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Discovering the Unexpected:

The Margaret Wise Brown Collection at Wyndham Robertson Library, Hollins University

by *Beth S. Harris*

Margaret Wise Brown was “the first author of picture books to be recognized in her own right ... [and] the first author to make the writing of picture books an art.”¹ In fact, she also broke the mold of what was being written for children during the 1930s and 1940s. Fortunately for researchers and aficionados of children’s literature, Brown’s legacy of innovation has been preserved at her alma mater, Hollins University in Roanoke, Virginia.

The Margaret Wise Brown Collection is housed in the Special Collections Department at Wyndham Robertson Library, Hollins University. Brown’s papers, along with the library’s collection of her books, comprise one of the most comprehensive collections of Margaret Wise Brown materials in the country. Behind this unique collection is the fascinating story of Brown’s prolific career and how the manuscripts found their way to Hollins University.

Born May 23, 1910, Margaret Wise Brown grew up in Brooklyn, New York, and attended her mother’s alma mater, Hollins College (as it was then called), where she received an AB in English literature in 1932. Although not academically inclined, Brown took an interest in writing due to the encouragement of her literature professor Margue-



rite Hearsey. Five years after graduation, Brown inscribed a copy of her first published book, *When the Wind Blew*, to Hearsey, “Remembering the stumbling words that led up to whatever clarity is here. And always thanking you for the first encouragement.”² A few years after graduation, Brown decided to apply for Bank Street’s Cooperative School for Student Teachers in New York City, a program of the Bureau of Educational Experiments. Enter-

ing the program in the fall of 1935, Brown soon fell under the influence of Lucy Sprague Mitchell, chair of the school. In addition to teaching, Margaret also became involved in the Bank Street Writers Laboratory, a group interested in applying the latest scientific theories to children’s stories. Referred to as the here-and-now approach, their textbooks and readers addressed the everyday world and concerns of children. The approach “represented a direct challenge to the widely held view of librarians and publish-

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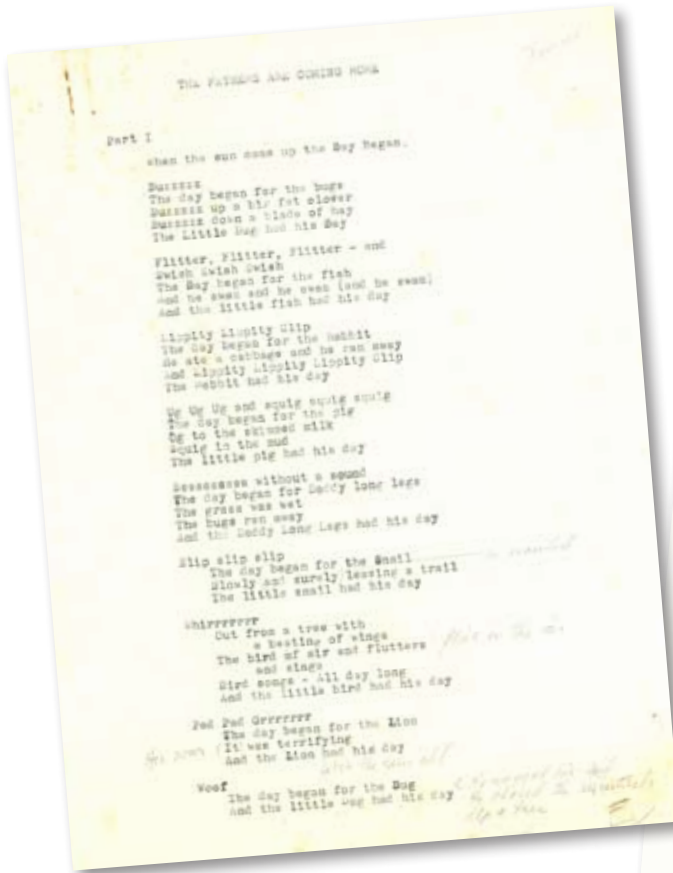


ers that fairy tales, myths, legends, and traditional nursery nonsense ... comprised the best introduction to literature for the young."³ During this time, William R. Scott, a young publisher, met Lucy Sprague Mitchell, who encouraged him to "devote his list to experimentally tested, here-and-now-style children's books."⁴ Scott was given an office at Bank Street and eventually met Brown, who became his first editor in 1938. According to Leonard Marcus, "she was a highly innovative juveniles editor, and throughout her career she played impresario to the entire field, taking pleasure in discovering or furthering the careers of illustrators and writers such as Clement and Edith Thacher Hurd, Garth Williams, Leonard Wisegard, Esphyr Slobodkina, Jean Charlot, and Ruth Krauss."⁵ Brown published a number of her own books with Scott, but eventually moved on to other publishers. Brown was illustrated by Garth Williams, Clement Hurd, and Leonard Weisgard, among others, and sometimes wrote under the pseudonyms Juniper Sage, Golden MacDonald, and Timothy

Hay. In addition to picture books, many of her works were published in educational textbooks and some were even set to music. Her life was tragically cut short when she died of an embolism in 1952 at the age of forty-two. Along with the classic titles *Goodnight Moon*, *The Runaway Bunny*, and *The Little Island* (Caldecott Medal, 1947), originally published during her lifetime, her works published posthumously continue to grow each year.

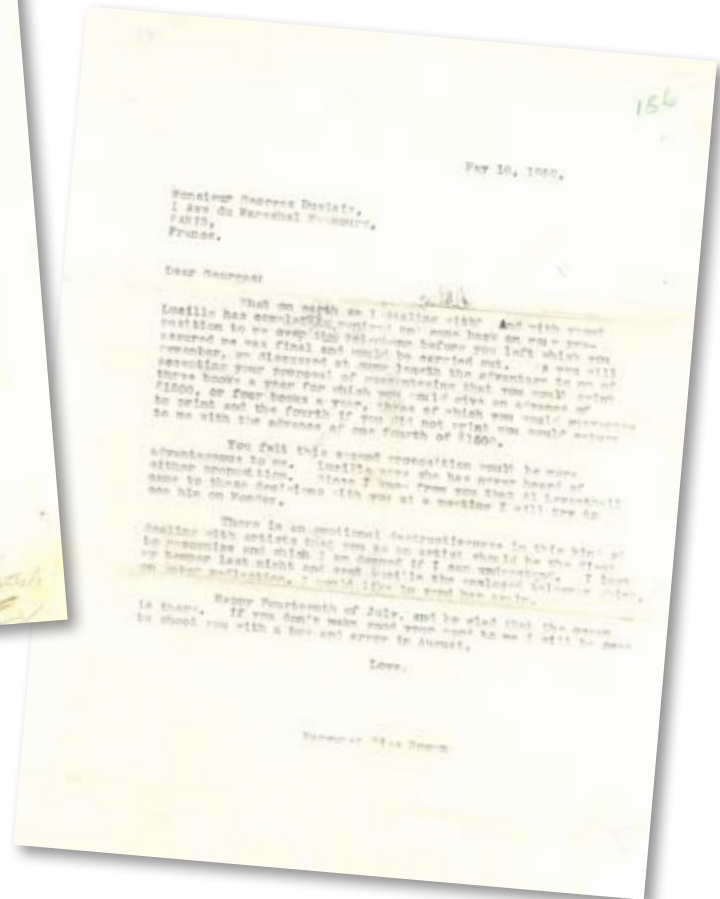
Along with the posthumous works, newly discovered works have renewed interest in Margaret Wise Brown. In the early 1990s, Amy Gary, president of WaterMark Press, a small publishing firm near Birmingham, Alabama, thought

there was a market for more of Margaret Wise Brown's books. She contacted Brown's sister, Roberta Brown Rauch, about reprinting some out-of-print titles. Rauch, who had gotten some of her late sister's manuscripts published, had grown weary of dealing with large publishing and decided to work with Gary. During one of Gary's visits to Vermont where Rauch lived, Rauch casually mentioned a trunk full of papers that had been languishing in her attic for the past thirty years. Gary was immediately intrigued and excited over the trunk's contents: sixty-seven unpublished manuscripts Margaret Wise Brown had been working on before she died. The cedar-lined chest also contained numerous pieces of correspondence to her publishers and other individuals. Since unearthing Brown's papers, Gary has spent time preparing many of these manuscripts for publication.



Left, manuscript page from *The Fathers Are Coming Home* by Margaret Wise Brown, first published in 2010.

Below, letter from Margaret Wise Brown to Georges DuPlaix (Simon & Schuster), May 16, 1952, *Correspondence Series*.



In the meantime, Gary told her grandmother, Fannie Strang (Hollins, class of 1928), about the discovery. Strang, an active Hollins supporter, recognized that these papers with their connection to her alma mater would be a tremendous asset to their recently inaugurated children's literature program. She urged then-Hollins president Maggie O'Brien to get in touch with Rauch about acquiring the manuscripts and papers, which Rauch generously agreed to donate. After three years of working out the details, the collection finally arrived at Hollins in the spring of 1993.

These papers include two hundred pieces of correspondence, more than five hundred manuscripts, music scores, papers relating to Brown's death, and legal records. The correspondence comprises letters from Brown's publishers, editors, lawyer, collaborators,

and various organizations. While most of the letters are addressed to Brown, many contain her responses drafted on the original letters. Subjects include contracts, royalties, copyright, and ideas for books and songs. Major correspondents include editors of the publishing companies Simon & Schuster, Harper & Brothers, and E. P. Dutton. Other correspondents include composers Dorothy Cadzow and Ruth Cleary Patterson, illustrator Garth Williams, photographer Ylla (Camille Koffler), Harper & Brothers editor Ursula Nordstrom, lawyer Harriet Pilpel, and members of the Artists and Writers Guild. In addition, the University Archives unit within Special Collections

holds her academic records, photographs, sound recordings, and articles written by Brown, as well as articles and theses written about her.

Many of the manuscripts have notations and offer, along with the correspondence, a glimpse into the writing and editing process. In addition to the day-to-day business of publishing, the letters also reveal personal aspects of Brown's relationships with her editors and publishers. In a letter to Brown, Ursula Nordstrom (Harper & Bros.) reassures her that they will work out communication difficulties and ends the letter with, "At the risk of sounding very stupid, I'd

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The Hollins Room, showing a portion of the Hollins Authors Collection, including the Margaret Wise Brown Collection.

like to say again how much having even a small connection with some of your books has meant to me, as editor and just plain civilian. We'll now sing Hymn 303, Love Ursula."⁶ Not all of Brown's frustrations were smoothed over so easily, however. Georges Duplaix (Simon & Schuster) was visiting France when he received an angry letter from Brown, ending with "Happy Fourteenth of July, and be glad that the ocean is there. If you don't make good your word to me I will be over to shoot you with a bow and arrow in August. Love Margaret Wise Brown."⁷

Even the legal papers, complete with "legalese" terminology, reveal interesting tidbits of Brown's personal history. Unpaid bills from the local pharmacy, a "French" cleaner in New York City, and the local grocery store provide insight into her character and life. A letter written to Brown's lawyer, from one of Brown's friends who owned

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"Smokehouse Hams," explained that "Tim" (a nickname) had purchased some hams from her but never paid for them. "Tim and I were best friends ... I do not want to do anything which will be embarrassing to anyone but I know that Tim wanted me to have payment for my hams."⁸

In addition to the manuscripts, the Wyndham Robertson Library has a substantial collection of

Margaret Wise Brown's published books. Brown was a prolific writer, with nearly one hundred fifty titles to her name. She once stated that she could write a story in twenty minutes but spent a year or more rewriting it.⁹ The Margaret Wise Brown book collection at Hollins, numbering more than 270 volumes in thirteen different languages, is an excellent example of texts and illustrations from what Maurice Sendak has described as the Golden Age of children's book publishing in America.¹⁰ The diversity of Brown's books at Hollins allows older readers to enjoy the nostalgic feeling of the early editions from their own youth, while younger readers can be introduced to book design and illustration styles of the period. Both will be delighted by new interpretations through modern illustrators. Margaret Wise Brown still touches readers today with *The Runaway Bunny* and *Goodnight Moon*. Some lesser-known

works in the collection, such as *A Pussycat's Christmas* and *Baby Animals*, have been paired with new illustrators and appeal to younger generations. Lastly, the collection includes new works discovered within the last decade, including *Mouse of My Heart* and *A Child is Born*, which are being read for the first time and have yet to stand the test of time.

The Margaret Wise Brown papers have seen frequent use since their acquisition in 1993. Jake Wheeler, college professor emeritus, reviewed the collection when it first arrived. A popular speaker on Hollins history and lore, he has often delved into this collection to enhance his presentations on Margaret Wise Brown. In an address to Hollins alumnae, Wheeler stated that “reading old manuscripts and seeing the correspondence has given me not only much amusement but insight into the life of a remarkable young woman who went places after starting at Hollins.”¹¹ Another researcher who has used these papers several times noted that she found articles, letters, and theses that she didn’t know existed and is “eager to return and give those papers my attention.... Anyone interested in the life and work of Margaret Wise Brown would find a trip to Hollins University more than worthwhile.”¹² Recently a visitor commented, “Where else can you hold in your hands not only Brown’s death certificate, but read scores of unpublished works, examine accounting records, or sift through correspondence? The collection is wonderful, including not only what might be expected but also esoteric, unusual, and surprising items.”¹³

In arranging, indexing, and preparing a finding aid for these papers, I have found they make history come alive for me as well as researchers and casual observers. The laborious process of writing and negotiating with publishers is

made clear as I read through the correspondence. One can reach out and touch the same things Margaret Wise Brown touched and created. After working many hours on this collection, I felt that I had a personal encounter with Margaret Wise Brown herself.

Numerous articles, theses, books, conference papers, and musical recordings have resulted from research in the Margaret Wise Brown Collection, including Leonard Marcus’s *Margaret Wise Brown: Awakened by the Moon*, Cynthia Rylant’s *Margaret, Frank and Andy: Three Writers’ Stories*, and the music recording *The Noon Balloon: Art Songs for Children* by Sandra Summer. Other potential uses of this collection include such topics as Brown’s literary development, women authors and the publishing industry (rights, fair treatment, etc.), and literary study. In addition, correspondents such as Clement Hurd, Dorothy Cadzow, and Elizabeth Randolph may be of interest to researchers.

Interestingly, Brown did not write out of her love for children but rather out of her love for language. In a 1949 Hollins alumnae magazine article, Brown said, “It is not hard to trace an interest in children’s books through a love of the English language. I don’t think I am essentially interested in children’s books. I’m interested in writing, and in pictures. I’m interested in people and in children because they are people—little primitive people—keener in some ways than they themselves will be later on. And, I am interested in simplicity. In children’s books all these combine.”¹⁴

Notes

1. Barbara Bader, *American Picture-books from Noah's Ark to the Beast Within* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1976), 252.

2. Margaret Wise Brown to

Marguerite C. Hearsey, inscription in a copy of *When the Wind Blew*, Wyndham Robertson Library, Hollins University, Roanoke, Virginia.

3. Leonard S. Marcus, *Margaret Wise Brown: Awakened by the Moon* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 53.

4. *Ibid.*, 89.

5. *Ibid.*, 2.

6. Ursula Nordstrom, letter to Margaret Wise Brown, TL (type-written letter), March 12, 1951, Margaret Wise Brown Papers, “Incoming Correspondence, Publishers,” Wyndham Robertson Library, Hollins University, Roanoke, Virginia.

7. Margaret Wise Brown, letter to Georges Duplaix, TL, May 16, 1952, Margaret Wise Brown Papers, “Outgoing Correspondence, Publishers,” Wyndham Robertson Library, Hollins University, Roanoke, Virginia.

8. Mary Watkins McLaughlin, letter to Harriett F. Pilpel, TL, November 28, 1952, Margaret Wise Brown Papers, “Legal Papers,” Wyndham Robertson Library, Hollins University, Roanoke, Virginia.

9. Margaret Wise Brown, “Writing for Children,” *Hollins Alumnae Magazine* (Winter 1949): 1.

10. Marcus, *Margaret Wise Brown*, dust jacket.

11. Jake Wheeler, “Goodnight Moon! Margaret Wise Brown and the Hollins Connection,” address, alumnae reunion, Hollins College, Roanoke, Virginia, October 9, 1996, Margaret Wise Brown Papers, “Materials About,” Wyndham Robertson Library, Hollins University, Roanoke, Virginia.

12. Candice Ransom, letter to author, TL, August 10, 2004, Special Collections Correspondence Files, Wyndham Robertson Library, Hollins University, Roanoke, Virginia.

13. Rory Kraft, email to author, October 14, 2010.

14. Brown, “Writing for Children,” 1. **iv**