

Turbulent Waters at William R. Scott: The Bizarre Tale of *Cottontails* (1938)

In 1946, six years after the success of Dorothy Kunhardt's *Pat the Bunny*, Margaret Wise Brown took credit for writing what may well have been the first tactile book designed for very young infants.

Cottontails was published in 1938. Wise Brown claimed to have worked with illustrator Leonard Weisgard. But the publisher, William R. Scott, listed the author as Ethel McCullough and the illustrator as Sister Mary Veronica.

Some suggest that Wise Brown intended to infuriate (successfully) Bill Scott after she changed to another publisher. Supposedly, she had helped manufacture the book, stitching balls of cotton for the rabbit tails, glass beads for apples, and buttons for locomotive wheels onto cloth pages – together with Ethel McCullough, Bill Scott's wife, and Sister Mary Veronica née Ella Sara McCullough, Ethel's aunt. No library lists this first tactile book for infants, not even the Library of Congress. However, I have located one remaining copy in the estate of Sister Mary Veronica, which was donated to the Bennington Museum in Vermont. The illustrations do not seem to be the kind or quality Leonard Weisgard produced. As to words – there are none. If Wise Brown 'authored' anything, it would have to have been the composition of the visual elements.

Whether Bill Scott listed his wife as author to punish the author who abandoned him or whether Wise Brown was vindictive enough to claim the book as her own to aggravate the Scotts cannot be established today. But maybe there is a third scenario. Perhaps Wise Brown conceived of the book and the project was seen to completion by Ethel McCullough when she broke with Scott Publishing.

The book appears aligned with the philosophy of the Bureau of Educational Experiments when it was directed by Lucy Sprague Mitchell. Wise Brown had conducted research with elementary school children there before she became an editor and writer at William R. Scott, and Scott had a son enrolled at that day school. I will demonstrate how the book faithfully reflects the 'here and now' approach of Lucie Sprague Mitchell and anticipates Margaret Wise Brown's developing theory of infant perception.