

How to Write for Children

ALICE DALGLIESH

IN a German town, a century and a half ago, the Brothers Grimm had finished the first volume of one of the "best sellers" of all time, their collection of folk tales. "Kinder-und-Haus Maerchen" they called it, explaining that they had used the phrase "House Stories" because "these stories are an inheritance in the house."

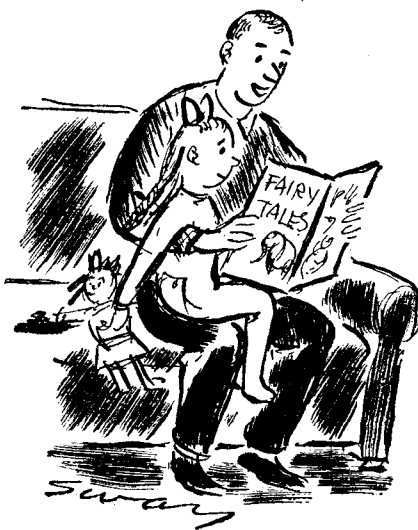
An inheritance in the house! What more could any author wish for his books? Few attain it even in the long-lived field of children's stories—Hans Christian Andersen, Kenneth Grahame, Lewis Carroll, A. A. Milne—a handful of names. Most of us can hope only to have our books live for a decade or a little longer. I must confess that nothing has delighted me more than having the mother of a five-year-old say to me: "I grew up on your Sandy Cove stories and I can hardly wait to read them to Elaine." At least in twenty-five years of writing I have become a literary grandmother!

What makes a book for children live, even in this modest way? To begin with, the author must have a real desire to write, a story to tell. I can truthfully say that most of my books were written because I simply *had* to write them. When a plot or a set of characters comes into your mind, nagging, insisting, when you think of it as you wake in the night and can scarcely wait to start writing, then you may have a book. Enjoyment is essential to good writing, but so is hard work. There is no way of avoiding this hard work, no short cut, no detour.

The writing of children's books is not a casual or hit-or-miss affair: it is a serious and honorable profession to be approached and held to with respect. A few months ago, I saw in a writer's handbook the misleading statement: "Anyone who can write English can write a children's book." Judging by the manuscripts I see as an editor, far too many people think this is true. In one way it is; anyone can *write* a children's book, but writing is one thing and getting it published is another; having it sell more than a few copies during the first year is another thing. There is a difference between hack work, and a (far too much) true craftsman's work. The published

novelist may not be successful when writing for younger readers. Children's books have a long, profitable, rewarding life *if children like them*. This is a *must*, for the books owe their continued existence to library replacements and they must be worn out by eager, seeking hands. It pleases me when I see my books on library shelves looking worn and ready to fall apart.

What background should one have to become a successful writer of children's books? To have had a full and rich childhood, its patterns and its



colors, its joys and its sorrows, etched indelibly on the mind, to be able to interpret it with understanding, is the best of preparations for writing. Nostalgic remembrance, however, does not take the place of a study of present-day children and their ways. My own preparation for writing was an exotic and colorful childhood, much reading, and a father who read aloud, not once in a while, but every day. It also includes much experience with children and with people of all ages. I am sure I could not have written a teen-age book had I not been foster-mother to a teen-age cousin during the war. I learned much from Elizabeth!

An important preparation for the writer is knowing something about children's interests at various ages. This does not mean "writing down." There are those who say there is no such thing as "writing for children"; it is the same as writing for adults. This is not strictly true. Certain techniques may be the same, quality

should be, but the story itself cannot fail to be conditioned by the age and emotional maturity of its prospective reader. Of course, one does not self-consciously write "to an age." But there are age differences and there is a definite progression, beginning with the simple (but not easy to write) form of the picture book, where one is a miser of words and each word must count, must fit into the pattern as a fragment of mosaic fits into the whole. There one selects consciously and sets in place bright fragments that will please the small child who is in a period of sensory delight and experimentation. With very little children rhythm is important. They love the lilt of words, the repetition of a phrase. They demand a direct approach and a beginning must be as direct as in an old folk tale that sets its scene in the first sentence: "Once upon a time there was—"

Two to four is the age of the "here and now," when the everyday things of the world are touched with magic and with wonder. I have not written stories for these first listeners; it is a specialized field of which I stand in awe. I leave it to Lucy Sprague Mitchell, to Lois Lenski, to Marjorie Flack, to Margaret Wise Brown, who know how to pattern (and sometimes over-pattern) their stories so that a very little child will ask for them to be read a hundred times. Even these simple stories have their above-average phrases, for "writing simply" does not mean writing baby-talk or the stilted phrases of a primer. In Mrs. Mitchell's "The Tickly Spider" the spider lives "deep in the grass about three buttercups away" from the little boy lying in the grass on his stomach. Margaret Wise Brown excels in the use of *sound* so important to this age. Her "Noisy" books are two- and three-year-old classics. For the above-average three-year-old there are more mind-stretching possibilities, but he will return time and again to the very simply told story.

THE four-to-seven group retains the love for rhythmic phrases, words still are magic balls to be juggled, pattern is a joy, though not an essential. How often, as I have told a folk tale, I have watched children carried along on the recurring waves of it, drifting with the sheer delight of repetitive sound! And those of us who attempt to write for this age, must realize that we compete with the perfect form of the folk tale. A story for this age group should be planned for story-telling; the author should always read it aloud. If it is carefully wrought it will be read countless

(Continued on page 45)

The Saturday Review

Americana. *The El Dorado that is California was occupied by American forces in 1846; gold was discovered in its hills two years later; by 1849 it seemed that every ambitious young man in the United States was hazarding the arduous trip overland or the long voyage around South America in the hope of making his fortune. The colorful story of the Forty-Niners and the opening of California is being fittingly commemorated by a shelf of new books from California as well as Eastern presses. Readers intrigued by two of the books reviewed below—John Bruce's "Gaudy Century" and Walter Caughley's "Gold Is the Cornerstone"—should look forward to other books due shortly, including Archer Butler Hulbert's "Forty-Niners," Joseph Henry Jackson's "Gold Rush Album," and Oscar Lewis's "Sea Routes to the Gold Fields."*

Gold Coast Gazettes

GAUDY CENTURY: *The Story of San Francisco's Hundred Years of Robust Journalism.* By John Bruce. New York: Random House. 1948. 302 pp. \$3.75.

Reviewed by JOHN T. WINTERICH

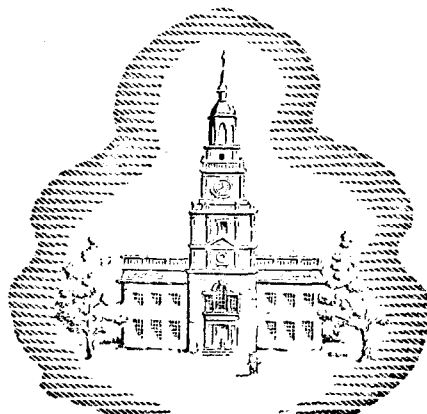
A SAN FRANCISCO cabbie once picked up John P. Irish, the last editor of the *Alta California*. Irish, according to John Bruce, "had three great distinctions: he had been the Democratic candidate for Governor of Iowa, could make the longest speech on the shortest material of anyone in the city, and never wore a necktie in his life." The cabbie looked his fare over and sighed: "Book characters, always, always book characters. I never get just people."

A good many of the men in "Gaudy Century," no fault of Mr. Bruce, are book characters. It hasn't been exclusively their fault, either. The most ordinary citizen, set down against the background of the city that burgeoned out of the Gold Rush, was bound to turn into a book character. He became a child of circumstance, and there was no other way for circumstance to bring him up.

Here is a practical instance of how circumstance helped. California's first newspaper, the *Californian*, began publication at Monterey on April 15, 1846. Its editor was Walter Colton, Chaplain, USN. The *Californian* greeted the world with this announcement:

OUR ALPHABET:—Our type is a Spanish font picked up here in a cloister and has no VV's in it, as there are none in the Spanish alphabet. I have sent to the Sandwich Island for this letter; in the meantime vve must use tvvo V's. Our paper at present is that for vvrapping segars; in due time vve vvill have something better.

VVALTER COLTON.



The *Californian* moved to San Francisco in May 1847, and was bought by a jeweler named Buckelew. On March 15, 1848, it published, all unaware, one of the great scoops of journalistic history. The tremendous intelligence appeared on page two, at the bottom of column three, with a run-in sidehead, exactly like this:

GOLD MINE FOUND—In the newly made raceway of the Saw Mill recently erected by Captain Sutter, on the American Fork, gold has been found in considerable quantities. One person brought thirty dollars' worth to New Helvetia, gathered there in a short time. California, no doubt, is rich in mineral wealth, great chances here for scientific capitalists. Gold has been found in almost every part of the country.

The book characters got to know about the gold and came in battalions, and newspapers were born, languished, died, prospered, were absorbed, and their editors left the impress of their personalities upon them. It was a rough age, but it had its delicate side. When, back in Washington, in 1859, Dan Sickles shot Philip Barton Key for stealing his wife, the na-

tion's papers made hay of the case. When Sickles extorted a written confession from Mrs. Sickles, the press had another field day. Mrs. Sickles said, among much else, that she and Key used to meet in a little shack he had engaged for the purpose, and "I have done there what is usual for a wicked woman to do." The *San Francisco Bulletin*, along with most of the Eastern press, published the confession, or that much of it anyway, and its editors were fined for "publishing and selling a lewd and obscene newspaper."

San Francisco's biggest story—the 1906 earthquake—knocked out the newspaper plants, and the *Call*, the *Examiner*, and the *Chronicle* combined to get out a four-page tabloid in Oakland. The *News*, only three years old and not yet walking, got out an issue on the spot; then the Army came along and dynamited the building.

Mr. Bruce, as city editor of the *Chronicle*, knows the city and its newspapers; he has delved to good purpose.

Snow on the Spot

MYSTERIES AND ADVENTURES ALONG THE ATLANTIC COAST. By Edward Rowe Snow. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co. 1948. 352 pp. \$4.

Reviewed by FLETCHER PRATT

THIS item reads something like a combination of Richard Halliburton and Edward Eggleston, with the improvement that the present incumbent is a more honest reporter than the one and takes a more direct interest in his task than the other. A football coach and wartime flyer, Mr. Snow is amply supplied with energy, and apparently with funds. No sooner does he hear of something queer going on anywhere along the Atlantic Coast from the mouths of the St. Lawrence to the Strait of Florida, than he is off in an airplane to investigate in person. Someone sank a shaft to a depth of 118 feet in search of a putative treasure on Oak Island off Nova Scotia and the shaft half filled with water; Mr. Snow talked to the man who financed the digging and himself went down the hole. People doubted that a by-gone doctor in Salt Lake City directed that his heart be pickled in alcohol and buried on Nantucket Island. Mr. Snow dug up the heart.

He narrates these investigations and tales in a book at once fascinating and—well, one hates to use the word authoritative in such a case, but there is hardly any other. Certainly nobody has gone deeper into the mystery of