

Gwynne Spencer  
Post Office Box 121  
Mancos, CO 81328  
(970) 533-7484  
(970) 533-9183 fax  
©2005 gwynne spencer  
gwynnespencer@aol.com

### **BOOKS FOR BABIES THEN AND NOW**

Long ago, when the dinosaurs were still alive, I was a child. In those faraway days, there were very few books for babies. Childhood had just barely been invented, you see, and while we weren't dressed up like little adults, we were expected to not need books until we knew how to read, which of course, always took place when you went to school.

So, there were no books for babies. Oh, I suppose the filthy rich folks had a few hardcover books—*Mother Goose*, *A Child's Garden of Verses* (like the one illustrated by Jesse Wilcox Smith), or other classic titles. But babies who chewed on everything were given clothespins to gnaw on and few books were read to them, on the presumption that they had the language facility of a cocker spaniel.

There were, however, cloth books. They were printed on starched cotton cloth, or duck and printed in two or perhaps three colors. They typically had eight pages and came with cardboard in the front cover. You were, according to my Aunt Ruth, whose memory is impeccable, supposed to cut up shirt cardboards (not many people will know what *THOSE* are), and slip them into the casings of each page to make them easier for little grubby hands to turn. Then, when you had to wash the book because of said little grubby mitts being laden with germs (remember, this was before penicillin was available except

for the troops), you would take out the cardboard, wash it in lye soap in the wash tub (not many people will remember them, either) and hang them to dry on the clothesline.

This was the state of affairs for many years. In the early 1940s, there was a small conclave that called themselves the Artists and Writers Guild. They were a branch of the Western Printing and Lithograph Company. Then one day, George Schuster was having lunch with Garth Williams (this is according to Garth), and they dreamed up the idea of Little Golden Books. "What if we could produce them for say, seven cents, and sell them at the checkouts at the A&P [an East Coast supermarket chain]?" they wondered. Under the savvy business leadership of George Duplaix and Lucille Ogle, they ran the numbers: there had to be 50,000 copies printed for the books to make a profit.

The first twelve titles were very conservative: *Mother Goose*, *Three Little Kittens*, *ABC*, the *Poky Little Puppy* was the most daring of the first group of titles. The editors trundled off to Columbia Teachers College where Margaret Wise Brown was teaching in the education department and enlisted her as their writer (singular), and then went to Madison Avenue and found Leonard Weisgard and hired him as their illustrator. Tibor Gergely came along as part of the deal with Leonard.

The *Here and Now* stories ( a project of Lucy Sprague Mitchell in the earliest days of Bank Street College of Education) were the next batch of titles: *Tootle*, *Scuffy the Tugboat*, *The Taxi That Hurried*, *Seven Little Postmen*. Rhythm and rhyme and bright pictures filled these little books with the shiny gold foil binding and sturdy cardboard covers that still only cost a quarter. Illustrators like Richard Scarry, Joan Walsh Anglund, Joe Kaufman clamored to illustrate for a flat fee (\$500).

Thus were Little Golden Books born. *Sailor Dog, A Child's Garden of Verses, Pantaloon, The Color Kittens, The Poky Little Puppy, The Saggy Baggy Elephant, Tootle, Scuffy the Tugboat, Mister Dog* and dozens of other titles, with the lilting unrhymed text of Margaret Wise Brown (a.k.a Golden Macdonald) were interspersed with titles she had her students at Columbia write for credit...and she subsequently sold to Golden Books under pseudonyms (Sue Denims). Authors like Lucy Sprague Mitchell (a linguistic scholar of early childhood) were illustrated by artists like Gustaf Tenggren, Eloise Wilkin, the Provensen's and others. The plethora of titles was amazing and in the cash-tight postwar baby boom, more and more titles showed up at John Wanamaker Department Store, Strawbridge and Clothier, Gimbels, Bonwit Teller as well as the local grocery store and even the drugstore where you could get apothecary substances, an ice cream soda, a pack of smokes, and a Golden Book.

Not only were the first Golden Books spectacularly cheap (25¢), they were unbelievably well written and illustrated. They became the mainstay of childhood reading. Even children of five could read the big print, and the stories of brave dogs and fearless bears, kittens and bakery-owning, world-traveling poodles were better than TV which then consisted of Edward R Murrow and his ubiquitous cigarette and a few Sunday specials with Uncle Miltie. Then came Kukla, Fran and Ollie, Captain Kangaroo, and Howdy Doody. But Golden books were still the best reading around. If your little brother chewed off the corners, it wasn't like he had ruined a library book (which was almost a capital crime.)

Golden Books (and Simon and Schuster and Margaret Wise Brown) thrived and grew into a publishing phenomenon. Many of the early titles were illustrated by Garth Williams, and were stunningly good. Of course, the librarians were gagging in the stacks. This "cheapening influence" on the high quality of children's literature (you better make sure you pronounce all four

syllables) was the stuff of library scandal. This of course, was the days when all librarians were women, wore stockings with seams up the back, and sensible shoes.

For families with modest discretionary income, Golden Books in the baby's room were a status symbol. It meant literacy had a priority in your household. Babysitters arrived in tow with their own favorite titles to share. America's post-war affluence, still building, still not secure, was still half a decade away when Little Golden Books became the mainstay of early childhood literature. Ursula Nordstrom was editor at Harper, and nurturing the work of many writers and illustrators. When Mr. Row joined the publishing house, money became less an issue, winning Caldecotts became the goal. Authors who wrote Golden Books were considered to be "demeaning the integrity" of the genre, still in its infancy, of picture books and were discouraged from writing for both companies. Rivalries grew. Hostilities popped out. Golden books went into decline, and eventually bankruptcy. Now in its fiftieth year, the company is being resurrected by Random House, and reissues of old titles are surprising eager buyers nationwide. Of the thousand titles published, many are now out of print. We shall soon see them coming back, according to editors at Random House. Maybe even Doctor Dan the Band-Aid™ Man will be back.

In the late sixties, you would be hard pressed to find a non-Disney Golden Book, since they had been totally bought. Golden became synonymous with Media product. But on the bright side, books for babies were still being published in cloth format. Titles were still ABC and 1-2-3, or Zoo and You. Babies were, however, now recognized as having intellect. So they must have books!

Then, a miracle happened. The invention of the laminated cardboard book. The Board Book was born. At first, it was same old. ABC and 1-2-3. But as the

editors became more savvy to the market, titles like *Goodnight Moon* and *Very Hungry Caterpillar* were eyed as a possible "crossover" title mix. Board books that accorded out, board books with flaps, board books with photos of babies, board books with touchy feely pages that surpassed the venerable Edith Kunhardt Pat the Bunny title that had enchanted two decades of little readers, blossomed in the cash-rich publishing world.

In many cases, the trade arm of the publisher was supported, like a bastard step-child, by the textbook publishing division. Harper and Row, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Macmillan, Scott Foresman, Addison Wesley, all had enormous revenue streams generated by the mandated textbook money flowing through the public schools. "In Adams fall We Sinned All," and the McGuffey Readers were replaced silently and swiftly by "See Dick. See Dick. See Spot." The millions of dollars of public money spent on textbooks subsidized the publication of trade children's books (and still does to a large degree) as a sort of penance for their instant wealth.

Then, in the late seventies, the mergers began. One publisher after another bought Golden. Harper And Row bought T.Y. Crowell. Macmillan spun off Greenwillow and they were both bought by William Morrow. Scribners became part of Macmillan. It was a dizzying dance of Who Owns Who This Week. The competition was fierce. And babies were finally perceived as key to the process of creating young readers, and especially with an eye toward brand loyalty.

You would never see an ad on TV for books (nor will you now), but you would find them for sale in the children's departments of major stores. Mail order clubs for books put Doubleday on the map, and school order forms were not far behind. Throughout the eighties, the Boomers bought books for babies in record numbers, and publishers obliged them with an ever more dizzying array of choices. Board books with scratch and sniffs. Board books with

sound effects. Board books with rotating tableaux. Board books with cloth pages, laminated pages, paper over boards. The variety seemed endless.

Feodor Rojankovsky illustrated what could arguably be the best version of *The Three Bears* ever produced. His dark and forboding *Little Red Riding Hood* was the stuff of childhood nightmares.

Now, if you go to a major chain bookstore (which of course didn't exist then, except for Brentano's and Borders, which were small family-owned chains), you will find a whole wall of books for babies. Books with microchips that "The Cow says....(push that button)... MOOO". Books to entice and delight the child's eye and draw them into the book as toy. Books have become toys for the babies, with bright designs and even brighter marketing that attaches Beanie Babies to the book, or employs Cheerios and Chocolate Chips as part of the reading experience. It's a whole 'nother world out there, a long long way from boring old cloth books.

But you know what? There is still a certain charm and retro joy to cloth books. For new babies, there is nothing quite as wonderful as crumpling up a cloth page of calico ducks on a yellow background, or polka dot horsies on a green satin field, and stuffing it in your mouth and slobbering all over it, sucking the very starch out of the cloth. But try and find a cloth book these days. So you have to make them. That's why God made pinking shears and sewing machines, I say.

And one of the best inventions for babies is the zip-lock baggie. You cut up a bunch of cardstock (or shirt cardboards if you happen to know where you can get such a thing these days) into the right size of your baggie. You add a photo (Uncle Fester, Aunt Matilda) facing outward, zip that Ziploc up, add a couple more pages (Fluffy the Dead Cat, Fido who Got Run Over by the FedEx truck) and staple them all together at the Ziploc edge. Then you put Duck tape

(or duct tape, if you want to be a spoilsport sorehead) over the staples and VOILA! You have a homemade, slobber proof, totally personalized and 100% indestructible baby book that nobody could buy the likes of anywhere.

Thus, the history of Board Books for Babies.