

RUTH KRAUSS AND ME: A VERY SPECIAL PARTNERSHIP

Before children's books grew up and took on some of the unsavory commercial characteristics of their elder sibling, grown-up books, there was **Ruth Krauss**. There were some few others, too, of course, but **Ruth**, along with Ursula Nordstrom, editor of children's books at Harper and Brothers, dominated the land-scape when I came on the scene in the early fifties. That ancient book world was populated with giant women - grand, inspired, towering women who invented the American children's book from scratch. Back then, most publishing-type guys wouldn't be caught dead in a "kiddie-book" department, and when they did show up (after we'd grown up and the whiff of Big Bucks reassured their masculinity), the better part of the business was all but dead.

In those cottage-industry days of the mid-forties, **Ruth** and her painter, writer, illustrator, cartoonist, and all-round ingenious husband, Crockett Johnson, teamed up and created that perfect picture book, *The Carrot Seed* (Harper), the granddaddy of all picture books in America, a small revolution of a book that permanently transformed the face of children's book publishing. *The Carrot Seed*, with not a word or a picture out of place, is dramatic, vivid, precise, concise in every detail. It springs fresh from the real world of children, the Bank Street world of listening to children and recording and re-creating their startling speech patterns and curious, pragmatic thinking processes. These explorations at the Bank Street School in Greenwich Village, pioneered by Margaret Wise Brown, were turned into hilarious, nutty, immortal poetry by **Ruth Krauss**, fresh from her anthropology courses at Columbia and the Writers Laboratory at Bank Street. In full charge of her intuitive grasp of all things related to real children (as opposed to children's book children), this vivacious, sexy, high-living lady suddenly appeared and conquered all. How could she fail? **Ruth** broke rules and invented new ones, and her respect for the natural ferocity of children bloomed into poetry that was utterly faithful to what was true in their lives.

She had the gleeful cooperation of that other "giant," Ursula Nordstrom, who was only too ready to encourage Kraussian mayhem and break into new forms. And I was the lucky kid who was taken up and apprenticed to those two happy hooligans. I found myself drawn into that yummy cottage industry, cooking up the most amazing dishes with my two new mamas and my new big papa, Dave (alias Crockett) Johnson. And it all took place in Connecticut, in **Ruth** and Dave's big rickety frame house by a river with a boat. So, with all the ardent thoughtlessness of youth (I was twenty-three), I pretty much abandoned my good but grumpy Brooklyn parents, who had no boat and little confidence in my ability to earn a living.

Ruth and Dave became my weekend parents and took on the job of shaping me into an artist. I was a good apprentice, and *A Hole Is to Dig*, in 1952, was my official baptism into picture books. I remember the porch table covered with a million (it seems) bits of **Krauss** words and thinkings, encircled by my little scratchy, dumpy doodles. **Ruth** and I would arrange and rearrange and paste and unpaste and **Ruth** would sing and **Ruth** would holler and I'd quail and sulk and Dave would referee. His name should be on all our books, for the technical savvy and cool consideration he brought to them. There was an impressive silence about Dave (he was the most giant of all!), and after **Ruth** had gone to bed I'd hang around with him, hoping he'd open up and waiting for my weekly reading list.

Ruth wasn't so patient, or quiet, and she could frighten me with her stormy tirades. It was hard for such a fiercely liberated woman to

contend with a potentially talented but hopelessly middle-class kid. In the end, she slapped me into shape - almost literally. When **Ruth** approved of a sketch, I was rewarded with the pleasure of her deep belly laugh, which rose upward and exploded in little-girl giggles. But her disapproval could be devastating. There was the awful weekend when we were near completion of *A Hole Is to Dig*, and both of us were worn thin with the whole messy business of pasting, doing, and undoing and **Ruth** began raging at something she'd missed and only just discovered in a number of my pictures. She accused me of assigning the kids middle-class roles: boys doing boy things, and girls (even worse!) doing girl things. "God forbid, a boy should jump rope!" screamed **Ruth**. Panic-stricken, I made some very hasty changes. There are, alas, some suspiciously hermaphroditic-looking kids lurking in the pages of *A Hole Is to Dig*. The very last little picture, the girl sleeping on a book, was originally a boy. Why did **Ruth** insist I change him to a girl? Perhaps because the two vignettes above him/her are of two little boys and she wanted a girl to finish off the triumvirate of book-loving kids? I didn't ask questions.

My favorite **Krauss** is *A Very Special House*, published in 1953. That poem most perfectly simulates **Ruth's** voice - her laughing, crooning, chanting, singing voice. Barbara Bader, in her *American Picturebooks from Noah's Ark to the Beast Within* (Macmillan), sums up that text: "It runs on, it erupts, it runs together - like a dream, daydream or nightdream or playdream; and the disarray, the flux, the indeterminacy were essential to the personal and private fancies that were to chiefly occupy **Ruth Krauss** thereafter." "Thereafter" was the series of books **Ruth** and I collaborated on, eight in all. They permanently influenced my talent, developed my taste, and made me hungry for the best. But nothing was so satisfying as *A Very Special House*; those words and images are **Ruth** and me at our best. If I open that book, her voice will laugh out to me. So I will leave it shut a while.

Is there anyone who grew up in the late forties or the fifties who doesn't treasure the memory of the fresh, bubbling, no nonsense nonsense of *I Can Fly* and the somber, ethereal shades and biblical rhythms of *Charlotte and the White Horse* and the supreme inventiveness of *Crockett Johnson's Harold and the Purple Crayon* (*Harold and Charlotte* were published in the same year, 1955) and all the other **Krauss** and **Johnson** masterpieces? Yet the death of **Ruth Krauss** on July 10, 1993, went unnoticed, aside from a small obituary, a mere footnote riddled with errors published in *The New York Times* five days later. We writers and illustrators of children's books are footnotes to the book business and are of interest only when we generate lots of money or, even more astonishingly, when we appear on the best-seller lists.

This condescension says more about the status of children than it does about us hard-working professionals. Those kids so brilliantly celebrated, loved, and congratulated in **Krauss** book after **Krauss** book are, in truth, powerless little tots of no special interest to any group, political or otherwise. As always, there is endless tongue-clucking coming from government, but little else. We are numbed by the daily reports of children getting murdered on the way home from school, by abuses committed in the best and worst neighborhoods. Children are stoical and suffer silently. What choice do they have? We kiddie-book folk oddly share their humiliation. Apart from parents, we are often the first to greet them in this life, the first to magically empower them. What a mighty role we play, and how often we hear praise, usually incoherent, from those grown-up kids who blush and sniffle and cannot recount those long-ago secret moments spent with our books. We snagged them before they could even talk. **Ruth** is their great champion, and with all due respect to those fine people who shared the obituary page with her, it is likely that she will be remembered best.

When I last visited **Ruth**, I was struck by her extreme frailty and her startling, strong, snow-white hair that fell thickly down her back to the floor. She was a child again, with her staring, suspicious eyes. I mentioned **Dave** and she murmured: "Poor baby." She frowned and looked troubled. Then, just as quickly, her face cleared and she smiled gently, shyly. How often I'd seen that transformation. I took her face in my hands and kissed her on the mouth. And I was rewarded once more with her growling belly laugh that rose up into a cascade of little-girl giggles. This was the same seductive **Ruthie**, the high-flying **Ruthie** who gave all of herself to her art. What a lucky kid I was.