

# CELEBRATING CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Essays  
on Children's Literature  
in Honor of  
Zena Sutherland

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## A Good Picture Book Should...



Arnold Lobel

One night a while ago, as I was watching the late news, I saw a brief bit of reportage on Dr. Seuss' seventy-fifth birthday. There was a party given for him somewhere in California. There were lots of children and balloons. Everyone looked very tanned and healthy and West Coast. The good Doctor, bearded and handsome, was there in the middle of it all. A reporter shoved a microphone up to his face.

"Don't you feel that the general quality of children's books is quite low?" asked an off-screen voice.

Dr. Seuss looked startled. He took a few backward steps.

"Now don't ask me to denigrate children's books," he said. "You're not going to make me do that." He turned away sharply and the interview was over.

I was cheered by this little exchange. Here, obviously, was a man who was not going to be made to bite the hand that had been feeding him. And I like to think that Dr. Seuss, having been around children's books for a long time, was

well aware of their real worth. Perhaps he was just tired of hearing his profession endlessly bad-mouthed.

The fact is, anyone who has been involved with the field and who has followed it for a period of time can see that each year brings along a really decent portion of good stuff. Since the late thirties when Dr. Seuss began working (and before, as well), we have been bestowing an embarrassment of riches on the young readers of the world. Sure, the junk is there, mediocrity is rampant, but there is enough quality around to permit us, as a group of artists, to be proud of what we have been producing.

Proud I may be, but, in the matter of my work and of children's books in general, articulate I am not. There seems to be a loud clamor and demand for those of us who make picture books to haul our bodies up onto the podiums of America. We are asked to talk at length about what we do.

A good picture book should have a narrative that is simple. But this narrative must be composed skillfully. It must retain its interest with the repetition of many readings. Solid characterization, humor, drama, poetry . . . all these things contribute much.

A good picture book should have drawings that are neither too cartoony cute at one end of the scale, nor too sophisticated and adult at the other.

A good picture book should have artwork that is appropriate to the mood and subject matter of the story. In terms of pacing and selection of images, the artwork should be well integrated into the narrative.

A good picture book should be true. That is to say, it should rise out of the lives and passions of its creators. A book that is created as a commodity will remain just that, however successful that commodity may turn out to be.

That about completes my standard list of remarks on the subject of children's books. There is hardly enough material there to keep an audience waiting through a salad, a plate of creamed chicken on toast, and a fruit cup.

I can pad a little. I can throw in a few amusing anecdotes about the domestic life of the artist. I can divulge a bit of technical information. I can display a color separation, maybe a proof or two. I can drop some lofty names from the arts and literature of the past and present to give some tone to the sources of my inspiration. But all of this falls into the category of making a short story exceedingly long. It disguises the simple fact that the picture book speaks for itself. Its qualities or lack of them are as plain as the print on its pages.

Picture books are nice. The best ones are enormously satisfying. They are objects of pleasing self-containment, somehow capable of suggesting everything that is good about feeling well and having positive thoughts about being alive. They are filled with light and color. The paper is wonderful to the touch.

Not too many bad things happen in picture books. If they do, they usually find their way to a happy resolution at the end. I like them that way. When I feel the morbid need for unpleasantness and despair, I can read the newspaper or watch the news on television or just look out of my window. Picture books are a sanctuary from all of that.

When I am brought low by the vicissitudes of life, I stumble to my bookshelves. I take a little dose of Zemach or Shulevitz. I grab a shot of Goffstein or Marshall. I medicate myself with Steig or Sendak, and the treatment works. I always feel much better.

I often wonder how we end up doing this work, those

of us who have dedicated our lives to the making of picture books for children. We are artists, but what has pulled us away from painting large, serious canvases to hang in museums? Why are we not drawing whiskey bottles for magazine ads? As a group we seem to cling to the need for the kind of imaginative playing that childhood allows.

The cellar in the house in Schenectady where I grew up was often converted into a theater. I painted scenery on old bedsheets and put on plays for my little friends. The gratification that I obtained in producing these enterprises must have been immense for me. I have refused to bring down the curtain. The hair has turned to silver, the body sags, but my show goes on and on.

For their authors, the best books are there for a reason. Doing a book just to have something for a publisher's fall list is, of course, not the most valid of reasons. Granted, a certain amount of economic expediency can be a factor. I have, on a number of occasions, completed a book to keep the pot bubbling and the fires burning. Seldom have I been pleased with the results.

It is those books that have a subjective importance to their authors that turn out to be the good ones. When I can put myself into a frame of mind to be able to share with the reader my problems and my own sense of life's travail, then I discover that I am working in top form. It is a devious process. It involves some amount of duplicity, this transformation of adult preoccupation into stories to which children will respond.

At the moment, there is my grandmother. My parents were divorced shortly after I was born. My mother went off to work each day and I was left in the capable hands of

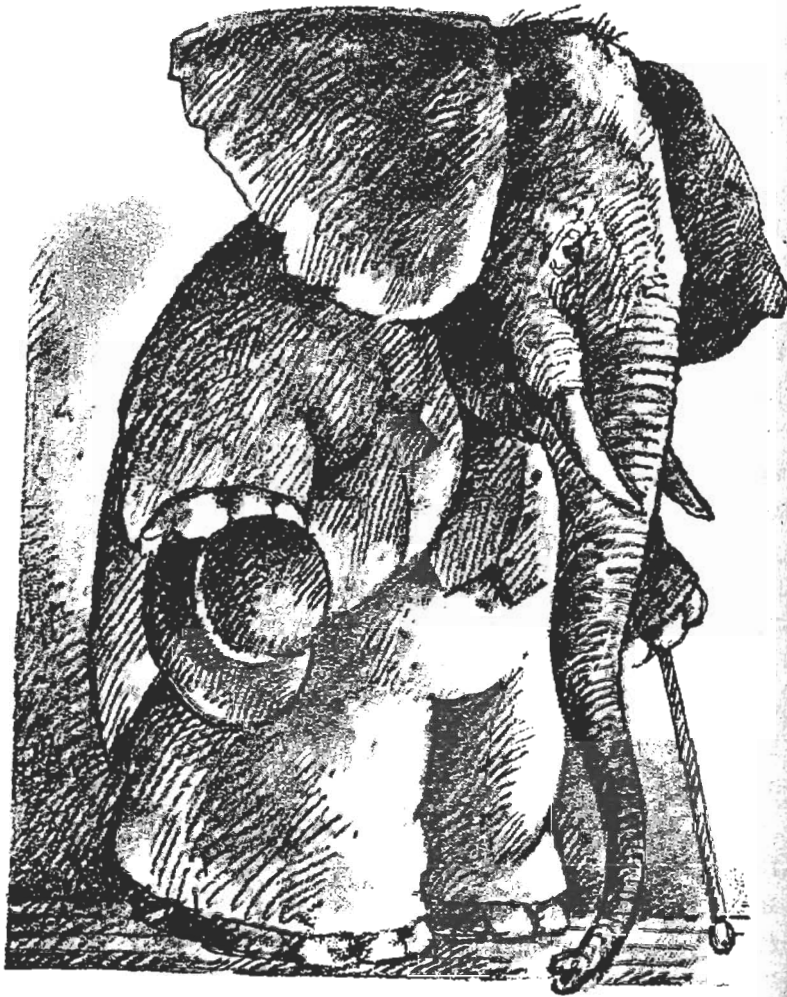
Grandma. It worked out fine. Grandma was strong and well organized. She had enough energy to deal with a circumstance that surely could not have seemed ideal to her.

Now Grandma has grown old. Very old. She is ninety-three and her body has become enfeebled. Her mind is gone. As I make the hour drive to the nursing home where she lives, I know that upon arrival I will not be recognized. It is a grim ordeal for me and I find that my visits to her are becoming less frequent. It is so difficult to witness life's last joke displayed with such cruelty.

I am deeply saddened by this situation. In an effort to exorcise my feelings, I have written a book. This is a book about an old person who is not feeble and who has all his faculties very much intact. I have written a book about the elderly person that I would wish my grandmother to be. That book, *Uncle Elephant*, has somehow dissipated some of my bitterness. That my character turns out to be a pachyderm has absolutely nothing to do with Grandma. I can be forgiven. I like elephants. I enjoy drawing them and I am a compulsive anthropomorphist.

I think the reader will be able to sense my emotional involvement here. If this book has weight and depth, it is because it is not arbitrary. It is an animal story for children but it has worked its way out of the fabric of my life.

For years, I've been convinced that there is an overwhelming separation between the creator of picture books and the children who read these books. This is a natural gulf caused by the age of the readers and the manner in which the books are used. Fan mail is only a partial indication of appreciation since much of it is prompted by a teacher or a librarian. But in the past months I've come to realize that the



A preparatory sketch for *Uncle Elephant*.

children are out there and anxious to indicate their responses. I need only to bolster my courage and present myself before them.

For one who is not used to large groups of children, this is not easy. Recently I've done it. I armed myself with big pads of paper and felt-tipped markers for drawing pictures. I arranged my features into a benevolent expression and sallied forth.

I found the third graders standing in the hall, waiting for me, as I entered the door of the school. They stood in several rows according to height. The tallest children in the back were holding a large banner on which was painted in big, red letters, "WELCOME MR. LOBEL." We were all nervous and we greeted each other stiffly, with the kind of formality that one associates with the meeting of diplomats at airports.

A procession was formed. We marched into the classroom. Posted on the walls of the corridor, all along the way, were many smaller signs and drawings. I saw the repetition of my name crayoned into various forms and designs. I caught glimpses of green and brown frogs and toads cut out of colored paper. I was momentarily stunned by a cartoon of my own face, small eyes, ample aquiline nose, bushy mustache. . . all accurately captured by some fledgling Daumier.

There was a special chair waiting for me. It had been wrapped in purple crepe paper. I was guided to it and was happy to sit down. The welcoming ceremony was over and I settled myself to the task of facing my public.

Miserable recluse that I am, this is not an experience that I have often allowed myself. At some point in my

80 § *Celebrating Children's Books*

career, I made the decision that to create books for children was to live a life of necessary isolation. My art was to grow in an atmosphere of lonely introspection. Inspiration was not to be found in the noisy and unpredictable company of children, but in the safe, dark confines of my imagination, among the dusty pages of my book collection.

I would guess that I am correct in making this assumption. It is doubtful that my muse would be able to work for me while sitting in that third grade classroom, even in a chair of royal purple. Any ideas would be quickly obliterated by all that exuberance and enthusiasm around me. But I am becoming aware that inspiration can certainly be nourished by this kind of appreciation.

At the end of the day I staggered out of that school in a state of complete exhaustion but high with the feeling that my work was being consumed, ingested, chewed-up, and loved. The books were being *used* and I felt the need to keep on making them. After twenty years of sustained effort, I think that is called a strong second wind.