

Příloha – výchozí text

The Lion And the Mouse

The battle that reshaped children's literature.

BY JILL LEPORE

Anne Carroll Moore was born long ago but not so far away, in Limerick, Maine, in 1871. She had a horse named Pocahontas, a father who read to her from Aesop's Fables, and a grandmother with no small fondness for "Uncle Tom's Cabin." Annie, whose taste ran to "Little Women," was a reader and a runt. Her seven older brothers called her Shrimp. In 1895, when she was twenty-four, she moved to New York, where she more or less invented the children's library.

At the time, you had to be fourteen, and a boy, to get into the Astor Library, which opened in 1854, the same year as the Boston Public Library, the country's first publicly funded city library, where you had to be sixteen. Even if you got inside, the librarians would shush you, carping about how the "young fry" read nothing but "the trashy": Scott, Cooper, and Dickens (one century's garbage being, as ever, another century's Great Books). Samuel Tilden, who left \$2.4 million to establish a free library in New York, nearly changed his mind when he found out that ninety per cent of the books checked out of the Boston Public Library were fiction. Meanwhile, libraries were popping up in American cities and towns like crocuses at first melt. Between 1881 and 1917, Andrew Carnegie underwrote the construction of more than sixteen hundred public libraries in the United States, buildings from which children were routinely turned away, because they needed to be protected from morally corrupting books, especially novels. In 1894, at the annual meeting of the American Library Association, the Milwaukee Public Library's Lutie Stearns read a "Report on the Reading of the Young." What if libraries were to set aside special books for children, Stearns wondered, shelved in separate rooms for children, staffed by librarians who actually liked children?

In 1896, Anne Carroll Moore was given the task of running just such an experiment, the Children's Library of the Pratt Institute, in Brooklyn, built at a time when the Brooklyn schools had a policy that "children below the third grade do not read well enough to profit from the use of library books." Moore toured settlement houses and kindergartens (also a new thing), and made a list of what she needed: tables and chairs sized for children; plants, especially ones with flowers; art work; and very good books. The kids lined up around the block.

The cornerstone of the New York Public Library was laid in 1902, at Forty-second Street and Fifth Avenue. Four years later, after the library's directors established a Department of Work with Children, they hired Moore to serve as its superintendent, a position in which she not only oversaw the children's programs at all the branch libraries but also planned the Central Children's Room. After the library opened, in 1911, its Children's Room became a pint-sized paradise, with its pots of pansies and

pussy willows and oak tables and coveted window seats, so low to the floor that even the shortest legs didn't dangle.

Much of what Moore did in that room had never been done before, or half as well. She brought in storytellers and, in her first year, organized two hundred story hours (and ten times as many two years later). She compiled a list of twenty-five hundred standard titles in children's literature. She won the right to grant borrowing privileges to children; by 1913, children's books accounted for a third of all the volumes borrowed from New York's branch libraries. Against the prevailing sentiment of the day, she believed that her job was to give "to the child of foreign parentage a feeling of pride in the beautiful things of the country his parents have left." She celebrated the holidays of immigrants (reading Irish poetry aloud, for instance, on St. Patrick's Day) and stocked the shelves with books in French, German, Russian, and Swedish. In 1924, she hired the African-American writer Nella Larsen to head the Children's Room in Harlem. In each of the library's branches, Moore abolished age restrictions. Down came the "Silence" signs, up went framed prints of the work of children's-book illustrators. "Do not expect or demand perfect quiet," she instructed her staff. "The education of children begins at the open shelves." In place of locked cabinets, she provided every library with a big black ledger; if you could sign your name, you could borrow a book. Moore considered signing the ledger something between an act of citizenship and a sacrament, to be undertaken only after reading a pledge: "When I write my name in this book I promise to take good care of the books I use in the Library and at home, and to obey the rules of the Library." During both the First and Second World Wars, soldiers on leave in the city climbed the steps past Patience and Fortitude, walked into the Children's Room, and asked to see the black books from years past. They wanted to look up their names, to trace the record of a childhood lost, an inky, smudged once-upon-a-time.

In the first half of the twentieth century, no one wielded more power in the field of children's literature than Moore, a librarian in a city of publishers. She never lacked for an opinion. "Dull in a new way," she labelled books that she despised. When, in 1938, William R. Scott brought her copies of his press's new books, tricked out with pop-ups and bells and buttons, Moore snapped, "Truck! Mr. Scott. They are truck!" Her verdict, not any editor's, not any bookseller's, sealed a book's fate. She kept a rubber stamp at her desk that she used, liberally, while paging through publishers' catalogues: "Not recommended for purchase by expert." The end.

The end of Moore's influence came when, years later, she tried to block the publication of a book by E. B. White. Watching Moore stand in the way of "Stuart Little," White's editor, Ursula Nordstrom, remembered, was like watching a horse fall down, its spindly legs crumpling beneath its great weight.

E. B. White, born in Mount Vernon, New York, in 1899, was a generation Moore's junior. As a boy, he was frustrated that there were books in his town library he wasn't allowed to look at. He had a pet mouse; he thought he looked a little mousy himself. In 1909, when he was nine, he won a prize for a poem about a mouse. The New York Public Library opened the year he turned twelve and won a silver badge for "A Winter Walk," an essay published in *St. Nicholas*, a magazine that Moore stocked on the shelves of her Children's Room. White grew up and in 1917 went to Cornell, where he

became the editor of the college paper, the *Cornell Daily Sun*. In 1918, Anne Carroll Moore wrote her first book review, in *The Bookman*. That review marks the birth of serious criticism of children's literature. (The next year saw still more firsts: the first Children's Book Week, organized by Moore, and the appointment of Louise Seaman—soon to be Louise Seaman Bechtel—to head the first children's department at a major publishing house, Macmillan. In 1922, the Newbery Medal was first awarded.) Moore's column ran in *The Bookman* until it folded, in 1926, the year after Harold Ross launched *The New Yorker*, where he hired White as a writer and a crackerjack thirty-two-year-old freelancer named Katharine Angell as a reader of manuscripts. Not long afterward, Angell became the magazine's fiction editor.

About this time, E. B. White fell asleep on a train and “dreamed of a small character who had the features of a mouse, was nicely dressed, courageous, and questing.” White had eighteen nieces and nephews, who were always begging him to tell them a story, but he shied away from making one up off the top of his head. Instead, he set to writing, and stocked a desk drawer with tales about his “mouse-child . . . the only fictional figure ever to have honored and disturbed my sleep.” He named him Stuart.

Anne Carroll Moore had an imaginary friend, too. “I have brought someone with me,” she would tell children, singsongy, as she fished out of her handbag a wooden doll she called Nicholas Knickerbocker. She even had letterhead made for him. “I'm the sorriest little Dutch boy you ever knew over your accident,” she once wrote, signing herself “Nicholas,” in a letter to Louise Seaman Bechtel. (When Moore forgot Nicholas in a taxi, her colleagues did not mourn his loss.)

In 1924, Moore published her own children's book, “Nicholas: A Manhattan Christmas Story.” It begins with Nicholas's Christmas Eve arrival in a New York Public Library Children's Room filled with fairy creatures:

The Troll gave a leap from the Christmas Tree and landed right beside the Brownie in a corner of the window seat. Just then the Fifth Avenue window swung wide open and in walked a strange boy about eight inches high.

It has not aged well.

From 1924 to 1930, Moore reviewed children's books for the New York *Herald Tribune*; beginning in 1936, her reviews also appeared in *The Horn Book*. She could be a tough critic, especially of books that violated her rules: “Books about girls should be as interesting as girls are” or “Avoid those histories that gain dramatic interest by appeal to prejudice. Especially true of American histories.” But merely in bothering to regularly criticize children's books Moore was ahead of everyone. Only in 1927 did *The Saturday Review* begin running a twice-monthly column called “The Children's Bookshop.” The *Times Book Review* didn't routinely review children's books until 1930. In 1928, *The New Yorker's* Dorothy Parker, in her Constant Reader column, reviewed A. A. Milne's “The House at Pooh Corner.” (Moore called another Pooh book “a nonsense story in the best tradition of the nursery.”) Pooh's wasn't just a Good Hum and a Hopeful Hum, Parker noted. It was a hummy hum. “And it is that word ‘hummy,’

my darlings,” Parker wrote, “that marks the first place in ‘The House at Pooh Corner’ at which Tonstant Weader fwowed up.”

In 1929, E. B. White married Katharine Angell and, with his office mate, James Thurber, published his first book, a lampoon featuring fake Freudian sexologists, titled “Is Sex Necessary?” (Their answer: not strictly, no, but it beats raising begonias.) In 1933, when the Whites’ son, Joel, was three, Katharine, who also had two children from her first marriage, began writing an annual and sometimes semi-annual roundup of children’s books for *The New Yorker*. Katharine White’s taste in children’s literature, if it fell short of Tonstant Weader’s fwowing up, was more than spitting distance from Moore’s indulgence in the adventures of Troll, Brownie, and Nicholas Knickerbocker. White found an A. A. Milne introduction to Jean de Brunhoff’s “Travels of Babar” to be “an unnecessary and misleading condescension, since de Brunhoff is witty without being Poohish, and Babar is an elephant who can stand on his own feet.” She favored sturdy characters and spare prose. But there was something else at stake. White’s column, which she once titled “The Children’s Shelf,” called into question the very idea of a children’s library. Maybe all kids needed was a shelf?

Then, as now, some of the best prose and poetry, not to mention the best art, was to be found in books written for children—disciplined, inspired, elevated, even, by the constraints of the form. Katharine White loved many books for children; above all, she admired the beauty and lyricism of picture books and readers for the under-twelve set. But she had her doubts about books aimed at older kids:

It has always seemed to us that boys and girls who are worth their salt begin at twelve or thirteen to read, with a brilliant indiscriminatio, every book they can lay their hands on. In the welter, they manage to read some good ones. A girl of twelve may take up Jane Austen, a boy Dickens; and you wonder how writers of juveniles have the brass to compete in this field, blithely announcing their works as “suitable for the child of twelve to fourteen.” Their implication is that everything else is distinctly *unsuitable*. Well, who knows? Suitability isn’t so simple.

And who decides what’s suitable, anyway? Parents? Librarians? Editors? White had her own ideas about who should draw the line, if a line had to be drawn, between what was good for children, what was childish, and what was just plain rotten. About Anne Carroll Moore she once fumed, “Critic, my eye!”

Sometimes, books labelled juvenile are, instead, antique. Children’s literature, at least in the West, is utterly bound up in the medieval, as Seth Lerer, a Stanford literature professor, argues in “Children’s Literature: A Reader’s History from Aesop to Harry Potter.” Lots of books for kids are *about* the Middle Ages (everything from “The Hobbit” to “Robin Hood” and “Redwall”), but the conventions of the genre (allegory, moral fable, romance, and heavy-handed symbolism) are also themselves distinctly premodern. It’s not only that many books we shelve as “children’s literature”—Grimms’ Fairy Tales or “Gulliver’s Travels” or “Huck Finn”—were born as biting political satire, for adults; it’s also that books written for children in the twentieth century tend to be distinctly, willfully, and often delightfully antimodern. “The Phantom

Tollbooth” has more in common with “The Pilgrim’s Progress” than it does with “On the Road.” Lurking in the stacks of every “children’s library” are dozens of literary impostors: satires, from ages past, hiding their fangs; and shiny new books, dressed up in some very old clothes.

Today, children’s book publishing—an industry richly described in Leonard S. Marcus’s excellent new book, “Mindors of Make-Believe”—is one of the most profitable parts of the book business. But that industry exists only because, in much the same way that the nineteenth-century middle class invented childhood as we know it, early-twentieth-century writers, illustrators, editors, and publishers—and, most of all, Anne Carroll Moore—invented children’s literature. It would be convenient if White and Moore stood on either side of a divide between antimodernist and modernist writing. But things don’t really sort out along those lines. A better way of thinking about it might be to say that Anne Carroll Moore did not like fangs. She loved what was precious, innocent, and sentimental. White found the same stuff mawkish, prudish, and daffy. “There are too many coy books full of talking animals, whimsical children, and condescending adults,” White complained.

Katharine White also hated the word “juvenile,” and sorely regretted, in the nineteen-thirties, that “it still adequately describes the calibre of the great majority of these books.” But what about her husband’s teensy talking mouse-child? True, Stuart was six inches shorter than Nicholas Knickerbocker. Whether he was juvenile remained to be seen, because, for now, he was still stuck in that desk drawer.

In April, 1938, *Life* ran a photo-essay called “The Birth of a Baby,” still shots from a film that depicted one woman’s pregnancy, labor, and delivery. The film had been banned in New York. Even the photographs proved too much for the American public, and the issue was pulled from newsstands in thirty-three cities. In *The New Yorker*, E. B. White offered a lampoon called “The Birth of an Adult,” stills of a film—drawings by Rea Irvin—portraying “the waning phenomenon of adulthood.” (Frame 1: “*The Birth of an Adult* is presented with no particular regard for good taste. The editors feel that adults are so rare, no question of taste is involved.”) “I have written a fine parody of *Life*’s ‘The Birth of a Baby,’” White wrote to Thurber, adding, “I also have a children’s book about half done.” He had, at last, opened the drawer.

That summer, the Whites moved to the tiny town of North Brooklin, Maine. In a November, 1938, essay for *Harper’s*, White complained that review copies of children’s books, two hundred of them, sent to his wife by publishers, were spilling out of the cupboards, stuck under sofa cushions, tumbling out of the hearth. About the only one he liked was Dr. Seuss’s “The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins.” The rest were cloying, clunky, and hopelessly naïve. (“One laughs in demoniac glee,” he wrote, “but this laugh has a hollow sound.”) What E. B. White found most depressing—and he was pretty discouraged in 1938, “this year of infinite terror”—was the looming war that threatened to make the whole planet unsuitable for anyone, while, in the world of children’s literature, “adults with blueprints of bombproof shelters sticking from their pants pockets solemnly caution their little ones against running downstairs with lollypops in their mouths.”

In his *Harper's* essay, White mused, "It must be a lot of fun to write for children—reasonably easy work, perhaps even important work." After Theodor Geisel (Dr. Seuss) pointed White's essay out to Anne Carroll Moore, she sent White a letter. If it's so easy, why don't you do it? "I wish to goodness you would do a real children's book yourself," she wrote. "I feel sure you could, if you would, and I assure you the Library Lions would roar with all their might in its praise." (Moore often inscribed her letters with a return address of "Behind the Lions.") White replied that he had started writing a children's book, but was finding it difficult. "I really only go at it when I am laid up in bed, sick, and lately I have been enjoying fine health. My fears about writing for children are great—one can so easily slip into a cheap sort of whimsy or cuteness. I don't trust myself in this treacherous field unless I am running a degree of fever."

Moore pursued the correspondence. In early 1939, she pressed upon White no fewer than five letters. She sent him copies of her reviews. She gave him writing tips: "Let it *flow*, without criticizing it *too close* to its *creation*." She inquired after his family, asking, more than once, after his child. She was very, very keen to make the acquaintance of his wife: "I'd like to include *Mrs. E. B. White* in this letter for two reasons. The first that she is the mother of the boy, or is it a girl? And second because she reviews children's books for *The New Yorker* or some other magazine." She begged him to get back to his children's book. "Can't you achieve a temperature, without getting sick, and finish it off?" She was attempting, as she often did, not only to cultivate this author but to claim him. "No one will be more interested than I when your children's book is ready," she wrote in February. "Let me know if I can be of service at any stage."

In March, White sent an unfinished manuscript to his editor at Harper & Brothers, Eugene Saxton. "It would seem to be for children, but I'm not fussy who reads it," he offered, adding, "You will be shocked and grieved to discover that the principal character in the story has somewhat the attributes and appearance of a mouse." Saxton was far from grieved. He wanted "Stuart Little" for a fall, 1939, publication date. Anne Carroll Moore would have liked that, too, eager as she was to take credit for the book. But that mouse would have to wait for a pack animal to budge. As White gently warned the pestering librarian, "I pull back like a mule at the slightest goading."

Two books that *were* published in 1939, Gertrude Stein's children's book, "The World Is Round," and John Steinbeck's "Grapes of Wrath," reveal a bit more about what was turning into a baby battle of the books. Anne Carroll Moore applauded Stein's book. Katharine White found it numbingly insipid. (It begins, "Once upon a time the world was round and you could go on it around and around. Everywhere there was somewhere and everywhere there they were men women children dogs cows wild pigs little rabbits cats lizards and animals. That is the way it was.") In her *New Yorker* column, White took aim at Moore: "A number of experts in children's literature have pronounced 'The World Is Round' a good book, but that does not surprise me, since, with a few exceptions, the critics of children's books are remarkably lenient souls. They seem to regard books for children with the same tolerant tenderness with which nearly any adult regards a child. Most of us assume there is something good in every child; the critics go on from this to assume there is something good in every book written for a child. It is not a sound theory."

“The Grapes of Wrath” met with the disapproval not of Anne Carroll Moore but of Annie Dollard, the librarian of a private subscription library in Brooklin. “She was a tiny spinster with firm convictions about which books were fit to read,” E. B. White wrote. “The library had acquired ‘The Grapes of Wrath,’ but Annie took it off the shelf and placed it on her chair and sat on it. That solved that.” Of course, that didn’t solve that, and Katharine White decided to do something about it, to make the library public, and better. Those two hundred review copies her husband had been tripping over before Christmas? She hauled them to the Brooklin library.

In November of 1939, Katharine White wrote to “Miss Moore,” for the first time, delicately hinting that she stop bothering her husband about “Stuart Little”—“I’ve decided that the less we say the sooner it will be done”—and steering the correspondence in another direction by seeking advice about how to apply for Carnegie funds for the Brooklin library. She also inquired, a little wickedly, after recommendations from the formidably humorless Moore for material for an anthology she and her husband were compiling, “A Subtreasury of American Humor.” Moore, apparently, was unhelpful.

Anne Carroll Moore did not write again to E. B. White until February, 1941, alerting him, in confidence, of her plan to retire: “I am telling you because I would love to make one of my very final recommendations a large order for E. B. White’s children’s book.” White wrote back to say how impressed he and his wife were by her “long and fruitful service to the children of the world,” which he considered “one of the great and honorable careers—none finer.”

Meanwhile, Katharine White had become something of a librarian herself. “Public libraries have more and more seemed to me a democratic necessity,” she wrote to Moore in 1942, “so most of my war efforts so far, instead of going into civilian defense proper, have been devoted to keeping alive the little library in this town.” What with all her donations of *The New Yorker’s* review copies, her little library, now public and incorporated, boasted “the best collection of children’s books in the country.” The only reason she was still writing her children’s literature column, she wrote, probably not entirely in jest, “is to have the books for the Brooklin library.”

Katharine White believed passionately in public libraries, and in stocking them with books for children. What worried her was tiny spinsters sitting on books. Making a room for children was one thing. Guarding the door was entirely another. And then there was the matter of setting traps for mice.

“A Subtreasury of American Humor” was published in 1941. As for including humor from children’s books, “we gave it up,” the Whites admitted; there wasn’t any. The next year, E. B. White wrote a wartime pamphlet on freedom of speech. In the winter of 1943-44, the Whites moved back to New York. Katharine began editing Nabokov. Her husband’s nerves were shot. He felt as if he had “mice in the subconscious”: “The mouse of Thought infests my head, / He knows my cupboard and the crumb.” Then, miraculously, over eight weeks in late 1944 and early 1945, he finished the book that he had been writing all his life. Saxton, White’s editor, had died in 1943. White sent the manuscript of “Stuart Little” to Ursula Nordstrom, the director of Harper’s Department

of Books for Boys and Girls; so great was Nordstrom's influence that she sometimes called herself Ursula Carroll Moore. (When the real Moore asked Nordstrom what possibly qualified her to edit children's books, Nordstrom replied, "Well, I am a former child, and I haven't forgotten a thing.")

Anne Carroll Moore had been waiting for "Stuart Little" for seven years, and during that time she had claimed E. B. White, the most celebrated American essayist of the century, as *her* writer. She may have been retired, but her grip on power had scarcely loosened. She still showed up for meetings at the New York Public Library; she still *ran* those meetings, dismaying her successor, Frances Clarke Sayers, who tried switching meeting places, to no avail: "No matter where you held them, she was there." (In an oral history conducted at U.C.L.A. in the nineteen-seventies, Sayers admitted that she found it all but impossible to stand up to Moore, who made her life "an absolute hell" by refusing to cede control: "She hung on to everything.") Moore had come to think of recruiting E. B. White to the world of juvenilia as her final triumph—a victory over Tonstant Weader, a victory over Katharine White. "Stuart Little" was to be Anne Carroll Moore's lasting legacy to children's literature. In her mind, it was her book. There was nothing for it: Nordstrom sent her a galley.

"I never was so disappointed in a book in my life," Moore declared. She summoned Nordstrom to her rooms at the Grosvenor Hotel, where she warned her that the book "mustn't be published." To the Whites she sent a fourteen-page letter, predicting that the book would fail and that it would prove an embarrassment, and begging the author to reconsider its publication. Exactly what the letter said, and even to whom it was addressed, is much disputed. The Whites threw it away—in disgust, Katharine said—and only six pages of an incomplete copy in Moore's hand survive. But even in this expurgated version Moore's criticisms were severe: the story was "out of hand"; Stuart was always "staggering out of scale." Worse, White had blurred reality and fantasy—"The two worlds were all mixed up"—and children wouldn't be able to tell them apart. "She said something about its having been written by a sick mind," E. B. White remembered. Everyone agrees that Moore made a threat and meant to carry it out: "I fear 'Stuart Little' will be very difficult to place in libraries and schools over the country."

"It is unnerving to be told you're bad for children," E. B. White admitted, "but I detected in Miss Moore's letter an assumption that there are rules governing the writing of juvenile literature—rules as inflexible as the rules for lawn tennis. And this I was not sure of." He shrugged it off: "Children can sail easily over the fence that separates reality from make-believe. They go over it like little springboks. A fence that can throw a librarian is as nothing to a child."

White did not write back. His wife did. "K refused to show me her reply," White wrote to his brother, "but I suspect it set a new world's record for poisoned courtesy." It did and it didn't. "I agree with you that schools won't be likely to use 'Stuart Little,'" Katharine wrote to Miss Moore, "but, to be very frank just as you have been, I can't imagine *libraries* not stocking it." And she couldn't help asking, "Didn't you think it even *funny*?"

On October 17, 1945, some fifty thousand copies of “Stuart Little” hit the shelves. The book’s pictures, by Garth Williams, share with its story a quiet tenderness, hushed but somehow breezy, too. (Nordstrom and White had rejected seven other illustrators, whose mice looked too slick, or too much like Mickey.) On the cover, little Stuart, in his shorts and shirtsleeves, paddling his canoe—a boat named Summer Memories—is at once so tiny and so grown up that he could easily have illustrated White’s wistful 1941 essay “Once More to the Lake,” about going camping with his son at a place in Maine where he had long ago gone with his father, and coming to realize that he wasn’t so sure, anymore, just who was who. (“Everywhere we went I had trouble making out which was I, the one walking at my side, the one walking in my pants.”)

The most disappointing book Anne Carroll Moore ever read begins with these words:

When Mrs. Frederick C. Little’s second son was born, everybody noticed that he was not much bigger than a mouse. The truth of the matter was, the baby looked very much like a mouse in every way. He was only about two inches high; and he had a mouse’s sharp nose, a mouse’s tail, a mouse’s whiskers, and the pleasant, shy manner of a mouse.

Two days after “Stuart Little” was published, an unhappy Harold Ross stopped by White’s office at *The New Yorker*. White recalled:

“Saw your book, White,” he growled. “You made one serious mistake.”

“What was that?” I asked.

“Why, the mouse!” he shouted. “You said he was born. God damn it, White, you should have had him adopted.”

Next, Edmund Wilson caught White in the hall. “I read that book of yours,” he began. “I found the first page quite amusing, about the mouse, you know. But I was disappointed that you didn’t develop the theme more in the manner of Kafka.”

White tried to laugh about all this—“the editor who could spot a dubious verb at forty paces, the critic who was saddened because my innocent tale of the quest for beauty failed to carry the overtones of monstrosity”—but then Malcolm Cowley, reviewing the book in the *Times*, proved skeptical, too: “Mr. White has a tendency to write amusing scenes instead of telling a story. To say that ‘Stuart Little’ is one of the best children’s books published this year is very modest praise for a writer of his talent.”

The real blow came when Frances Clarke Sayers, presumably acting on Moore’s orders, refused to buy “Stuart Little” for the library, sending a signal to children’s librarians across the country: “Not recommended for purchase by expert.” In November, a syndicated New York *Post* columnist squibbed, “There will be a to-do about the New York Public Library’s reluctance to accept ‘Stuart Little.’ “ For this unsavory gossip, White graciously apologized in a letter to Sayers, assuring her that neither he nor Nordstrom had planted the notice to apply pressure on the library (as, clearly, Sayers suspected), and that he regretted the appearance of “dark and terrible goings on in the world of juvenile letters.”

One way to read “Stuart Little” is as an indictment of both the childishness of children’s literature and the juvenilization of American culture. Published just a year before Benjamin Spock’s “Baby and Child Care,” E. B. White’s “Stuart Little” might justifiably have been titled “The Birth of an Adult.” That or “Is Childbirth Necessary?” The *Washington Post* even ran a review in the form of an affectionate imitation of “Is Sex Necessary?,” right down to the idiotic sexologists. (“ ‘Lacks verisimilitude from the very first line,’ said Herr Von Hornswoggle. ‘Man or mouse, homo sapiens or *Mus musculus*—no little rodent can sail a ship in Central Park lagoon while still teething. Much, much too Jung.’ “)

Whether Mrs. Frederick C. Little had given birth to a mouse or to a creature that just looked like a mouse was, especially in 1945, poignant social commentary about a culture that refused to look at the facts of life. The one thing Stuart wasn’t was a baby. No bottles, no diapers, no nighttime feedings, no prams, no cribs. No baby talk. From the first, Stuart dressed himself and was helpful around the house. The Littles’ biggest problem was that mice were so badly treated in children’s books. Mr. Little “made Mrs. Little tear from the nursery songbook the page about the ‘Three Blind Mice, See How They Run’ “:

“I don’t want Stuart to get a lot of notions in his head,” said Mr. Little. “I should feel badly to have my son grow up fearing that a farmer’s wife was going to cut off his tail with a carving knife. It is such things that make children dream bad dreams when they go to bed at night.”

The Littles also questioned the suitability of “ ‘Twas the night before Christmas,” when not a creature stirs, *not even a mouse*. “I think it might embarrass Stuart to hear mice mentioned in such a belittling manner,” Mrs. Little told her husband. They settled, at last, on another kind of bowdlerizing:

When Christmas came around, Mrs. Little carefully rubbed out the word mouse from the poem and wrote in the word louse, and Stuart always thought that the poem went this way: ‘Twas the night before Christmas when all through the house Not a creature was stirring, not even a louse.

Tearing the pages out of books and rubbing out words that might worry their little one—it was just what Katharine White had been complaining about all along. In “Stuart Little,” her husband backed her up. And, in her next children’s-books column, she, in turn, vindicated him, lamenting the pitiful state of a literature “careful never to approach the child except in a childlike manner. Let us not overstimulate his mind, or scare him, or leave him in doubt, these authors and their books seem to be saying; let us *affirm*.”

“Stuart Little” leaves you in doubt, a good deal of doubt, really; it doesn’t exactly end so much as it’s just, abruptly, over. In Chapter VIII, Stuart falls in love with a bird named Margalo, and when she flies away he goes on a quest. In the book’s last chapter, he stops his coupe at a filling station and buys five drops of gas. In a ditch alongside the road, he meets a repairman, preparing to climb a telephone pole. “I wish you fair skies and a tight grip,” Stuart says, thoughtfully. “I hope you find that bird,” the repairman says. Then come the book’s final, distressing lines:

Stuart rose from the ditch, climbed into his car, and started up the road that led toward the north. The sun was just coming up over the hills on his right. As he peered ahead into the great land that stretched before him, the way seemed long. But the sky was bright, and he somehow felt he was headed in the right direction.

Stuart Little isn't Gregor Samsa. He's Don Quixote, turning into Holden Caulfield.

Anne Carroll Moore tried very hard to insure that schools would ban "Stuart Little." Some did. But some schoolteachers decided, instead, to teach the book. In February, 1946, a fifth-grade class in Glencoe, Illinois, was assigned the task of writing a different ending. One little girl managed, with felicitous economy, to get to a happy ending in just nine paragraphs:

After talking to the repairman, Stuart took the road heading north. "Chug chug" went his car. "Five drops running out," thought Stuart. "I'll stop at that filling station just ahead." So he drove in.

"What do you want?" said the man.

"Five and one-half drops," said Stuart. "The last five drops I got didn't take me as far as I wanted to go." Just then Stuart saw a bird hop out of the filling station.

"This is Margalo," said the man.

"MARGALO!" yelled Stuart.

"You must know each other," said the man.

"I'll make you a deal," said Stuart. "I'll give you a whole ten dollars if you'll let me have your bird."

"It's a deal," said the man.

"Hop in, Margalo," said Stuart and away they went. They were married back in New York and raised a family of half mice and half birds.

That little girl cleared the fence by a good three feet.

And the New York Public Library? Did the mouse scamper past the lions? In late 1945, the library's director, Franklin Hopper, invited Louise Seaman Bechtel, the pioneering editor of children's books at Macmillan, to deliver an endowed lecture on book publishing. Bechtel had discovered that although Sayers had bought a copy of "Stuart Little," she kept it under her desk. At the library, Bechtel, appalled, urged Hopper to read it. He did, and wrote to Bechtel the next day. He liked it very much. He was furious: "Have those who talk about its abnormalities no imagination?" Did Anne Carroll Moore think she could rule his library from the goddam Grosvenor? Hopper ordered Sayers to take Stuart out of his hiding place. "He got into the shelves of the Library all right," E. B. White wrote, "but I think he had to gnaw his way in."

For a while, many American libraries did ban "Stuart Little." But the best librarians, like the best schoolteachers, have a genius all their own. In March, 1946, the seventh graders at the Clifton School, in Cincinnati, Ohio, mailed a letter:

Dear Mr. White:

We have just finished your book “Stuart Little.” Our school librarian asked us to read it to help decide whether it would be a good book for the library. We think it would be.

It’s a quiet little letter. But that noise, the scritch-scratch of pen across paper, those thirty-eight seventh graders signing their names at the bottom of that letter? That’s the sound of a horse falling down.

In January, 1946, when Louise Bechtel delivered her lecture at the New York Public Library, Anne Carroll Moore was sitting in the front row, glaring. Undaunted, Bechtel made a point of plugging “Stuart Little”: “I hope it gets all possible awards and medals.” Moore made her disapproval known. “E.B.W. will be tickled to hear that A.C.M. sent me a blast,” Bechtel wrote to Katharine, afterward. Very likely, he wasn’t so tickled. He didn’t much like the dark and terrible goings on in the world of juvenile letters.

Moore, in her rage, fallen but still kicking, seems to have used her influence to shut “Stuart Little” out of the Newbery Medal, a prize awarded by a panel of librarians, including, that year, Frances Clarke Sayers. White’s book was not even among the four runners-up. The day after the awards were announced, Bechtel was “still grinding my teeth in rage,” she wrote to Katharine White, complaining about “these stupid unliterary women in charge.”

Harper, meanwhile, headed Moore’s criticism off at the pass. “Some people—those who think they understand a thing if they can paste a neat label on it—will call ‘Stuart Little’ a juvenile,” the press’s publicity material read. “They will be right. They will also be wrong.” In December, 1946, while Katharine White was ushering J. D. Salinger’s first *New Yorker* story to press, a story that turned into “The Catcher in the Rye,” Nordstrom told E. B. White that there were now a hundred thousand copies of “Stuart Little.” White invited his editor to a posh lunch to celebrate. “You can eat 100,000 stalks of celery and I’ll swallow 100,000 olives. It will be the E. B. White-Ursula Nordstrom Book and Olive Luncheon.” Not exactly happily ever after, but close.

Katharine White wrote her last children’s-books column in 1948. Her own children were grown. The Brooklin library would survive without her review copies. But she was exasperated, too. “No one who has examined five hundred and more juveniles, as I have this year,” she wrote wearily, “could say that the American child now occupies a submerged position in an adult world. There can surely be no childish taste, good, bad, or indifferent, that the eager publishers have not tried to satisfy.” In those baby-boom years, you couldn’t walk a block without bumping into a pram. Did American letters, too, have to make way for babies?

E. B. White published a second children’s book, “Charlotte’s Web,” in 1952. His wife said that he considered it “his only really completely satisfactory children’s book,” and it was adored, as far as I can tell, by everyone—everyone, that is, except Anne Carroll Moore, who complained that Fern’s character was “never developed.” Nordstrom, after hearing of Moore’s reservations and reading a rave by Eudora Welty in the *Times*,

gleefully wrote to White, “Eudora Welty said the book was perfect for anyone over eight or under eighty, and that leaves Miss Moore out as she is a girl of eighty-two.”

Anne Carroll Moore died in 1961. “Much as she did for children’s books and their illustrators at the start of her career,” White wrote to Bechtel, “I can’t help feeling her influence was baleful on the whole. Am I wrong?”

The Central Children’s Room at the New York Public Library on Forty-second Street closed in 1970; it reopened at the Donnell Library Center, on Fifty-third, the next year. Next month, the Donnell is closing, to make way for a hotel. Plans have been made for a new children’s room to open in a different space at the main library sometime after the building’s centennial, in 2011. (This fall, kids’ books will circulate from a temporary space on the ground floor.) To augur the return of the Children’s Room to Forty-second and Fifth, Christopher Robin Milne’s stuffed animals, Pooh, Tigger, Piglet, Eeyore, and Kanga, donated to the library in 1987, have been installed on the third floor.

“Stuart Little” has now sold more than four million copies. In later editions, E. B. White made a tiny change. Mrs. Frederick C. Little’s second son is no longer born. He arrives.