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Kiddie lit: Where have you gone "Oh, oh, oh."?

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—I spent a few hours this week reading books intended for preschool kids. I was curious about how writers and editors represented the world out here to this audience. Early impressions are probably as important as first impressions.

Baby Boomers were read stories heavy on plot and action. With the exception of Dr. Seuss, most were illustrated realistically. The Great Big FIRE ENGINE Book, for example, is about firefighters doing their work. Its color illustrations are vivid, even disturbing. Richard Scarry's books are filled with animal characters in human activities; he provides lots of detail and sly wit.

Dick-and-Jane readers focus on situations familiar to young children in a typical, post-WWII suburb. They employ simple action verbs—"Look, See, Play, Run, Jump."

Many of these stories rely on Spot, the dog, and Puff, the cat, getting into believable jams. In the 1956 edition of The New We Work and Play, Dick is painting the children's chairs. Spot jumps up and sits on the wet, red paint. "Look at Spot. Oh, oh, oh." Action can't get much hotter than that.

The Little Engine That Could by Watty Piper is a classic underdog triumph. It's interesting that altruism, not reward, motivated the Little Blue Engine to abandon its assigned job and risk its boiler hauling candy and toys to children on the other side of the mountain, kids with sketchy track records.

Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel by Virginia Lee Burton is a tale of industrial dislocation. Mike and his outdated steam shovel, Mary Anne, can't compete against the new diesel-powered excavators. They end up in a rural village where they dig a foundation for a new town hall while forgetting to leave an exit ramp. Mary Anne is turned into the building's furnace, and Mike is retained as the janitor. Not exactly a happy ending for either one.

Books from the 40s and 50s were often built around "regular" persons -- farmers, coal miners, builders, police -- in situations that showed preschoolers a good behavior.

More recent books for preschoolers are different.

I found few positioned around adult work. No rogue engines hauling sugar highs; no blue-collar labor; no Daddies (or Mommies) in banks (like "Mary Poppins"), stores, offices or factories. Writers no longer seem interested in

these settings.

I found few books that taught a life lesson.

I also found very few stories where wildlife wore black hats, or even gray ones. No more Big Bad Wolf, not even an ethically conflicted one. I could not find a single example of creatures like the deadly cobras, Nag and Nagaina, in Kipling's "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi."

Nature is now a Peaceable Kingdom. The lion lies down with the lamb who uses him for a headrest.

Barn Cat by Carol P. Saul and Mary Azarian shows their heroine as having no interest in catching or eating any living thing. Her diet consists of poured milk from a woman in denim overalls and work boots.

I know of no barn cat who lives likes this, though I know plenty of fed cats who have grown fat from not having to work. Every barn cat I know is expected to kill rodents and eat them if they have a mind to. Our barn cats regularly share their conquests with us by depositing them on our front porch. And we praise their effort.

John Gile's, The First Forest, shows "The Tree Maker" -- sort of a Zeus in early hippie clothing -- fashioning a forest brotherhood until "one sad day greed...created a scene nothing short of disgraceful. The greedy tree announced: 'If the sun makes me grow, I'll be biggest and best if I catch every ray.' So he stretched out his limbs and shoved others away...."

Greed misled many trees and changed the woods into "wilderness." Then The Tree Maker punished all the selfish trees by making them "lose every leaf from their limbs every fall." The good trees are ever green.

Gile's story has more upside-downers than the Las Vegas housing market. I'm against greed as much as the next guy who never learned to work it. But telling kids that trees don't compete against each other is disinformation. Deciduous trees lose their leaves as part of their evolutionary survival strategy, not because they've been bad.

I think The Tree Maker has kept too much company with the lady who feeds her barn cat.

Farms are still a favored setting, but they're often a romanticized recollection of Old MacDonald's place, which hasn't been around for decades.

I found three exceptions to the prevailing faux-farm rule. Ann Purnell's Maple Syrup Season, Margaret Carney and Janet Wilson's, At Grandpa's

Sugar Bush and Marsha Wilson Chall's Sugarbush Spring show children the old way of tapping and sugaring.

The three are sentimental and a little corny, but they lay out a more honest line for kids to take into farming than having cows oinking and pigs mooing (Bernard Most, The Cow That Went OINK) or cows on strike demanding electric blankets. (Doreen Cronin, CLICK, CLACK, MOO Cows That Type).

E.B. White's talking pig, Wilbur, in Charlotte's Web wasn't a phony. Readers knew his life crisis was genuine. The new books lack this quality.

One farm book that is absolutely true to itself is Louise Price Bell's, Johnny Tractor and His Pals, published by Deere & Company. The ensemble cast of Johnny Tractor, Clancy Combine, Danny Drill, Chucky Cultivator Dicky Disk, Henry Harrow and Perry Plow decides that "Farmer Fowler needs all of us in some way."

A more honest advertising pitch for the Deere family of great green machines I can't imagine. Johnny is consistent with Deere's understandable effort to establish brand loyalty with future farmers of America as soon as they're able to cultivate a sandbox. A gender-sensitive update might add Wanda Wagon and Barbie Baler to the boys in the field.

Most of the recent environment-oriented books frown on using natural resources, a perspective given to Boomers when hunters shot Bambi's Mom. The conveyed sentiment today seems to be that humans endanger all living things.

What's missing in the "we-are-the-enemy" point of view is that we are also the only solution.

People have learned how to manage natural resources, land and farms in ways that satisfy both the need to use them and the need to do it sensibly in environmental terms. That knowledge should be shared with our kids.

It's easy enough to find examples of where we haven't applied that knowledge—with consequences that would lead Dick and Jane into a big "Oh, oh, oh."

When all is said and done, people can't survive without using resources. Using no resources doesn't seem very sustainable, does it?

I'm not arguing for narrowing the current approach to kiddie lit. I'm arguing for more blooming flowers in this garden, not fewer.

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