

## Afterword: Propaganda, Namby-Pamby, and Some Books of Distinction

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There have probably been more books for children published in any given year of this century than in any entire decade of the century before it. There have probably been more books for children published in the United States of America in each of the decades of this century than in the entire world in all the years before 1900. Yet in relation to the small number of merely good, the sizable number of merely adequate, and the vast number of decidedly mediocre books, the great American children's books are surprisingly few. Why so much, and why is so much of it unmemorable? The reasons for the abundance also explain not only the general mediocrity but also what distinguishes excellent books from the rest.

There have been more human beings alive in this century than ever before, and therefore, more children to write for, more adults to write for them, more publishers to publish books for them. But there has also been more interest in childhood than ever before. Throughout this century, adults have taken for granted an idea that became popular only in the last century: that children see and think differently than adults do. Furthermore, what was a revolutionary attitude near the beginning of the nineteenth century had become a commonplace by 1900, an accepted idea by which all Americans live: childhood is not just different from maturity; in some ways, it is better.

In the last century, children were considered to be stylishly dressed in the pinafores of servants and the suits of ordinary seamen. In fact, the similarity throughout history between children's clothing and the workclothes of laborers has implied the inferior position children occupied in the scheme of things—a position explained by devastating childhood mortality rates that made it foolish to invest too much attention in those who might not live long and also by religious and philosophical systems that did not value childlike innocence. But in contemporary America, blue jeans, once the working outfit of laborers and then the standard uniform of children and teenagers, have become fashion for adults also. This reversal of the patterns of history implies

a deep worship of childhood and childlike things. Not surprisingly, much recent writing for adults has been a sort of fantasy once produced exclusively for children, and the most popular American movies tell stories like the ones that used to be found only in children's comic books. It is also not surprising that some contemporary pop therapists encourage adults to solve their problems by screaming like infants and by being as egocentric as children.

The American worship of childhood emerges from the American ideal of equality. If everyone can equally aspire to change one's position in life for the better, then everyone *can* equally change. The means by which one changes is education, and the time one learns best is childhood, when one is flexible, impressionable—still innocent enough to become better than one's parents. No wonder that adults wish to ape the hopefulness with which they invest childhood; and no wonder that twentieth-century America has produced so many children's books.

As part of a vast educational enterprise, these books are meant to make children better than they already are; consequently, they are as filled with educational propaganda as children's books of all times have always been. But paradoxically, their underlying admiration for the flexible innocence of childhood implies something quite different from earlier books—that innocence is in itself desirable. Therefore, many American children's books of this century have been mediocre for two contradictory reasons. On one hand, they belabor educational concerns with an unfailingly blatant obviousness; on the other, they suggest that infantile ingenuousness is "cute"; that is, they imply that children should be admired for being ignorant, immature, in need of education. The archetypal American children's story of this century, the one told again and again in countless books, sums up these contradictions. It is about a fuzzy, childlike animal who leaves home to see the world and learns that home is best. The animal is supposed to be adorable because it does not understand and cannot cope with the world it explores; but then that same ineptitude is

also the means by which young readers are supposed to learn better. Such books imply that children are limited in their need for education, as well as wonderful because they are so limited.

The rare books that stand out avoid neither worship of childhood nor high-minded educational intentions; they inevitably include both. But in the best books, the two do not contradict one another. Rather, their writers find ingenious, innovative ways of balancing the two. Because their worship of innocence balances their condemnation of it, such books neither condemn nor worship. They merely describe innocence honestly.

For all its failings, Frank L. Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) is such a book. Published in the first year of this century, it is the first important children's book of the century. Yet its language is undistinguished, its plot feebly organized. Dorothy simply walks through Oz, a pedestrian described in pedestrian prose, until Baum runs out of interesting places for the yellow brick road to pass through. Not only is Dorothy's trip episodic but it does not even have the purpose we expect of such trips. She learns nothing from her quest; in fact, one of the charming things about the book is that Oz hardly affects her unflappable common sense.

Nevertheless, Baum does *try* to teach his young readers something, the thing Dorothy knows all along: home is best, because the unfamiliar things we dream of are not just uncomfortable but nearly always disappointing. So Baum makes Dorothy spend all her time in Oz wishing she were back in Kansas; and he insists on making many of his wonderful inventions mere fakes. The lack of conviction Baum expresses in his own inventiveness is one version of the great paradox of American children's literature; Baum wanted both to indulge in childlike imagining and to condemn it, and rather than integrate the two, he merely let them sit side by side and contradict each other.

But they do not really contradict each other, because Baum's fresh inventiveness dwarfs the educational uses he pretends to find for it. Nevertheless, it is unfortunate that his vision was larger than his willingness or his capacity to express it, and that most people nowadays know Baum's Oz only through the grandiose M-G-M film of 1939, a more tightly conceived expression of Oz that gets rid of Baum's freshness along with the crudity of his style.

As Baum's difficulties suggest, fantasy is something of an un-American activity, an indulgence in impractical foolishness that interferes with the serious business of getting ahead by means of

hard work and discipline. Few American writers have avoided either encumbering their fantasies with heavy superstructures of moral allegory or else defiantly indulging in wispy whimsies that avoid meaning altogether. Consequently, the great American fantasies tend to be quite unlike the vast mass of American fantasies; instead, they are Americanized versions of forms first established in other countries.

Wanda Gág's picture storybook *Millions of Cats* (1928), the one undeniably great American children's book of the 1920s, has the folksy charm of both European folktales and primitive European woodcuts; what is ingenious and refreshing is Gág's clever combination of the two. The blocky solidity of the pictures and the insistently memorable refrain control and allow the grotesque violence of a story in which "hundreds of cats, thousands of cats, millions and billions and trillions of cats" all devour each other. A similar infusion of vitality into old forms can be found in the remarkable *Jack Tales* (1943), collected by Richard Chase. These energetic American versions of European folktales show how old stories can come to reflect new cultural circumstances.

Numerous Americans have produced quite adequate literary fairy tales in this century, including writers as diverse as Carl Sandburg and John Gardner; but only two writers have produced distinguished work of this sort, stories that seem both American and like traditional fairy tales. In *Many Moons* (1943), James Thurber fuses clever *New Yorker* satire, unabashed Hans Christian Andersen sentimentality, and the usual American children's-book moral allegory into a story of great charm. In a more substantial series of literary fairy tales in recent years, in particular those in *The Girl Who Cried Flowers and Other Tales* (1974) and *The Hundredth Dove and Other Tales* (1977), Jane Yolen has shown that, despite their lack of detailed characterization, fairy tales can be both subtle and affecting. Many of the prolific Yolen's more than sixty books are ingenious experiments in adapting traditional European folk materials to contemporary forms; in the singularly undreamy *Dragon's Blood* (1982), her nuts-and-bolts descriptions of the care and maintenance of dragons make them far more believable to practical contemporary minds than most fictional versions of such beasts.

The European influence on Eleanor Cameron's work is transparent enough to amount to homage. In *The Court of the Stone Children* (1973), Cameron convincingly transplants to American soil the rich British tradition of children's fantasies

about contact with people from the past; in *Beyond Silence* (1980), she reverses the pattern and takes a contemporary young American to Scotland for a different sort of contact with the past. Both these books are thoroughly American in the way they relate fantasy elements to the psychological needs of their main characters, so that what is delightful is also useful; both possess a refined psychological subtlety found also in Cameron's fine realistic novels, particularly in *To the Green Mountains* (1975).

Lloyd Alexander's five books about Taran of Prydain, beginning in 1964 with *The Book of Three*, are firmly grounded in the legends of ancient Wales; but the strength and also, far too often, the weakness of these books is that Alexander's young hero and heroine are very much contemporary Americans—just as the hobbits in J. R. R. Tolkien's books, another obvious influence on Alexander, are very much British academics. Somehow, short British academics do not seem out of place amid the wilds of Middle-Earth; but while the democratic exuberance of Alexander's Taran and Eilonwy breathes new life into the old Welsh stories, Taran's soul-searching sensitivity and Eilonwy's liberated motor-mouth frequently do seem out of place amid the pseudomedieval trappings of Prydain. On the other hand, Alexander's characteristic breeziness accords perfectly with the pseudo-Sufistic trappings of Abadan, the setting of *The First Two Lives of Lukas-Kasha* (1978); like much Sufistic wisdom, this witty book delightfully undercuts its own philosophic pretensions. In her trilogy of books about Ged, the wizard of Earthsea (*A Wizard of Earthsea*, 1968; *The Tombs of Atuan*, 1971; *The Farthest Shore*, 1972), Ursula Le Guin indulges in just as many pseudo-European trappings. But unlike Taran, Ged suffers, and suffers mightily, from his thoroughly American denial of tradition. The conflict between Ged's personality and his environment becomes an important theme of the three books, a theme explored most poignantly in *The Tombs of Atuan*, the second book of the three. Here Tenar's escape from the suffocating traditions of her gods leads her to a tortured exploration of the relationship between freedom and tradition. In their absolute integration of European traditions and American values, and in their elegant control of imagery that moves them past political allegory into profound expressions of Jungian archetypes, the Earthsea books are the most distinguished American achievement in the area of high fantasy.

But high fantasy is not necessarily a great American tradition. As *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*

and many of the other books already mentioned suggest, American fantasies tend to be breezier than their English counterparts. They hide their serious intentions under layers of slapstick or whimsy, perhaps because of a democratic fear that seriousness is stuffy and aristocratic. Consequently, many of the masterworks of American children's literature are delightfully unstuffy, decidedly hilarious, and not at all profound.

Dr. Seuss has produced an astonishing number of such books. His first book, *And to Think that I Saw It on Mulberry Street* (1937), is not so wacky and frenetic as some later Seuss extravaganzas nor even so wacky as the less frenzied *Five Hundred Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins* (1938) nor so frenzied as the less wacky *Horton Hatches the Egg* (1940). But the integration of verbal and visual rhythms in *And to Think that I Saw It on Mulberry Street* is amazingly sophisticated for a book that comes so early in the history of its genre; Dr. Seuss understood how to lay out the pages of a picture storybook decades before anyone else even thought it mattered. While his later books are less ingenious in design, their exuberant pictures of, and words about, crazy beasts are impeccably nonsensical. The essence of Dr. Seuss's peculiar talent can be found in three very big books. *If I Ran the Zoo* (1950), *If I Ran the Circus* (1956), and, above all, *On Beyond Zebra* (1955) are of Wagnerian proportions; they express a deeply anarchic insanity in impeccably controlled verse. The limited vocabulary of the easy-to-read books Dr. Seuss produced later in his career, beginning with the revolutionary *The Cat in the Hat* (1957), seems also to have limited his imagination. While it is decidedly superior to most books of this sort, *The Cat in the Hat* is to *On Beyond Zebra* as commercial jingles are to grand opera.

Dr. Seuss's long career marks the fullest flowering of the interbreeding of children's books and cartoon art, but many other classics of American comic fantasy are also illustrated in cartoon style. As one of the few books not illustrated by its writer that actually achieves excellence, *The Story of Ferdinand* (1937) is a genuine rarity. Munro Leaf's words and Robert Lawson's pictures share a sly satirical wit that makes the propagandistic intentions of this pacifist story more than just bearable. The humor implies a more sensitive sort of machismo than the bellicose celebration of brute violence that Ferdinand himself so wisely rejects, and both words and pictures cleverly use small details to suggest further implications. While Lawson's work on his own as a writer was rarely so artful, his novel *Ben*

*and Me* (1939) is another comic delight. The cartoonist's anarchist spirit emerges in both pictures and words, as the testy mouse Amos sends up the stodgy pomposity not only of his buddy Benjamin Franklin but also of the numerous stodgy novels for children about the American past that dominated publishing for children in the 1930s.

Ben is a mouse, Ferdinand is a bull, Dr. Seuss's bird-hatching Horton an elephant. Talking animals dominate American children's literature, which in this way decidedly belongs to the tradition begun by the fables of antiquity, a literature also devoted to equal doses of one part blatant propaganda and one part delight in the stupidity of fuzzy creatures. Not surprisingly, this most actively pursued of all genres of children's literature is also the most frequently clichéd.

In the context of countless cute bunnies and timid mousies, two wonderful books by E. B. White seem particularly noteworthy. The first of them is not really about an animal; *Stuart Little* (1945), a surprisingly accomplished first novel for children, describes a boy who merely *looks* like a mouse; but he can talk to birds. Stuart has horrified generations of adults, who have seen him as freakishly deformed. But children and oddballs, who can recognize in him their own feelings of alienation in face of a world designed for people more powerful than themselves, rightfully adore Stuart, the indefatigable Don Quixote of American children's literature. Wilbur, the less heroic pig hero of White's *Charlotte's Web* (1952), is even more widely and more deservedly adored. The cute animals who face silly domestic crises in most children's books do so with unflinching optimism, mostly because they are too innocent to know any better; but Wilbur, who started out being as ingenuous as all the rest, learns from his spider friend Charlotte a wisdom as great as Stuart Little's. Nor does Wilbur escape the occasional moment of justly merited despair.

In *Charlotte's Web*, White displays perfect control of diction and imagery, and an almost perfect understanding of the limitations and possibilities of children's literature as a genre. White's manuscripts, now housed at Cornell University, reveal that this book cost him much effort, that he rewrote it again and again. The result has the apparent effortlessness of all great art, a simplicity that resonates to great depths. Even very young children enjoy hearing the gracefully told and gripping story of *Charlotte's Web*; highly sophisticated readers find more and more in it as they read it again and again. It is certainly the most likely candidate for consid-

eration as the greatest of all American children's books.

White's animals possess the characters animals might have, if animals actually had characters like human beings; Wilbur is piglike, and Templeton is a real rat. They represent one of the many ways writers have developed to describe those strange beings who look like animals, think like people, and act sometimes like one, sometimes like the other. Some writers merely use their characters' animal natures for the sake of distance—in order to tell children stories with human implications that they might find unsettling if the stories actually happened to humans. A fine example of such an approach is the series of books about Frances by Russell Hoban, begun in 1960. The illustrations for these books, first by Garth Williams and then by Lillian Hoban, are often the only indication that Frances and her family are badgers, not people; for Frances's problems are those of a human child. Furthermore, Hoban explores those problems with a light tongue-in-cheek irony that not only cheerfully undercuts Frances in her many moments of self-indulgence but also implies the deep emotional intensity both badgers and people often invest in theoretically minor upsets.

In another well-wrought book, this one about a toy mouse, Hoban makes more of the nonhuman nature of his characters. The windup father and son team of *The Mouse and His Child* (1967) must cope both with the rigidity of their lives as toys and with the violence of their lives as animallike creatures in the wild. Adults sometimes treat children like toys, adorable, quasi-human playthings that are rejected when they break down and stop conforming to preestablished patterns; and adults sometimes treat children like animals who talk, rude, uncivilized beings who try to act like *real* human beings. In *The Mouse and His Child*, Hoban explores the existential problems of creatures who are part toy, part animal, and part human, in terms of a clever parody of Samuel Beckett's gloomy plays. Whereas Beckett describes people who lose their vitality when they start acting repetitively like machines, Hoban describes machines who develop hope when they learn to act like people—an interesting message for children.

In his funny *Fables* (1980), Arnold Lobel's animals most often conform to the fable tradition, and their adventures provide hilarious allegories for human behavior. But the main characters in Lobel's limited vocabulary books *Frog and Toad are Friends* (1970) and *Frog and Toad Together* (1972),

while always both funnier and more touching than they realize themselves, are at their best when they confront their paradoxical nature as animals who act like people. In "The Swim," for instance, Toad must realize how silly a toad looks in a human bathing suit.

In terms of more accurate zoological detail than any of the other animals mentioned so far, the bat in Randall Jarrell's *The Bat-Poet* (1964) is very much a bat. But he is also very much a poet, and his wonderful, strong poems about bats and mockingbirds are as good as any other poems for children written in this century. Not that there is much competition; far too many of the versifiers who set themselves up as children's poets indulge in weak-brained evocations of the world as theoretically seen through the eyes of excessively gentle children. Such poets evoke what is limited and childish, rather than what is significant and childlike; but the bat's poems *are* childlike, for Jarrell convincingly shows us what a thoroughly ingenuous nonhuman being might see. A similarly persuasive evocation of innocence appears often in the poems of David McCord (starting with *Far and Few*, 1952, and collected in *One at a Time*, 1977), almost never in poems written specifically for an audience of children; unfortunately, McCord is most frequently represented in anthologies by his least evocative and most childish poems.

The animals in Jarrell's brief, but beautifully wrought, allegorical book *The Animal Family* (1965) are even less human than his bat; they do not talk. In fact, what makes this book special is the poetic way Jarrell makes his characters seem alien. The animals, the mermaid, even the one human being, are all "different," to use a word that echoes so poetically through the book itself.

One final animal is also different—the highly cultured and very gentlemanly mouse of William Steig's *Abel's Island* (1976). Steig tells of this witty Edwardian gentlemouse in a delightfully quirky pseudo-Edwardian style. In a fascinating twist on a long-established convention, Abel is one humanlike animal who survives his confrontation with the wilds, not because, like Beatrix Potter's Peter Rabbit or Baum's not-really-cowardly lion, he gives up human postures and learns to act like his true animal-like self but instead because he has a degree of civilization that keeps him regular, idealistic, and gentlemanly human no matter what horrors nature throws at him.

As a mouse from the past, Abel joins Lawson's mouse Amos as a representative of numerous his-

torical characters in American children's literature of this century. Unlike most of those characters, however, Abel and Amos have some vitality; for most American historical fiction for children has been high-minded and stodgy, moral porridge thick with historical detail. The characters in these books are almost always courageous, honest, dutiful, patriotic, clearly not mice but men—even when they are women.

Nevertheless, there is one undoubted masterpiece of American children's literature about the past: the wonderful series of Little House books by Laura Ingalls Wilder, published between 1932 and 1943 and describing Wilder's own life as a child some decades earlier. These books are the most distinctly American of the great American children's books and the first important American children's books to be set neither in England, like Howard Pyle's *Merry Adventures of Robin Hood* (1883), nor in an invented land like Baum's Oz. In the earlier books of the series, Wilder described the events of her own frontier childhood with a carefully maintained double perspective. While the child Laura's perceptions are convincingly childlike (and not always admirable), readers with a more mature understanding can always see the mature implications Laura ignores in what she perceives. Each of Wilder's books is orchestrated thematically and in terms of carefully organized images in a way that makes them distinct from the others; but as a group, they each take their places as movements in a symphony, the whole being a detailed and cohesive portrait of a nation's and a child's maturing.

Two other interesting books about the American past suggest the problems American children's writers have frequently had with this genre. Esther Forbes's *Johnny Tremain* (1943) is pompous, spectacular, sentimental, uplifting—one of those books so persistent and so sincere in its pursuit of sheer trashiness that it is hard not to enjoy. Forbes clearly meant the fervid patriotism of this simpleminded M-G-M-movie-of-a-novel, which was set in the time of the Revolutionary War, to apply equally to the war Americans were fighting at the time of the book's appearance: World War II. Some decades later, another book about the Revolutionary War, *My Brother Sam Is Dead* (1976) by James Lincoln Collier and his historian brother Christopher Collier, also clearly applied to the war Americans were then currently involved in, this time the Vietnam War. The different places those two wars occupy in the minds of Americans say much of the differences between these two books. The quiet, searching

questioning of *My Brother Sam Is Dead* is an elegant answer to the fireworks of *Johnny Tremain*. But it has none of the exuberance of *Johnny Tremain*; and *Johnny Tremain* has none of the bleak, documentary accuracy of *My Brother Sam Is Dead*.

In fact, few American historical novels for children have managed to balance accuracy and intensity, as British historical children's novels often do and as Laura Ingalls Wilder's books do. Possible exceptions might be Paula Fox's *The Slave Dancer* (1973), in which stripped-down prose communicates the horrific events aboard a slave ship with some of the intensity of good playwriting; the three novels on medieval Japan Katherine Paterson published in the early 1970s; and *Sing Down the Moon* (1970), in which Scott O'Dell writes of the "Long Walk" of the Navaho tribe in 1863 with a cool quietness that is deeply moving.

But the small American achievement in historical fiction for children is more than balanced by the many excellent books Americans have produced from the 1940s on about children coping with the more-or-less contemporary world. Such books often manage to integrate honest reporting with the usual educational impulses, both to describe childhood accurately and suggest how children might transcend their childishness.

A charmingly homey domesticity dominates the books about the Moffats, written in the early 1940s by Eleanor Estes, and about the Melendys and their friends and relations, written by Elizabeth Enright from the early 1940s through the 1950s. These have all the fresh wholesomeness of earlier domestic books like Eleanor H. Porter's *Pollyanna* (1913); but while Estes's stories take place at about the same time as do the saccharine events of Pollyanna's life, both Porter's and Enright's children act convincingly like children, rather than like the ethereal sparks of the divine fire that passed for children in the utopian domestic novels of earlier years. Similarly wholesome, but invested with a dry, taciturn wit that wonderfully evokes the small towns they are set in, are Robert McCloskey's *Lentil* (1940) and *Homer Price* (1943). The gentle satire of these books is accurate and loving.

By the time Beverly Cleary wrote *Henry Huggins* (1950), typical American children were more likely to live in suburbs than in small towns. But Cleary's children are just as wholesome, just as cutely trouble-prone and as craftily resourceful in getting out of trouble, and just as undisturbed by public anarchy or secret nightmares as had been their earlier counterparts. It wasn't until unflappable

Henry Huggins gave up center stage to the more sensitive Ramona Quimby, in the 1970s, that Cleary's young characters showed any sign of actually possessing ids or their environment any signs of the various social disruptions of the real world.

Other young characters in children's novels do not live such utopian dream lives. The hapless hero of Judith Viorst's picture book *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* (1972) faces a catalogue of domestic horrors with delicious deadpan bitterness. Harriet, the would-be writer of Louise Fitzhugh's cleverly acerbic *Harriet the Spy* (1964), has to cope not only with the implications of her own difficult character but also with an urban environment as uncomfortably filled with hostility, folly, and misunderstanding as the real one. *Harriet the Spy*, a paradoxical triumph of both comic satire and psychological truth, is one of the small handful of important American children's books because it is childlike only in the unflinching pleasure it takes in its young heroine's unflinchingly honest perceptions of the world around her. It was greeted with much controversy upon publication, for there are many adults who simply do not want to know that there are children like Harriet—children who not only can see through adult hypocrisy but who also have a few hypocrisies and other failings of their own. Fortunately, a lot of children are at least that human. Fitzhugh's real triumph is that she lets the book end without making Harriet into anything less than she already was.

The clever satire of *Harriet the Spy* is much more convincingly descriptive of the human condition than the presumably real but highly melodramatic grotesquerie of those novels of recent decades portentously labeled as the New Realism. The characters in these books, an army of clones of J. D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield, are all alienated, all living in nightmarish worlds dominated by malevolent adults, and all convinced of their own undoubted moral superiority. As satisfying wish-fulfillment fantasies, these books are without peer in the history of literature for young people; as realism, they obviously leave much to be desired. But Robert Cormier, whose *The Chocolate War* (1974) is just as luridly melodramatic and self-indulgent as the rest of these books, produced a genuine masterwork in *I Am the Cheese* (1977), a book that turns its genre inside out. Adam Farmer actually experiences the horrific alienation that characters in other young adult novels merely imagine in a craftily constructed plot that is enormously gripping. In comparison to the intensity of *I Am the*

*Cheese*, novels about children with life-shattering problems like obesity, annoying siblings, and the onset of menstruation seem more than a little self-indulgent.

Other less intense novels present just as convincingly accurate portraits of children. In an undeservedly unheralded series of autobiographical novels, Ilse-Margret Vogel chronicles young Inge's childhood in Germany with a gentle nostalgia that oddly suits and perceptively comments on the disruptive events these books describe: the death of a twin sister (*My Twin Sister Erika*, 1976), the visit of an insane aunt (*Farewell, Aunt Isabell*, 1979), and a competition between Inge and her mother for the affections of a young man (*My Summer Brother*, 1981). In *Drop Dead* (1965), which is either a realistic fantasy or a quite fantastic realistic novel, Julia Cunningham tells a horror story in a chillingly quiet way that mirrors the superficial quiet of her inwardly seething protagonist; and Claudia and James Kincaid of E. L. Konigsburg's *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* (1967) do not seethe at all. In fact, they feel that their lives are devoid of excitement, and Konigsburg understands them well enough to allow them to choose for themselves the safest of all possible adventures: a stay in the exotic wilds of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Konigsburg's keen eye for the realities of suburban childhood and unfailingly ingenious narrative techniques are exemplified equally well in many other books, most notably an eccentric novel about concentric twins, (*George*) (1970), and a collection of wise short stories, *Throwing Shadows* (1979). Paradoxically, some of her impeccably understood safe Americans are the Renaissance Italian Leonardo da Vinci and the various medieval husbands of Eleanor of Aquitaine; for like most American forays into history, Konigsburg's historical fiction finds a past peopled with contemporary American types. Nevertheless, all of Konigsburg's books are filled with the deliciously snippy Konigsburg wit and an unflinching insistence on standards of personal morality that might make Henry James flinch.

Konigsburg is one of three American children's novelists of our time whose work is distinguished both by excellence and by a flexible willingness to explore new forms. The other two are Katherine Paterson and the astonishing Virginia Hamilton.

While Hamilton's first novel, *Zeely* (1967), is not as complex or as rewarding as her later books, it is still more complex and more rewarding than most children's books. But Hamilton really hits her

stride with the ingenious *The Planet of Junior Brown* (1971), a book that makes unbelievable situations and characters seem chillingly real; and in *M. C. Higgins, the Great* (1974), she has produced her best book so far. Complex, psychologically searching, artistically integrated, this novel represents a new maturity in thinking about children's literature, not just for Virginia Hamilton but also for the many award committees that named it best book of the year in a unique sweep. Hamilton's books since *M. C. Higgins* have been a fascinating, and often fascinatingly flawed, series of experiments that attempt to combine various aspects of fantasy and realism; the most recent of these, particularly *The Magical Adventures of Pretty Pearl* (1983), suggest that the experimentation is bearing fruit and that another great book is on the way.

Taken together, the string of books Katherine Paterson published throughout the 1970s are almost as diverse as Hamilton's. But Paterson is not the innovator Hamilton is, and each of her novels is merely a fine representative of a recognizable genre: the historical novel in her three wonderfully evocative novels of ancient Japan and three different sorts of realism in the stark *Bridge to Terabithia* (1977), the comic *The Great Gilly Hopkins* (1978), and the sensitively delineated *Jacob Have I Loved* (1980).

It was the British Randolph Caldecott and Beatrix Potter who first showed how it might be possible to tell an interesting story in a combination of words and pictures. But it has been Americans, a people besotted by the rich visual imagery of motion pictures, snapshots, and comic books, who have explored the implications of the picture storybook, the most twentieth-century of children's genres, and who have discovered most of the significant technical innovations within it. The best picture storybooks have texts designed to be read aloud in the rhythms of well-ordered speech and pictures that communicate the tone the words should be spoken in. There have been more excellent picture storybooks than any other sort of American children's literature.

The list begins with Wanda Gág's feisty *Millions of Cats* and includes the wonderful books by Leaf, Lawson, and Dr. Seuss already mentioned. In the 1930s, there were also the charming *The Story About Ping* (1933), in which the rhythmic grace of Marjorie Flack's words is matched by the delicacy of Kurt Weise's pictures; the first of Ludwig Bemelmans's whimsical books about Madeline (1939); and Virginia Lee Burton's *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel* (1939), a book less imposing but more fun

than her spiraling monument of 1942, *The Little House*. In the 1940s, Robert McCloskey's exuberant pictures for *Lentil* were matched by his equally exuberant but more charming pictures for *Make Way for Ducklings* (1941), still one of the most interesting explorations of visual point-of-view in picture books; just as charming in a decidedly unexuberant way are Marie Hall Ets's delicate and poetic pictures for *In the Forest* (1944). The one book that stands out from the lively but undistinguished picture books of the 1950s is Lynd Ward's *The Biggest Bear* (1952). Ward's pictures depict his tall tale in a visual style that mixes equal amounts of inflated pomposity and deflating wit, perfectly complementing the text.

But the most interesting picture books of the 1940s and 1950s were almost always those with texts by Margaret Wise Brown—a fact that reveals how significant and how difficult a writer's contribution to a picture book always is. Few of Brown's books actually tell stories; but she realized better than anyone has before or since how pictures can support and amplify the very simplest of texts. Almost every one of her books conveys an ingeniously innovative idea in carefully chosen words that delight even the youngest of children. In her best texts, like the rhythmically insistent *Goodnight Moon* with illustrations by Clement Hurd (1947), Brown's text is like poetry itself and makes poetry out of otherwise undistinguished art.

The most important of American picture book artists, and perhaps the most important American practitioner of children's literature in this century, began his work in the 1950s. But Maurice Sendak really began to make a distinctive contribution in the 1960s, a decade in which he produced not only the dreamy, light-filled, impressionistic pictures that transform Charlotte Zolotow's pedestrian text for *Mr. Rabbit and the Lovely Present* (1962) into a quirky and decidedly paradoxical masterpiece but also many important books that he both illustrated and wrote. In 1963 he produced the most famous, and still, perhaps, the most significant American picture book—a book distinctly American in its Oz-like insistence on the relationship between fantastic places and real life. All by itself, *Where the Wild Things Are* is a catalogue of picture book technique; while the story of Max's encounter with some highly innovative grotesques is satisfyingly gripping, the book is a technical triumph as well as an emotional one.

In later years, *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963) turned out to have been the first book in a peculiar

trilogy. The next book in this improbable series on related themes is *In the Night Kitchen* (1970), a joyful celebration of Sendak's fascination with comic strips and other aspects of the rich American tradition of popular culture, including billboard art, Mickey Mouse, Laurel and Hardy—and, perhaps, the great popular tradition of sexual titillation, for Sendak's young hero is the first unabashedly naked child to immodestly reveal his all in a children's picture book. In the final book of the trilogy, *Outside Over There* (1981), nakedness abounds and so does complexity, as Sendak presents all his favorite motifs in concentrated form: bare skin, floating bodies, big feet, magical openings in secure enclosed spaces, ingenuous demons, the relationship between control and anarchy, and the music of Mozart. All of this is, quite magically, childlike enough both to delight young children and confuse middle-aged adults.

In addition to his brilliant and influential picture books, Sendak has made important contributions to every sort of children's book. His pictures of overweight and forbidding-looking medieval princesses idiosyncratically, but wonderfully, evoke the spirit of the Grimm fairy tales in *The Juniper Tree and Other Tales from Grim* (1973). His words just as capably describe the real life adventures of the ebullient and indefatigable girl Rosie in *The Sign on Rosie's Door* (1960) and the nonsensical fantasy adventures of the self-indulgent and indefatigable dog Jennie of *Higglety Pigglety Pop* (1967).

Other illustrators, less blessed by a multitude of talents, have often produced brilliant pictures for texts that are, to be kind, pedestrian. Ezra Jack Keats's interesting collages for *The Snowy Day* (1962) must fight his own boring text; his magnificent, brooding pictures for *Apartment Three* (1971) come to seem melodramatic in relation to the small story accompanying them. Gerald McDermott's showy pictures for *Arrow to the Sun* (1973) are a rich coalescence of Pueblo motifs and contemporary graphic design; they imply subtle details about the story that his choppy text does not even hint at. Leo and Diane Dillon are a little luckier in having Verna Aardema's quite tellable texts of African tales to illustrate in their fluidly sensuous pictures for *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears* (1975) and the too much neglected *Who's in Rabbit's House?* (1977), a fascinating evocation of bodies in motion.

The other distinguished book artists of our time are often at their best when they use the least words, as do Peter Spier in his intricately detailed and comically honest pictures for *Noah's Ark* (1977)



and Donald Crews in his vibrant and courageously simple books *Freight Train* (1978) and *Truck* (1980), or when they avoid the faddish ideas about childhood and illustrate the traditional words of the great European fairy tales, as do Nancy Eckholm Burkert in her cool, elegant pictures for *Snow White* (1972) and both Trina Schart Hyman and Susan Jeffers in many fine books. Hyman's pictures are distinguished by a fluid use of line and a dramatic fervor that is richly melodramatic; Jeffers's sophisticated combinations of intricate detail and white space are unfailingly elegant (but surprisingly similar in book after book). The 1970s and 1980s also produced two brilliant practitioners of illustration without color: David Macaulay in intricate books about buildings like *Cathedral* (1973) and *Unbuilding* (1980) and Chris Van Allsburg, whose almost photographic pictures in *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi* (1979) and *Jumanji* (1980) possess a chilling surface stillness that seethes with magical possibilities.

In *The Wreck of the Zephyr* (1982) and *The Polar Express* (1985), Van Allsburg proves that color pictures can be equally mysterious. This book, Sendak's *Outside Over There*, and fine novels by E. L. Konigsburg and Virginia Hamilton suggest how the great tradition of American children's books has continued in the 1980s. In the light of the conservative atmosphere of America in this past decade, it may not be surprising that these distinguished books have all been produced by established writers and illustrators. Thus far, the 1980s have been as unexciting a decade in children's literature as any in this century, and apart from those few books by writers with an already established reputation for surprising their readers, there have been no unsettling innovations, no major breakthroughs, no particularly new voices—at least none that have captured the interest of large numbers of children and large numbers of adults interested in children's books. The 1960s and 1970s may well have been a "Golden Age" for children's books in America; that age may be over.

American children's literature has grown

more complex as the century has worn on, just as the lives of American children have. It may be for that reason that there have been more interesting and noteworthy books in recent decades—and it may be that the decidedly less interesting books of recent years result from adult attempts to hide the real complexity of life in our time from both ourselves and from child readers. Nevertheless, the great American children's books share certain qualities, no matter when they were written. They all balance admiration of the childlike with an honest perception of the limitations of childhood. Sometimes they do so by means of a double perspective, as in Laura Ingalls Wilder's books; sometimes by means of ambivalent portraits of humanlike animals like Frog and Toad, or of monsters that evoke ugly human emotions, like Sendak's wild things. Sometimes the expression of ambivalence is the balance between simple, childlike texts and complex, sophisticated pictures that typifies the great American picture books; sometimes, even, there is a final simple accommodation between what one desires and what one must put up with, as in the case of E. B. White's Wilbur and Virginia Hamilton's M. C. Higgins.

The great American children's books are almost all about children (or childlike animals) who are eternally hopeful and never really fulfilled, eternally open to change yet unchanging, eternally educable but never actually educated. Dorothy of Oz, the bull Ferdinand, the pig Wilbur, Burton's Little House, the girls Harriet and Claudia, and the boys Max and M.C. are all delightfully involved in the business of growing up—and they, none of them, grow up. They merely get older without becoming much different from what they were so charmingly in the first place. In this way, they express the great paradox of childhood in America and thus, of American children's literature: an abiding interest in how children are childlike, based on the conviction that the most childlike of all qualities is the ability to grow past the childlike.