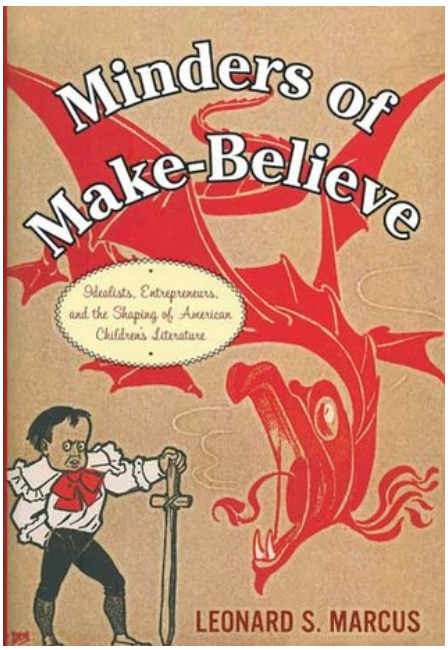

Minders of Make-Believe: Idealists, Entrepreneurs, and the Shaping of American Children's Literature

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Minders of Make-Believe: Idealists, Entrepreneurs, and the Shaping of American Children's Literature Leonard S. Marcus
An animated first-time history of the visionaries--editors, authors, librarians, booksellers, and others--whose passion for books has transformed American childhood and American culture

What should children read? As the preeminent children's literature authority, Leonard S. Marcus, shows incisively, that's the three-hundred-year-old question that sparked the creation of a rambunctious children's book publishing scene in Colonial times. And it's the urgent issue that went on to fuel the transformation of twentieth-century children's book publishing from a genteel backwater to big business.
Marcus delivers a provocative look at the fierce turf wars fought among pioneering editors, progressive educators, and librarians--most of them women--throughout the twentieth century. His story of the emergence and growth of the major publishing houses--and of the distinctive literature for the young they shaped--gains extraordinary depth (and occasional dish) through the author's path-finding research and in-depth interviews with dozens of editors, artists, and other key publishing figures whose careers go back to the 1930s, including Maurice Sendak, Ursula Nordstrom, Margaret K. McElderry, and Margret Rey.
From The New England Primer to The Cat in the Hat to Cormier's The Chocolate War, Marcus offers a richly informed, witty appraisal of the pivotal books that transformed children's book publishing, and brings alive the revealing synergy between books like these and the national mood of their times.

Minders of Make-Believe: Idealists, Entrepreneurs, and the Shaping of American Children's Literature Details

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From Reader Review Minders of Make-Believe: Idealists, Entrepreneurs, and the Shaping of American Children's Literature for online ebook

Virginia says

This was a textbook for a graduate class, and I hated it. Not only is the writing so-so, the drudgery with which the facts are portrayed makes an interesting history seem incredibly boring. Additionally, he bounces back and forth in time so much that it’s hard to keep track of when things occurred. The chapters are linear, but within them, the events are not placed in sequential order. Such a frustrating read.

Betsy says

This is a review certainly, but it is also a look at how librarians fit within Marcus's take on the publishing industry, past and present. When you are aware of your own personal worldview, it makes sense to interpret the books that fall into your lap with that view at the forefront of your mind. FYI.

Beware setting yourself up as a guardian of the moral and cultural growth of children, for lo thou shalt be kicked in the rear historically as a result. As a children's librarian there's a wide swath of literature out there that looks at literature for kids from a historical perspective. Librarians, as it happens, are often very good at writing books about the things that they love. If they happen to love titles for the short set (and whatever you do, don't call it kid lit!) so be it. And thus it has been and thus it would continue to be if it weren't for other scholars in the field like Leonard Marcus. Mr. Marcus has, in a sense, made a career out of filling in the gaps that librarians have left in the field. Examinations of the Little Golden Books as with his book, Golden Legacy: How Golden Books Won Children's Hearts, Changed Publishing Forever, and Became An American Icon Along the Way or the collected letters of editor Ursula Nordstrom in Dear Genius. And so I find myself in a mighty odd position as I read his newest title, *Minders of Make-Believe*. I cannot help but recognize that children's librarianship as it exists today has changed significantly since the days of Anne Carroll Moore and Frances Clark Sayers. That said Marcus's book, a brilliant piece and required reading for anyone in the field, sometimes proves a bitter pill for someone like me to swallow. Dishing up the dirt and setting the record straight, it's best for librarians like myself to learn from our illustrious past and find a way to continue to set literary standards so that we can avoid becoming an arbitrary footnote in collections like this particular one.

The history of America and the history of children's books begin at practically the same point. Charting the growth of the American publishing industry and the very notion of the children's book as object, *Minders* tackles the didacticism of early efforts alongside the literary growth on the business side of the equation. Marcus charts the shift from America's reliance on British children's fare to its love affair with homegrown authors and illustrators. Familiar names begin to appear, and familiar authors as well. Drawing upon the input of librarians, booksellers, publishers, authors, illustrators, and really anyone with a finger in the children's publication pie, *Minders of Make-Believe* is the most compelling story imaginable, if your heart lies with the birth of American children's picture book creation.

Marcus's readability is his forte. I'm no academic, and authors that write convoluted sentences for the sake of the sentences themselves bother me. There is nothing that Leonard Marcus writes, however, that does not

belong in this book. His smallest statements kick home his messages. "Even timeless books . . . are books of their time." "Not all children's books are children's literature..." On top of that, he's pulling out constant surprises. Things that I should have known but didn't appeared like little delicious jewels in the book. The first children's book to feature child protagonists? James Janeway's, A Token For Children. Mother Goose's "early British rivals"? They included Gammer Gurton, Tom Thumb, and Nurse Lovechild. Librarians, booksellers, and publishers alike will be intrigued to learn that advance copies of books were not sent to reviewers in the days of May Massee, but were secured on loan instead. My previous belief that the Caldecott Medal was almost named the Brooke Medal after L. Leslie Brooke turned out to merely be a case of Anne Carroll Moore just throwing a wrench in the award committee's works for kicks. Who knew that there was a controversy surrounding Garth Williams's soft and sweet The Rabbits' Wedding because it involved the marriage of a white rabbit to a black rabbit? Or, on a different lapin note, that the ad campaign for Pat the Bunny was "*For Whom the Bell Tolls* is magnificent - but it hasn't any bunny in it." And the book is just jam-packed with names so delectable and delicious that an author in search of character names would have an abundance to choose from. Monikers like Algernon Swinburne, Melancthon Montgomery Hurd, Oliver Optic, and so on.

Marcus does an excellent job of winnowing down great swaths of information to suit his themes and talking points. A good historian can mention a detail or fact and make you want to know more and more. For example, I was intrigued by the frequency of the Quakers and their role in early American printing. It would be off-topic for Marcus to comment on this fact, but that won't stop me from seeking more information out regarding their role. Ditto the seeming lack of interest in discussing Scholastic books when so many other publishers have their histories neatly laid out for all to see. What was their story? Of course, looking at history in this fashion really does give you the sense that what goes around comes around. To my mind (and this is probably due much in part to my own relative newness to the field) we are currently having a kind of children's literature renaissance. Looking back to 1871, however, and you run across similar cries of joy from writers like Bret Harte reporting that, "The idea of pleasing children by writing down to their suppositious level and flavoring the work with bland imbecility, has also exploded." Clearly Mr. Harte could not have predicted the rise of the celebrity picture book.

Marcus also draws connections between seemingly disparate events, weaving them together brilliantly. Who else would have noticed that the first Caldecott Medal was handed out mere days from the publication of the very first "Action Comics"? That old bugaboo of librarians, the comic book, appearing on the eve of their best-known illustration award? Gives me downright shivers, it does.

What should be noted here is that Marcus does not confine his attentions to the "quality" publishers. He loves his Little Golden Books and pays particular attention to things like the "Big Little Books" of the Depression. Best of all, though the role of minorities in the publishing industry was not as prevalent as that of whites, Marcus still takes note of the contributions of such people as W.E.B. Dubois and Jessie Redmon Fauset with their publications like *The Brownies' Book* (a title I knew about already thanks to Eleanor Tate's novel, Celeste's Harlem Renaissance). He discusses the rise of the Coretta Scott King Award and even the birth of companies like Just Us Books and Lee and Low.

None of this is to say that Marcus doesn't insert his own very particular point of views into the narrative from time to time. For example, woes betide you if you were clever in the Roaring Twenties. Discussing the 1933 Pulitzer Prize given to Frederick Jackson turner for his writings about the frontier days, Marcus notes, "Urbane 1920s intellectuals and writers had had little more than a patronizing smirk for America's buckskin-clad forebears: what a difference a depression made." Ow! The statement is not without merit (if you've ever read Dorothy Parker's hilarious and cruel review of a Winnie-the-Pooh title then you'll know what he means) but the bite is deep.

I noted that while librarians appear in this title frequently, they are primarily seen in a historical sense. Come to the final chapter in the book, "Suits and Wizards at the Millennium's Gate", and it is not surprising that the most prominent mention of this occupation is the explanation that the 1996 purge at Random House was due in part to the fact that, "the department no longer needed to cater to the needs of libraries and schools." Oh, they're mentioned in terms of Harry Potter and censorship issues, but long gone are the influential players in the field. We have no Anne Carroll Moore to rally behind. The big names aren't as nationally known, though I think it a temporary lull.

It is a bit unfortunate that librarians are at their most interesting when they dislike something. The problem with being a self-diagnosed arbitrator of culture (in this case of children's literature) is that you have to believe that standards do not change. But librarians have changed with the times, a fact not addressed in this book. Certainly librarians are discovering the beauty and allure of the internet with surprising results. Suddenly they are creating blogs, starting websites, and offering advice to vast numbers of people. We should take heed of Marcus's book and use it to learn about how others see us and how we can continue to stay true to the profession without sacrificing our taste for standards and superior quality. You take many things away from this book, but that is how I see it.

In the chapter "Change and More Change" Marcus comments on the frequency of the people who work in publishing to switch from publishing company to publishing company. We live now in, "a culture marked by a loosening of the bonds of employee loyalty to a given house; by an increased tendency for employees, including senior editors, to change houses at least once during their professional lives; and, as a consequence of this more fluid situation, by a loss of institutional memory." We have let Marcus remember for us, and if he remembers it one way rather than another, who are we to object? This is necessary reading for anyone and everyone involved in children's books with an eye to where we've been and where we're going.

Jake Rideout says

Finally! FINALLY!

After a mere 2.5 months, I finally managed to finish this book. While it was rich with information that a person like me (school librarian, former bookseller, and Children's Lit Fellow) should have stored in her mental arsenal, the delivery was at times a little dry. Okay, a LOT dry. I will admit to skimming entire pages as I slogged through the 40's and 50's.

This book works best if you already have a decent working knowledge of publishers and their major titles from the last 50-60 years. That way, when a factoid about Beverly Cleary appears in the middle of a long passage of departmental turmoil, you don't have to stop and Google her to figure out the significance of that lone sentence.

Barb Middleton says

Writer Lucy Boston describes editor, Margaret K. McElderry, "...she sailed forth, leaving me feeling like waste paper after royalty had passed." This awestruck comment gives a glimpse of publishing history during the early 1900's that reflects a time when editors had more authority and nurtured fledgling authors to create close relationships that inspired loyalty to each other that lasted throughout their careers. This editorial

relationship and the evolution of bookselling is revealed over 300 years by Leonard Marcus. Peppered with funny and eye-opening comments from people in the profession, this is a great read for those interested in the history of publishing. More of a scholarly text than coffee table book, the density might deter some. If you want something more light and humorous then I would recommend, "Letters of a Genius" by Leonard Marcus.

Marcus begins with pioneers in publishing and the focus on moral instruction in children's books. As a young nation, the USA pirated many British books and there were no international copyright laws for foreign authors to take action. When this changed in the 1900's and the middle class emerged reading was seen as a way for self-improvement. The introduction of the Newbery Medal elevated children's literature and close relationships evolved between editors from different publishing houses and new authors. Television triggered the advent of commercialism resulting in the highly successful series and comic books that were pooh-poohed by librarians as being "subliterary."

Being a librarian, I found their place in bookselling interesting even if they usually looked like the dips or villains in the tale. Led by Anne Carroll Moore, Librarian of the New York Public Library, the most colorful quotes Marcus has are from Moore trying to sound literary but coming off as rigid, judgmental, and egotistical. She wrote that "Charlotte's Web" was a mongrel work that failed to adequately develop the main character and was a confusing read. Ouch! While she was a writer who won the Newbery Medal and reviewer with great influence, Marcus shows that she was not a risk-taker and unable to see progressive writing talent. Marcus shows librarians as book critics that influenced the industry to create taboo-riddled storybooks that suited their tastes and if it wasn't for the risk-takers such as Ursula Nordstrom, there would not be "Where the Wild Things Are" or "Stuart Little" or "Charlotte's Web" or "Stevie." Moore intrigued me and I rocketed off into cyberspace searching for more information on her. I would like to read a biography about her.

That, for me, is the strength of this book. Marcus has so much information that I wanted to know more about certain people or publishing houses. This book is a great reference tool and launching point to look more indepth at the evolution of children's books if you want to. I would have liked it if Marcus had continued to the 21st century with a look at digital books and the impact of social networking. Marcus doesn't cover this but I did come across a New York Times article that discusses Goodreads as a forum for recommending books and its influence on the book industry today. Good food for thought.

Bruce says

Marcus has written a very interesting history of publishing English books for children in the United States from the 1690 *New England Primer* to the midnight release of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* in July 2000. The twentieth century, when publishers first appointed knowledgeable women editors to begin and run specialized children’s imprints, gets the most coverage. As the subtitle advertises, the debates in the field supply the story’s plot: should books for children be educational or entertaining, truth or fiction, draw upon folktales or the daily sensations of children in their new modern environment, is our business literature or commerce, and is children’s literature really literature at all? The characters, and there are some characters, are supplied by the publishers, editors, librarians, and educators who wrestle with these issues and the economic necessity of keeping their enterprises afloat.

Anna says

From the New England Primer to Harry Potter. Marcus covers both the business side of things--from the days with no international copyright law, where Americans could publish Hans Christian Andersen and Lewis Carroll without giving them a dime, to the rise of women in publishing as maternal keepers of the children's book departments, and the spawning and eventual conglomeration of all the familiar houses: Simon & Schuster (who started their own company because, as Jews, they were excluded from all others), Houghton Mifflin, Random House, etc. Also deals with the high-minded purpose of juvenile literature, which has been used for centuries as a means to instill "proper" values in the young. Who decides what children read? Marcus asks, and goes on to detail American answers: clergymen, businessmen, librarians, educators, women. A fascinating history of a usually overlooked segment of literature. Plus name-checks of all my favorites: Margaret Wise Brown, Dr. Seuss, Robert McCloskey (who kept a whole flock of mallards in his studio while writing "Make Way for Ducklings").

Harold Underdown says

Minders of Make-Believe tells the story of children's book publishing in the United States from Colonial times to the mid-1990's. It's the only book available on the subject, and it's excellent.

Contents of Minders of Make-Believe: Two chapters cover the period from the 17th century to the beginning of the 20th. The story then jumps forward to a chapter about the 1920's, when the first specialist children's book editors and imprints appeared. Then the story continues with chapters about each decade up to one on the 1980's, which includes some events from the 1990's, ending with the story of Harry Potter and the implications the series' success had for the industry. Fifty pages of notes provide support, followed by an extensive and useful index. In each chapter, information about changes in the business are woven together with stories about companies, individuals, and books.

My detailed review: http://www.underdown.org/minders-marc...

Tony DiTerlizzi says

A fascinating history of children's publishing in America from the early colonists' printing presses to Harry Potter. Highly recommended for anyone thinking of entering (or active) in the field.

Jamie says

Even though on first glance this might seem like a book just for "library nerd" types, I truly think anyone who has ever enjoyed childrens books would enjoy this, well, history of children's books. Tales of librarians, and how we got our "we know better than you do what you want to read" reputation. Watching publihsers go from publishing no childrens material to some to making bank off of it.
My favorite anecdote is how the early publicity for "Pat the Bunny" actually name checked Hemingway. And if you can't imagine how this could be, check this book out.

jacky says

This book was featured in *Instructor* a few years back. I was excited to read it, but was a little let down when I finally got it. I had hoped that the book would focus more on authors and texts than it did, but if I had looked at the title and blurb more closely I would have known not to expect that. I read the first 20 pages or so, then skipped ahead to the chapter on the 50's. I read about half of that. Soon, the due date for the book was approaching, so I skipped head to the last chapter that covered the 1980's and 90's. I had hoped to see more about the texts I'd read as a child, and though there were a few mentioned, it was really more about technology and company mergers. It also really only went up to HP, no mention of the late 90's or 2000's. I did like the bit about Harry Potter at the end, and I found the info on Dr. Sesus, the Bernstains, Where the Wild Things Are, and Eric Carle interesting. I'm sure if I had the time (and a shorter to read list) I could like the rest of this book, but for right now I'm accepting this incomplete read.

Susann says

Leonard Marcus lives in Brooklyn and I wish he would invite me to dinner so that I could check out his bookshelves and we could talk about children's books all night long. This is the history of American kidlit and the stories of the publishers and librarians who decided what American children should be reading. Marcus has a real knack for plopping the reader right into each time period and for making me ~~interested~~ fascinated with so many of these "minders." I've always been a kidlit enthusiast but, until I read Ursula Nordstrom's letters and this book, I had barely thought about the publishing side of things. I particularly enjoyed learning about the tastes of each editor, so that I could see why and how some of my favorite authors matched with their respective publishing houses.
The two chapters covering the 17th-19th centuries moved more slowly for me, but that's due to my personal lack of interest in those eras and not to Marcus' writing.

Katherine says

I only skimmed the first several chapters (did librarians really see themselves as guardians and protectors of childhood in decades past?) and read through the last half of the chapter on the 1970s and the chapter on the 1990s.

I didn't get much out of it, mainly because I can't keep the various publishing houses and their imprints straight. There were people who were incredibly influential in bringing children's literature to where it is now (mostly booksellers who I've never heard of before). One thing that stood out to me is that the independent bookstores, like St Paul's The Red Balloon affected the amount of money that publishers put into childrens books. They didn't have the rate of returns that the chains did (because they knew their customers) and the publishers saw potential for growth there.

Another thing that stood out for me was that as parents worked outside the home more in the 80s, lists like the Newbery and Caldecott winners became more important for selection. This highly educated and busy generation needed lists of 'the best' in order to make their selections. Or, so says the author. I think. Again, I only skimmed it.

Amit says

A comprehensive history of children's literature in America, starting from the founding of the New England colonies to J.K. Rowling's third Harry Potter book.

The author does a great job of tying the cultural trends in different periods with the kind of childrens books that are published. For instance, the second page of the chapter on the 1950s (called "Fun and Fear") has a quote from a cultural anthropologist, Martha Wolfenstein, which goes, ".... from having dreaded impulses and being worried about whether conscience was adequate to cope with them, we have come round to finding conscience a dnuisacne and worrying about the adequacy of our impulses." And this is a pattern seen chapter after chapter.

As the title indicates, the books does a tremendosu job describing the thousands of personalities that have been involved in this genre over the few centuries. The author provides background for each of the people he pulls into the story, writes about how these people were interconnected in their times, and traces the careers of important figures.

Finally, the book traces the history of business aspects - and how technology as well as culture affected the business. He talks about how book publising (in general, not just childrens') starts in Boston but then gradually moves to New York because of NY's proximity to imported British books. How books are purchased by parents and children till the end of the 19th century, the growing influence of libraries in the 20th century and the dominance of large retail chains over the last three decades.

The book ends in the mid-nineties. Perhaps an updated edition would cover the impact of the Internet, and of electric reading devices ranging from Leapfrog's to the Kindle. And I must admit - though I tried reading this book cover-to-cover, after page 100 or so, I decided to start skimming it.

Julie says

3.5 stars.

GraceAnne says

This is so *good*. He shapes a coherent narrative from the disparate strands of how children's literature came to be in the US, and the redoubtable and remarkable women (and a few men) who made it happen. The grace of his prose never falters, and he tells the story as it happened. It was marvelous to see the women whose names I knew only as giants in the field, and those I had the privilege of knowing personally, come to vivid life (and work) in these pages.
Librarians, teachers, scholars, people who want to know how publishing happens would both enjoy this and learn from it. Bravo.
