

Remembering Children's Books of Yesteryear during National Library Week

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By [Ellen Handler Spitz](#)

Feeling rebellious over our dizzying speed-mad era of e-books, e-readers, digital and virtual realities, I want to advocate for the practice of borrowing a good old-fashioned book from the library—especially now, during [National Library Week](#). I want to remind everyone of the simple joy of settling down in a cozy nook, turning well-worn pages, and reading aloud to a child.

To read a book we once loved as a child to a child today is like soldering silver chains between the generations. Why silver? Because silver is just as beautiful as gold, but if you want to see it gleam, you must polish it. Besides, it is not intergenerational bonds alone that are being polished when you do this but links between actual childhoods. To read a book you once loved is to connect a 21st century child with worlds gone by. Recall how milk was delivered in clanking metal cans or later in bowling pin-shaped bottles of stamped glass with wired paper tops; how dresses with scratchy layers of tulle crinoline had to be pulled over little girls' cringing heads; how children hid with pounding hearts behind parterre drapes when the dreaded tutor or sitter arrived. By ambience and innuendo, the books of yesteryear expose today's children to bygone worlds of sensibility. They enlarge the scope of what it means to be a child today. They foster a sense of self that expands through historical imagination.

Of course, like blown soap bubbles, all aesthetic criteria dissipate moments after taking shape, but cultivating taste in childhood matters. And every book encountered in childhood fosters an awareness of visual design and language. The finest old books enchant our eyes with subtle palettes and artful, uncrowded designs. Rarely busy, loud, or frenetic; never garish or slick, they can however be spontaneous and quirky. Take Dorothy Kunhardt's *Now Open the Box* of 1934, where an upside down circus lady balances on an umbrella with a teacup on one foot and scissors on the other, and not without plenty of room left blank on the page for curious eyes to tarry. Notice that when artists leave room on the page this way an invisible door swings wide to welcome children's own projections. Such pages spark silent dialogues instead of enforcing passivity. They offer trust and also a bit of a dare. They go deep without our even noticing. Whimsy and surprise, after all, attract the eye, but children's hearts are held by feeling. In Kunhardt's *Now Open the Box*, a curled snake rolls itself as it climbs upstairs. Circus performers weep short vertical dashes. "Big" is a double-page spread; "little" fits under your fingernail. With psychological brilliance, this simple story taps into widespread secret fears of losing the unconditional love accorded to you when you are a tiny baby, fears of growing up bigger and bigger into a world of adult demands, where everyone must "perform tricks."

The old books often spring from linear plots. (Look: Aristotle is winking his approval.) This matters because young children's *own* first stories are *post hoc* and paratactic; which means, they narrate by saying: "and," "and," "and"). But careful books foster an awareness of *propter hoc*, that is, of causality. And since causality is the ground of ethics, it matters that it be modeled in

what we offer children. Even as beguiling and zany a tale as *Three Ladies beside the Sea* of 1963 by Rhoda Levine and Edward Gorey, which foregrounds the enduring power of childhood wishes, presents its story line as causal.

Which brings up the question of “message.” Rarely do older books spell entertainment pure and simple. Children, after all, are constructing worlds! No matter how piously we rail against didacticism and say “we shouldn’t tell kids what to do,” young children take in and learn from everything we make available: “Children will listen.” Unburdened by publishing guidelines as to “age-appropriate” vocabulary, many older books afford chances to reach. They tantalize, judiciously withholding their rewards, drawing children back again and again to their pages. Take *Ounce, Dice, Trice* of 1958 by Alastair Reid, with its merriment augmented by edgy artist Ben Shahn. This book teaches a poet’s love for language. It catches the way children play with musicality, repetition, and unpredictability, and how much children love the haunting, slippery behavior of words. Busily acquiring language, young children treat words like balls, toys, and magic wands. Their pleasure skips right along with an initiation into what is supremely valuable.

With no slight intended but rather my sincere appreciation to the wonderful children’s book authors of today, I urge you to check out the classics of the past. Borrow them from your library. Share them with the children in your life. Their quality rewards sustained attention—hushed, absorbed hours. Read alone or with an adult, they allow today’s children to slow down, to turn away from trivial distractions, and to expand inwardly in historic time, from generation to generation...

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Note: For those readers who wish not only to borrow the old books but to own and gift them, The [Children’s Collection](#) imprint of *The New York Review of Books* is dedicated to republishing the finest of out-of-print children’s classics.

About the author: Ellen Handler Spitz has been serving as Honors College Professor at UMBC since 2001. She is the author of *Inside Picture Books*, *The Brightening Glance: Imagination and Childhood*, and *Illuminating Childhood*, among other books; her signature seminars are titled Great Books and Cultures of Childhood. She reviews children’s books from time to time for *The New Republic* and *The New York Times Book Review*.