THE BOOK OF KNOWLEDGE

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Creative Writing
FOR VERY YOUNG CHILDREN

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THE written word should be
Clean as bone,
Clear as light, firm as stone.
Two words are not as good as one.

Anon.

In some ways writing for children is like writing for anyone. The key to it is simplicity. And the check in writing for children is to know how much you can write and how much you can't write, and this you can learn only from the children you are writing for or from the honest child left in yourself. Children are keen as wild animals and also as timorous. So you can't be "too funny" or "too scary" or "too many worded." All these are things not as easy as they sound for grown people.

There is always that old problem of learning how to write. We speak naturally but spend all our lives trying to write naturally. I quote my old master, Geoffrey Chaucer:

The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne,
Th'assay so hard, so sharp the conquering.

One must humbly learn and serve the craft, that like carpentry or any craft must be learned backward and forward. Writing for very young children is writing words that will be heard—words to be read aloud; so that the sound of what you write is a part of the meaning of what you write—the rhythms, the repetitions and the sound and fury and quietness with which you write what you have to say: Hey diddle, diddle, the cat and the fiddle, the cow jumped over the moon.

This kind of writing is usually achieved

by accident. Children often talk it. Poets and song writers sing it. So the more poets you read, the more songs you sing. And the more children you listen to, the more you will discover these qualities for yourself, and the better you will know when they come in your own writing or in anyone else's.

Also, don't fool yourself. Most good songs and stories are written to please yourself as well as the children you're writing for. We all have a child still alive in ourselves who can recognize and meet those qualities of pure childlikeness in another child. So never believe anything people tell you that you can't see or recognize either in children themselves or in the child within. The child that is within all of us is perhaps the one laboratory that we all share.

There are two ways—perhaps many more—but there are two ways to know the children you are writing for. The first and best way is to go directly to children themselves. Listen to them and watch them listen to a story. Watch what interests them and what bores them, what frightens them and what comforts them, and above all what delights them.

MEMORIES OF CHILDHOOD AND OF IMAGINED THINGS

The other way is to go to the children through memory, the memories of the real world we knew as a child and the imaginary countries of the worlds we made up. But memory is a tricky place in which to meet children. Memory, true memory, is a wild and private place to which we return truly only by accident as in a dream or a song, or by beaten paths to a place rigidly set by our having visited those familiar and fixed memories so often.

As you write, memory will come out in its true form. You will write of a daisy all the better for having stared at it and cherished it and picked it and smelled it and pulled it apart as a child, or perhaps just from the delight yoou had in its being a white wild flower that came back every spring for you and for the bees on its long green stem that you could pick. Or maybe you only heard of a daisy. And what a lazy, bee-buzzing, freesh-morning sound the word "daisy" is! Aggain I quote Chaucer:

In May, that moder is of monthes glade,
That fresshe floures, blewe, and whyte, and rede,
Ben quike agayn,, that winter dede made. . . .
* * * * * * *
The longe day I shoop me for to abyde
For nothing elles, and I shall nat lye,
But for to loke upon the dayesye
That wel by reson men hit calle may
The 'dayesye' or elles the 'ye of day'. . . . .[1]

Chaucer wrote when the English language was young, when it was a joy to name all the things about him; and in this joy there is the same childlike pleasure that a very young child has in murmuring the names of the things in the world around him. For a child is a young Columbus. He has just arrived in this country, he has only been here a year or two or three. He is just learning, not only a new language but language itself. If you were just learning to fly it would be as exciting as it is for a child to learn to speak and to learn to use the words he knows and the sounds and the words he doesn't know, and to name affectionately all the things in his dear familiar world around him.

"The great grey-green, greasy Limpopo River, all set about with fever-trees." Kipling in THE ELEPHANT'S CHILD gives us these first delights. Sense only makes

[1] Some of the words that you will find in the quotations from Chaucer on this page: *moder*—mother; *floures*—flowers; *quike*—quick, alive; *dede*—dead; *shoop*—shaped; *dayesye*—daisy; *ye*—eye.

sense in contrast to Nonsense. I think that is why children are so amused by Nonsense. Also because our "Sense" often makes so little sense to them, this Nonsense of our so-called sense becomes a private joke among children.

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Margaret Wise Brown, who wrote this article. Left, one of Ylla's photographs from Miss Brown's *The Sleepy Little Lion*. Harper's.

The greatest joke to me is to be writing all this for THE BOOK OF KNOWLEDGE. I used to tell my brother and sister stories at night on the sleeping-porch. If the story seemed good and they hadn't heard it before they would accuse me of making it up. And knowing well that the twenty-four red volumes were too voluminous to betray me, I would tease them by saying I found it in THE BOOK OF KNOWLEDGE and they would spend hours and days searching through the twenty-four huge red volumes for the stories I told them, trying to prove me a "story teller"—a polite word in our family for a liar. They never found the stories there nor were they ever sure they weren't there. And if they couldn't tell the difference what was the difference?

I never tried to write a story for children until I was out of college for three years, and then it was a silly story, about a Fairy Bumblebee, a story that tried too hard to sound like a children's story, all decked out like a Christmas tree with echoes of all the fairy stories I had ever read. It was only when I started getting children to tell me stories of their own and to let me write them down for them that I learned how second-hand and silly my own first attempt at a story was. Their own stories were more natural, quicker and truer in language, even though often incomplete. For years I took down their stories and the more I listened the more I learned and admired the incidental art of their descriptions, words very near to real poetry and sometimes flashes of poetry itself. Here were artists to be learned from. Then I realized how all these stories and fragments of songs and poems had the quality of a dream as they told them. One had to be absolutely still and write very fast to catch them. And then, curiously enough, when the stories were read back to them they would correct me if I had gotten a word wrong, or if I had gotten the emphasis of their story wrong in the way I had punctuated it. These are the young beginnings of the artist—the honest child. To write for these fellow-artists was a challenge. One had to do one's simple best and better than that, much better.

This experience of writing from a child's dictation is an invaluable clue to the easy, natural way to write for children. A child's own story is a dream; but a good

story is a dream that is true for more than one child or that can suggest his own dream to him, or start him dreaming. If you have ever written down dreams as a casual experience it is easy to recognize other dreams. And this is a good start to writing casually. A story a day, or a poem a day, half a dozen of them—out of so much writing one or two of them may be some good or mean something to children.

ONCE UPON A TIME IN A SALMON-PINK TIE

About that same time I was asked to write a collection of stories by a man in a salmon-pink necktie who talked of trout fishing. In the last three minutes of this, my first business encounter with a Publisher, he showed me the size of the volume he wanted, gave me a contract and $250 advance, and told me to go write a book for five-year-olds.

It was incredible—to be asked to write! Before beginning this book for five-year-olds I wrote down what I wanted to write for them.

The jacket cover of THE FISH WITH THE DEEP SEA SMILE quotes from this letter to the publisher:

"The book is an attempt to write of a child's reality, the things that seem important to a child of five or six or seven—nonsense that children can recognize; getting lost and getting found; being good and being bad; shyness and loneliness and the sheer joy of living. Wonder at the colors and smells and sounds of the world so fresh to their brand new senses; the importance of the seasons. This book hopes to touch their imaginings and to suggest further imaginings in the realm of a child's reality."

That last line still interests me. What did I mean? "To touch their imaginings and to suggest further imaginings in the realm of a child's reality." I think I meant that a child's story is only a stepping stone into the world that a real story can open up for him. In some stories you give facts as tools for a child's imagination to go further on. In some stories you give a very young child a form to put his own observations into—as in THE NOISY BOOK or THE IMPORTANT BOOK published by Harper's. In some stories you have the luck to charm him into a good story that for a few moments seems real to him. But it is in the child that the story continues and, fusing with memory, can even become part of him.

It is with some relief that in children's books one finds again an elemental world in which all senses must be alert to meet this challenge of a young child's most excessive awareness and needs. But above all we can have tremendous respect and reverence for what none of us know about children, for what is still to be known or remembered or discovered. That is why writing for a child is a challenge.

To write for a child is to write for

From Miss Brown's *The Dream Book*, illustrated by Richard Floethe. Random House, publishers.

someone who is seeing this world for the first time; and in the mechanics of writing for the very young, the two- and three-year-olds—in the sudden starts and stops, the sounds and silences in the words—it is not unlike writing for a puppy or a kitten. A five-year-old child is often more freshly aware of many things than he will ever be again. His is also the world of pure language. I have always been tremendously interested in and amused by the sheer elements of language, but unless a writer is very lucky this playfulness turns into preciosity and writing for other writers. But when the sheer rhythms and thunders and patterns of language are given back to children then they come into their rightful element. That is perhaps the simple secret of Mother Goose.

Writing for children is for me a happy accident. I still don't mean to and I always mean to stop when it is natural for me to do so. But I am grateful to the world of children's books for remaining one of the purest and freest fields for experimental writing today. Most of my books have been experiments. For instance, THE NOISY BOOKS are a device I worked out with very young children to draw them into the story by questions and rhythms and repetitions and to use every quality of a book in timing and action, from the turning of the pages to the final closing of the book as a part of the story.

THE RUNAWAY BUNNY was an attempt to put the bold, tender, repeated cadence of an ancient French love song into the loving world of a child.

THE THING IS TO DARE TO BE SIMPLE ENOUGH

In THE GOODNIGHT BOOK and BUMBLE-BUGS and ELEPHANTS and THE LITTLE FUR FAMILY I merely dared to be very simple, simple enough for a very young child of two or three to follow. And on this point, it is remarkable that none of us have dared to be, or been able to be, as simple as Beatrix Potter. And no one else has been as good.

SSSSH BANG was an experiment with a whispering device. Other stories and songs and poems have been experiments in the sleep-inducing qualities of words and poetry that could be brought very quietly into a children's book. So many books are read at bedtime.

SAD LITTLE TALE WITH A HAPPY ENDING

In WHEN THE WIND BLEW I took a plot of Chekhov, about a very sad and bitter man trying to drown a fly in an ink blob and then suddenly deciding to save its life and by that one small gesture feeling better; and I tried to make a sad story on this theme for children, believing that many of the graver cadences of life are there at any age.

There are scientific books that teach us a great deal about the differences between children of different ages. And if we combine these books with our own observations of children they are invaluable to any really grounded writing for very young children. These books are in themselves only a limited study, and merely a tool and a check to your own observations and to the delight and simplicity you may by some happy accident still share with children.

But a book should try to accomplish something more than just to repeat a child's own experiences. One would hope rather to make a child laugh or feel clear and happy-headed as he follows a simple rhythm to its logical end, to jog him with the unexpected and comfort him with the familiar; and perhaps to lift him for a few moments from his own problems of shoe laces that won't tie and busy parents and mysterious clock time into the world of a bug or a bear or a bee or a boy living in the timeless world of story.