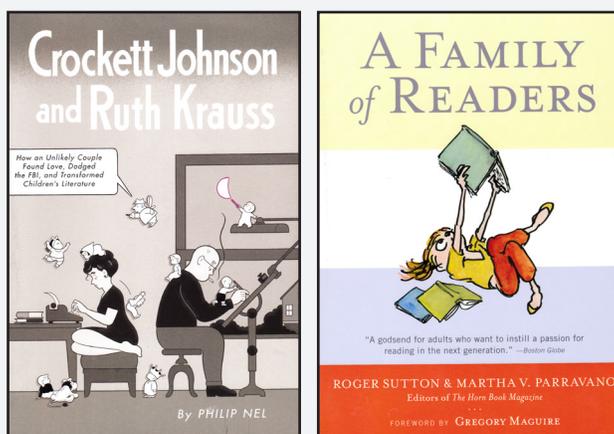


Professional Reading

Crockett Johnson and Ruth Krauss by Philip Nel
A Family of Readers edited by Roger Sutton and Martha Parravano

Jill P. May



At one of our last editorial meetings, we determined it was time to make a change in the way *FOSR* acknowledged all of the wonderful books people are publishing about children's, adolescent, and young adult literature. We need to make recommendations to you all year long. As we've said in our summer reading column, some of the books we find that we think you would enjoy might not be available in your local book store, or even at your public library. Having a column each issue is our way of saying, "There are certainly a lot of new professional books worth reading every day, books we can't afford to put on the back burner until summer." From now on, our "Professional Reading" column will appear each issue, with selections introduced by someone on *FOSR's* Editorial Board. Since *FOSR* board members come from different academic places, we expect to see divergence in the books selected.

We're putting the book titles in the column's masthead so that you can immediately survey what has been chosen. Just as we've done in the summer, we will list the titles in alphabetical order by the authors' last names so we don't seem to suggest that one title is better than another. The short reviews that will appear should help you determine which of the many wonderful books are of interest to you. Enjoy this first selection, and watch for different choices of our board members in future issues.

Nel, Philip. *Crockett Johnson and Ruth Krauss: How an Unlikely Couple Found Love, Dodged the FBI, and Transformed Children's Literature*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2012.

Philip Nel's lively monograph about the private lives of David Johnson (aka Crockett Johnson) and his wife Ruth Krauss might not be a page-turner of a mystery, but it is not an easy book to put down. Johnson and Krauss were friends and book collaborators with several important early figures in children's literature, including Maurice Sendak and Ursula Nordstrom. Krauss's early picture books were often compared to the ones being created by Margaret Wise Brown. Crockett Johnson's whimsical cartoons first appeared in his high school newspaper; later he had a long-running cartoon strip that was published in newspapers across the United States.

Philip Nel's *Crockett Johnson and Ruth Krauss* is a recent addition to the Children's Literature Association series, suggesting its scholarly heft. Nel carefully details how two very familiar picture book authors were terribly creative artists involved in early US publishing. As political advocates, they believed in supporting strong social values and opposed the beliefs of some leading political figures during the years between WW I and the end of the Vietnam War. Several leading artistic figures also enter into Nel's observations because they were friends with Johnson and Krauss.

Johnson's early career as a political cartoonist and Krauss's unlikely musical career foreshadow their individual strengths. Johnson could draw satire into the simplest of illustrations, while Krauss spent much of her time striving to perfect the natural cadence of the language of the child. While it might be supposed that Ruth Krauss, with her emphasis on the child's world, might have become the renowned picture book author from early US picture book publishing, Nel shows why Crockett Johnson's winsome stories of Harold and his purple crayon became the classical literature that has continually been shared in homes and schools.

Those who have earlier read Philip Nel's *Dr. Seuss: American Icon* (Continuum, 2003) or *Tales of Little Rebels: A Collection of Radical Children's Literature*, co-edited by Nel and Julia Meckenberg (New York UP, 2010), will appreciate Nel's proclivity towards extensive historical research. Containing some 26 pages of "Notes" and a thirty-seven-page bibliography, *Crockett Johnson and Ruth Krauss* interweaves factual information about these two authors and their working lives as children's literature icons with sparse close readings of their works. *Crockett Johnson and Ruth Krauss* is an enticing exploration of early picturebooks written and published for American children that should hold the attention of professors of children's literature, teachers who share the books created by these two, and parents who wish to consider what kinds of people write books to entertain a youthful audience.

Perhaps one of the highest compliments a book can receive is that it sends its reader off to find other books on the same topics. That happened to me. You might want to pick up earlier publications, including Jules Feiffer's memoir *Backing into Forward* and Leonard Marcus's wonderful edited collection of letters from early book editor Ursula Nordstrom, *Dear Genius*.

Sutton, Roger and Martha V. Parravano, eds. *A Family of Readers: The Book Lover's Guide to Children's and Young Adult Literature*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick P, 2011.

Sutton and Parravano are editors for *Horn Book Magazine*, a highly revered publication in the world of children's and young adult publishing, so the competence in compiling and editing the entries within this book should come as no surprise. However, while *Horn Book* is most apt to be read by practicing teachers and librarians, *A Family of Readers* addresses issues of selection and family reading for another equally important audience: parents and caretakers who have a day-to-day role in shaping youngsters' reader interests. Much that is included resembles articles published in *Horn Book*: introductory articles, often by the editors, explain the possibilities of literature for each stage of childhood, authors and reviewers give first-hand insights into the creative processes employed in successful books for young readers, and a bibliography of children's and adolescent books is included for each discussed genre.

I found myself integrating this collection into my earlier reading. For instance, I had just finished Phil Nel's book, so I was immediately drawn to Roger Sutton's interview with Maurice Sendak (60–63) and the short essays by authors Margaret Mahy (74) and Cynthia Voigt (75). The lists of books made me consider what I might add that could further entice a young audience into the world of children's and adolescent literature. The importance of our changing society—and the implications this has always had for authors and illustrators like *Crockett Johnson and Ruth Krauss*—seemed to be best addressed in "Reading about Families in My Family" by Megan Lambert (277–79). I kept returning to her autobiographical confession and considering what my children had enjoyed reading while they were growing up.

Here's the best thing about *A Family of Readers*: I could pick it up in any spare moment and get through a whole essay, whether I was taking a break from writing or getting ready to turn off the light and go to sleep. All of the short pieces could be read in a few moments, and any of them could inspire personal reflection. Many would need to be read more than once because though they were easily read, they were thoughtful entries. And because there were booklists, I wouldn't have to hunt for other books that tied in to my daily reading about children's literature.

Works Cited

- Feiffer, Jules. *Backing into Forward*. New York: Nan A Talese/Doubleday, 2010.
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- Mickenberg, Julia L. and Philip Nel, ed. *Tales for Little Rebels: A Collection of Radical Children's Literature*. Foreword by Jack Zipes. New York: New York UP, 2008.
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