

Unitarianism and the Creation of Children's Literature

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I got started down this path in my own childhood. Like many chronic readers, I was a misfit, and any hope of normalcy came through my siblings — all five of whom, along with my three sisters—in—law, are here tonight. This is very humbling — these are the people with whom I shared bunk beds, clothes, school bus rides, meals, adventures — all the experiences that provide connections that we have no language for. Although our mother always read to us, I think stories in our family conjure up Grammie, who was the size of a child herself, but contained multitudes — she acted out characters in different voices, most memorably of little brother bear cubs named Jimmy and Johnny. They rolled their R's like little Scotsmen.

As a child, I liked church. It functioned as my siblings did — giving me a place to fit in while not demanding conformity. The people were nice, there were always perfect white cubes of sugar in glass bowls, and I learned intriguing words, like “pre—prandial collation” and “peripatetic.” The place was full of mysterious possibilities – little stairs to a choir loft, a cabinet door that opened to reveal a dumbwaiter big enough to hold a little brother, a giant metal safe with dials, built right into the basement wall, which my brother Kevin was entranced by. What impressed me most was that adults took his interest seriously. The black range in the kitchen was the size of our family sedan, and the old parsonage had a staircase that split in the middle, allowing a companion to disappear into the kitchen while you landed in the front hall. It all made real a world that was otherwise invisible. It was like being in a book.

And with that, I will begin.

My first moral dilemma involved reading. As with most memories that cause me to go crimson, I remember being on the horns, but not the acts that led up to the moment. Nevertheless: I was six years old. My first grade classroom was the kind that had two individual bathrooms at one end, and I was in one of them, with a book. *The Five Chinese Brothers* each had an amazing power, which was cool on its own, but together they were invincible. Now, I don't remember anything about why or how I came to be in the bathroom with a book. I just remember feeling compelled to find out what happened next, and it was only when I finished the book that I became awake to the world, and my dilemma. I realized that I was stuck, and had created a problem without ever having been aware of making choices. If I came out with the book, everyone would know that I had been using the lav, as we were taught to call it, as a private library. But I could not just stay closeted up. I decided to hide the book. I can still picture the condensation on the white porcelain behind the toilet's flush mechanism, which was where I first thought to put the book. But I was afraid the pages, which were that sort of rough, flecked off—white construction paper, would wick up the drops, and ruin my favorite picture, which was of the brother who could swallow the whole sea, leaving the ocean floor littered with fish. I opted for leaning the book against the wall behind and underneath the toilet, thinking I

would go back and rescue it — although I don't know if I did. Really, all I remember is the book and figuring out how to hide the fact that I had been reading.

It would have been convenient, for the sake of this evening's talk, if I had had been hiding out with a book written by a Unitarian instead of an American retelling of a Chinese folk tale, written in 1938. *The Five Chinese Brothers* is controversial now, and experienced by some people as racist. At the time it was printed, however, it was more likely to be seen as controversial for an entirely different reason. Our country had legalized anti—Asian sentiment for over a generation, by severely restricting immigration. In only a few years, Japanese—Americans would be rounded up and sent to internment camps. This book promoted the idea of the Chinese as having a popular culture, of tall tales and stories passed on to children. It was only the third American book for children that told them anything at all about China, and the first that wasn't an ancient history lesson, as if the only important thing about Asia was its distant past. The author, whose grandfather was a revered story—teller, opened the very first library for children in France, which had the wonderful name of "The Joyous Hour." In the 1930s, she was in charge of the children's reading room at the NYPL, a position that granted moral weight. A devout Catholic, she responded to the horrors of WWII by working tirelessly for racial equality and interfaith harmony, and was instrumental in forcing the Vatican to address anti—Semitism in the liturgy.

As I said, it would have been convenient if this woman had been a Unitarian. But she was not, and the fact that I am not obscuring that should make you trust me when I say that if there was ever an alternate universe, in which our religion was queen, and everyone else had to explain themselves.... Well, children's literature is that world. I can sum up a year of research by telling you that almost everything associated with books for children — adventure stories, rags to riches stories, realistic literature, series books for boys, girls books, picture books, children's libraries, story hours, libraries in public schools, Newbery and Caldecott medals for children's books — every single one of these was initiated and developed by Unitarians. At last, an explanation for why I feel at home with children's books!

Those of you who know your Bible know that there are two versions of the creation story. In Genesis, we first see creation achieved from a distance, with orders coming down from on high and everything unfolding as it inevitably must. It is a narrative that could only have been developed after the fact, but it reads as though it were present tense. Everything makes complete sense, even as it is happening — like an instruction manual. First separate light and dark, provide water and adequate lighting, grow some plants, get some animals — okay. Now you are ready to have a life. The second version — which scholars agree is actually the older version — is the textured, up—close story, happening in the dust and breath. It proceeds on an intimate, rather than cosmological, level; and if there is a plan, we can't see it. There is a lush garden, but a treacherous snake has been set down there — and that snake is the only conversation partner to be found. This story has a kind of resonance we can't shake off. It stalks us with primal emotions.

This talk is the logical conclusion to everything I have ever done professionally; a perfect blending of history and education and religion and books. But that orderly framework could only be developed after I lived a different,

completely personal tale — a love story, really — in which I kept poking around in old children’s books and their authors, trying to grasp precisely why they had a hold on me, and then being amazed, over and over again, at the number of Unitarians I found. This was no seamless narrative. At best, it could be a game of connect the dots. The thing about reading is that it can provide a kind of core experience that feels essential and deeply private, but even so, there is a communal aspect to books. We are in the company of all the others who found themselves in those pages. We are also participating in a pattern. It is fairly predictable. At a certain age, you are going to have *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* read to you. It is the number—two best—selling hard cover children’s book of all time. There are over fifty million copies of it floating around. A little while later, it will be the story of *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel*. I don’t need to tell you the religion of either of those book’s authors, right?

Let me tell you the story of the day last October, when Stephen Kendrick, on behalf of the Minns Committee, called and invited me to speak here. Excited, restless, eager, when I hung up the phone, I walked down to our public library, to the children’s room. It was a general reconnaissance mission. I just wanted to see what I could see, so to speak. Which of my favorite childhood books were on the shelves? Who had been written about in a biography? What were today’s kids reading? I started reading bits of things while standing in the stacks, when a nice young woman came up to me and said, “And where is the child you are here accompanying?” Replying that I had come alone, she promptly told me I must leave. Library policy. No adults in the children’s room unless said adult had children with them. Afraid of what I would appear to be if I did not immediately comply, I began simultaneously walking toward the door and asking if there were times adults were allowed to browse, because sometimes I was looking for a story to go with a sermon — that I didn’t necessarily know what I was looking for until I found it. But the answer was no. Adults were not welcome in the children’s room.

This is an oddly shaming experience. The notion that I appear creepy or threatening is tough to incorporate into my perception of self, and being kicked out of the library — me? It’s the one place I always fit in! It’s the place that stands for sanctuary... well, it is disrupting. The fact that it is policy, not personal, doesn’t really matter. I felt badly enough about it that I would not have told you about it, if I hadn’t read about it happening to Daniel Handler a week later. Handler is the alter ego of Lemony Snicket — the man who wrote *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. In an interview, Handler’s treasured memories of the library and the freedom he found there prompted the interviewer to ask if he still visited the children’s section. Handler was rueful, and explained. “I was in Seattle and had a chunk of time to get some work done. I went to the library’s children’s section because I wanted to look at some books to help me with my book. I was asked to leave because I didn’t have a child with me. I was dressed in a suit. I wasn’t misbehaving. I left a Lemony Snicket business card as I walked out. “

For the record, Handler is not a UU. His family is Jewish, and he says he is a secular humanist. I know that this qualifies him in some of our minds, but My point is that Handler’s reaction freed me a little bit. And it also got me thinking about not just children’s books, but how we access them. A huge reversal has taken

place. The library of my childhood was in the basement. Even as recently as when my own kids were little, children's rooms were in library basements — like religious education space. You could tell the building had been designed without children in mind. In 1900, which is when the movement to build public libraries across the country really took off, just about half of the existing libraries banned those under fourteen. An 1896 report by the U. S. Commission on Education does not once mention books for children, even though it tallied 36 million books held in 5000 libraries. Now, the teens in our public library enjoy a private quiet study, plus a big room with social space, computers, video equipment, and open stacks of books, movies, and games. It is right across from the café. There is a huge room for those under fourteen, with everything listed above plus places to stage plays and perform music. The entire first floor of the library is devoted to children. And adults are banned.

How did this happen?

Usually the story of how children's rooms became the norm in public libraries credits a couple of women who opened a bookshop in Boston in 1915. Theirs was the first bookstore exclusively for children. Then, with war ending and troops returning, and altered immigration patterns, a man named Frederic Melcher proposed a literacy initiative called Children's Book Week to the American Library Association. Melcher, a bookseller who became the editor of *Publisher's Weekly*, was a very active Unitarian, and many of you might recognize the name from the UUA's Melcher Book Award, which honors the year's most significant contribution to religious liberalism. Melcher liked developing awards: in 1921, after the librarians had greeted Children's Book Week with enthusiasm, he proposed the Newbery Medal for children's literature. Later, he added the Caldecott Medal for distinguished picture books. These incredibly successful ventures transformed public libraries, and the publishing world. The trajectory implies progressive freedom; libraries were first private, then subscription based, then public but for adults, and then for everyone, of every age, and ultimately of every race as well.

The bookshop that started it all was the brainchild of a woman who had wanted to be a librarian, but had no money to attend school. Bertha Mahony was in her thirties, had been working for almost twenty years, and she decided it was time to reclaim her life. Eleven when her mother died, she had helped raise younger siblings and then worked as a secretary. Now she would work with what she loved: books. Her decision to specialize in children's books was based on a glutted market: there were already a number of bookstores, but none were for children. Every single person Mahony sought help from was a Unitarian. She went and studied bookselling with Frederic Melcher. She brought in a partner, Elinor Whitney, with whom she started *The Horn Book*, a magazine that reviews children's books. Whitney was a writer for children herself. An irrelevant but fun detail: her grandmother was the inventor of alphabet blocks – which she was smart enough to patent!

Additionally, Mahony met with librarians, many of whom did offer service to children even though there was no such thing as a children's librarian. The most significant contact was Caroline Hewins, who had managed to transform the private Hartford Young Men's Institute into the Free Public Library, open to girls as well as

boys. Hewins was part of a somewhat radical Unitarian group who saw library work as religious. They believed in reading, and several of the men in this group actually trained as Unitarian ministers in order to serve “the parish church of literature.” Guidance extended beyond providing books — I found this very funny story in which Atheneum staff had to figure out how to prevent romance in the stacks. A certain couple kept meeting up in the German Literature alcove for purposes other than reading. First, Hewins began checking out as many German books as she could. This wasn’t enough deterrence, so on went the lights – which shone through all the gaps in the newly emptied shelves. This did the trick, and after a few moments in the spotlight, the couple moved on. In her memoir, Hewins — who grew up in West Roxbury, in a house next to Brook Farm that had just recently been vacated by the family of Robert Gould Shaw — wrote that she did not know many children outside her family until at last she went to school. There she met “a little girl in the class who was a bookworm and had the run of two libraries, one a minister's, the other the property of a leading Boston publisher. We came together like ‘halves of one dissevered world’ and what one had not read the other had.” Hewins gave Mahony a list of well—reviewed children’s books, suggesting they would sell.

On the one hand, we are told that services to children didn’t exist yet; that it was because of this bookstore and the *Horn Book* that children’s literature came to be. But Hewins had a list of well—reviewed children’s books. Where did it come from? The reality was that for the previous fifty years, book reviewers addressed children’s books in exactly the same way they did those for adults; that is, all received essay—length analytical reviews by respected critics (such as William Dean Howells and Mary Mapes Dodge, both of whom were Unitarian). By the 1870s, there were nineteen monthly magazines in this country, nine of which were edited by Unitarians, and every one of them included book reviews. When the books in question were for children, they were evaluated as literature, not for religious or moral purpose. In other words, by World War I, children’s books had been around for a long time, but they had never been separated out as a distinct field. The twentieth century phenomenon we are actually talking about is a process of specialization.

Why, if children’s literature was already being taken seriously, did the field need to be reinvented? And was it a good thing?

Once upon a time, books for children were automatically good for children – that is why they were written. All books had the same purpose, which was educational, narrowly conceived. They inculcated the right beliefs. All this changed, rapidly and dramatically, in the middle of the nineteenth century. The whys and hows relate to the industrial revolution, which made printing easy and cheap; the theory of evolution, which changed our concepts of time and development; and religious freedoms, which promoted both denominationalism — or a highlighting of the differences between religious groups — and secular, public institutions like schools and libraries. Basically, these forces changed where we look for meaning. Instead of finding it in antiquity, or believing that life was somewhat cyclical in nature, we began looking to the future... which means, children. This is where anxious parenting was born. Instead of upholding the past or standing for the same

thing their parents and grandparents had stood for, children became important forces for change — for progress towards a social ideal. The Quakers were the first to act on this belief: their publishing houses specifically printed books for children that would combat slavery. They wanted to raise a generation of abolitionists. The Unitarians were right there with the Quakers, but with some equivocating from the leadership. The Congregationalists, on the other hand, condemned both the abolitionist movement and the role of women. Whatever the theological differences, the social ones had enormous implications.

Books for children are one of the primary places we can see the changes that the Civil War created. Realism entered the scene. Longfellow's little girl, who had a little curl, right in the middle of her forehead — well, there was nothing to say about her until the 1870s, when he could tell us that “when she was good she was very good indeed, but when she was bad, she was horrid.” Before the war, all books portrayed children as they ought to be. They didn't even have to struggle to be good. Perfection was simply the only possibility. Now, children began to be seen as people, in possession of feelings and imaginations, living in a world that had problems — problems which they had the power to address, and wrestle with. The five books generally recognized as classics of children's literature — *Hans Brinker*, *The Story of a Bad Boy*, *Little Women*, *Through the Looking Glass*, and *Tom Sawyer* — all date from this period. With the exception of the British one, all were pioneers of realistic fiction, and the first three were written by Unitarians. These books have no hint of piety in them, but they are full of faith.

Realism has a complicated legacy, though. Because it acknowledges that stories have different, even opposing, functions for us — they either help us adjust to our environment, or they help us refuse to adjust — realism is a liberating movement. Yet our classics of realism and naturalism were also invested in promoting national unity at the expense of the newly freed slaves. Children were taught to fight against the evil institution, but when the war was over, effort went into establishing bonds with the former slave owners rather than the former slaves. Realism told children that they should refuse to adjust to an unfair and immoral society, while creating a world in which black people were inferior and, ironically, child-like. There is no way to address this briefly, but it seemed irresponsible to not at least acknowledge this issue. We can proudly claim the two writers for children consistently noted for promoting a thoroughly moral message — Eliza Cabot Follen and Lydia Maria Child, who both included Native and African American children in their stories as fully human figures, and challenged racism— but we have to also claim the others who did not see as clearly.

The irony of promoting freedom while also trying to control the social order involves not just race, but gender, and we see that tension more clearly in the world of children's books than perhaps anywhere else. It turns out that the reason half the libraries had not admitted children was not simply that they hadn't thought of it yet. For some, it was an active attempt to protect children from the dangers of reading. The library had fiction in it, and fiction — which is by definition NOT TRUE — was morally suspect. Realistic fiction was a compromise measure — a step in the right direction not so much because it turned away from idealized, perfect children, but because it was infinitely better than the horrid, enticing, sensationalized adventure

stories that kept getting printed. These were positively dangerous, because they humanized behavior that was socially unacceptable. Children might identify with pirates and smugglers, and stop trying to perfect themselves. This jeopardized not only the child's future, but society's, too. The conversation about the role of adventure stories became intense throughout the 1870s, and generally it was split along gender lines. Actually, it wasn't a conversation — it was the nineteenth-century version of a culture war, and a great deal of it is still alive, in arguments about censorship, school curricula, and protection policies. But we can sum it up by saying that women librarians, along with the more traditional male ministers, wanted to claim reading for pleasure and remove the idea of books as a grim duty, while still banning certain kinds of books — the fun ones; the series books; the rags to riches stories – all of which were written by Unitarian men.

(As an aside, I want to tell you that last year I unearthed a figure named Captain Barnacle, who wrote adventure stories set in Hawaii. His real name was Charles Newell, and his father had been a Universalist minister who studied with Hosea Ballou. I was very excited to find a Universalist involved in early literature! Charles was fifteen when his father died, and he left his home in Weymouth and headed to New Bedford, where he got work on board a whaler. He traveled around the Cape of Good Hope, and the Horn of Africa, and went to Hong Kong and the Far East. In his twenties, Newell began crafting his experiences at sea into stories — romances and adventures. He became a captain, and kept a lending library on board, made available to all the crew. Newell eventually gave up seafaring and practiced medicine, but he also kept publishing stories. They were peopled with sea queens and magical nymphs, the pantheon of Polynesian gods and goddesses. Newell introduced mainland Americans and Europeans to this culture, and they greeted the stories with ridicule. He made naked people with brown skin and the wrong belief system seem noble, and honorable. Newell said his stories were a way to honor his father, whom he remembered as reading novels aloud, and telling adventure stories and romances. The message he got was completely positive. It was about joy, and openness, and being alive.)

Which brings us back to the list of well-reviewed books that Caroline Hewins gave Bertha Mahony when she was setting up the first children's bookshop. Where did it come from?

In October of 1865, the American Unitarian Association convened a group called the Unitarian Ladies' Commission on Sunday School Books. It is, admittedly, a difficult name to say with a straight face — all I can think of is the "Ladies' Sewing Circle and Terrorist Society" t-shirt which was popular when I was young. But this was a rather amazing group. The idea was to develop a list of all the children's books in print, and separate them into categories. Religious leaders of all stripes had been calling for an effort of this type — There were between five and six thousand books for children being published per year, all marketed to Sunday Schools, and many of them were new versions of books everyone already had. Others were simply inane. But until you bought the book, you didn't know. Nothing was classified, and the booksellers liked it that way. The commission was a group of fifty women across the U.S. and Canada who, over a five-year period, read more than 3500 books and made

recommendations. They were picky. They tossed out all but 977 books, and those they divided into three groups: Good for Unitarians; Highly recommended for religious tone, but not Unitarian in belief; and Good secular books.

One source of guidance for the commission was an article by Samuel Osgood, a Unitarian minister who had served in Louisville before the Civil War, and then was in New York City. Writing in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1865, Osgood outlined three main qualities necessary in children's books: They should be child centered and based on children's needs, which cannot be done by approaching everything as a matter of reason; that writers for children need to understand development; and that the difference between a child and an adult is about expression, not intelligence. Simple, direct writing can convey reality. Finally, he said, play is powerful, and books should be part of children's play. Stories help children organize themselves by uniting attention, emotion, and symbolism. They encourage children to wonder, to search, and relate.

The Ladies' Commission finished their list in 1870. Despite the admonition to make reading play, adventure books were not on the list, which was intended for Sunday Schools — the public library movement was then just beginning, and did not yet have any structure. But over the next thirty-five years, as the commission issued supplements, public libraries did grow, and debates about what their holdings should be were common. Generally, openness won, championed by Unitarian clergy like Thomas Wentworth Higginson and James Freeman Clarke, and leaders in the library movement. By the turn of the century, public libraries had given up the effort to dictate taste, in favor of making available what people enjoyed and wanted. Service was provided by not making judgments about reading material. One librarian explained that he was a pastor, not a priest or prophet: he could only help people by accepting them and their taste in literature.

The list that Caroline Hewins provided to Bertha Mahony was the one developed by the Unitarian Ladies' Commission on Sunday School Books, and this is where the story of the Children's Library movement really begins. There is an assumption that children's libraries mean expanded opportunity — something exists that didn't before. But in most ways, these new rooms were a conservative move. Children were being served as part of the general population in the library, and the separate room was a chance to remove anything we feared. It was a protection from unworthy literature. These days, we don't block access to the books or the movies and video games that children want, but we do remove adults as part of a protective policy.

One of the ironies of Bertha Mahony's bookshop is that it did not remain exclusive to children for very long. She said that it cut children off from human experience, and didn't work, and so by 1921, the sign read, "The Bookshop for Boys and Girls — With Books on Many Subjects for Grown-Ups." Children did not want to be isolated from potential new worlds. The whole point of books was how they opened up possibilities. Nevertheless, Mahony's bookshop did inspire some of the more conservative librarians to seize upon this idea, and create a special section of the library in which their influence could shape lives. It was analogous to the blitzkrieg in the German Literature section of the stacks; a way of solving a problem without addressing it. And it was a remarkably successful move. The head of the

Children's Room in the New York Public Library, Anne Carroll Moore, became a huge force in children's literature, shaping what libraries and schools across the country purchased, which ultimately dictated what was published. When Moore and a New York editor had a disagreement over the value of a book, the librarian challenged the editor. "What qualifications allow you to judge what is appropriate?" she demanded. To which the editor calmly answered, "I was a child once myself, and I remember it well."

What does it mean to have a story about children's libraries signifying freedom and inclusion when in many ways it is masking a story of control? This orderly telling of twentieth-century progress happens above the plane of human pettiness and personal agendas. We don't see the jockeying for power; the women banning the sensationalist male writers; or the publishers thrilled at the splitting of boys and girls; or of pictures from text. These divisions led to explosions in the market for children's books, and to a failure to take them seriously as literature. They stopped being reviewed. (As an aside, we can thank *Harry Potter* for the fact that sales of children's books are now tallied, and occasionally reviewed.) The other day I looked at a book called *Books of the Century: A Hundred Years of Authors, Ideas, and Literature from the New York Times*. It compiles over a thousand reviews from the twentieth century. Children's books are mentioned precisely twice. One is a review. Can anyone guess of what book? (*Charlotte's Web* — E.B. White wrote for the *New Yorker*, so he mattered.) The other is a column by Dr. Seuss, lamenting how often he is told that someday he will achieve success, and write for adults.

I have some sympathy for that nostalgic idea of a completely safe place. Part of the appeal of children's books is, in fact, that backward longing; that recapturing of childhood. Someone called this being a "reformer in search of the past." But what is really being offered is a mixed message in which children matter profoundly while at the same time being of no real consequence, and of reading as simultaneously liberating, but potentially dangerous. As a culture and as individuals, we carry anxiety about our duties to children. The whole future rests on them! We do want to protect, but we also want to open every door. It isn't clear how to do both, especially in a world that is organized around market forces. Anxiety sells. But we should perhaps be more concerned about splitting people into categories than we are about openness. The evidence shows that divided groups become rigid; that instead of flowing easily from one stage to the next, and perhaps moving back again, learning from each other and integrating memories in new ways, we splinter. Daniel Handler as a person cannot enter the children's room. But when he impersonates a fictitious writer named Lemony Snicket, Daniel Handler is paid thousands of dollars to visit the children's room.

One of the funniest quirks of fate involving the separation of children's books from the mainstream is that it gave radicals a place to hide. After World War II, anxiety about the Soviets being ahead of us scientifically funneled federal money into publishing educational materials that would both increase general understanding and prod young people into scientific fields — but we couldn't say so. The topic had to be romanticized, made enticing — because Soviets are the ones

who force things on others. We are democratic. We let people choose. Meanwhile, teachers who had been forced out of their jobs and writers unable to publish because of suspected communist ties were hired to write these new, enticing science books. Because they were for children, no one paid much attention to who was writing. In this case, librarians helped. Champions of intellectual freedom, they channeled work to Marxists and leftists, and used networks among publishers to get the books to print while keeping authors under the radar.

These books had a profound effect on children's literature. Series books based on science and history took off, and so did a kind of method of critical thinking that was definitely at odds with the original anxiety-driven agenda of government officials. Following the Transcendentalist tradition of using nature as a model, evolution on a biological level was related to evolutions in consciousness. These were science books that subtly introduced social issues, and raised whole new generations of idealists. And they were direct marketed: Scholastic and Arrow Book Clubs, featuring inexpensive reprints sold through flyers at school, was the brainchild of one of the left-leaning science writers in 1946. This history is relevant to us as UUs. Our Sunday Schools had begun linking science to social and religious development about ten years before this movement in children's book publishing. These curricula were not popular — and then suddenly, in the mid-40s, they were. They became one of the major causes for growth in the denomination. I loved them as a child — I still remember hatching eggs, and our classroom which had the ascent of man posters marching across three walls.

I started my research by looking at Newbery Medalists, an astonishing percentage of whom have been Unitarian or Unitarian Universalist. These books are generally for older readers, and I wish now that I had started instead with picture books. That would have been convenient, for the sake of this talk! Picture books imprint themselves in us. They lodge in our senses, and are inherently more relational than books for older kids, and often have a rhythmic structure that functions as a kind of meditation — or maybe it's just that I write meditations that sound like children's books! Slowly paced, they admit that fears recur, and remind us that love is constant. So although I don't know a lot about picture books, I can tell you that many of our best-known and longest-lasting picture books were written by people who experienced a kind of disruption in their childhood faith. Some, like Mem Fox, were children of missionaries, who couldn't simultaneously grasp how their religion could be true and still live by the racial laws in Rhodesia. Others, like the author of the *Velveteen Rabbit*, had a mother who experienced such devastating losses that she converted to Catholicism and sent her daughter to a convent. Margaret Wise Brown had parents who each came from a different tradition, which they loved, but did not share with her. Crockett Johnson, the man behind *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, was the son of a Methodist minister. He stopped going to church when he married, because his wife, Ruth Krauss (who wrote *A Hole Is to Dig* and other great children's books), was Jewish. She stopped going to temple, too. But she did go to a writers' group at the Unitarian church! I wonder if these experiences worked to open them up; to create questioning and depth; an engagement with the

core issues, which are always about justice; about the coexistence of good and evil; and the gulf between instinct and thought.

The overarching theme of the Minns Lectures this year was about outreach. How have we in the past, and how can we now speak to people in ways that matter, and show that we have something to offer? It is important to know our history, in its fullness. These books are not church programs, but they do represent an attempt by Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists to share their faith, and the denomination recognized their importance. The American Unitarian Association did set up a method for selecting literature, and making it available everywhere. And the message of these books is a reminder that sometimes, simpler is better. Richer, deeper, and more potent.

I will close by mentioning two writers for very young children who capture what I mean. First is Robert Munsch, a UU in Canada. Anyone who knows a child born in the 1990s knows *Love You Forever*. Freudians don't much like this book, which features a rascally little boy who does things like flush watches down the toilet, but I find it both moving and funny. All through his life, at night, when he is asleep, the mother visits, and sings "I'll love you forever, I'll like you for always, as long as I'm living, my baby you'll be." When he is grown, she sneaks into his house with a ladder just to hold him and sing this song. I think that's the part the Freudians object to. But there is permanence and a circularity to it that I like. Eventually the son has a daughter, and he sings her the same song. And when his mother is old and ready to rest, he begins to visit her, singing "I'll love you forever, I'll like you for always, as long as I'm living, my mommy you'll be." I think it stands on its own, but it is more powerful if you know that Munsch and his wife had two full-term stillborn children delivered in a two-year period. The book was Munsch's response to the news that another attempt might kill his wife. I like how that makes ambiguous exactly who is a parent and who is a child, and even, in a way, what living means. We love people who no longer live, and who, in some cases, never quite breathed. But the love is there never the less, and changes us.

Transformation is always a possibility in children's books, and perhaps is not often enough made obvious in church. The fluidity and refusal to see the world in stark, objective terms is what makes the books we are introduced to when young stick with us for so long. We are always turning them over, finding new resonance, because they do not neatly resolve everything. They don't protect, but help us process and invite change without too much anxiety. Beatrix Potter was very clear that her writing and drawing were intimately linked with having grown up Unitarian. To her, this meant being raised openly and with freedom, but having to manage the restrictions society imposed. Her stories are full of animal children who successfully survive dangers and navigate unrealistic demands, and whom we love because they ask questions, disobey, and wreak havoc, but never mean any harm.

Recently I heard the story of an elderly woman who had been deeply moved by Potter's most famous book, *Peter Rabbit*. Sitting in a coffee shop in Cambridge, this woman broke into a stranger's conversation about the "accident" that led to the father Rabbit being baked into a pie. She apologized for eavesdropping, swore that she normally did not do such things, but at this moment had to. It seems all her life she had refused to ever take a sip of chamomile tea, because Mother Rabbit gave it

to Peter after he went into Mr. McGregor's garden. The other bunnies, you will remember, had blackberries and cream. As a child, she assumed the tea was a punishment, and if it was a punishment, it must taste terrible, therefore she had never tried it. It was only when she was in her seventies that she ever tried chamomile tea, and was surprised to find out that it was nice! Suddenly, as an older woman, she was re-processing the story: the mother might have been trying to soothe Peter.

I don't think it matters very much what Mother Rabbit's intentions were, but I think it matters hugely that the story floated around in this woman's head for seventy years, and that she was still curious about what it meant. My own personal favorite — the one I still wonder about — is *The Tale of the Flopsy Bunnies*. That is the one that begins with "Lettuce, I've heard, is a soporific," and then goes on to explain that these bunnies had an improvident father who fed his children scraps and food begged from others, and that is how they happened to be in the compost heap, eating rotten lettuce until they fall asleep.

Sleep is, of course, how so many children's books end. It isn't because we are trying to get the child to go to sleep, the way it is often implied — a way of getting rid of them. It is because a bedtime story captures everything: shared experience, comfort, security, imagination, and freedom all at once. It is precisely what happens in church when it is working well: We are drawn in close, aware of all that makes us fragile and faulty, and all that we love — and in that exact moment, we are shown how to fly. So may it be, and sweet dreams.

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