Behind the Scenes in Children’s Books


Eve Tal

Have you ever wondered who published the first children’s book in the United States, or who started the first children’s library?

Perhaps you have wondered why none of Laura Ingalls Wilder’s books ever won the Newbery Medal, or why Munro Leaf’s The Story of Ferdinand1 aroused political controversy when first published.

Unless you are a scholar of children’s literature, these questions may never have occurred to you. However, if I have piqued your curiosity, you can turn to Leonard S. Marcus’ Minders of Make-Believe for the answers to these and hundreds of other questions about children’s books that may have never crossed your mind. I confess they never crossed mine.

Minders of Make-Believe is more than a compendium of children’s literature trivia, however. Marcus is an esteemed historian of American children’s books, and his works
include *Margaret Wise Brown: Awakened by the Moon, Dear Genius: The Letters of Ursula Nordstrom,* and *Golden Legacy: How Golden Books Won Children’s Hearts, changed Publishing Forever, and Became an American Icon Along the Way.* In *Minders of Make-Believe,* Marcus tells the story behind the three-hundred-year-long history of children’s books in America by presenting “the thoughts and actions of the people responsible for the creation and dissemination of children’s books” (xi)—publishers, critics, librarians, booksellers, and others. Using the lens of children’s books, Marcus has created a social history of America’s changing relationship to childhood, from the founding of the American nation to the millennium. Teachers, librarians, and anyone who loves children’s literature will find the book an insightful, witty journey through a past that reflects directly on our present.

Marcus begins his journey with a chapter on Colonial America through the Civil War. Literacy was strongly encouraged in New England as early as 1642 with a series of laws mandating that “children, servants, and apprentices” (1) acquire the ability to read. Towns of fifty households were required to hire a teacher for their children, while towns of one hundred were required to open a public school. Literacy was closely associated with the fulfillment of religious duties, so it is not surprising that the first recorded children’s book published in America in 1689 was *The New-England Primer,* designed to teach children their letters and encourage the “good Christian life” (2). After the War of Independence, homegrown literary production flourished with an emphasis on steady sellers that remained in print for decades. Perhaps the best known children’s book of this period is Parson Weems’ *The Life of George Washington; with Curious Anecdotes, Equally Honourable to Himself and Exemplary to His Young Countrymen.* The early version was rushed to the printer in 1800 by the market-savvy author a year after Washington’s demise. The story of the cherry tree is among its “curious anecdotes.” Weems followed it with a popular series on the founding fathers.

The names of early children’s book publishers are unfamiliar today, but by the 1850s a family print shop owned by the Harper brothers had established New York as America’s preeminent commercial city and become its largest employer. Harper and Brothers offered both fiction and nonfiction in a uniform series for young readers. Their line included Jacob Abbott’s Rollo Holiday, rival to Samuel Griswold Goodrich’s Peter Parley. In the absence of international copyright laws, the popular Parley books were plagiarized in England and then republished in turn by Goodrich himself in America.

By 1852 a reviewer for the *New York Daily Times* was marveling at the “wealth and variety” (30) of children’s books available for Christmas giving, with a substantial portion published in America. The first circulating collection of children’s books was organized in 1875 by Caroline M. Hewins, the head of the Hartford Library Association. This was followed in 1887 when Minerva Sanders of Pawtucket, Rhode Island, set aside a corner of her library reading room for children, thus founding the first library to welcome children as library patrons.
Writing at the close of the Civil War, Samuel Osgood, a Unitarian clergyman and scholar, argued for juvenile literature’s power to foster the “intellectual development and to preserve the spiritual well-being”(32) of America’s youth, while at the same time decrying the fact that America had not yet produced a single juvenile book worthy of being considered a classic. Osgood speculated that the reason might lie in the fast pace of American life and parental pressure on children to grow up too soon—a familiar criticism today as parents pressure their toddlers to grow out of picture books. By 1865 nearly every major American book publisher was producing at least one magazine for children. Contributors included such well-known authors and illustrators as Charles Dickens, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, John Greenleaf Whittier, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Howard Pyle, and Louisa May Alcott, whose career as a magazine publisher provides insight into a little known facet of the writer’s life.

The latter half of the nineteenth century witnessed the publication of books that would vie for the title of children’s classics. Mary Mapes Dodge’s *Hans Brinker, or, The Silver Skates*, published in 1865, immediately became a best seller, while Frank Baum’s *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* appeared in 1900.

Marcus devotes his later chapters to the decades from 1920 through 1990. He focuses on the growth (and disappearance) of publishing houses whose names will be familiar to readers and provides insight into the women who came to rule the world of children’s books, whether as librarians, critics, or editors. Anne Carroll Moore, the Superintendent of the Department of Work with Children at the New York Public Library (1906) was the first in this long line of Ivy League women. When Macmillan created the first Department for Books for Boys and Girls in 1919 and chose Louise Seaman for the job, Marcus notes that “the editing of children’s books joined school teaching, library service to children, and missionary work in the sisterhood of modern day ‘mothering’ professions” (78). The publishing industry quickly recognized the logic behind departmentalization, and Seaman was joined by May Massee, Ursula Nordstrom, and many others. By 1943 Frederic Melcher noted in *Publisher’s Weekly* that fifty publishers maintained “full-fledged juvenile departments” (179), while twice that number occasionally published children’s books. In fact, keeping the various publishing houses and their editors straight was beyond me, and I would have appreciated an appendix with diagrams showing the development of major publishing houses as well as their editors and well-known books.

*Minders of Make-Believe* does not neglect the Newbery Awards, Caldecott Awards, or Children’s Book Week. Marcus elucidates the debate between the proponents of classic children’s fantasy (the librarians) and realistic, age-appropriate books (educators like Bank Street’s Lucy Sprague Mitchell.) He notes several attempts by publishers and editors to promote books for minority children, only to see them fail time and again because of economic considerations. Even as late as the 1980s, Marcus quotes an anonymous editor...
as saying in response to complaints from the African American community: “You’re only 20% of the population. How can I be concerned with you?”(281) He details the rise of mass market children’s books beginning with the Little Golden Books in 1942, which at twenty-five cents a piece were bought by the handful, although they were snubbed by critics and librarians. By 1950, over three hundred million Little Golden Books had found their way into American homes, including mine.

The long-term historical focus of *Minders of Make-Believe* highlights the lack of both predictability and stability in the world of children’s books. Publishing houses rise and fall. Editors come and go. Children demand realism, move on to horror, and return to fantasy. Marcus points out in his closing discussion that all the “gatekeepers of culture and commerce” (315) were taken by surprise by the Harry Potter phenomenon. Throughout the three hundred year history of children’s books in America, attempts to control the tastes of children by religious leaders, educators, librarians, critics, and marketing departments have always failed. I find something heartening in this, for while children may not write books, ultimately they are the ones who read them.

The one thing missing from my enjoyment of *Minders of Make-Believe* was the absence of illustrations. A glimpse of early children’s books would have been welcome, as would photographs of the editors and librarians whose careers fill so many pages. But these are small criticism beside the awesome amount of material covered in the book. So much of what we take for granted today had its roots in earlier years. So much of what appears timeless was the result of the vision and struggle of lovers of children and their books.

As for the story behind *Ferdinand* or Wilder and the Newbery award, you will just have to read the book.

**Notes**

1. Any book discussed in my article not mentioned in Marcus is included in my references at the end. The remainder can be identified through Marcus.

**Works Cited**


**About the Author**

**Eve Tal** has published two award winning novels for young adults, *Cursing Columbus* and *Double Crossing*. Her nonfiction study, *A Truth To Tell: Victims of the Shoah in American and Israeli Novels for Young Readers*, focuses on how children’s writers shape the dark truth about the Holocaust for young readers and includes many useful resources for teachers. It will be available shortly as an e-book through www.lookagainpress.com at online bookstores.