



## Overview

Martha V. Parravano

**R**eading to Them” is a useful rubric, but not one to be taken literally. The reading that happens with a child on your lap — or cuddled with you in a chair, or through the slats of a crib, or around a low table in the toddlers’ section of a library — is rarely linear. It is a complex give-and-take that falls somewhere along the interactive spectrum, depending on the specific book being read, the age of the child, the relationship of the adult and child, even the time of day. But in general, reading with small children is more sharing than telling, and more activity than lesson.

With a one-year-old baby, you may be the one reading the book aloud, but the baby will probably want to turn the pages herself. With an enthusiastic toddler, reading can be a joyfully communal activity, resulting in an experience that is at once aural (listening as the adult reads), visual (looking at the pictures), vocal (identifying objects, imitating animal sounds, joining in on a text’s familiar refrain, asking questions about or commenting on story or art), and kinetic (pointing at pictured objects, mimicking a character, acting out a Mother Goose rhyme). Preschoolers may memorize chunks of

text—or whole books—and may want to do the “reading” themselves, with adults or siblings or stuffed animals as audience. (There are many excellent titles that manage to be both satisfying picture book experience and reading primer: from classics such as *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* and *How Do I Put It On?* to newer titles such as Laura Vaccaro Seeger’s *Dog and Bear* and Emily Gravett’s *Orange Pear Apple Bear*, to name just a few.)

I think of picture books as stores of transferable potential energy. Rarely, if ever, is the child a total nonparticipant in the “reading to them” equation. A seemingly passive listener may be quietly absorbing story and pictures, storing up enough experience with the book until he is eventually ready to interact more fully. As a three-year-old, my younger daughter was delayed in her speech development and preferred balls and playgrounds to books. I persisted in reading to her, though—lots of Mother Goose, Peggy Rathmann, Byron Barton, Eve Rice, Nancy Tafuri, Lucy Cousins, and Donald Crews. A particular favorite, read night after night, was William Steig’s *Doctor De Soto*, in which a mouse dentist and his clever wife outwit a scheming fox. Ellie, basically languageless, never joined in the reading as did her very verbal older sister, but seemed to listen and enjoy. Then late one evening after a very long day, returning from a family vacation, we sat in a crowded DC-10 surrounded by a horde of unrepentantly rowdy high-school hockey players. Ellie sank lower and lower in her seat, trying to get as far away from them as possible. Suddenly she stood up and yelled as loudly as she could, “*No one will see you again, said the fox to himself*” —verbatim, from *Doctor De Soto*. This rather surreal (to the hockey players) statement earned her a few seconds of blessed (and stunned) silence. For me, it reinforced my belief in “reading to them.” What pours out of a picture book through repeated readings by an adult reader will eventually be reinvested by the child listener.

There’s a simple, benignly empowering part most children can

play in the picture-book transaction: turning the pages. If a child is allowed to turn the pages of a picture book himself, whether he is looking at it independently or listening to an adult read, he is in control of the experience. He can choose when to speed up and when to slow down; when to linger on a particularly absorbing spread and when to rush excitedly on to find out what happens on the next page or, conversely, to skip the boring bits. A child turning the pages of a picture book not only learns to exercise power on an age-appropriate scale but also learns about story and pacing and begins to define his own literary and visual likes and dislikes.

Reading to children does not necessarily require traditional picture books. A baby's diet of board books can be supplemented by homemade scrapbooks or family photo albums, or engagingly photographed clothing or toy catalogs, or colorful nature magazines. A five-year-old might want to be read beginning readers and early chapter books as well as picture books. But the reverse is true as well. One needn't ever grow out of picture books — especially now, when more and more picture books are aimed at older elementary-age children. And in this image-ascendant age, visual literacy is arguably becoming at least as important as verbal literacy. The skill of navigating through picture books will translate directly to navigating through, say, graphic novels. In fact, picture books give young readers a basic structural sense of how to tell a story in words and images, and that narrative DNA is all the more important when they leave the thirty-two-page structure. One can think of the picture book as finger exercises on the piano — you return to them even after you've moved on to more complex forms. In any case, it would be a shame to confuse format of book with quality of experience or to deprive a child of the treasures of the picture-book world.

In the ever-shifting continuum of “reading to them” — an evolving range of books, situations, and participants — there remains the ideal of the parent, the child, and the picture book. So much contributes to the unique success of this ideal interaction — even its

physical shape. Consider a small child sitting on his mother's lap while she reads him a picture book. The picture book opens to a width that effectively places the child at the center of a closed circle — that of mother's body, arms, and picture book. Or perhaps the child is too big or too independent to sit on a parent's lap — he sits next to her, one person holding the left side of the open picture book, the other the right side. Again, a circle. I don't think it's an accident that so much adult-child book-sharing forms and takes place within a circle, or that so many picture books open to a size that facilitates one. That circle, so private and intimate, is a place apart from the demands and stresses of daily life, a sanctuary in and from which the child can explore the many worlds offered in picture books. Despite all of our society's technological advances, it still just takes one child, one book, and one reader to create this unique space, to work this everyday magic.

Once established, of course, the space grows elastic and expands as the child grows. It stretches to the length and shape of a parent in an armchair reading to a five-year-old in bed, an audiobook entertaining a family on a road trip, a teacher standing before a hushed, enthralled classroom.

But all that comes later. Let's begin with books for the very young.

*Chapter One*  
**BOOKS FOR BABIES**

**A Future of Page Turns**

Martha V. Parravano

**B**abies don't need complex stories, elaborate artwork, or high educational content. Books for babies can be as simple as Tana Hoban's groundbreaking series of wordless black-and-white board books (*Black on White; White on Black*), with their high-contrast images of bibs, pacifiers, stuffed animals, and other homely objects associated with newborns. But though the books themselves may be simple, the interaction is anything but: with board books a baby is honing his visual and listening skills, bonding with the adult reader, and, yes, taking the first steps toward literacy. Every time an adult reads a book with a baby, she is passing on an essential building block of literacy: the page turn. The mechanics of reading — the fact that in order to read a book one has to turn its pages — is a basic skill, but it has to be learned. The page turn — the progression of left to right and front to back (at least in our Western culture) — is the foundation of reading. As an adult reader shares a book with a baby, she is transmitting that essential knowledge, the key to later literacy.

Babies watch with remarkable intentness the components of their universe: faces, their own hands, a mobile. First board books should be a barely differentiated extension of that small universe.

It's not necessary to use books to expand a baby's world—a *reflection* is more than sufficient.

Babies respond to books that promote interaction—animal sounds, vehicle noises, movements, opportunities to name objects or body parts. Pictures in books for babies are not only visual feasts for the baby but prompts for parental commentary. Any book a parent reads to a baby, even a wordless one, will be an opportunity for expressive language, be it a re-creation of animal sounds or the naming of objects or the creation of spontaneous stories to go with the pictures.

Board books are specifically made for babies: with their stiff, sturdy cardboard pages, nontoxic materials, and glossy wipeability, they will survive teething, spills, spit-up, and worse—anything a baby can throw at them (sometimes literally). The most successful board-book creators tap into babies' enthusiasms, attention spans, and (occasionally) senses of humor. Helen Oxenbury's series of oversize board books, *All Fall Down*, *Clap Hands*, *Say Goodnight*, and *Tickle, Tickle*, features four diverse, active toddlers in an implied day-care setting singing, clapping, falling about, and waving—all with toddler-appropriate energy and warmth. Rosemary Wells's Max books are about the power struggle between a willful baby rabbit and his bossy older sister, Ruby. In *Max's First Word*, Ruby tries to persuade Max to name various innocuous household objects, but "Max's one word was BANG!" Wells connects with her young audience because she is funny, able to shape plot and character with the briefest of texts, and *always* on Max's side.

One distinction to be aware of is between board books conceived originally for the format and those that started life as full-size picture books. Board books are big business for publishers. Consumers love board books, for good reason: compared to picture books, they're less expensive, more durable, and more portable—easier to tuck into a bag already bursting with snacks, extra clothes, toys, games, crayons, and puzzles. But beware: a board-book version of a picture

book most probably reflects some compromises made necessary by the format change. While standard picture books have thirty-two pages, board books can have as few as twelve. So board books that are adapted from picture books must either conflate pages (taking the text and art from, say, two spreads of the original picture book and cramming it onto one page) or drop material altogether.

Ann Herbert Scott's *On Mother's Lap* is a classic picture book about sibling rivalry and familial love. It features a generous design based on double-page-spreads; a simple text; and a small, satisfying story. When Michael, a young Inuit boy, has the chance to snuggle with his mother in her rocking chair while his baby sister naps, he is anxious to include all his favorite things — his reindeer blanket, doll, toy boat, and puppy — in the experience. But when Baby wakes up, he balks at including her. "There isn't room," he says jealously. Mother persuades him to give it a try, and Michael finally admits that "it feels good." The book ends with an iconic picture of family warmth and togetherness, with Michael's mother telling him, "It's a funny thing . . . but there is always room on Mother's lap."

The board-book version (at four by six inches) is too small to be a satisfying lap read; it excises two crucial setup illustrations and an entire double-page spread that depicts the conflict (so that, oddly, the board-book version has resolution but no conflict); and it's not meant for babies. It is clearly older brother Michael who is the center of the story, Michael with whom readers are meant to identify. Despite the simplicity of text and layout, this story of a boy dealing with his feelings about a new baby is meant for older siblings, not babies.

A more successful translation from picture book to board book is Anne and Harlow Rockwell's *The Toolbox*. Because the original picture book was aimed at very young children, the pictures (of a saw, a hammer and nails, pliers, and so on) are paramount, set against expanses of white space; the text is extremely brief, almost always one line per page; and the subject matter is of interest to many small

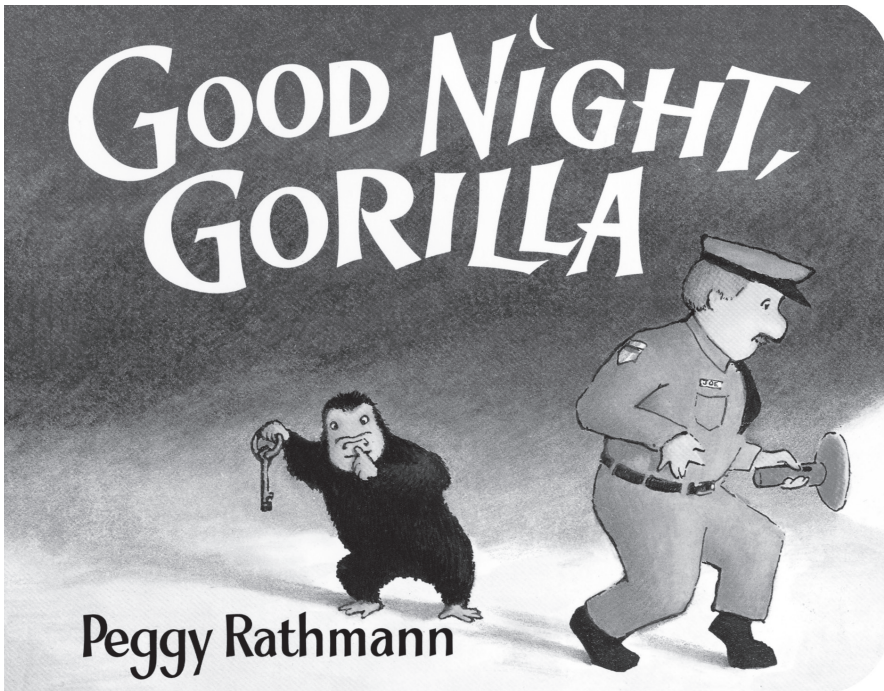


children. The board-book version is a complete representation of the original, with no illustrations or transitions omitted, and it's fully two-thirds the size of the original picture book.

The challenge, of course, is how to judge a brand-new board book gleaming up at you from its place on the bookstore shelf. After all, *Goodnight Moon* is just as good in board-book form — better, perhaps, since the board-book version is virtually indestructible. Peggy Rathmann's subversively funny *Good Night, Gorilla* is also a perfect fit as a board book (and its glossier pages make it even easier to spot the runaway balloon on every spread). Janet and Allan Ahlberg's delightful *Each Peach, Pear, Plum*, a must for the nursery, is 99 percent successful (the last page, with all the hidden fairy-tale characters, is perhaps a little cluttered in the smaller size). But as you're standing in the bookstore, it won't be immediately obvious to you which books work and which don't. Publishers don't advertise the fact that they've conflated pages or dropped pictures to make a board-book version of a picture book, and the original picture book is not always available to scrutinize for a page-by-page comparison — even if one had the leisure to do so. In any case, it's not the paring down of pages per se that is so egregious: it's the resultant loss of meaning and story shape. I pity the children (and parents) who know only the butchered versions of some of the best children's picture books — such as unworthy recent board-book editions of *Caps for Sale* and *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel*. They will never know what they're missing.

My best advice is to read a board book as you would any picture book before purchasing it. In that way you can see for yourself whether it holds together as a story, whether it feels like a whole or seems truncated, and whether it's aimed at babies and toddlers or is really better suited to older children.

Choosing original board books — those created specifically for the format — is easier, as long as you don't let yourself get sucked into the latest publishing trend. As publishers have discovered that



From picture book to board book: Peggy Rathmann's *Good Night, Gorilla* makes the transition with great success. (Note how the cover makes an immediate connection between the mischievous gorilla and the child audience—an irresistible invitation to young readers.)

board books make great baby-shower gifts, for instance, we see bookstore shelves filled with titles like *Urban Babies Wear Black* — a hoot for hipster moms but unlikely to appeal to babies, whose interests do not yet extend to art galleries or yoga or, indeed, the concept of urban chic.

Board books seem to be more vulnerable to publishing trends than many other genres and therefore tend to go out of print quickly. (Lesson learned: if you find something your child loves, buy multiple copies!) One of my daughters' favorite books when they were babies was *Let's Make a Noise* by Amy MacDonald and Maureen

Roffey. It was a perfect first board book: pure, simple interaction. “Let’s make a noise like a dog (train, cat, truck, sheep, baby)!” It was the enthusiastic and communal encouragement of making the noise that worked so well, as well as the clean, bright, cheerful pictures of the named objects and animals. (An added bonus: the noise the baby makes is “WAAAAH,” allowing lots of room for imitation and dramatic expression.)

Two new board books by photographer Margaret Miller are masterpieces of minimalism: each contains just six close-up photographs of babies’ faces, with one or two words on facing pages. *I Love Colors* shows a vocal baby wearing a red bow on her head, a serious baby in purple heart-shaped glasses, a happy baby with an orange flower tucked behind one ear, a shy baby peering through a plastic green ring — each photograph tightly focused and absolutely engrossing. *What’s on My Head?* is similarly captivating and also quite funny, as the items perching on the subjects’ heads — a rubber ducky? — are sometimes unexpected, but always familiar and baby-pleasing.

*Baby Happy, Baby Sad* by Leslie Patricelli homes in on recognizable baby emotions, tapping into babies’ basic realities. With its repeated, limited vocabulary and its humorous, expressive illustrations picturing “Baby HAPPY” (Baby holding a balloon or cavorting au naturel) and “Baby SAD” (Baby gazing up at the loosed balloon or swathed in a confining snowsuit), it is an excellent introduction to the concepts of happiness and sadness — as well as opposites.

Sandra Boynton’s must-have *Blue Hat, Green Hat* knows exactly what babies find funny, eliciting laughs even as it explores two concepts of interest (colors and clothes). While the other three animals model the various articles of clothing with deadpan aplomb, the hapless turkey is completely unschooled in how to wear a hat (he stands in it) or how to put on pants (he puts them on his head). The text, brief and straightforward, is infectiously interactive: “Blue hat, green hat, red hat, OOPS!” The word *oops* — short and punchy but with that croonable long *ooooo* — is amazingly fun to say (or shout)

out loud, especially when all concerned know that it's coming at the end of every spread and anticipate it. "Oops!" provides punctuation to the proceedings that will amuse babies and toddlers for reading after rereading. (Boynton's *Moo, Baa, La La La!* — pure fun from the title on — is another crowd pleaser.)

Note the tight focus all these board books purposefully keep — the minimal backgrounds in the illustrations; the hewing to familiar objects and concepts; the brevity of the texts; the physical humor or action; the familiar, comforting emotions. Full-size picture books that babies love follow a similar formula. Books by Byron Barton (*Machines at Work; Dinosaurs, Dinosaurs*) are surefire winners, with their direct, no-nonsense language ("Hey, you guys! Let's get to work!"); simple, eye-catching illustrations, often in primary colors; and perennially fascinating topics (machines, astronauts, construction workers, dinosaurs). Look for tried-and-true children's book creators Tana Hoban, Margaret Wise Brown, Donald Crews, Eric Carle, Anne Rockwell, Vera B. Williams, and Eve Rice and their successors Mem Fox, Emily Gravett, Leslie Patricelli, Kevin Henkes, and Wong Herbert Yee — all of whom seem to have a direct line to small children's likes and dislikes, fears and joys. Satoru Onishi's *Who's Hiding?* is a virtual lineup of animals (eighteen of which stand in an array looking straight out at the reader) in which babies guess which one is facing backward, which one is angry, or which one is missing on a progression of spreads. The distractions are nil; the concepts are age-appropriate; the fascination level is high. Lynn Reiser and Penny Gentieu's picture books *You and Me, Baby* and *My Baby & Me* couldn't be simpler — just clear, wholly engaging photographs of babies from diverse backgrounds interacting with parents and pre-school siblings.

For parents interested in giving babies the gift of a love of language, it's never too early to introduce Mother Goose. To read Mother Goose rhymes aloud is to hear the music in language. A good Mother Goose collection is like that magic self-replenishing

pot in the folktale: never empty, with something for everyone, for every mood, for every time of day. Shout the rambunctious “Jelly on a plate, / Jelly on a plate, / Wibble, wobble, wibble, wobble, / Jelly on a plate”; growl the swaggering “I’m Dusty Bill / From Vinegar Hill, / Never had a bath / And I never will”; whisper the lullaby of “Come, crow! Go, crow! / Baby’s sleeping sound, / And the wild plums grow in the jungle, / Only a penny a pound. / Only a penny a pound, Baba, / Only a penny a pound.” (Joanna Rudge Long’s “What Makes a Good Mother Goose?” — a more in-depth look at this nursery essential — follows on the next page.)

Babies’ reading is no different from that of any other age in one important respect: it can be solitary as well as communal. True, a baby will get to know books first by mouth, and only later by eye and ear, and will need an adult to introduce her to the wonders they contain. But soon that same baby will be reaching out from her parent’s lap to turn the book’s pages, and then sitting by herself, poring over her book, turning the pages, and “reading” to herself. She will have taken the first steps toward a future of page turns.

## What Makes a Good Mother Goose?

Joanna Rudge Long

**I**t is a truth universally acknowledged that every English-speaking child is the better for an early friendship with Mother Goose — “early” meaning from birth, because nothing boosts language development better than those catchy rhymes and rhythms. Scholars and educators alike praise the virtues and resonances of these traditional rhymes. They are essentials of both popular culture and our literary heritage; they stimulate young imaginations; reading, saying, or singing them draws parents and children together in shared delight. Best of all, those beloved, familiar, playful, nonsensical verses are just plain fun.

Mother Goose rhymes have appeared in print for more than two hundred years. Since nineteenth-century illustrator Randolph Caldecott elaborated on verses like “Hey Diddle, Diddle” and “Bye, Baby Bunting” with his ebullient caricatures of English country life, hundreds of illustrators have adapted the rhymes to their own styles and sensibilities. A few of these collections endure; many more have fallen by the wayside, even such treasures as L. Leslie Brooke’s 1922 *Ring o’ Roses*.

Illustrations for Mother Goose come in several flavors. The most widely accepted are often the sweetest; Kate Greenaway and Jessie Willcox Smith set the tone with their pretty children in the rural, period settings many people associate with nursery rhymes. More stimulating to young imaginations is the kind of rambunctious vigor initiated by Caldecott, carried on by Brooke, and adapted with idiosyncratic verve by such luminaries as Roger Duvoisin, Raymond Briggs, Amy Schwartz, and Michael Foreman—vigor that reflects the outlandish characters and shenanigans in the verse itself. Editions for different audiences have always appeared in different shapes and sizes, from board books featuring single rhymes to the eminent folklorists Peter and Iona Opie's scholarly tomes. Those for the youngest may contain just a few familiar verses, copiously illustrated. Older children can explore fat volumes with hundreds of rhymes, including additional, often omitted verses for well-known rhymes. Smaller volumes may have a particular focus. In *To Market! To Market!*, Peter Spier sets a score of rhymes in the early nineteenth-century market town of New Castle, Delaware. Leonard S. Marcus and Amy Schwartz celebrate the foolish, the disappointed, and various miscreants in a merry take on *Mother Goose's Little Misfortunes*. Robert Sabuda's virtuoso pop-up, *The Movable Mother Goose*, features arresting graphic design as well as extraordinary paper engineering. With *We Are All in the Dumps with Jack and Guy*, Maurice Sendak turns two hitherto unrelated rhymes into a fantasy on urban poverty, social responsibility, and compassion. Versatile Mother Goose provides a rewarding venue for many such creative endeavors.

Each of these books is a world unto itself; to enter one is to go to a place both rich and strange, whether pretty and placid or comically offbeat. Mother Goose is read, reread, chanted, and pored over with a special imaginative intensity.

The collection my children almost wore out was Raymond Briggs's *The Mother Goose Treasury*. Robust, earthy, and sporting more than



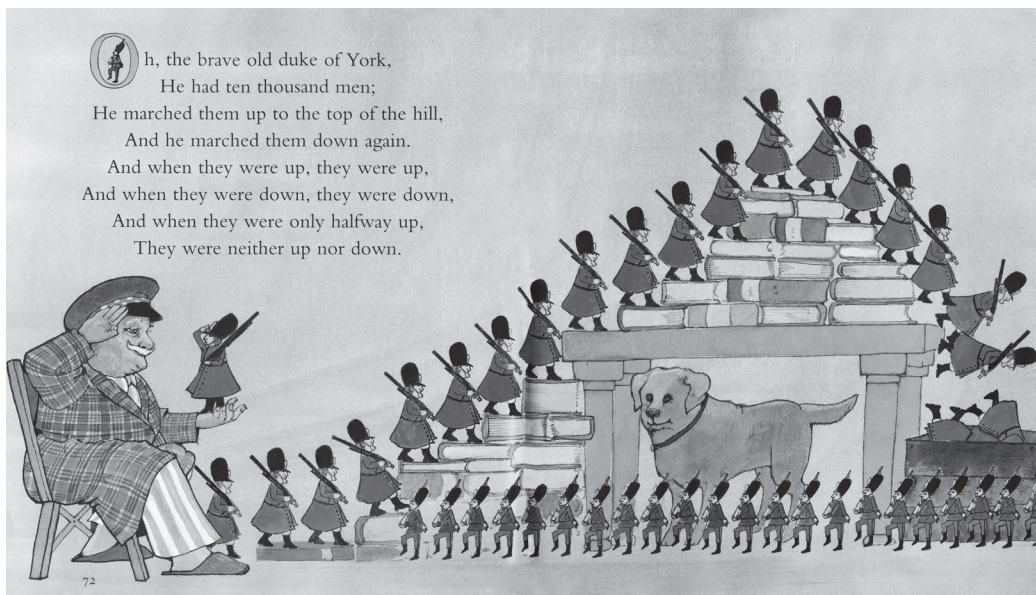
four hundred verses, Briggs's book features clean, uncluttered pages with lots of spot art; sequenced vignettes for longer dramas; colorful, action-packed full-page art; and a marvelous array of characters — seedy or cranky, feckless or determined, often mischievous, rarely prim.

Now, though there's a plethora of Mother Geese in print, Briggs's isn't among them. It's well known that the swing from the verbal to the visual within the last generation has remodeled not only tastes but the very way children perceive. No longer is it acceptable for color to alternate with black and white; children today expect all color, all the time, and are accustomed to a more generous supply of illustrations. Busy parents are content to settle for a relatively brief collection, perhaps supplemented with picture books spun from single verses.

Fortunately, in this new climate, there are still good choices, big and small, sweet or silly or pungent or all three. Iona Opie's *My Very First Mother Goose* (along with its companion volume, *Here Comes Mother Goose*), illustrated by Rosemary Wells, is a lap-friendly charmer, with large type, ample dimensions, and bright colors. Though some characters are human, more are animals, especially cats, mice, and bunnies. "Little Jumping Joan" is a black, rope-skipping rabbit who doubles as the narrator of "I had a little nut tree" — who better to "skip over water, dance over sea"? Mischievous, anxious, earnestly hardworking, gleeful, or affectionately cuddly, these appealing animal characters will be familiar to readers of Wells's many popular picture books. Also, using them is a tactful way to sidestep the issue of racial balance.

An illustrator of Mother Goose has many such choices, each a chance for creative interpretation. For example, Wells's "brave old duke of York" — a benevolent-looking gent, pajama-clad and portly — watches his toy soldiers march up and down a hill built of fat books. (Observant tots may notice that the march ends in a wastebasket; see the illustration on the next page.) The pussycat





Oh, the brave old duke of York,  
 He had ten thousand men;  
 He marched them up to the top of the hill,  
 And he marched them down again.  
 And when they were up, they were up,  
 And when they were down, they were down,  
 And when they were only halfway up,  
 They were neither up nor down.

who says he “frightened a little mouse under [the queen’s] chair” is evidently fibbing—it’s the cat who exhibits alarm here, while the mouse, clearly a privileged personage, sticks out her tongue at him. Just about every verse has such nifty details to discover in successive “readings” of the pictures.

With just sixty-eight rhymes, most of them short (or without their final verses), *My Very First Mother Goose* is a fine place to begin. Eventually, however, the well-read child will need a more comprehensive collection. An example is *Mary Engelbreit’s Mother Goose*, one hundred rhymes visualized in Engelbreit’s old-timey greeting-card style, the round-faced characters reliably cute and pink-cheeked (even the lambs and unicorn). The selections, chosen with the help of critic Leonard S. Marcus, are excellent, as is his introduction, peppered with such sage insights as “It is one of the happy truths about Mother Goose verses that it is absolutely impossible to sound too foolish while saying them” and “These days, the first rhymes most

children know are those . . . in television commercials. Against this backdrop, wise old Mother Goose holds out a refreshing, life-enhancing alternative: equally irresistible rhymes with nothing to sell.”

Two of the best of the more comprehensive volumes still in print came out in the 1980s. With its quaint, innocent-looking figures and childlike drawing style, *Tomie dePaola's Mother Goose* (with 204 rhymes) is immediately appealing. But there's much more going on in dePaola's art than the casual reader may notice at first. His figures — so decorative, so comfortably arrayed in their ample white space — are also subtly expressive; his sophisticated juxtapositions of light, bright colors are unexpectedly harmonious; his elegantly balanced compositions include just enough action and detail to inspire young imaginations to fill out the stories for themselves. Arrangement of the rhymes, from an unusual fifteen stanzas about Mother Goose herself to a series of bedtime entries (closing with two prayers), is coherent. All in all, it's a book to have early and enjoy through childhood and beyond.

For somewhat older children, *The Arnold Lobel Book of Mother Goose* (306 rhymes; formerly titled *The Random House Book of Mother Goose*) is especially rich in variety, story, and visual imagery. Old standards with a full complement of extra verses; variants on the familiar plus much that's unfamiliar; couplets, riddles, limericks, ballads — all are grouped by subject (rain, say, or chickens), or by more tenuous links, and set to good advantage among a wealth of spot art, spreads, and vignettes. A string of small pictures may narrate a single story or multiple rhymes share a setting (the sea, rooms in a house, the moon). Borders sometimes fence the action, but elsewhere it escapes into large, dramatic vistas. Each freely drawn illustration is neatly self-contained, yet all are marshaled into exquisitely designed spreads. Characters are as lively and varied as all humanity, mostly comic or amiable but sometimes unexpectedly dark (a tiny Wee Willie Winkie issues an urgent warning among towering, angular buildings; the cow sweeps over the moon in an awesome

celestial phenomenon). Creative touches abound: the crooked man is a cubist portrait; it's mice who like "pease porridge cold . . . nine days old"; London Bridge is a vertiginous, patched-together conglomeration. All in all, this is an ample and robust volume, vibrant with the many human conditions that gave rise to the rhymes in the first place: quirks, incongruities, injustices, nightmares, absurdities, laughter, hopes, dreams.

There's always room for another fresh take on the old favorites. In Leo and Diane Dillon's new *Mother Goose: Numbers on the Loose*, these gifted illustrators bring twenty-four rhymes to life in richly detailed mini-stories of their own invention. Like many a Mother Goose, it's a book for multiple ages: for preschoolers to enjoy the dancing rhymes and rhythms; for primary-age children learning their numbers; and for the older ones, who can appreciate and weave together the many imaginative pictorial details to tell the old stories anew.

So how do we choose among these treasures? As to illustrations, they should create an intriguing world, one to lure a child again and again. For the littlest, it's important to have durable pages, open format, clarity of design, and a preponderance of familiar verses to revisit until, ineluctably, they're learned by heart. These funny, often enigmatic verses beg for visual elaboration — look for illustrators who've made the best of their opportunities. Comparing the illustrations for a favorite rhyme in several collections is a good way to get to know different illustrators, to evaluate their styles, skills, and imaginative strengths, and to discover which ones suit you best.

As to content, a more comprehensive collection can be a grand conglomeration of thumbnail portraits and delicious nonsense, the lyrical and the raucous, sorrow and glee, the witty, the tragic, or — intriguingly — both at once. Tampering with texts is usually a bad thing, though there are exceptions (as those who remember the earlier version of "Eeny, meeny, miny, mo" will acknowledge). If there's much that's unfamiliar, a note on sources shows good faith

on the part of the compiler. It's also good to have an introduction, such as Iona Opie provides for *My Very First Mother Goose*. Hers is an inspirational celebration, concluding with a playful alphabet of attributes. And who better than Opie herself to give us these last words, some of them as absurd as Mother Goose herself:

Mother Goose will show newcomers to this world how astonishing, beautiful, capricious, dancy, eccentric, funny, goluptious, haphazard, intertwingled, joyous, kindly, loving, melodious, naughty, outrageous, pomsidillious, querimonious, romantic, silly, tremendous, unexpected, vertiginous, wonderful, x-citing, yo-heave-ho-ish, and zany it is.

Just so does Mother Goose continue to engage those tiny “newcomers.”

*the reading writer*

## TRASHING ELMO

GINEE SEO AND BRUCE BROOKS

When our son Drake was on the way, certain policies and principles regarding his childhood scarcely needed to be spoken — indeed, to mention them aloud would have seemed coarse, even insulting. For example:

WE WILL NOT CENSOR BOOKS AND TOYS.

But because Bruce has been through this business twice before (with Alex, now twenty-four, and Spencer, fifteen), he might have winced a bit at such a declaration. He is aware of something he calls the “Berenstain Loophole,” first invoked shortly after Alex’s second birthday. On that occasion, one of Alex’s pals (with witless parents, obviously) slipped a wrapped package of two Berenstain Bears books in among the other guests’ gifts of Hot Wheels racers and Playmobil emergency vehicles. Alas, Bruce — naif that he was — had no idea such . . . *printed matter* existed, so he failed to pounce and destroy until it was too late: Alex got his mom to read him the books several times in the next couple of days.

A disaster unfolded. One of the books related that Sister Bear was afraid of the dark. Her drippy terror played out in lurid imagery, to be solved on the last page by the purchase (suggested, of course, by that nonpareil of homespun wisdom, Mama Bear) of a night-light.

Until this point in his life, Alex was indifferent to the fact that something called the Dark even existed. It had never crossed his mind that the relative luminescence of his room was attached to a value system. Sometimes you could see everything, sometimes you couldn't—you went with what you got. Ah, but chez Berenstain, things were differently ordered, so for two weeks Alex decided that there was a Dark, and maybe he ought to be afraid of it. Bruce was finally subjected to the infamy of following the lead of Mama B.: he bought Alex a night-light.

So, functionally, Ginee-and-Bruce's new rule might read:

WE WILL NOT CENSOR BOOKS OR TOYS  
UNLESS THEY ARE TOTAL CRAP.

Alas, this rule does not take into account adoring relatives, babysitters, friends of babysitters, pediatricians, and the nice man at the Rite Aid on Seventh Avenue. Even one's otherwise faultless friends can fall prey to a Thomas the Tank Engine beginner set—and après that, the deluge: the book-with-wheels cannot be far behind. So you do the inevitable (especially when the gift giver is present). You gamely read the thing in question, which may or may not have appendages and emit funny noises. You hope that will do it. But your child appears enchanted. "More?" he inquires, and then you are in for it, doomed to read the thing through at least three more times before suggesting an alternative ("Let's read *Freight Train!*") or a distraction ("Let's have a sugary snack!"). Later, at your leisure, you wrestle: Should I put this back in his book pile, or do the unimaginable and throw it away? A book. In the trash. Like the Nazis and the Branch Davidians.

Here's the thing that every newish parent quickly understands: very young children have inclinations that defy categorization or comprehension. It takes talent to recognize this and speak to it; when those forces are brilliant or at least benign, you end up

with books like *Goodnight Moon*; *Good Night, Gorilla*; and *Blue Hat, Green Hat*. When those forces are greedy and malevolent, you end up with Tinkle Tubsies or non-Henson Elmo or Lord-knows-what beaming character concocted by market research and focus groups, an incubus guaranteed to make serial killers of your kids. This realization, of course, then wreaks havoc on the rash corollary to the second rule, which is:

WE WILL PERSONALLY PURCHASE ONLY THAT WHICH WE COULD  
IMAGINE MAKING OURSELVES (I.E., WRITING OR EDITING) AT OUR  
VERY BEST (WE ALL HAVE AN INNER CRAP ARTIST).

But here is the humbling thing: children, especially young children, have strong irrational likes and dislikes, and some of the books they love best are, frankly, a mystery. For example, *Spring Is Here* by Taro Gomi. This was a gift from friends who have a daughter two years older than our son, and it baffled us at first. Don't get us wrong; it's a lovely book, just . . . weird. It's a celebration of the seasons in which a calf metamorphoses into fresh earth, growing grass, and the changing seasonal landscape, only to change back into an older calf at the end of the story. You would not be amiss in thinking it sounds a bit like a short Japanese animated film in board-book form. You would therefore think that it wouldn't be appealing to a developing human unable to say *spring*, let alone *anime* or *Miyazaki*. Yet this quickly became one of Drake's favorite books (and other children's as well; we noticed the book was in its seventh printing).

There is something liberating in all this. It confirms something we all know, which is that "taste" at this — or any — age is an elusive, reaching thing. And that for every non-Henson Elmo book out there (yes, we have one, and yes, he loves it, and Bruce put it in the trash on Tuesday without a moment's pause), there is a Denise Fleming (*Barnyard Banter* — genius!) and a Richard Scarry (*Richard Scarry's Cars and Trucks and Things That Go* — best boy-book ever)

and, most wonderful of all, some bizarre yet irresistible new kooky book yet to be discovered to make things right in the universe. And who knows? We, the snarky all-knowing parents, may even learn a thing or two.

So: channel your inner authoritarian and bin everything cutesy and stupid. Trust your ineluctable sense of “taste.” But be prepared for some surprises. And for God’s sake, stay away from Chuck E. Cheese. That way lies madness.



## MORE GREAT BOOKS FOR BABIES

Janet Ahlberg and Allan Ahlberg, *Peek-a-Boo!*

34 pp. This nicely oversize board book with sturdy die-cut pages is the perfect format for the Ahlbergs' classic picture book, which follows a baby through his ordinary but eventful day.

Byron Barton, *Boats; Planes; Trains; Trucks*

32 pp. With simple, direct text and black-outlined, color-blocked pictures, these oversize board books are ideal for young vehicle enthusiasts whose exuberance might otherwise result in ripped pages.

Margaret Chodos-Irvine, *Ella Sarah Gets Dressed*

32 pp. Undeterred by her more decorous family, Ella Sarah insists on wearing a flashy outfit of her choosing. Happily, her friends arrive for tea wearing equally outrageous costumes. In this lap-size board-book version of the Caldecott Honor Book, the illustrations retain their distinctive patterns, colors, and sizes.

Eileen Christelow, *Five Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed*

32 pp. A popular picture book with a rhyming, repetitive refrain well suited to the audience is nicely reissued — essentially unchanged from the original — as a lap-size board book.

Olivier Dunrea, *Gossie; Gossie & Gertie*

32 pp. Dunrea's captivating stories about two inquisitive goslings make perfect board books. Dunrea is precisely attuned to the toddler world: making friends, losing beloved objects, wanting someone else's beloved objects. The goslings march across the clean white pages in their bright blue and red boots, having tiny adventures and learning about the world as they go.

Mem Fox, illustrations by Judy Horacek, *Where Is the Green Sheep?*

32 pp. This charming tale, in which readers search for an elusive green sheep, works beautifully as a board book. The bouncy, rhyming text will appeal to

very young children, and Horacek's art remains clear and clean and easy to interpret. Right in line with toddlers' sense of playful discovery.

Mem Fox, illustrations by Helen Oxenbury, *Ten Little Fingers and Ten Little Toes*

40 pp. Two babies join a multiethnic playgroup. Fox's lilting verse ("And both of these babies, / as everyone knows, / had ten little fingers / and ten little toes") just has to be read aloud, and Helen Oxenbury's spacious illustrations, featuring her irresistible round-headed tots, will engage even the youngest viewers.

Chihiro Nakagawa, illustrations by Junji Koyose, *Who Made This Cake?*

40 pp. Miniature workers use tiny construction vehicles to make a giant cake. Kids will love searching for the little guy who trips himself up, and truck fans will pore over every action-filled scene.

Satoru Onishi, *Who's Hiding?*

32 pp. Onishi introduces — with humor — eighteen animals, six colors, and the child-appealing visual challenge of camouflage.

Leslie Patricelli, *Higher! Higher!*

32 pp. A smiling dad pushes a little girl on a swing; with each push, she says, "Higher! Higher!" Up she goes, flying to greet a giraffe, a mountain climber, an airplane. Finally, she heads into space, where she meets a little green alien at the apex of his own swing. Cheerful cartoonlike acrylics reinforce the book's preschooler-perfect sensibilities. Also available as a board book.

Phyllis Root, illustrations by David Walker, *Flip, Flap, Fly!*

32 pp. Gently pastoral illustrations and bouncy wordplay introduce animal babies taking their first thrilling "steps." The spaciouly composed illustrations are light-filled and blithely anthropomorphic, the babies clearly overjoyed to be doing their thing. Generous doses of onomatopoeia and alliteration add to the fun.