BOOKWOMEN

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

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Epilogue

Disputes about censorship and editorial policy, changes in employment status, and even Bertha Mahony Miller's dramatic, if temporary, delegation of responsibilities to Beulah Folmsbee did not signal the dissolution of bookwoman culture. From New Hampshire, Elinor Whitney Field continued her collaboration with Miller and remained connected to the *Horn Book* as an associate editor until 1957. She died on November 24, 1980. Not content to remain away from the everyday operations of the *Horn Book,* Miller returned as its managing editor in 1941. She did not fully relinquish editorship until 1950. In later years, she edited and compiled several books, including *Newbery Medal Books* (1955) and *Caldecott Medal Books* (1957), with Elinor Whitney Field; *Illustrators of Children's Books, 1744–1945* (1945) with Beulah Folmsbee and Louise Latimer; and *Illustrators of Children's Books, 1946–1956* (1958), with Ruth Hill Viguers and Marcia Dalphin. She also undertook, on behalf of the Horn Book, Inc., the publication of eighteen volumes of the history of children's literature. Miller contributed to several journals, including the *Saturday Review of Literature, Publishers Weekly, American Review of Books, Book Review, Child Life,* and *Parents Magazine.* She received the Regina Medal of the Catholic Library Association in 1967 and remained chairman of the board of Horn Book, Inc., into her eighties. On May 14, 1969, at eighty-seven years of age, she died at Ashburnham. To honor their founder and recognize her lifelong friendship with Miller, the New England Round Table of Children's Librarians established the Jordan-Miller course in children's literature in 1969. The School of Library Science at the University of Southern California established the Bertha Mahony Miller Seminar Room in 1973.[1]

After forty years, Alice Jordan retired from Boston Public Library in 1940. In retirement, she continued as book editor for the *Horn Book* until 1949. At the age of eighty-nine, she died on March 9, 1960. In honor of her friend, Miller—then seventy-nine—ran a *Horn Book* memorial issue in November 1961. She also established a fund in Jordan's memory to support a lecture series at the Boston Public Library beginning in 1962. Today, the Boston Public Library houses one of the world's largest collections of children's literature, named in Jordan's honor.

Anne Carroll Moore was awarded an honorary degree of doctor of letters by the University of Maine in 1940. The following year, she became the first recipient of the Constance Lindsay Skinner Award in recognition of her pioneering work in the field of children's literature.[2] After retiring from NYPL in 1941 at the age of seventy, she agreed to teach at the University of California Graduate School of Librarianship. She was awarded an honorary doctor of letters degree by Pratt Institute in 1955 and the Regina Medal in 1960. Between 1903 and 1955, Moore authored or edited twenty-one books, frequently focused on commemorating the work of authors and illustrators. On January 20, 1961, the day of John Kennedy's inauguration and ten months after the death of Jordan, Moore died in New York City.

May Massee continued working at Viking until 1960. She received the Constance Lindsay Skinner Medal in 1950 and was the first woman member of the American Institute of Graphic Arts. In total, she published four Caldecott and nine Newbery winners. She died on December 24, 1966. By contrast, after her retirement from Macmillan in the 1930s, Louise Seaman Bechtel never again worked, formally, in publishing. From 1949 until 1957, she wrote for the *Herald Tribune Book Review* and, additionally, wrote for the *Saturday Review*, the *New York Times*, and the *Bookman*. With the help of Virginia Haviland, she compiled her speeches and essays into a volume, *Books in Search of Children*, published by Macmillan in 1969 and dedicated to Elizabeth Coatsworth Beston. Between 1933 and 1957, she served at various times on the juries of the American Institute of Graphic Arts and remained a trustee of the local library at her home at Mt. Kisco until 1962. She continued to contribute to the *Horn Book* and to serve as an associate editor until 1957. She wrote two children's books, *Brave Bantam* (1946) and *Mr. Peck's Pets* (1947), as well as a privately published memoir about her life with Edwin ("Ned") deTurck Bechtel, *The Boy with the Star Lantern* (1960). She served on the Library of Congress committee concerned with children's books and the publication of the *United States Quarterly Book List*.

She routinely spoke on behalf of children's literature for the remainder of her life, and served as advisor to Susan Hirschman, children's editor at Macmillan, during the 1960s. In 1960, speaking on "Books on the Ladder of Time"—a metaphor characteristic of bookwomen's writing—at the fiftieth anniversary celebration of NYPL's annual children's holiday exhibit, she praised the work of authors and illustrators and expressed the hope that "whatever happens to the commercialization of publishing, there will always be new, experimental, individualistic publishing done." Bechtel died in 1985 at ninety-one. Throughout her long career, she insisted that the personal touch was essential: "Perhaps we shall see the Miss Moores . . . of the future broadcast books to half a continent from a space station. Whatever the undreamed-of changes in book promotion, one special skill of theirs surely will continue and prevail. That is, the seemingly simple matter of personal introduction of the child to the book."[3]

Thus, the end of the 1930s is best understood as a transitory moment for bookwomen, some of whom continued work on behalf of children's books for another three decades. Still, the transition was significant: within a few years, a generation of younger, non–New Englander bookwomen made their way into literary careers, seeking, and in some cases gaining, entry into the "closed world."

This study has shown that the children's book industry changed substantially between 1919 and 1939, in part because of the accomplishments of these women. Individually, their lives reflect significant and palpable achievement; collectively, they constitute an extraordinarily complex group of literary women. During the twenty years under discussion, the number of books available to children nearly tripled. The U.S. Census of Manufactures figure for children's books in 1919 was 24,435,000, including 433 new juvenile titles; by 1939, the total reached 60,232,000, with 1,041 new titles in the peak year of 1938.[4] That bookwomen participated in creating this situation is clear; the strategies by which they inserted themselves into the process, and the attitudes supporting them, are more complex. In some ways, they became casualties of their own success.

Bookwomen brought attitudes to their professional lives that revealed the depth of their liberal faith. Their confidence in expertise, in the possibility of reform through education, and in children's right to childhood formed the substructure upon which their goals, decisions, and activities rested. No problem, they believed, defied the power of education and collective action, and their vital attachments to social and professional organizations reflected their endorsement of this concept. Associating expertise

with college attendance, job experience, institutional affiliations, and intimate knowledge of the processes they oversaw, bookwomen entered new careers or redefined old ones.

In varying degrees, they complicated their definition of expertise by accepting the notion that children were the proper jurisdiction of women. Packaging this traditional belief in the modern language of expertise, they proclaimed a "new" day for children's books. But while insisting that their professional authority derived partly from their "natural" knowledge of children, bookwomen had no early impulses to devote their working lives to children. Whether they were perceptive enough to recognize that tying themselves to children would provide social approval and security for their careers, or whether they were compelled by their society into child-centered roles is difficult to untangle. Either way, the inclusion of "natural" knowledge in their definition of expertise carried one primary consequence: bookwomen were simultaneously confined and liberated by the children's book field they created.

Their authority derived from carefully nurtured alliances that at once reinforced their belief in collective action and affirmed the importance of individual contributions. During the early stages of their careers, they "borrowed" authority from the libraries, publishing firms, or social organizations with which they were affiliated. As they became acknowledged as experts in their own right, however, their reputations lent prestige to the institutions that employed them.

Ranging from personal friendships to more impersonal business relations, alliances were also cultivated with authors, illustrators, and other recognized authorities in the book field. Alliance building also included mentoring young women new to the field of children's literature, and bookwomen did so consistently. In the 1920s, this was especially important because, in the absence of consolidated and meaningful feminist leadership, there were few precedents for aspiring young female professionals. In the 1930s, when layoffs among women approximated national trends, female role models were especially important, and even harder to come by than in the previous decade. The dwindling potential pool of mentors made bookwomen's mentoring roles throughout the period all the more critical.[5]

While a major goal of creating space was alliance building, bookwomen's embrace of newcomers was tinged with exclusionary professional practices. Editors outside New York or Boston did not receive the same sort of acknowledgment as "insiders." This fact exemplifies a dichotomy peculiar

to bookwomen: the public "face" exuded a solidarity not always reinforced in private attitudes. This public/private split was evident in moments of personal disclosure as well; outwardly, bookwomen showed enormous optimism about their work, but privately displayed ambivalence and fragility. Under fire, bookwomen required, and generally received, reassurance from each other, due to the powerful sense of personal identification each woman made with her career, "becoming" the profession she practiced: a bookshop, a magazine, a children's department. The contemporary attitude of "just doing my job" was unknown to bookwomen; they were their jobs. Identified by their professions, they also lost identity to them, making outside criticism seem exceptionally difficult to endure.

The development of space, both figuratively and literally, proved an essential ingredient in alliance building, signaling specialized spheres of influence and establishing meeting places for colleagues. Space was cultivated in such places as children's rooms in libraries, room 105 at NYPL, the Bookshop for Boys and Girls; figurative space was created in book columns such as Moore's "Three Owls." The Book Caravan in particular suggested the broad and fluid concept of space bookwomen envisioned for their work. The importance of space to bookwomen, and how they utilized it, in fact, is perhaps the characteristic that best reveals the extent of their bourgeois beliefs. Bookwomen brought qualities of private space into the public sphere and, in so doing, enhanced the relevance and legitimacy of "private." They did so not because they hoped a familiar environment would make them more comfortable or recognizable, but because they believed in the power of "public" as an essential principle of a just society. The "public" common good, however defined, ultimately rested on the "private" individual good, and should be deliberately acknowledged and purposely intertwined. At the same time, public space never really became private space, nor was it intended to. Cozy, homelike décor aside, public space required the observance of certain behaviors and rituals that distinguished it absolutely from private space. So, while cooperating with the gender line was generally useful because it allowed bookwomen into certain public spaces, the public/private line, by contrast, disallowed their presence. Unsurprisingly, this was the line they most often blurred by their use of space and language. By challenging the customary and arbitrary line dividing public and private, bookwomen helped to remodel both.

Initially, bookwomen regarded the rapid expansion of the children's book market as evidence of their influence. Once past the initial exhilaration of presumed success, however, bookwomen developed a complex relationship

to the market frequently marked by suspicion, ambivalence, and resignation. The complexities of that relationship reflected much about the tenacious cultural perceptions they developed as children. The relatively affluent childhood circumstances of most bookwomen, situated in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, allowed them a nostalgic, if not always accurate, memory of a "simpler" America. Such nostalgia was at odds with a society in the process of rapid change. Carrying images of small communities into large cities, bookwomen were dismayed by a marketplace in which service and social intimacy had little purchase. Miller's Horn Book Guild is only one example of the ways they sought to reconcile small town neighborliness with their desire for national and international expansion of the market for children's books. The balancing act between the personal touch and the impersonal market, in fact, proved one of the greatest challenges bookwomen faced.

Moreover, by 1939, the market had grown too large for the personal oversight bookwomen thought optimal. In 1919, it had been reasonable for them to read and evaluate all or most of the roughly four hundred children's titles published each year. Twenty years later, it was much less realistic to be thoroughly knowledgeable about the one thousand children's books published annually, pressing bookwomen to redefine their claims to authority. Various strategies might have been utilized, but bookwomen ultimately decided to forgo the language, research methods, and measurable outcomes characteristic of "scientific" child experts.

Still, language became a defining feature of bookwoman culture, situated at the problematical intersection of gender and class discourse. The boldness with which bookwomen expanded their careers was circumscribed by their lack of willingness to take risks; by retaining "rosy" language, the *Horn Book* provides the most obvious example. James Daugherty implied that the magazine's editors used language that excused them from mainstream literary criticism. But the saccharine language Daugherty criticized can alternatively be regarded as bookwomen's determination to establish voice. If that determination made them appear exceptionally agreeable to each other, that is precisely what gave the *Horn Book* its special significance in that historical moment. Although the *Horn Book* editors can be accused of unwillingness to risk precious financial support with critical reviews, the magazine's dedication to celebrating the careers of literary women was the very thing that identified its importance in the trek toward those careers. Bookwomen's language, therefore, represented more than mutual admiration. The magazine's gender composition was an essential

component of establishing voice and, hence, power. The tradeoff seems clear: bookwomen accepted the obvious safety resulting from compliance with social expectations that women innately understood children and, in exchange, retained the ability to exclude male voices. In the sense that the *Horn Book* eventually acquired male financial backers, the fiscal structure of the magazine resembled the union. But while such backers offered needed capital, they had little if any voice in the routine operation of the magazine.

Bookwomen, contrarily, were powerfully woman-identified. With only a fragile foothold in nontraditional literary careers, mutual support was essential to continued success. Daugherty's view failed to discern this imperative, as well as the many shades of subtle disagreement, territorialism, rivalries, and ambivalence among bookwomen that mitigate his interpretation. From a contemporary vantage point, it is clear that the vague, romantic language bookwomen preferred has remained crucial to our vocabulary about childhood, frequently and prominently employed by adults who interact with children. Wrapped in the "rosy" language of bookwomen, children are still connected, by adults from day care workers to movie producers, to "joy," "wonder," and "beauty." The subjective nature of these terms makes them no less important today than when bookwomen utilized them to describe an essential component of, and hope for, the next generation. With adolescent suicide rates tripled in the past twenty-five years and over three million American children victims of violence each year, creating safe environments and positive opportunities for youth continues to press the nation.

Language is only one example of bookwomen's unwillingness to take risks. Although they competed with men in a general sense, bookwomen's attention to children largely absented them from immediate competition with males. Posing no economic threat to the publishing industry, the *Horn Book* functioned, in view of its dependence on advertising, as the "handmaiden" of publishing. Moreover, the magazine's early racial homogeneity suggests that the *Horn Book* reinforced the notion that certain jobs were suitable for women, but only white women. At the same time, the *Horn Book* exerted great influence over the houses by determining what books were reviewed, ultimately resulting in a relationship of mutual, if not always harmonious, respect. Having consolidated their authority, bookwomen gradually ventured further out into the literary marketplace, better able to weather the criticism they received. In retrospect, the longevity of the magazine suggests that its editors possessed more than rose-colored glasses,

and that they eventually found their way in a world of changing markets driven by shifting and sometimes unpredictable reading audiences.

Bookwomen created new opportunities for women in literary careers. As the ill-defined and arbitrary gentleman's publishing tradition of the nineteenth century gave way to the rise of editorship, bookwomen were among the early decision makers in that reconfigured industry. Their focus on expertise and autonomy, utilization of new technology, intimate association with the book production process, and sharp understanding of market demands placed them squarely at the advent of modern children's book publishing in the twentieth century. By 1939, about thirty publishing houses had added children's editors to their staffs, almost all of them women.

This achievement was remarkable, given the complicated, and often hostile, social response to working women. Women found the highest degree of career success when citizens felt that the family structure—and bank accounts—were secure. Where social problems were perceived, working women were likely culprits. Throughout the twentieth century, working women were blamed for a variety of perceived social ills, including race suicide, demoralized males, unruly children, and even the Depression itself. In 1924, indeed, social researcher Lorine Pruette concluded in her book *Women and Leisure* that, in part, American women failed professionally because society had fewer expectations for their career success than for men. By extension, fewer social expectations for women's careers meant fewer consequences for failing. Because less prestige was tied to a woman's career, it was easier to live without one. The growing tendency to identify women as consumers also defined new, largely semiprofessional, working slots into which young women could or should be steered.[6] During the Depression, sex segregation in the workforce became more prominent than ever, often resulting in lower prestige and pay for women. The women in this study turned sex segregation to their advantage, using it to create autonomous professional space.

Bookwomen not only created new career opportunities for women but also helped to shape American literary practice. As critical bridges between nineteenth- and twentieth-century publishing, their attitudes about children's literature were reminiscent of the past, yet dynamic in their vision for the future. Many of the institutions that bookwomen created around the turn of the twentieth century, such as children's reading rooms and storytelling, remain central features of modern literary practice concerning children. Professional awards, beginning with the Newbery, also shaped

the future of the field by acknowledging the importance of good books for children. Bookwomen did not inaugurate the awards but responded to them vigorously and energetically.

By acquiring authority, crossing and expanding boundaries, engaging in diplomacy, and developing a "concurrence of spirit," bookwomen created an empire in children's book publishing.[7] Relations among bookwomen, sometimes strained over differences of opinion, personal eccentricities, or professional rivalries, were characterized overall by generosity, cooperation, and even, at times, simple forbearance. In 1973, Miller's biographer claimed that bookwomen "willed a literature for the young into being by creating it, publishing it, evaluating it, and spreading the glad tidings of its existence far and wide."[8] More to the point, they willed new opportunities for women into being by creating them, evaluating them, and relentlessly advocating them. Those efforts helped to bring women into new literary professions, and children and their books to a prominent and permanent place in American culture.