

THE TALE OF A STORY

Elisabeth Hopkins

CHILDREN'S BOOKS HAVE BEEN of great interest to me for the past seventy-nine years; that is as far back as I can remember. I could read when I was four years old and a year later I was reading books for pleasure. I read anything I could get hold of and was fond of the many well-illustrated books that were then available at low prices. Books for the Bairns and the Bouverie Series of books cost 1d each so were well within the range of the majority of our budgets. Much of what I read would now be frowned on, not by children, but by psychologists, teachers and other interested adults, parents excluded. The latter naturally want to share the tales they enjoyed in their youth with their offspring. They do not care if the book is sexist or whether the hero is a boy or girl; nor do children. Like the majority of children I identified myself with the hero, were he male or female. I thoroughly enjoyed a moral tale and *Grimm's Fairy Tales* did not frighten me as I realized the stories were not real. We had no horrors in our lives and it was exciting to read about them. It is strange that after centuries of fairy tales, there now seems to be a movement to have them banned.

For some years I was manager of a bookstore and became interested in books from another angle. Of course adults buy far more children's books than do the children themselves. I observed that the younger children, even if they could read, chose by the illustrations, whereas older children wanted to know about the book's contents and were always pleased if the scene was set in a place they knew. Unless they themselves painted or drew, illustrations meant little to them. Parents tended to look for old favourites of their childhood. Other adults were more choosy and were sometimes chauvinistic in their approach. Teachers were critical and viewed the matter from all points, but naturally their own tastes tended to influence them, irrespective of the worth of the book. I recall one customer, an elderly Canadian who wanted a book for a ten-year-old. I showed her a classic, published in the Everyman's Library. She gave it a brief look and said "Too English." I pointed out that though published in England it was written by an American about a little American boy, but this did not alter her

obvious prejudice, one that prevents our children from sometimes having the best of the arts.

When buying I tried not to let my preferences blind me, but I found it hard to accept books with grotesque or even hideous illustrations or with babyish or ungrammatical language. I could not see why lambs (not yet called “baby sheep”) which are beautiful animals should be given enormous eyes, legs like stilts and outsized ears — caricatures in fact. I came to the sad conclusion that it was a reflection of the ugly world in which we live, peopled by those whose children are raised where there seems to be little of real beauty. But let us expose our children to all that there is and one way to do this is through books, well-written and illustrated. Every book written for children must perforce be educational, for they are learning and expanding their vocabularies. For this reason they should never be written down to, and what is written should be clear, concise and grammatically correct.

Those of us who can remember our childhood know that much of our time was spent in an imaginary world. One could easily pass from the real to the unreal. I used to envy the little girls in Mrs. Molesworth’s delightful stories, “The Cuckoo Clock” and “The Tapestry Room,” who had such wonderful adventures when they went through the thin veil of the prosaic real world into the mystical fairy one. Children lose this gift soon enough, so we should do nothing to discourage it.

Having these thoughts in mind, I was delighted when David Robinson of Talon Books asked me to write and illustrate a book for children. I had in the past entertained some of my small friends with stories I had written and illustrated for them. Although I was pleased with the idea I had also some trepidation. I had destroyed all that I had written in the past, so I had to start from scratch and learn all the technicalities. Fortunately I had David to teach and guide me. Living on a small island, as I do, I could not go to book stores to see how others approached the matter and I did not have the benefit of a public library. I thought all I had to do was write a story, do some illustrations and send them to the publisher to do the rest. I soon found there was more to making a book than that. Instructed by David and with help from experienced friends, I became absorbed in the craft. There was much to learn; the illustrations had to be done to exact measurements and there had to be the right number of them. The text had to be cut so that it would fit into the space allotted to it under the picture. I learnt what the expressions *bleeding* and *scripture* meant. I wanted the book to be entertaining, and from what I hear it has proved so, in spite of its moral bias. By stressing that the animals lived peacefully and omitting all reference to belligerency, I hoped that children might realize that one can obtain one’s desires and needs by love and honesty without any fighting. I hoped, too, that the readers would be made aware of the fact that beasts are part of nature, as

we ourselves are, and that they should be treated with compassion, mercy and justice and not exploited for our amusement or pleasure.

Having decided on the fairy tale pattern I had to think of original characters, and a cougar won. I could not recall a cougar being the hero of a book for children. So *The Painted Cougar* was conceived and I got to work. I do not know now how I began or whether illustrations or the text came first; probably first one and then the other. But I had my cougar hero to work on and now had to send him on his adventures. For some years I had been painting beasts decorated with flowers and symbols. Sometimes they wore wrist watches, necklaces or other adornments. I felt I could use this fantasy on Leon, as I named the cougar. In his anxiety to please and win his lady love, he could have his body decorated with paintings of the various things, new and exciting to him, that he had seen on his journey from the desert to man's world. This gave me the opportunity of introducing a dragon, always a favourite with children, which with a kindly snake performed the beautifying. I gave the story an unexpected (I hope) ending with a slight moral tone.

Various alarms and excursions occurred when it went to the printers. Although I had many people read it and report on mistakes or omissions in the text or pictures, some crept in, and David would come rushing to the island and patiently point out what was wrong and wait for me to correct it. I am now much more tolerant of mistakes I find in books which have been carefully edited!

At last it was finished and the first copy was in my hands. To me the months spent on the book were instructive, fulfilling and satisfying, in spite of the mixed feelings of pride and unworthiness I experienced when I first saw it in print.

A GIRL IS FALLING

Theresa Moritz

This leg with silver stocking
and red toenails
I found while I was counting zinnias,
is no more a curiosity
than the gloved hand
on the neighbor's porch
or the ear the mailman found
and carries with him now
for listening.