

A Cultural Opportunity for Children: Margaret Wise Brown's Picture Books

Conference Paper

Children's picture books automatically blend pictures and words, in the very nature of their mediums, but only certain authors, among those who even have control over their books' illustrators, reach beyond choosing illustrations that depict the mood or theme of their words. Margaret Wise Brown remains a central figure among children's picture book authors who sought, not only to represent her stories well in a thoughtful manner, but to offer child readers two genuine mediums of high art. Through the art in her books, children have the opportunity to continue development of cultural empathy through exposure to new ideas. Brown both saw and created visual art out of her own lived experiences by recognizing art as existing all around her in the man-made and natural worlds, and, by metaphorically hanging frames, she helped others see that art as well. The artists that Brown chose for her picture books represent some of the great emerging modernist artists of her time. In particular, Brown's most regular collaborator, Leonard Weisgard, demonstrated that children's books provided a successful medium for experimentation and artistic collaboration.

In her respect for the genre of children's literature, and in her recognition of the potential it held, Brown believed picture books offered opportunity for both child readers and visual artists. Brown was not alone in this belief as the American Library Association awarded the first Caldecott Medal to Dorothy P. Lathrop for her work on *Animals of the Bible, A Picture Book* in 1938, a year after Brown published her own first book, *When the Wind Blew*, in 1937. The presence of the award "lent added prestige to the picture book as an art form just as a growing number of American illustrators were turning to the genre as an outlet for their talents and an influx of European émigré artists was further enriching the scene" (Marcus Golden 30). As the

picture book genre grew in size and importance, Margaret Wise Brown, and her partners in visual art, was among the first to prioritize respect for children and their cultural educations in her design and creation of their books.