The Evolution of Children’s Literature
Getting Sidetracked—Delightfully—at the Baldwin Library

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Thanks to my receipt of The Louise Seaman Bechtel Fellowship in 2002, I spent an unforgettable month studying at the Baldwin Library of Historical Children’s Literature at the University of Florida (UF) in Gainesville. The fellowship honors Louise Seaman Bechtel, the first editor of a separate department devoted to the publication of children’s books at in the 1920s. Because of Bechtel’s success working in the industry for fifteen years, other publishers followed suit, and children’s book publishing became a viable industry. ALSC’s Bechtel Fellowship, which began in 1993, is awarded each year to a candidate who has at least eight years of professional experience working with children and literature.

The Baldwin Library includes approximately 100,000 volumes of books published from the early 1700s to the present, almost all of which were originally owned and read by children. This vast library’s genesis is owed to formidable book collector and librarian Ruth Baldwin. In 1953, Baldwin’s parents, living in London at the time, sent her forty nineteenth-century chapbooks from England for her thirty-sixth birthday. A perpetual collector and one who believed that “two of something is the beginning of a collection,” Baldwin was delighted. This gift, and a few more which followed, were the beginnings of what is now the Baldwin Library.

In 1956, Baldwin joined the faculty of Louisiana State University’s (LSU) School of Library Science. She spent the next seven years combing the East Coast and beyond, buying as many children’s books as possible. Not a wealthy woman, Baldwin searched for books costing no more than $1 each. By 1961, she had collected over four thousand books, and by the mid-1970s, she had amassed more than thirty-five thousand volumes. In 1975, UF professor Joy Anderson lectured on children’s literature at LSU and saw Baldwin’s collection. Baldwin shared with Anderson her desire to preserve the collection in an academic institution so it could be available for scholarly research and study. Subsequently, UF officials met with Baldwin and an agreement was reached to move the collection to UF. Baldwin accompanied the collection, joining the UF faculty in 1977 as curator of the Baldwin Library until her retirement in 1988. She died in 1990.

During my month-long visit, many of the staff in special collections at UF shared their vivid memories of Baldwin, and recounted how fiercely protective she was of her books. They described her as a cantankerous force to be reckoned with, and noted how she displayed a watchful, possessive demeanor when individuals came to examine her books.

Rita Smith, once Baldwin’s assistant and now curator of the collection, said Baldwin knew every book in the collection and was firm, resolute, and quite proprietary in her belief that only certain people would be allowed to see “her” collection of children’s books. Everyone who shared memories of her did so with a nostalgic grin, as if remembering an unforgettable character and a legendary archivist.

The Baldwin collection is remarkably diverse, and includes notable volumes such as the first American edition of Alice’s

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Adventures in Wonderland, complete runs of the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew series, Little Golden Books, pop-up books from the nineteenth century, thumb bibles, books on manners from the eighteenth century, alphabet books, and more than eight hundred North American titles published before 1821, making it one of the largest collections of its kind in the United States. Unlike other collectors of children's books seeking rare (and inherently valuable) volumes, Baldwin sought to obtain books owned by children who actually read them, wrote in them, and shared them with family members and friends. Many of the books I examined included personalized Christmas or birthday wishes. Many were stained or had torn and scribbled pages. Although not particularly valuable when Baldwin purchased them, many of the books—for example, Little Golden Books—are now valuable simply because no one else took the time to collect them.

Having worked in children's literature for almost twenty years as an ardent reader, I approached the Baldwin collection with what I believed was a solid knowledge of children's books and the history of their development. I had read thousands of books and studied their literary criticism. I felt as though I certainly knew the most important books and hundreds of esoteric ones as well.

Through the Richland County (S.C.) Public Library's annual event honoring Augusta Baker, "A(gusta) Baker's Dozen: A Celebration of Stories," I previously had the opportunity to hear many well-known authors and illustrators talk about their work and the creative process. I was seasoned, right? Considering my age, and the fact that I did not join the profession until 1986, the answer was surely "yes." I realized I had missed so many books my predecessors had shown to children, some of which were out of print much before the 1980s, such as the lovely picture books by Clare Turlay Newberry. I remember seeing Marshmallow in my library's collection and am saddened that today's children will never see her marvelous drawings. It was not until I arrived at UF and began browsing the card catalog that I realized just how many children's books I had never seen.

Applicants applying for the fellowship must select a topic of study. I selected the life and writings of the turn-of-the-century British author Edith Nesbit, known for her novels about the mischievous Bastable children. I had read the Bastable stories many years ago and considered them some of the most charming, memorable books I had experienced. I had also read about Nesbit's childhood, her stormy marriage to Hubert Bland, her involvement as a founding member in the Fabian Society, and her rise to fame at the age of forty with the publication of her first novel The Story of the Treasure Seekers. In anticipation of my fellowship adventure, I imagined spending hours reading about Nesbit.

I packed four suitcases, drugged my kitty with some light sedatives from the veterinarian, and made the six-hour journey via automobile from Columbia, South Carolina to Gainesville, Florida. As I envisioned it, I would spend an entire month with no responsibilities except to study the life and writings of one of my favorite authors of children's literature. I would study her imagery, the subtle way she imbued her stories with political ideologies and thoughts about society, and the impact she had on the development of the children's novel. I would not waste time or digress from my chosen path. I would awaken each morning, resolve and with determined single-mindedness of purpose. After all I thought to myself, and perhaps needing a bit of a pep talk, I am the manager of the children's room at the Richland County Public Library. I manage a staff of seventeen, a collection of approximately 100,000 volumes, and a high daily circulation. If I can stay focused in my "regular" job with all of its diversions, distractions, and impromptu digressions, then mastering the history and works of a single author during a month of sequestered academic research should be, well, a piece of cake!

Upon arriving in Gainesville and settling into my private cottage on the grounds of a beautiful, century-old restored mansion serving as a bed and breakfast, I shopped for groceries, acquainted my kitty with the best under-building nooks and crannies surrounding my cottage, talked to the proprietors to determine parking sites on the university campus (there is no parking), and settled in for the night with A Woman of Passion: the Life of E. Nesbit 1858-1924 by Julia Briggs. The next morning I traveled to campus with legal pads and sharpened pencils (Oh yes . . . how I would write and write!)

The special collections department of the George A. Smathers Libraries houses the Baldwin collection. After pressing a buzzer, double glass doors opened, and I entered the beautiful reading room with its long wooden tables, fifty-foot-high cathedral ceilings and windows reminiscent of those found in large European churches. History filled my senses. Wooden card catalogs flanked the entrance, mural-sized book illustrations adorned the walls, and an aura of contemplation and intellectual reflection filled the air. Here is where I would read, discover, and ponder; it was a perfect spot for thinking. Rita Smith greeted me, showed me to my desk in the work area, and took me on a tour of the collection. The Baldwin collection is under lock and key, behind a steel door, in closed stacks kept at a standard chilly temperature.
Walking through the stacks and watching as Smith magically opened and closed them, my head spun. I yearned to touch every book. Unfortunately, this tour would be my only opportunity to physically see all of the books on the shelves. Not even visiting scholars are allowed unrestricted browsing rights. Wishing I possessed a photographic memory, I attempted to file away in my head some of the books I wanted to examine more closely. It took considerable restraint to keep myself from pulling them off the shelf, one by one, and opening all of them. How would I ever maintain my focus on Nesbit? How could anyone focus on any one topic, when presented with all of these possibilities?

“You will look up the books in the [wooden] card catalog,” Smith said. “Then you will go to the online catalog to find the accession number for the item. Next you will write down the information, including that number, on a pull slip, submit it (no more than fifteen at a time) to the staff at the reference desk who will then have the books pulled for you.”

“Good Lord,” I thought. “No browsing through the stacks serendipitously choosing any book along the way?” I had chosen E. Nesbit, yet I wanted to see books I would never otherwise have the opportunity to see. “Oh well,” I reflected. “I don’t need to be looking at all those books anyway. I’m here to study E. Nesbit. Stay focused,” I said to myself.

By the end of four-and-a-half weeks I had examined more than 400 books, 398 of which had nothing to do with E. Nesbit.

How did I become so distracted?

For many readers, one book leads to another. We all know that reading the flap of a novel often prompts further reading. We know that reading reviews, articles in The Horn Book, or entries in books such as Anita Silvey’s Children’s Books and Their Creators, leads us to more books and authors. This is one of the best parts of being a librarian—discovering books through books. At no previous time in my career, however, had I experienced such a distracting domino effect as at the Baldwin Library.

The first domino fell as I consulted Smith and UF professor of English and children’s literature John Cech; both offered mentoring and guidance during my stay. Cech is the author of the quintessential Angels and Wild Things: The Archetypal Poetics of Maurice Sendak as well many other books for adults and children. He is also the director of the Center for Children’s Literature and Culture at UF and produces and hosts “Recess!” a daily National Public Radio program exploring the cultures of childhood.

I asked them to suggest books they felt I should see during my stay. What were the most important books? The most unusual? The oldest? The most valuable? The most interesting? The most common-at-the-time-but-now-hard-to-find books? Smith and I lunched with Cech one day, and he suggested I look at the thumb bibles, books on manners, hornbooks, and primers. So, I set forth to see them too. I thought, “I’ll just look at a few of these, and then I’ll start in on E. Nesbit.”

Ah, the best laid plans.

The oldest book in the Baldwin collection is a 1668 publication of Aesop’s Fables. After seeing it, I was led to more collections of fables (I saw more than thirty, mostly from the nineteenth century, before stopping myself.) The most valuable set of books is the Poetic Garland, a four-volume set of books published in 1886 and one of the first books of rhymes written solely for children. After discovering it, I asked Smith what other books from the 1800s were most notable in the collection, as I knew most of Baldwin’s purchases during her formative collecting years were from the nineteenth century. She directed me to a bevy of nineteenth-century pop-up books, which held my attention and left me spellbound for three consecutive days.

One day I asked Smith about Baldwin; she shared an article about Baldwin and Bechtel that was published in the Winter 1988 issue of Youth Services in Libraries. She also reminded me of the boxes of Bechtel and Baldwin papers that were housed in special collections, saying, “most of the Bechtel papers are at Vassar, where she attended college. However we have some of her papers here at UF.” Was this an opportunity to see the personal papers of the woman to head the first separate department for children’s books in America? Not a chance I’d pass that up! Besides, how long could it take?

I promptly asked the desk staff to retrieve all fifteen of the Bechtel boxes. Feeling fairly smug, I told Smith about the request. She quietly gasped and said, “Why don’t you limit yourself to say, two to three boxes at once?” Returning to deliver this news to the desk staff, I spotted two boxes waiting for me. It seemed the desk staff agreed; two at a time was plenty. What they knew, that I did not, was that each box contained hundreds of documents, from Bechtel’s daily diaries of her trips abroad, to handwritten original copies of speeches, to letters from her close friends Berta and Elmer Hader, authors of the 1949 Caldecott winner The Big Snow. As I read her papers, I found myself in the inner sanctum of the mind of this great lady.
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Countless tidbits filled page after page, such as the story of Dorothy Lathrop and Rachel Field seeing a doll in a shop in Greenwich Village and returning directly to Bechtel saying, “You’ve got to publish this book we’re going to write about a doll.”

I read her thoughts about the need for children to have more than the ubiquitous newspaper and magazine comics that typically filled their lives. I spent four days examining ten of the fifteen boxes. Reading about the books she published and the authors she admired prompted me to further investigate this time period in children’s books, looking at out-of-print titles by authors I had long admired.

Browsing the card catalog, I discovered the tip of a huge iceberg: out-of-print books written by some of the leading children’s book authors from the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. These included Ludwig Bemelmans, Miep de Jong, Tasha Tudor, Marguerite de Angeli, Marjorie Flack, William Pene du Bois, Roger Duvoisin, Pamela Bianco and her mother Margery Bianco Williams, and Munro Leaf, just to name a few. I was previously unaware of Bemelmans’ first book Hansi (1934) or his amusing story Sunshine (1935), which spins the tale of a grumpy old man—Mr. Sunshine—who advertises for a quiet apartment tenant and winds up with a noisy music teacher who rehearses frequently and loudly. I discovered that DeJong, the author of one of my all-time favorites (The Wheel on the School, 1954), also wrote the powerful and moving The Tower by the Sea (1950) about the persecution of an old woman who, because she lives with a magpie and rescues a kitten from the sea, is believed to be a witch. De Angeli’s Henner’s Lydia (1936) enchanted me with the story of a Pennsylvania Dutch girl who yearns to go to market but is told by her mother that she must first finish making her rug. As a fan of Flack’s Angus books, I was delighted to discover Humphrey: One Hundred Years Along the Wayside with a Box Turtle (1934), and Topsy (1935), the story of a cocker spaniel adopted by a stuffy woman who simply does not understand dogs. Du Bois tells the hilarious story of Mr. Armstrong, a detective who specializes in training aspiring investigators from fields not known for producing crack gumshoes. In The Great Geppy (1940), his private eyes attempt to solve an orchestral burglary while his swimming sleuths set out to retrieve a stolen pearl.

The list of books I saw from the twentieth century goes on and on, including thirty editions of Little Black Sambo, Inez Hogan’s stereotyped portrayals of African American children, and some of the first photo essays by Jill Krementz.

Despite the allure and seduction of so many literary distractions at the Baldwin, I did eventually find time to read about Nesbit and found her to be a fascinating and complex woman full of contrasts, contradictions, and in some ways, ahead of her time. Married to fellow Fabian society founder, unsuccessful bank clerk, and columnist Bland, she was a bit of a wanderer, too—in the love department, that is. She adroitly celebrated through a host of alleged affairs with fellow Fabians, the most notable of whom was George Bernard Shaw. Bland reportedly engaged in several affairs himself, and their marriage was a turbulent one. It was not until Nesbit turned forty that she produced her first successful piece of writing, The Story of the Treasure Seekers.

She published approximately forty books for children and is known for being the first writer for children to present characters who face the tough truths of life. Writing around the turn of the century, she followed the marvelous tradition of children’s literature instated by Lewis Carroll, George MacDonald, and Kenneth Grahame. But her books were quite different than those of the aforementioned giants. Nesbit’s children turn away from their secondary world, seeing life as it often is—filled with longing, wanting things right away, and clinging to each other when parents in their lives are unavailable, as is the case with the Bastable children in The Story of the Treasure Seekers and The Wouldbegoods.

I discovered several Nesbit short stories in two out-of-print collections: The Rainbow Queen and The Youngest Omnibus. Both stories address themes of children going off in search of treasure or the granting of a wish, only to find that home is where they really want to be. It is reasonable to speculate that Nesbit felt
similarly, always wishing for her father, who died when she was young, and finding herself moving from place to place as a child.

While reading more than four hundred books, as well as box after box of Bechtel’s papers, I wondered what books and authors would leave me with enduring thoughts and perspectives, and if those impressions would forever change the lens through which I view children’s literature. The winner in that category was the set of books about how to be a better, cleaner, smarter, healthier American written by Leaf during the 1930s and 1940s: Grammar Can Be Fun (1934), Fair Play (1939), A War-Time Handbook for Young Americans (1942), Health Can Be Fun (1943), and How to Behave and Why (1946). Clearly reflecting the attitudes of adults toward children in the United States during World War II, these fiercely direct, instructional picture books are unapologetic, if not shameless, in offering the perfect prescription for children to be wholesome in mind, clean in body, and patriotic in spirit. For instance, from Fair Play:

In our country, some people have more money than other people have, but there is no law that says that any one of us can’t make more if we try.

There are some selfish people who have a lot of money and don’t try to help other people. And there are other selfish people who don’t have much money and would like to take away the money of other people for themselves, but they wouldn’t like it if somebody else took theirs. Both kinds are selfish and both kinds are bad Americans . . .

We give every man and woman an equal right to help make our laws so as to run this country. We give every man and woman a chance to make as much money as he or she honestly can, and we all have to obey the same laws. If we all tried to keep from being selfish and were willing to help others as much as we could, that would be FAIR PLAY and we would all be even happier than we are now.

These Leaf books reflect what was true then and is still true today—children’s literature consistently reflects the values and customs adopted by society at the time of the book’s writing. Adult perceptions of children and childhood determine the books that end up in the laps of those children. Nothing supports this perspective more powerfully than seeing, through the eyes of the Baldwin collection, the actual three-century historical evolution of children’s literature. The Baldwin’s remarkable portrait of the conventions and mores of society, which reflects society’s beliefs and ideas about children, provides a framework through which we might better understand the many meanings and purposes of children’s literature. Additionally, it offers us a hint of what fifty years from now, society might say about books such as Maurice Sendak’s Where the Wild Things Are.

Seeing so many books from so many generations that reflect what society thought of children during various decades offered me a more profound insight with which I now read the literature. Now when I share the classics of yesterday and today with children, I feel the weight of history that precedes them. The memory of those four hundred books I touched, which children from long ago also held in their hands, read, and loved, transcends simple nostalgia. It brings new life, purpose and meaning to the act of reading to children. Books for children have changed so much over the years and the evolution of them will, no doubt, continue as society’s values evolve. The tradition of children’s librarianship as one whose main purpose is to bring children and books together seems richer and more meaningful to me after spending a month embedded in the past. It’s the reason we work in this field: to bring children and books together. Spending a month at the Baldwin reminded me of the power of what librarians do, and the history that will forever support our passionate endeavor.

Reference

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