the Hat* is so loopy she leaves her children in the care of a fish; hers will be the house where all the kids go to smoke weed in high school. But most parents in books for the very young are steady, kind, and dull—less like child-services cases and more like presidents in textbooks from the pre-pathography era.

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[1]Cleary was also ahead of the nontraditional family curve, featuring a working single mother in her 1953 book, *Otis Spofford.*

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Why are the literary scales on the rest of the shelves weighted so heavily toward bad parenting? Tolstoy's line about all happy families being alike is the wrongest literary maxim this side of Fitzgerald's claim that American lives lack second acts, but no one would deny that unhappy families make for better stories. Also, what we need from stories changes as we age. When we are very young, what we need are our parents. When we are older, what we need is to pull away from their gravitational field, or at least to try, and in the process kick up a little ruckus.

The Runaway Bunny endures in part because it hits a sweet spot between infancy's abject dependency and a toddler's itch to make some actual use of his or her newfound mobility. Anyone who read *The Catcher in the Rye* or *The Outsiders* as an adolescent will remember how those books crystallize the conflicting emotions, the yearning for security and the need to rebel, so endemic to that stage of life; well, *The Runaway Bunny* serves a similar purpose for the Pull-Ups years (or year).

The text begins, "Once there was a little bunny who wanted to run away." Like most children sniffing at independence, he announces his plan—"I am running away"—to which his mother responds, "If you run away, I will run after you. For you are my little bunny." So begins a lyrical back-and-forth in which the little bunny insists that if his mother does run after him, he will become a fish and swim away in a stream, and she responds that she will become a fisherman; he then says he will become a rock on a mountain "high above you" and she responds that she will become a mountain climber "and climb to where you are"; and so on. Several pages later the bunny has become a sailboat being blown homeward by his mother, who is now the wind itself. It is a beautiful image but also a bit frightening: a parent who has literally become elemental, as necessary to life as earth, water, and fire. The story goes on for a few more exchanges, but it's all

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