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Main content

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Wise Brown, "laureate of the nursery," "writer of songs and nonsense," the author of more than ninety picture books of which fully a dozen or more are acknowledged classics, observed that to write for the young one must love "not children, but what children love." One must know how, that is, to see the world as a child sees it, as though "for the first time" and as an emotional realm no less difficult--and unlikely, on occasion--than one's own.

A synthesizer by nature, a collector of stray cats and dogs, as a writer for young children Brown adventurously merged elements of the folk story-teller, the Romantic lyric poet, and the modernist experimenter with unconventional narrative forms, the childlike comic mask, and the role of the knowing parent-comforter. Intensely dedicated, ambitious, a festive protean innovator, she was among the first concerned with the picture book for the nursery-aged child, whose particular interests and needs writers and publishers had largely neglected. Brown also demonstrated, at a time when a juvenile book's chief claim to art was thought to be its illustrations, that writing for young children can also be an art--if, as Brown put it, "anyone is lucky enough to write a book simple enough ... to lift the child for a few moments from his own problems of shoe laces that won't tie and busy parents ... into the timeless world of story."

Margaret Wise Brown was born in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, the second of three children, and raised from the age of three at Whitestone Landing, Long Island, near woodlands and beaches where she spent much time alone, living, as she said, "in the imaginary countries of the worlds I made up." Her father, Robert Bruce Brown, was an executive of the American Manufacturing Company, makers of rope, cordage, twine, and bagging. Her mother, Maude Johnson Brown, was descended from an old Virginia family.

From her childhood Brown recalled "a city street with high iron gates, a red brick church ... and the sound of boats on the river"; "the surprise of running away down a dirt road through the wild green summer of my fourth year"; "the painful shy animal dignity with which a child stretches to conform to a strange adult social politeness." She had thought about death, dreams, "mysterious clock time," aging, and "a problem of aesthetics I had--why wasn't an airedale's face beautiful, if it was beautiful to me?"

Stories that she later told friends about her childhood and family were notoriously inaccurate, such as the one, for example, about her grandfather B. Gratz Brown's having fought "the last legal duel in this country on a sandbar that disappeared in the Mississippi River." Facts, generally, concerned her less than the emotional resonances of experience, an attitude or cast of mind that must have set her somewhat apart from her family, to whom "storyteller"--if we may take her word--was "a polite word for liar." If, after inventing a particularly wild tale for the other children gathered on the...

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Margaret Wise Brown is one of the most popular children's authors of all time. Her classic Goodnight Moon (HarperFestival), illustrated by Clement Hurd, has Margaret Wise Brown is one of the most popular children's authors of all time. Her classic Goodnight Moon (HarperFestival), illustrated by Clement Hurd, has See All. In 1910, Margaret Wise Brown was born in Brooklyn. While her education brought her to a boarding school in Switzerland and a college in Virginia, she would eventually return to New York City as a young adult, where she would sow the seeds for a fruitful career with a teaching role at Bank Street Experimental School. It is at Bank Street Experimental School where Brown was introduced to a new style of writing: "here and now." Pioneered by the school's founder, Lucy Sprague Mitchell