

BOOKWOMEN

*Creating an Empire in Children's
Book Publishing, 1919–1939*

Jacalyn Eddy

THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN PRESS

Making Books

Children's Book Publishing and Louise Hunting Seaman

ONE MORNING IN THE SPRING of 1919, George Platt Brett, president of the Macmillan Company, summoned a young employee named Louise Seaman to his office. He intended to offer her a promotion by appointing her head of the children's department he had created a few months earlier. The young man originally selected for the position had not lived up to expectations, leaving Brett irritated. Contemplating a replacement, he thought of the bright young woman he had hired a little more than a year earlier to work in the trade advertising department and had later transferred to the educational department to make greater use of her talents. She might, he hoped, do a better job than her predecessor in making the children's department a success.¹

On the surface, Brett's decision to create such a department at Macmillan appeared innovative since nothing similar existed in any American publishing house. In reality, however, the move reflected motives and beliefs stemming from social responsibility, publishers' most deeply cherished tradition. Historically considered a "gentleman's business," publishing was nonetheless becoming big business, and Brett was vitally concerned that Macmillan should help set the pace of change in the industry without disrupting its commitment to tradition. The creation and early development of the children's department in that firm illustrate the tension between convention and innovation.²

Publishing's gentlemanly reputation resulted both from the nature of its relationships and from its products. Brett's quasi-personal relationships with authors—the "writing fraternity," as he termed it—marked him unmistakably as a "gentleman-publisher."³ But much of the reputation rested

on its material products. Unlike the products of other industries, books represented “culture”; their publishers, by extension, were culture distributors. Publishers therefore polished a public image of themselves as far more than purveyors of the common, profit-driven commodities produced by other industries, claiming that theirs was a high civic calling. The justification for this image resulted from their sense that they were responsible for producing both finely made books and fine literature possessing the power to shape the morals, beliefs, and attitudes of their readers. Regarding book publishing in a democracy as a public service, publishers were devoted to creating literature that would transmit ideas into the cultural mainstream.⁴

Given the spectacular growth of publishing throughout the nineteenth century, their sense of social responsibility must have seemed particularly well placed. The reasons for growth were multifaceted, arising from the rapid and dramatic increase in literacy among Americans, the expansion of mass markets, rapid technological advances (such as the Napier and Hoe cylindrical presses and advances in papermaking), and the increasing pre-eminence of cultural institutions concerned with literacy, such as libraries and public schools.⁵ The heightened importance of print, so critical to the authority of the library, enhanced the publishing industry’s claims to authority as well.

While the established houses frequently began as and remained family businesses for several generations, they were rapidly becoming family businesses on a large scale.⁶ This occurred in part because, by the 1870s, publishers had to compete against an unremitting tide of what they considered “cheap” paperbacks from the presses of newcomers like Irwin and Erastus Beadle, George Munro, and Ormond Smith, for whom profit was more important than trade courtesy or moral influence.⁷ In 1884, shocking established publishers, Munro responded aggressively to the complaints about his books and business practices. “My contemporaries have called me a pirate. Posterity will have a truer word with which to characterize my work—that of reformer. The cheap libraries have broken down the . . . American wall of trade courtesy and privilege. For whose benefit was that erected? for a monopoly of publishers in this country. They dictated terms, and precious low ones too, to the authors, on the basis of non-interference among themselves. From this time forth we shall have a free field and no favor, and the longest finger takes the largest plum.”⁸

While unoffended by Munro’s desire for profit, established publishers nonetheless believed that the profit motive should be offset by other

attitudes they did not see in the dime novel trade. From a technical point of view, even the best books produced by Munro and others were poorly formatted, printed on cheap newsprint, usually without a cover, and often with three columns of fine print to a page. Illustrations, if included, were selected from house stock with little concern for their relevance to the text. And, in the absence of participation in international copyright law, such publishers felt no obligation to pay royalties to authors. Although piracy was common among all publishers, the older houses strove to differentiate themselves from cheap publishers and create professionalism in the business, gradually offering higher royalty payments to authors. Despite publishers' complaints about dime novels, however, one fact was quite clear to gentleman-publishers: Americans were highly interested in reading them.

Aside from the overlay of civic concern, therefore, all publishers engaged in a fierce scramble for readers throughout the nineteenth century, the consequence of which was the widespread adoption of business practices that tarnished the reputation of the entire industry. Houses turned out badly made books, in terms of both print quality and subject matter. Publishers frequently resorted to creating a book idea themselves and finding authors to accept the assignment. According to editor Edward Bok, publishing houses hired girls and women to scour the nation's newspapers and periodicals for stories that might be quickly and cheaply made into sensational novels. Publishers did not generally care where material was obtained; whatever the source, it should include plenty of murders and dramatic rescue scenes.⁹ The stories were then turned over to managers who offered authors between two hundred and seven hundred dollars for a seventy-five-thousand-word story.¹⁰ Even reputable authors, Bok claimed, were eager to supply stories for such boilerplate operations. By the 1890s, publishers were accused of having become little more than manufacturers of common commodities, the very designation they had long dreaded and sought to prevent. Even *Publishers Weekly* reluctantly conceded that the book trade was "far from satisfactory."¹¹ Blame was placed on the pace of social change, and even on readers themselves. The *Dial* spoke for many when it indignantly declared that the public, "created by the department store and the bargain counter," acquired its books "in delightful ignorance."¹²

As survivors of ferocious competition in the industry and as subjects of intense criticism, publishers were caught between maintaining traditional principles in book publishing, which might mean insolvency, and

responding to the public's demand for inexpensive books, which meant lowering standards. But while anxious to assure the public of Macmillan's careful attention to finely made books and "good" literature, survival dictated that Brett broaden his definition of these things. For realists, survival into the twentieth century meant executing a delicate balancing act that included adapting to broader markets with reading tastes that might very well conflict with their own.¹³

Brett had long recognized children's books as a morally legitimate and economically significant part of the publishing business, and believed that creating a department specifically devoted to juveniles would increase Macmillan's profits and prestige while still allowing him to be a gentleman-publisher. While the majority of Macmillan's receipts came from textbook sales—no small business, since America had produced more textbooks than all European nations combined since the Civil War—the house produced many other kinds of books, including a successful backlist of juveniles.¹⁴ Some twenty years earlier, although no "department" existed as such, a woman named Kate Stephens had served as children's editor under Brett's close supervision. As one might expect of an "editor," her time was spent acquiring and evaluating manuscripts and negotiating contracts with authors and illustrators. But the position had not provided autonomy, forcing Stephens to clear nearly all editorial decisions directly through Brett, who used her more as ambassador than editor in any modern sense. Real authority over what books were printed and when, what topics were appropriate for children, how much was paid, and the size of a print run remained squarely with him.¹⁵

Yet, several things in publishing—and in America—had changed since Stephens's editorship at the close of the nineteenth century, and Brett understood that the responsibilities and authority of the new children's editor required expansion. Mass markets confronted him with a singular reality: he could no longer afford the luxury of reading all the manuscripts and making all the decisions. The personal oversight of all production aspects, from manuscript acquisition to final printing, became increasingly difficult for publishers to retain even though such involvement had been a defining characteristic of the industry's identity. The rapid proliferation of books throughout the nineteenth century—at Macmillan and elsewhere—denied publishers the ability to preserve such tight control over each and every publication decision and, even if they had time, they no longer personally possessed the expertise needed to make such decisions in widely disparate fields of knowledge. Even editorial assistants like Stephens, who

had helped to sift through incoming manuscripts on a fee-for-service basis, were inadequate to meet demand.¹⁶

Gradually but persistently, therefore, publishing authority drifted away from the gentleman-publisher toward a new middle layer of professionals: carefully selected editors on whose taste and judgment publishers could rely. By placing children's books in the hands of an expert, Brett hoped his new department would demonstrate to the public an awareness of, and commitment to, improved books for children with minimal disruption to past publishing practices. The qualities of editorial candidates were thus obviously critical. Louise Seaman, he hoped, possessed those qualities.

The public had long wanted quality reading material for children. During the seventeenth century, children's books were generally catechisms and moral teachings aimed at indoctrinating children into the beliefs of their elders. Children were exposed early to adult literature graphically portraying the consequences of godlessness or extolling the advantages of an untimely demise. Such books have been characterized, with understatement, as "gloomy."¹⁷

As fiction became more acceptable, signaled by the appearance of such books as Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, didacticism in children's literature shifted from moral to social object lessons. The writing of Maria Edgeworth, Samuel Goodrich, Jacob Abbott, and others encouraged children to glean lessons that were more earthbound, tied to social relationships and a "gospel of usefulness." Set in the New World and with characters who articulated American dispositions and social values of thrift, obedience, hard work, and upward mobility, children's books in America became "American" by the 1820s.¹⁸

Then, at midcentury, children's books entered another new phase, stemming largely from changes in the genre's characters; children's fiction, like adult fiction, became more realistic. To be sure, stories continued to reinforce prevalent social attitudes, but characters were no longer mythic or merely symbolic, less likely to resemble Eva (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*) and more likely to display "normal" childhood traits of mischief or personal ambition. A great many children's "classics" were produced during this so-called first golden age, defined by the work of such authors as Louisa May Alcott, Robert Louis Stevenson, Mark Twain, and Mary Mapes Dodge.¹⁹ Good picture books still had to be obtained from such European illustrators as Kate Greenaway, Randolph Caldecott, Walter Crane, and Leslie Brooke, but by the last decades of the nineteenth century, American illustrators—most

notably, Howard Pyle—achieved prominence and contributed to the overall richness of the period.²⁰

At the same time, however, American youth patronized the dime novel trade with the same zest as adults. To the alarm of antitrash campaigners, dime novel publishers created libraries specifically targeted to a youth market, beginning with Beadle's Half-Dime Library.²¹ Most were about one hundred pages long, with roughly eighty thousand words or, in the case of the Half-Dime libraries, about half that. The novels were adventure stories, sensational accounts of life on the frontier or at sea, some featuring folk heroes such as Buffalo Bill or Davy Crockett. But after the 1880s, detective fiction became the principal subject of dime novels, including such famous characters as Deadwood Dick, Spring-Heeled Jack, and Rob Roy. One such British novel was the notorious *The Wild Boys* (1866), set in the sewers of London. The book's adventures included "body-snatching doctors, a bare-breasted woman flogged by her uncle, ravishings, mutinous convict ships, and countless corpses." A rerun of the serial was stopped by police since adults, viewing such "trash" with suspicion, considered these books well outside the confines of "real" literature.²² But as children's books flooded the market, the profit margin for publishers became more slender, encouraging further erosion of quality. Selling for anywhere from twenty-five to sixty cents at dry goods counters, children's books were frequently made on the cheap by cribbing together what *Publishers Weekly* described as "shreds and patches of information picked up along the highways and byways of literature."²³

Brett was undoubtedly aware of the antitrash campaign, conducted on many fronts, including children's periodicals. Launched specifically to combat the popularity and bad influence of dime novels and penny dreadfuls on children, the magazines were run by authors and editors eager to save and redirect America's youth.²⁴ Of them all, *St. Nicholas* represented the high-water mark of what has generally been considered the golden age of children's periodicals.²⁵ Conceived in 1870 by Rowell Smith, a founder of *Scribner's Monthly*, the periodical was distinguished by its high quality fiction and included in its early issues stories by individuals who later became some of the best-loved juvenile authors. Among them were Rudyard Kipling, who was so impressed with the magazine that he allowed the first American printing of the *Jungle Book* stories to appear there in 1893, and Mark Twain, who authorized the serialization of *Tom Sawyer* beginning in the same year. In addition to fiction, *St. Nicholas* included poetry, pages of puzzles and riddles, and a correspondence column. One of the most

popular features of the magazine, started in 1899, was the St. Nicholas League, a department of the magazine to which aspiring authors under the age of eighteen could submit their writing. The early work of a long list of well-known writers was printed as a result of this column.²⁶

Much of the magazine's tremendous popularity came from its energetic editor, Mary Mapes Dodge, who "felt the call" to provide literature for children that they could "belong to." The result was a "wholesome" periodical of "sheer fun" designed to "prepare boys and girls for life as it is."²⁷ Annual volumes, bound in red and gold, were printed in November, in time for holiday giving. Issues were read, cherished, and reread. Alice Jordan declared *St. Nicholas* "a treasure house of riches . . . the very kernel of American books for children"²⁸

Thus, the final decades of the nineteenth century witnessed a glut of children's books with wide variations in quality. As the twentieth century opened, children continued reading nineteenth-century classics, but during the 1910s complaints against publishers for failing to stay abreast of changes concerning the attitudes, education, and needs of children gained momentum. Individuals representing a broad range of professions, including psychologists, behaviorists, librarians, and schoolteachers, argued persuasively for the reform of publishing and the special needs of the young. In 1919, Lida Rose McCabe of the New York *Sun* insisted that juvenile authors were "behind the times" and encouraged them to visit children's rooms in public libraries and "awaken to the . . . readers they are up against."²⁹

Such challenges, some of it from bookwomen, compelled Brett to respond. The end of World War I convinced him that the peace and prosperity he anticipated for the 1920s would result, among other things, in expanded book sales for Macmillan. Thus it seemed a good time to invest in a children's department. Although publishing for children was at an all-time low in 1919—only 433 new titles appeared that year—Brett recognized that children's books, together with fiction, had accounted for more than 25 percent of the publishing total since 1904.³⁰ Convinced that more readers and more interest in reading were evident, he and other publishers optimistically viewed their trade as on the "threshold of a new American era."³¹ Old-timers like George Haven Putnam, Henry Holt, and Edward P. Dutton were passing from the publishing scene, and new houses continued to emerge.³² But the "new era" would not flourish without careful cultivation. Some of the old ways of doing business, Brett recognized, required modification.

At Macmillan, in particular, prosperity was already underway. It was, after all, the wealthiest of all American publishing firms, whose story began in 1869, when the British company sent Brett's father, George Edward, to set up an office in New York. Originally located on Bleecker Street in Greenwich Village, the business prospered through its early years and, in 1874, Brett engaged his son as a salesperson for the firm.³³ In 1890 the younger Brett officially took over the management of Macmillan's American concerns when Brett senior became ill and, later in the decade, died. The reorganization of the British Macmillans in 1896 severed the ties between London and New York, leaving Brett junior president of Macmillan. Gradually thereafter, Macmillan became a publishing firm in its own right rather than merely a retail outlet and distributor.³⁴

During his tenure, Brett dominated Macmillan, consistently demonstrating sound business judgment and earning the respect and watchful eye of other publishing firms.³⁵ When he assumed leadership, Macmillan was a fifty-thousand-dollar-a-year business; when he retired in 1931 it was a multi-million dollar enterprise. An optimist, Brett believed that the company's success depended upon obtaining good manuscripts, selling efficiently, and paying sharp attention to business details, a creed he extended to children's books.³⁶

Apparently, Brett's only hesitation about appointing Seaman to head the children's department was the fact that she was a woman. By 1919, Macmillan had hired more women than ever before, but not as department heads, as Brett intended to make abundantly clear in his conversation with Seaman. Publishers in general had recently begun hiring more women, partly in response to pressure from the suffrage movement. At the conclusion of the war, in fact, eighty-two of ninety-three houses surveyed actually favored the employment of women, although not necessarily in high-paying or more prestigious jobs. At the moment that Brett prepared to offer Seaman the editorship, roughly two-thirds of the women in publishing continued to be employed in low-paying positions, with slim hope for promotion. Of the 1,406 women reported in the survey, 826 worked in clerical and stenographic jobs, 259 in editorial departments, and 321 in publicity and promotional work. Publishers projected adding 340 women per year to their staffs, 230 of whom would take clerical support positions. The rest were divided between editorial and publicity functions, more or less maintaining the prewar ratio.

Still, publishers expressed a desire to retain specially trained women who could eventually be promoted to managerial positions, including editorship.

For this, they were willing to pay wages of six to fifteen dollars per week at the low end, and twenty-five to one hundred dollars per week at the high. The houses employing the largest number of college-educated women were those, like Macmillan, largely concerned with textbooks. In these houses, college women generally represented 20 to 30 percent of female employees. Among general publishers, however, the proportion of college- to non-college-educated women was much lower. Two New York houses reported that none of their female employees were college graduates; in a third, only 13 of 107 female employees were college educated. Nor was college training reflected in the wage scale; noncollege women frequently received the same salaries as college women.³⁷ For employers like Brett, in other words, “specially trained” did not necessarily mean college educated. In 1919, therefore, personality and experience remained crucial determinants in job promotions among women in publishing.

In her office that morning, Louise Seaman could not help but wonder—perhaps nervously—why Brett had summoned her. Preparing to meet with him, Seaman recalled her first conversation with Macmillan’s president four years earlier when she, newly graduated from Vassar, was in desperate need of a job. At that time, Brett had refused to hire her, claiming that it was beneath her social status to work as a file clerk or a typist, “the only sort of work we have here for women.”³⁸

The “social status” to which Brett patronizingly referred was not altogether apparent. Like other bookwomen, Louise Hunting Seaman did come from a relatively comfortable background. Born in the Dutch suburb of Flatbush in Brooklyn to a railroad accountant and an artist on June 29, 1894, she was the oldest of four children. She attended both private and public schools, including the Packer Collegiate Institute in Brooklyn, where she received a classical education. At the urging of her English teacher, Seaman’s parents allowed their daughter to attend Vassar, a decision she regarded throughout her life as “a great kindness that changed me and my future.”³⁹ She loved Vassar and found that the free elective system in particular introduced her to fields of knowledge she would not otherwise have pursued.⁴⁰ She joined the staff of the college’s literary magazine; later, the staff selected her to edit the college’s weekly newspaper, an opportunity she anticipated would prove important in her life’s work and pursued vigorously.⁴¹ While at college, Seaman also developed a close, lifelong friendship with classmate Elizabeth Coatsworth, who not only fueled Seaman’s literary interests but also gave shape to her view of the world by sending Seaman long, detailed letters from her extensive travels.⁴²

Brett's had been only one of many rejections from publishers as Seaman sought employment after college graduation in the summer of 1915. Her education was adequate, but the only women working in book publishing typically gained entrance either by virtue of kinship with publishers or else in the lowest paid positions. Women between these two extremes were generally absent from publishing, largely because management structures contained few midlevel positions for which educated—but not socially connected—women could compete.

On the surface, more opportunities were available to her than to her late Victorian counterparts twenty years earlier, but it was still quite likely that a woman's college education overqualified her for available professional choices after graduation, or that few professions appropriate for her level of education admitted women.⁴³ Seaman could not even type, and her round, childlike face did not help matters. In most cases, she did not make it past the employment managers, although occasionally she met with an editor. Despite writing samples and glowing letters from professors, they all turned her down. One frankly advised, "Come back, sister, when you've grown up." Throughout the hot summer, Seaman crossed name after name of potential employers off her list. Discouraged, she envied classmates who, after graduation, had gone to Europe to work in war hospitals or for the Red Cross. Indeed, her job search became sufficiently discouraging to prompt her to enter teaching, one of the few professions that traditionally welcomed women.⁴⁴

For a time, Seaman taught elementary classes in English, history, and music at a private school in New Haven. She remembered her students there fondly and, although she was "scared stiff" and struggled with feelings of inadequacy, discovered that she loved teaching. Occasional incidents reminded her that she had not attended Vassar to teach elementary school. In one case, the wife of a Yale professor proudly presented her with a castle made entirely out of Borax soap cakes to help with classroom instruction on the Middle Ages. Seaman accepted the gift graciously but felt, like Mahony, that her work was trivialized.

But New Haven had another appeal: the possibility of study at Yale, which had only recently opened its graduate programs to women. Eighty women were already enrolled, and Seaman thought she might like to join their ranks. She arranged an interview with the dean about her plan but, once again, her young appearance was problematic. "Graduated rather young, didn't you?" he asked. "Dear, dear! Are you telling the truth about your age?" Seaman quickly asked him to let her prove her "mental age," a

shrewd response that earned her an immediate and long-lasting friendship that sometimes bestowed special favors. In one instance, the dean smuggled Seaman into the Elizabethan Club, where a librarian opened the safe, allowing the thrilled student to hold Yale's folios of Shakespeare. Other professors were less generous, denying her entrance to their classes on the basis of gender. In any case, Yale offered few courses that fit her teaching schedule, and she was unable to complete a master's degree.

After two years, the New Haven school acquired a new principal who quickly informed Seaman that because she had not married, it was time she "tried New York." Seaman, shocked by the "tactless" dismissal, was soothed by the fact that the new director arranged for an interview with Carl Van Doren, then principal of the Brearley School. Turned down, however, for lack of experience teaching older girls, Seaman again found herself jobless in New York. The idea of working with her hands was appealing and she decided she might enjoy book printing. She went to see George Brett again, but this time with a letter from one of Macmillan's top manuscript readers, now married to a former Vassar classmate. With this inside track, Brett hired her at once and assigned her to trade advertising at twenty dollars a week. Seaman, although elated, had mixed feelings. America had entered the war in Europe, causing her brother and several "old beaux" to enter military service. She was envious; "Book work," she claimed, "didn't seem the right way to take a man's place."

Despite her misgivings, Seaman accepted the job more eagerly than her boss, Scudder Middleton, accepted her arrival. Declaring himself "surrounded" by "all these useless women," her new boss grudgingly gave her a desk and a copy of Macmillan's catalog, suggesting that she would be the first person who had ever read it and expressing the hope that it might "touch the heart of the Great White Father [Brett] so he promotes you away from me." After this turbulent introduction, Seaman settled into her new position and became more familiar with Middleton, a "famous figure" of the 1920s who had authored one small volume of poetry. Frequently late to work and hung over, he put his feet up on the desk, sent his secretary for ice water, and told his "harem" his adventures of the night before.

Seaman did as she was told and read the catalog of several hundred double-column pages, but clearly did not regard herself as a member of her boss's "harem." In spare moments, she wrote poetry on the job, and when one of her poems appeared in the *New York Times*, Middleton was angry. "Well," he said, "get to work. Try a circular on Wells' Joan and Peter, here are the galleys." He also assigned her to write a booklet on the three-volume

Life of Gladstone by Christopher Morley. Her friend and coworker Rebecca Lowrie helped Seaman get through the project, and a grateful Seaman considered her a mentor for many years. This relationship undoubtedly shaped her lifelong commitment to mentoring women in literary careers.

A few months later, Brett moved Seaman to the educational department and raised her pay to twenty-five dollars a week. There she worked under an Irishman named Callahan, assigned the task of “taking the Catholicism out of . . . American History.” When the war ended a few months later, Seaman recalled, “we all leaned out of the windows of [Macmillan], cheering or in tears, as decimated regiments marched proudly down Fifth Avenue. My brother came home, shell-shocked from bombing submarines off a converted yacht, and went back to college. We didn’t realize it, but we were living in a new world.”

Now, a little more than a year after she was first hired, she stood, once again, in front of George Brett. Settling comfortably back into his chair, thumbs in his vest, pince-nez gleaming, neat gray beard thrust out, Brett came directly to the point, proposing to make Seaman the next children’s editor. “I suppose that’s a subject on which a woman might be supposed to know something!” he commented. Concealing her anger, Seaman suggested instead that her teaching experience “might have prepared me for it.” Seaman’s irritation with Brett’s assumption situates her in sharp contrast to Anne Carroll Moore, Alice Jordan, and Bertha Mahony. Unlike the other women, who were significantly older and accepted “natural” knowledge of children as the legitimate basis for their professional roles, Seaman believed that college and employment, not gender, had prepared her to accept Brett’s offer of editorship. Unaware of (or ignoring) Seaman’s anger, Brett continued, “You may try it. Bring ideas to me, along with your weekly manuscript list. Children’s reading . . . should aim at building their character, shaping their morals. We have a long list of classics, as you know. You will have plenty to do, filling that out and you should unify them. You are a department head, but for the present, we shall not make that public, for only men are the heads of departments. You will be called editor, but you will be responsible, as they are, for your own manufacturing budget, your catalogue, et cetera. Check your sales every day—I will route the blue slips to you. Your salary will be thirty dollars a week. Good morning, Miss Seaman.”⁴⁵

This statement contained key points that structured Seaman’s role as children’s editor. First, although Brett recognized that traditional authority structures were undergoing significant changes, he hesitated to relinquish

control over publication decisions. Second, the statement reinforced his commitment to male privilege. Brett's initial appointment of a male editor to the position and his insistence on having the extent of Seaman's responsibilities remain secret demonstrated that he did not intend to abandon male prerogative. Still, he accepted the possibility that a woman's performance as editor could equal—or in this case, surpass—that of a man. To that extent, his decision was forward looking, relative to his contemporaries, although based on the conservative assumption that women were “supposed to know something” about children. In this way, Seaman's relationship to Macmillan resembled those of Moore and Jordan to their libraries twenty years earlier: new professional space often derived from presumed “natural” knowledge, whether or not the promotee conceded such knowledge. Nonetheless, gains were made. Louise Seaman was now the head of the first commercial children's department in America. She left Brett's office, delighted, and later celebrated with friends at a bistro on Sixth Avenue.

Until the end of her life, Seaman considered her appointment to the children's position the result of “sheer luck,” possibly representing an undervaluation of her education and ability to function in the “business world,” typical cultural cues that women frequently received about their potential for success in business. Later recalling the appropriateness of Brett's decision to appoint Seaman, Bertha Mahony likewise revealed the extent to which such cueing influenced her own thinking; selecting good books for children, she commented, was “more like dressing a little girl than anything else. One chooses every detail of her wardrobe in harmony with herself. . . . So with a book . . . women . . . bring particular interest and ability.”⁴⁶

Some were concerned about Seaman's new role, however. In her autobiography, Seaman recorded that Frances Hackett, a reviewer for the *New Republic*, disapproved of Seaman doing children's books and working for Brett, “an old tyrant.”⁴⁷ Seaman herself anticipated that new personal opportunities would ensue from her expanded professional role and furnished her small, second-floor apartment on West Tenth Street with the donations of well-wishing friends and family members. Although she did her “cooking in a cupboard,” the new apartment established Seaman as “a bachelor business girl.”

After the initial excitement subsided, however, Seaman became concerned about her qualifications for the job of children's editor, continuing to resist the idea that her sex automatically prepared her for work with children. “What,” she wondered, “did I really know about children? . . . How could one ever decide what books for which children, and help the

books to reach them?" In addition to questioning assumptions about gender, Seaman hesitated to make reading decisions for others, something that had apparently never troubled Brett. Her personal struggle with professional qualifications thus blended with less personal concerns about the nature of editorship itself. And she recognized that her experiences with children were limited. Aside from teaching middle- and upper-class girls in New Haven, her exposure to children included only one summer vacation as a wartime substitute teacher at a large children's convalescent home in Westchester County. While limited, however, this experience had created an essential lens through which Seaman viewed children. The students in Westchester were quite different from those at New Haven, consisting of boys from city slums who frequently suffered from severe physical handicaps but who nevertheless "wanted to learn, not to play." Once a week, Seaman followed the doctor of the convalescent home on his rounds and witnessed, perhaps for the first time, the "miracles of modern surgery," opening her mind to "the lives of those crippled boys from homes with so little to lead them to books."⁴⁸

The Westchester episode was a defining moment in the development of Seaman's ideology of children and books, and their enthusiastic response to stories and poems left an indelible impression on her attitude about children and their need for good books. Central to her reflections about the events of that summer were images of children impaired and ailing, bereft of the "right" to childhood through either physical infirmity or social deprivation. Equally prominent was a clear connection between such deprivation and an important remedy: books. The body might be impaired or the home impoverished, but books, to Seaman, provided an essential ingredient of a fulfilling life. This could be interpreted as a patronizing, simplistic solution to complex medical and social dilemmas, spoken from the perspective of health and relative prosperity. Whatever the attitudes behind her conclusions, however, the importance of books to children was, from that time, solidified in her mind.

By the time Seaman assumed her new position in June, Brett had made several key administrative decisions about her role. First, her work would be limited by the amount of time he was willing to allow her to devote to it; she would continue certain responsibilities of her old job in addition to those of the new.⁴⁹ Brett might have felt that a full-time children's editor was too expensive or that, possessing "natural" knowledge of children, Seaman's workload would not be that demanding. Whatever his reasons, Brett also initially kept her under the close scrutiny of trade editor Harold Strong

Latham. A 1911 Columbia graduate, Latham was originally hired for the advertising department but moved to the editorial staff within a year. With the exception of titles in the religious books department, Latham was in charge of all trade books, including those for children.⁵⁰ An author of several books for boys, Latham's authors saw him as "genial" and "sympathetic," and it appears that Brett wanted him to teach Seaman the role of editorship.⁵¹ She regarded Latham as a "very kind soul" who mentored her "in bits of time" as his own hectic schedule permitted. Struggling "dazedly" with the new responsibilities of her job, which included a large manuscript list, manufacturing orders, and reprint slips, and representing Macmillan at Book Week in November, Seaman settled into the position, discovering immediately that "one must cope with figures, with sales and profit and loss. How could I be any good as a business woman? I would have the backing of the greatest American publishing house of its time. How could I get on with its president? Well, the die was cast." At her desk next to Latham's, privacy was impossible. Phone calls were unavoidably overheard, and private conferences with authors were conducted in the hallway outside the elevators.⁵² Sometimes she saw Brett there, "lifting his derby ironically and pulling out his watch, if I were late."⁵³

When she was not familiarizing herself with the juvenile list, Seaman continued writing jackets or press releases for adult literature, a task she thoroughly enjoyed. When time allowed, she was thrilled by opportunities to meet authors. On one occasion, the poet Edwin Arlington Robinson came to Macmillan specifically to meet her. "One day an engraved card was brought in to me—Mr. Edwin Arlington Robinson," she recalled. "I pulled over a chair, licked an inky finger, rose to face the tall, dark-eyed, spectacled person who carried a malacca stick and wore spats! He looked about humorously, then spoke very softly so that the busy desks on either side couldn't hear." Robinson complimented her on the jacket copy she had written for his new book and, in the course of the conversation, invited himself to her apartment for tea. A friendship resulted that lasted until the poet's death. She also enjoyed friendships with John Masefield, Vachel Lindsay, Brooks Adams, John Dos Passos, and Katherine Anne Porter. Seaman longed to be part of "the literary turmoil" of the decade, sometimes worrying that becoming the children's editor would eliminate that opportunity from her professional life and fearing the segregation that other bookwomen seemed to welcome.⁵⁴

Although obtaining the editorship at Macmillan was not easy and, for the moment, she had more questions than answers, Seaman's new job was

highly significant. It carried implications for the future of women in the publishing industry by creating a point of entry for women into managerial positions. As her appointment demonstrated, the ability of women to enter the traditionally male world of publishing no longer relied upon kinship as it so often had in the past. Success as a children's editor, therefore, raised the question of whether, perhaps, women might also be successful in a broader range of publishing occupations.