

ACCEPTANCE PAPER

by *Virginia Lee Burton*

Making Picture Books

In the first speech I ever made I told the sad story of my first book, an effort upon which the blessing of printer's ink never fell. I wrote and drew that book with all the ardor of an aspiring novice. My friends and I thought that it was very good and very clever, but thirteen juvenile editors disagreed with us. When the manuscript finally came back to me for the last time I discovered the reason for its editorial unpopularity. For then I read it to my son Aris, who was about four years old, and he was so bored that he went to sleep before I could finish the reading. That was the best criticism I have ever received, and by its principle I have been guided ever since.

Children's books are for children. That, of course, is a truism, bald and obvious, but just because it is obvious it is too often ignored or forgotten. Children live in a world of their own, different in many ways from our adult world, and books for children must deal with the things of their world. What we may imagine interests them often leaves them perfectly cold, and, on the other hand, what we dismiss as being of no interest may be fascinating to them. Naturally, then, they are the best of all critics of the books they are to read. I am fortunate in having two boys, two alert little critics for whom and with whom I write and draw all my books. And my boys, like most children, are both frank and keen in their criticism, and they tell me exactly what is right and what is wrong in my illustrations and in my manuscripts.

I have often been asked how I create my books. Actually I make them in collaboration with my children and their friends. I show them the pictures I have drawn, and I tell them the story

that explains the pictures. I watch their fluctuations of interest, and I let them be my guides. When their interest lags, I know that I must delete whatever it is that bores them; when I hold their attention I know that I am on the right track; and when their interest is fixed but unsatisfied I know that I must elaborate my point, or make it more vivid.

In this creative collaboration with children I have learned several things. First, one must never "write down" to children. They sense adult condescension in an instant, and they turn away from it. Moreover, their perception is clear and sharp, perhaps more so than ours. Little things interest them. No detail escapes them. In the crowd scenes in *The Little House* there were so many people and cars and trucks it was difficult to keep track of heads and feet and wheels. Michael, my youngest son's job was to see that they were all on. Purposely, in the end papers, I put a flat tire on a car. He immediately spotted it. Indeed, every detail, no matter how small or unimportant, must possess intrinsic interest and significance and must, at the same time, fit into the big design of the book.

Second, the text and the pictures must be perfectly correlated, and it is vastly preferable to have them on the same page, or on facing pages of the book. Any one who has experienced the ordeal of reading aloud to a child a book with illustrations on a different page from the text will appreciate this point. A hundred times the continuity of the story is broken by the child's demand to see the picture on "the other page," and long before one reaches the end of the book its meaning and its pleasure have been lost in the fluttering pages. In all but one of my books, a case where circumstances dictated otherwise, I have not only placed text and illustrations on the same page, I have also worked the typography of the text into the pattern of the page. Many times I have sacrificed the length of the text or added to it to make it fit the design.

Third, children have an avid appetite for knowledge. They like to learn, provided that the subject matter is presented to them in an entertaining manner. The extent of this desire to learn was something of a revelation to me. In *Mike Mulligan*, for example, the diagram of the steam shovel, with each part carefully labeled,

which I put on the end papers because I thought it too complicated and too detailed for the body of the book, aroused intense interest in the children. Or again, in *The Little House*, the border pattern, on the end papers, representing the history of transportation, proved to be one of the most appealing features of the book.

But if the children learn something from my books, I, too, learn in making these books, for they entail not a little research work, to say nothing of a variety of experiences. For instance, on one occasion I drove some three hundred miles over icy roads to attend a New England town meeting, which ultimately found no place in the book I was writing. Other experiences, such as examining steam shovels, snow plows, hydraulic bull dozers and a dozen other mechanical monsters of our time, were more fruitful. Especially memorable is the day that my son Aris and I rode in a grimy, greasy engine cab, with a battery of levers and gauges in front of us and an "awful noise" of escaping steam all around us — an experience which, I confess, I enjoyed more than Aris did.

To return, however, to the essential qualities of children's picture books, one must strive to give children what they like and want, and I am convinced that they like and want the best qualities. Among these qualities are clarity, well-defined detail, imagination and fantasy in the pictures; rhythm, simplicity and significance in the text — and in both there must be humor, from subtle (for, contrary to much adult belief, children are fully capable of appreciating subtlety) to blatantly obvious. To cite only one instance from my own work, my children never look at the bowed legs of Stewy Slinker without smiling. In brief, children's books must contain the same human and æsthetic elements that appeal to adults, but these elements must be selected from the children's world.

Perhaps I should say from the children's *worlds*, for there are different worlds for children of different ages. Thus one must pattern one's books for definite age groups. *Choo Choo*, my first published book, was written for my son Aris, who was then four years old. It was the story of a run-away locomotive, a rampant adventure of the sort which Aris often produced in miniature in his toy play. This was something which he could and did

understand and which held his interest because it was to him a super-dramatization of one of his daily diversions. My second book, *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel*, was for my second son, Mike, when he had reached the age of four; and again, it was a story of things with which he was familiar in his play, about which he wanted to know more, and which he liked to see dramatized. When I wrote my next book Aris was nine years old, and he had fallen prey to the dime comic books. Hoping to counteract the not too elevated taste induced by this variety of literature, I did *Calico, the Wonder Horse*. At this time it was my good fortune to meet Grace Allen Hogarth, the new juvenile editor of Houghton Mifflin Company. *Calico* was a new thing in the way of children's books, an experiment, as it were, and as such a risk for any publisher. Despite all this, Grace Hogarth encouraged me, gave me a free hand, and in a sense fostered this book into existence.

In *The Little House*, next in the sequence of my publications, I dared to make another departure from the usual in books for children. This time I was writing for the age span of from four to eight. The heroine of my story was the little house, but unlike most central characters the little house is stationary until the end of the book while its surroundings change. And the changing surroundings represent the sweep of social history, or to make a very bad pun "her-story." My problem was to convey the idea of historical perspective, or the passage of time, in terms comprehensible to a child. At the outset, the rising and setting of the sun signify the passing of the hours of the day; the waxing and waning of the moon, the succession of the days of the month; and the rotations of the seasons, the evanescence of the year. Once this rhythm is established, the child grasps the idea of change and perspective, and conceives the century of a city's growth, with the development of transportation, of paved streets, of reinforced concrete buildings, and the general idea of urbanization. A nocturnal scene every four or five pages spaces the bright colors and accentuates the sense of the flow of time. Many people have said that *The Little House* has a message, that the further away we

get from nature and the simple way of life the less happy we are. For my part, I am quite willing to let this be its message.

But apart from the significance of any one book, it seems to me that books for children are among the most powerful influences in shaping their lives and tastes. In this sense these books are important means of advancing to a better world, for the future lies to some extent in the hands of the children of today. Tomorrow their ideas and their tastes will be the ones that count. Books created primarily for entertainment can do much to form the norms of future thought and action. Educational books can perhaps do still more. The drawings in educational books now used in the schools are not often of the best quality, and yet they have had more influence on the æsthetic and intellectual standards of the country than most of us realize. In recent years these standards may have been raised somewhat, but there is still ample room for improvement. Few of our best illustrators have gone into educational work, and the consequence is that most school-books are not as well illustrated as they might be. Remember that taste begins with first impressions. Remember, too, that children are taught reading by seeing, that is, by associating a picture with a word. If the picture is well drawn and finely designed they learn more than a literal definition. They acquire a sense of good design, they learn to appreciate beauty, and they take the first step in the development of good taste. Primitive man thought in pictures, not in words, and this visual conception of the outside world is much more natural and far more fundamental than its sophisticated translation into verbal modes of thought. The basic things are always the most important, and good art, certainly a basic thing, impressed on young minds through the medium of children's books is without doubt one of the best possible ways of giving children a true conception of the world they live in.

edited by BERTHA MAHONY MILLER

and ELINOR WHITNEY FIELD

Caldecott

Medal Books: 1938-1957

with the Artists' Acceptance Papers

& Related Material chiefly from the

HORN BOOK MAGAZINE

HORN BOOK PAPERS

VOLUME II



THE HORN BOOK, INCORPORATED · BOSTON · 1957