

has applied herself educationally, and has sought and found solace in religion.

What particularly impresses this author, however, is that she is both repentant for her crime and seeks forgiveness. She does not flinch from what she did, and freely refers to those she killed as “my victims.” All the more reason why she cannot be killed unless the state abrogates justice in order to arrogate to itself revenge.

Post script

Although Karla Faye Tucker’s case is a highly compelling argument for abolishing the death penalty, I cannot recommend reading *Crossed Over*. The author, Beverly Lowry, is a novelist, a middle-class Texan, whose son became embroiled in drugs and died in a hit-and-run accident. In her grief, she somehow found Tucker, befriended her, and decided to tell both Tucker’s story and her own. Unfortunately, her book is poorly written, sensationalist to the point of being silly. Nonetheless, there is little doubt that she has brought Tucker’s story to the fore.

I hope she has helped save Tucker’s life.

A pioneer in poetry for the very young

by Richard and Susan Welsh

Margaret Wise Brown: Awakened by the Moon

by Leonard S. Marcus
Beacon Press, Boston, 1992
337 pages, hardbound, \$25

The Fish with the Deep Sea Smile: Stories and Poems for Reading to Young Children

by Margaret Wise Brown
Linnet Books, The Shoe String Press, Inc.,
Hamden, Conn., 1988 (reprint of 1938 ed.)
128 pages, hardbound, \$18

The Log of Christopher Columbus’ First Voyage to America in the Year 1492, as copied out in brief by Bartholomew Las Casas

edited by Margaret Wise Brown
Linnet Books, The Shoe String Press, Inc.,
Hamden, Conn., 1989 (reprint of 1938 ed.)
Ages 8-12, 84 pages, hardbound, \$17

Homes in the Wilderness: A Pilgrim’s Journal of Plymouth Plantation in 1629

by William Bradford et al.
edited by Margaret Wise Brown
Linnet Books, The Shoe String Press, Inc.,
Hamden, Conn., 1988 (reprint of 1939 ed.)
Ages 12 and up, 76 pages, hardbound, \$16;
paperbound \$8.95

Literature for children, as for adults, is created by small groups of opinion-shapers. These operate through publishing houses, and mass-media and mass-advertising dicta of what to read and what to ignore. Children’s literature today is as much a reflection of 20th-century cultural decay as its adult counterpart, and for the same reasons. Yet there is something even more disturbing about bad books for children. While no person should be subjected to cultural degradation, when that person is a child, it is a mind and morality not yet formed that is being perverted; it is mankind’s future.

Leonard Marcus’s biography of Margaret Wise Brown, one of the 20th century’s most creative and prolific writers for young children, provides a fascinating and informative look at some of these influences as they operated in the crucial period of the 1920s through the immediate postwar years. The irony, which Marcus identifies (though not sharing the reviewers’ evaluation of its historic and moral significance), is that this century’s cultural warfare agency *par excellence*—the “Progressive movement” of John Dewey, et al.—managed to launch in Miss Brown one of the most subtly effective saboteurs of its cultural gameplan. It is probably for this reason that most readers will not even recognize her name, or at least not consider her of the same historical significance to small children’s literature as her contemporaries Theodore Geisel (“Dr. Seuss”), H.A. Rey (*Curious George*), Ludwig Bemelmans (*Madeline*), or Jean de Brunhoff (*Babar*).

Margaret Wise Brown died in 1952, at the age of 42. Including some 20-odd titles published posthumously, she authored over 100 books for small children, about 40 of which are still or again in print. As editor for the new “pro-

gressive” publishing house of William R. Scott (founded in 1938), she also became the foremost “impresario” for the new publishing field of literature for very small children, discovering, seeking out, encouraging, publishing, and publicizing other authors and illustrators.

The ‘fairy tale war’

From the turn of the century and down through the 1920s, as Marcus relates, the field of literature for children was largely dominated by the New York Public Library’s Anne Carroll Moore, a hard-core romantic whose nominal defense of “classical” literature for children did not extend much beyond the basic fairy tale or ancient myth format, rooted in a conception of childhood as a time of happy magic and bucolic innocence. As Marcus relates, “In her fantasy world, nothing could ever be only what it seemed. A brownie or gnome . . . had always to appear to confer a touch of magic on an otherwise all too prosaic world.” Moore’s influence was incalculable. As director of the library’s children’s division, her annual buying guide of children’s books, published in November for the crucial Christmas market, was the predominant book review in this area. More critically, about half the print run of any new children’s book, prior to the 1940s, would be bought by libraries—nearly all of which deferred to Moore, much as local newspapers and radio stations today are little more than outlets for the AP-UPI-*New York Times* news cartel.

Enter the Progressives: From about the turn of the century, a movement had set out to seize political and cultural power worldwide, led in philosophy, psychology, and education by John Dewey, William James, Edward L. Thorndike, and the behaviorist psychologists in general. Institutionally it was centered on the National Education Association (NEA) and the newly founded Teachers College of Columbia University. One of the foremost tenets of this movement was and is that the creative human mind, as such, does not exist. All that is real is *perception*, learned reactions based on sensual pleasure and pain. From this, they inferred the possibility of controlling human behavior by manipulation of those reactions.

Out of this movement, in 1916, emerged the Bureau of Educational Experiments (“Bank Street School”) in New York City’s Greenwich Village, an institution combining a nursery school, teacher-training program, and developmental psychology research. Bank Street was founded and bankrolled by progressivite Lucy Sprague Mitchell, a student and disciple of Dewey, James, and Thorndike. In 1921, Mitchell took up the cudgels to do battle with the all-powerful Anne Moore, using as her weapons the new Progressive theory and practice of “here and now” stories for children. With her, later, came Margaret Brown, not long out of college and still groping for a career and productive identity, who had been working at Mitchell’s Bank Street School since 1935.

The ensuing “fairy tale war,” as it was dubbed, was itself something of a draw, the two extremes in part exhausting themselves and in part compromising (particularly as the original combatants aged and disappeared from the scene). The “here and now” literature offered nothing better than its romantic foil—the “beep-beep, crunch-crunch” school, its detractors called it, with good reason, referring to the empiricist ideology’s banal insistence on “real-life” sounds, images, and themes.

The Bank Street School’s typical method of “testing” a new children’s story or picture prior to publication was to present it to its nursery-school toddlers, and measure their reactions. (One illustrator, later a collaborator of Brown’s, was initially flustered when the tots gazed at his illustrations for a few minutes, then dispersed; he was reassured that he had succeeded masterfully by holding their attention for the unusual span of five minutes!)

Margaret Brown was something different. She was a superlative poet for the very young.

Brown’s independent contribution

Goodnight Moon, the book for which Brown is best known, exemplifies her independence of both schools, while also carrying with it the limitations of the author’s Bank Street baggage in the form of its less than inspired illustrations by Clement Hurd. Originally panned by the New York Public Library’s internal newsletter as “unbearably sentimental,” and unmentioned in its public newsletters, the book sold reasonably well when first published in 1947, but did not really take off until 1953; since then it has become a mass-marketing phenomenon, with its multiple spinoffs such as stuffed animals, and other hoopla. Yet, it is a good book, by virtue of its poetic quality.

The point that Brown understood, even if only half-consciously (as biographer Marcus demonstrates), is that whether the overt content of a child’s story is fantastical and fairy-like (strange beasts, talking animals, and the like), Arcadian-idyllic, or “here and now” machines in a modern urban setting, is ultimately irrelevant. Any of these apparent themes can be used, either prosaically and didactically, or poetically, because in poetic literature—whether verse as such or prose—the true idea-content, the true stimulation of the listener’s own powers of creative imagination, is *between the lines*, and elsewhere than in the pictures.

To take one example, Brown’s *The Little Island* begins:

There was a little Island in the ocean.
Around it the winds blew
And the birds flew
And the tides rose and fell on the shore.

A few pages later:

Small flowers, white and blue,

and violets with golden eyes
 and little waxy white-pink chuckleberry blossoms
 and one tickly smelling pear tree
 bloomed on the Island.
 And that was the spring.

For children fed such fare, Shakespeare will come as an old friend, when later they encounter the “Spring” song from *Love’s Labor’s Lost*:

When daisies pied and violets blue
 And lady-smocks all silver-white
 And cuckoo-buds of yellow hue
 Do paint the meadows with delight. . . .

Unfortunately, Brown remained insecure and often self-destructive for much of her life, subordinating herself emotionally to a sequence of older mother-figures who had, in general, very little comprehension of what she was about. For similar reasons she failed to break with her progressivite grooming in the form of the artists with whom she collaborated, most of them veterans of the Paris and other “modernist,” social-realist, and other degenerated art cults of the early 20th century. The most important exception is Garth Williams, whose seemingly sentimental “fuzzy-wuzzy” style often conveys wry ironies that wonderfully complement Brown’s poetic language. One of the best of these is *The Sailor Dog*, unfortunately out of print (except for a very poor, truncated reproduction in a Golden Books anthology).

There are few books that so well capture a small child’s effort to master the emotions called up by his or her powerful urge to get out and explore the world, to be independent; the fear of both real and imagined dangers accompanying that exploration; and the restoration of warmth and security represented in real life by loving parents. The tension between these two urges is the single most important fact of life for children, and their parents.

Writes Brown, in a choral refrain that is repeated several times throughout the story: “At night Scuppers [the sailor dog] threw the anchor into the sea and he went down to his little room. He put his hat on the hook for his hat, and his rope on the hook for his rope, and his pants on the hook for his pants, and his spyglass on the hook for his spyglass, and he put his shoes under the bed, and got into his bed, which was a bunk, and went to sleep.” The crucial security is there, but at the same time it is Scuppers himself in command; and the comforting “familiar objects”—so important to the Progressivite “here and now” fetish—are not limited to dinner tables and taxicabs and socks, but rather are objects of exploration, discovery, and mastery of the big, exciting, sometimes dangerous, but beautiful world at large.

Brown’s better work stands out by far above that of most other contemporary, or later, authors, even in those of her works marred by the manneristic illustrators whose inferiori-



Margaret Wise Brown with her dog, Crispin’s Crispian. Her whacky sense of humor is shown by the fact that in her will, she tied the rights to her Doubleday books to the custody of the bad-tempered animal; later, she offered Crispian to her French innkeeper. The result was a five-year legal battle over her estate between the innkeeper and her heirs.

ty to her own conceptions she apparently failed to understand. She did, however, know in her soul that she was something different from her erstwhile mentors, even if she could not admit it to herself. Thus, to her Bank Street patron Lucy Mitchell, she wrote, more wishfully than actually, that “even a here and now story can be a dream and you have written plenty of them yourself which your litteral [sic] heavy footed followers have failed to notice.” (In fairness to Mitchell, a complex person in her own right, it was she who initiated, among other useful projects, the publication for children of the log of Christopher Columbus, edited by Margaret Brown. This has recently been reissued by The Shoe String Press, as has a journal of the Pilgrims’ first months in Plymouth, also edited by Brown. Mitchell had long advocated the use of such original source materials, on the theory that they give the study of history greater immediacy.)

Humor and verbal action

What kept Brown going despite her insecurities was, in part, her eccentric and provocative sense of humor, which with her command of beautiful and evocative language (especially verbs) were the foundations for her success in this unique cultural domain. In the seasonal round of *The Little Island*, the seals didn’t just come, but “came barking down from the north”; and “seven times the Summer had droned its hot bee-buzzing days around him.” Or, from *Mister Dog*:

"Once upon a time there was a funny dog named Crispin's Crispian. He was named Crispin's Crispian because—he belonged to himself. In the mornings he woke himself up and he went to the icebox and gave himself some bread and milk. . . . Then he took himself for a walk."

Brown was a pioneer in the writing of books for very young children—from infancy through the older preschool years, a group for whom nearly nothing existed in English literature beyond Mother Goose, and who cannot yet comprehend either the Grimm tales or literature written for older children. (The psychological importance of classical fairy tales for children starting at age four or five was convincingly argued by the late Bruno Bettelheim in his *The Uses of Enchantment*. Between these compact and psychologically powerful tales and the corrupt romanticism of modern fantasy, there is a world of difference.)

Goodnight Moon and its predecessor *The Runaway Bunny* are the best-known of Brown's books for the very young, but only two among many. Perhaps the best insight into Brown's art can be found in one of her earliest works, a collection of poems and (very) short stories entitled *The Fish with the Deep Sea Smile*. It is utterly unlike anything one expects for the very young: It is not a "look at this," "this is a that," sort of object-fixated look-and-say book such as one finds littering bookstore shelves today. In it is the strength of real poetry, albeit simple enough for those who cannot even really talk yet themselves (though understanding far more than they can say).

It is strong in evocative and powerful verbs, and the author's "theme and variation" method that resembles the Bank Street "learn by repetition" format in appearance only. That is, she presents first a repetition-series; but suddenly, the format changes, and the listener realizes, even if not yet consciously, that beyond the simple series, is a higher-order idea: a true progression, the formation of a concept "between the lines," *by the child*. Thus, from *Two Little Gardeners*, co-authored with Edith Thatcher Hurd (emphasis added to highlight the verbal shift):

Spring!
The snow melted
A snowdrop came up
A robin hopped
And a worm *turned in the ground*. . . .
Then the rain came.
And the sun shone.
And the wind *came softly blowing through the night*.

Mass culture

In the medium term, it was neither Brown nor the Progressives who defeated the Moore-romantics, but rather the publishing innovation of mass-market, cheap children's books ushered in by Simon & Schuster's "Golden Books" imprint in 1942. Selling for 25¢—15% the average price of

other children's books, these titles, for good and ill, spelled the end of the old system, at least for the printed word. Both old-school romanticism and progressive behavior modification continued to thrive, however, in the new medium of television. Since Brown died in 1952, television did not figure significantly in her life.

Perhaps naively, given its subsequent history, she saw in television a device that might "bring back the ballad singer." "How wonderful it would be to walk along the street and hear children putting their own thoughts to music, making up their own songs," she wrote. As we know now, television's effect has been the opposite, rendering its audience passive and dull. Its hypnotic "larger than life" content has redounded on the print medium, to the effect that the now-dominant form of children's literature is the luxuriantly airbrushed, color-saturated "coffee-table" type of book, which, far from stimulating a child to imagine, think, and create, overwhelms with its mass of detail, or narcotizes with romantic vapors. It is the happy, hallucinatory marriage of the once-warring forces of the "fairy tale war."

It is a welcome relief from this, that Margaret Wise Brown's clean, spare yet not simple, verbally charged poetry remains available. Marcus's book provides an insightful study of the artist and occasional sharp glimpses of the cultural and political forces which ensured that she would have few successors of like quality.

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