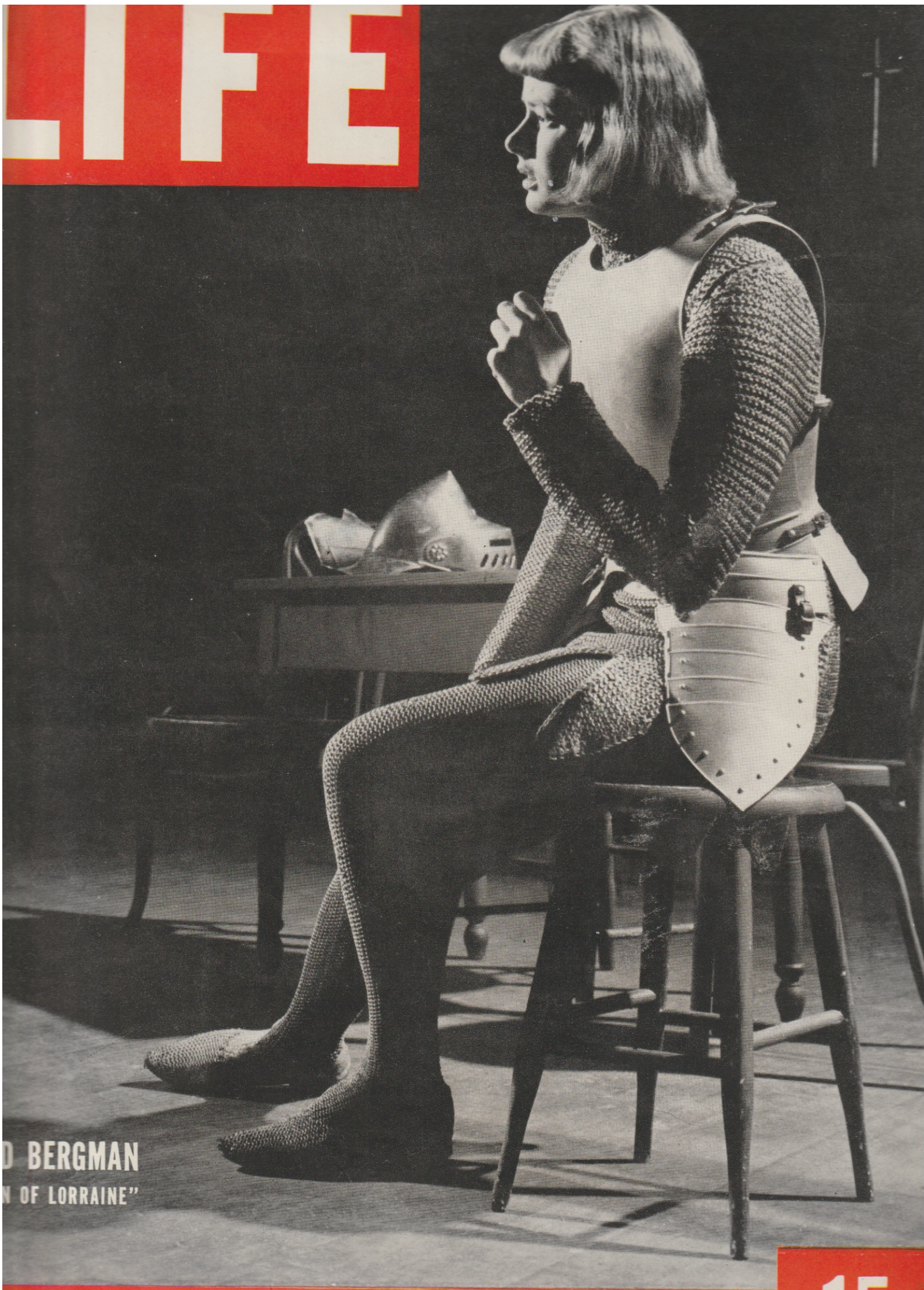


LIFE

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MISS BROWN WRITES IN BED, WITH A QUILL PEN. HERE SHE IS USING A BLUE HERON FEATHER. USUALLY SHE FAVORS SWAN'S PLUMES



Child's Best Seller

Margaret Wise Brown, who uses three pseudonyms, has written 53 books and bound one of them in bunny fur

by BRUCE BLIVEN JR.

BETWEEN now and Dec. 24 hundreds of thousands of mothers, grandmothers, uncles, brothers and friends of young children will approach salesgirls in bookshops, toy stores, drug and department stores with minor variations of the stereotyped inquiry, "Which book would be best for my nephew, Theodore? He is 4 years old, but very advanced for his age." (No one has ever asked for a book for a backward nephew. Most publishers, therefore, lie in age-level advertisement; a book that should be a pushover for a Three is called suitable for a Four.) The chances are good that a customer, especially if he is looking for something in the \$1 to \$2.50 class, will come away with one of Margaret Wise Brown's books.

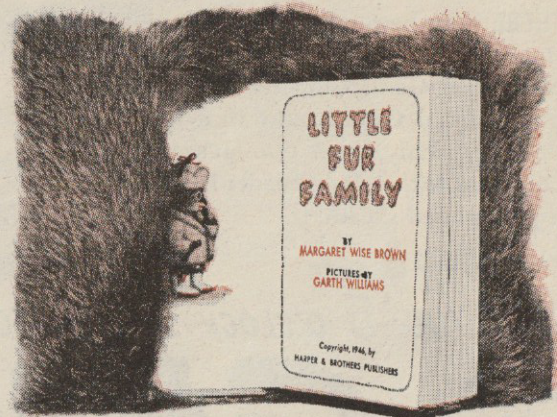
In the brief 10 years Miss Brown has been writing for children she has had 53 books published, of which 47 are still in print and on sale under the imprints of seven different publishers. Miss Brown's total sales are, in round numbers, 836,000. A publishing house is usually reluctant to let any writer in its stable appear under another firm's colors. In Margaret Wise Brown's case, however, her seven publishers combined are unable to keep up with her output. To avoid flooding the market, Miss Brown has adopted three noms-de-plume. For Doubleday she is Golden MacDonald, author of the best sellers, *Little Lost Lamb*, *Red Light Green Light*, and *Big Dog Little Dog*. As Timothy Hay she is the author of Harper's *Horses*. Juniper Sage, printed by William R. Scott, is really Miss Brown and a collaborator, Edith Thacher Hurd.

Harper and Scott also publish Miss Brown under her real name, but Doubleday believes that Golden MacDonald, who has written three smash hits in a row, now has greater sales appeal than Margaret Wise Brown and would be reluctant to drop the deception. Miss Brown manages to feel entirely free from jealousy towards her pseudonymous selves. She does think, however, that the Misses MacDonald, Hay and Sage have clear-cut writing personalities and distinct styles, and has said that by the first draft of a new book it is perfectly clear in her mind who wrote it.

During the first two weeks of October, three new Brown books, all destined to be hits, appeared on the market. Doubleday published *The Little Island* by Golden MacDonald which, as a Junior Literary Guild selection, started off with a sale of 20,000. *The Man in the Manhole* by Juniper Sage (Miss Brown and Edith Thacher Hurd) is a most promising title on the new Scott list. *Little Fur Family* by Margaret Wise Brown (Harper), a miniature volume bound in New Zealand rabbit fur, looked and felt so good that the publishers ordered a huge first printing of 75,000 copies. Harper is already planning a second edition in normal size and texture and has published a limited (two copies, valued at \$15 each) mink edition for the carriage trade.

In addition to her solid claim to the title of World's Most Prolific Picture-Book Writer, Miss Brown, who is unmarried, is probably prettier than any of her competitors. She is a tall, green-eyed, ash blonde in her early 30s

with a fresh outdoors look about her. People who meet her for the first time are likely to think she is extremely sophisticated, which is entirely true. Her striking appearance is usually punctuated by some startling accessory such as a live kitten in a wicker basket or a hat made out of live flowers, and is emphasized nearly always by a high-spirited Kerry blue terrier on a kelly green leash. Nominally she lives in New York City. Actually she is away in Maine (where she spends her summers), Connecticut, Long Island, Vermont or Virginia about half the time. She almost never reads newspapers, depending for her information about current events upon whatever her friends happen to tell her; nearly all subjects of major



HER LATEST BOOK, in bunny fur, costs \$1.50. A mink-bound edition of two copies has been published.



FUR FATHER SETS OFF TO WORK



FUR CHILD GETS A BATH



HE MEETS A FURLESS FISH

LITTLE FUR FAMILY recounts the adventures of the only child in a little fur family, "warm as toast smaller than most in little fur coats, and they

CHILD'S BEST SELLER CONTINUED

importance come up sooner or later, although occasionally the time lag is fairly long. She did not hear about this summer's stock-market crash, for example, until three weeks afterward and for a while, on account of a fisherman's garbled report, Miss Brown understood that the U.S. and Yugoslavia were at war.

Miss Brown, therefore, is likely to say things that in simplicity and form have the surface glitter of an epigram. A friend once asked her what time it was and Miss Brown replied, thoughtfully, "What time would you like it to be?" If you ask Miss Brown what her hobby is she will answer, probably, "Privacy." Many a stranger, afraid to ask her what the hell she was talking about, has taken such a remark home for study under the impression that Miss Brown combines the best features of Dorothy Parker and Immanuel Kant.

The first things Miss Brown can remember about her childhood are high grille fences and a red-brick church in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, where she was born. Her father, Robert Bruce Brown, was one of the heads of the prosperous American Manufacturing Company, makers of hemp rope, cordage, twine and bagging. Margaret's mother came from a first Virginia family with a genealogy filled with Revolutionary War heroes.

The woods and beaches around Whitestone Landing, N. Y., where the Browns soon moved, were Margaret's favorite playground. She had 30 rabbits, 10 squirrels, a bowl of goldfish, a collie of her own and six other "borrowed" dogs, but only three children to play with, not counting her brother who was really too old and her sister who was really too young.

In school and college Miss Brown was interested in those writers who, in the '20s and early '30s, were experimenting with forms and techniques. She took a short-story course at Columbia but couldn't think up any plots. Then she decided to study at the Bureau of Educational Experiments in New York City, now known as Bank Street Schools. It turned out to be the first step toward her picture-book writing career.

Writing for young children looks easy. An entire book may contain 300 words of text, or even less. The words are simple. It is not as easy as it looks, however, because children are a merciless audience. An author of picture books may fool publishers and adults some of the time; the unavoidable test is what happens when the child hears the story. Most of Miss Brown's 53 books, put to this trial, are a rollicking success. Her "noisy books" (*The City Noisy Book*, *The Country Noisy Book*, *The Seashore Noisy Book* and *The Indoor Noisy Book*) are written in sounds and questions that bring the child into the story. They concern a small sightless dog, Muffin, who trots around hearing noises: an automobile's



GOES TO PLAY IN WOODS



MEETS TINY FUR ANIMAL



AND GOES TO BED PIGGYBACK

lived in a warm wooden tree." The fur boy is kind to fish and ladybugs, polite to his fur grandpa, comes home on time. Illustrations are by Garth Williams.

"awuurraawuurra," an airplane's "rrrrr," a frog's "Jugar jugarum," a vacuum cleaner's "mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm" or the hush of a very quiet custard. Nothing could be more fascinating to a four-year-old than listening to his parents' struggles with the vocal demands of the text or more hilarious than the books' surprise questions: "It began to snow. But could Muffin hear that?"

At the Bureau of Educational Experiments Miss Brown learned what will tickle small children, entertain, enchant and make them jump. The Bureau, a hotbed of progressive education theory directed by Lucy Sprague Mitchell, combines a model nursery school and student teachers' course. Miss Brown enrolled in the course and was soon offered a job on the publications staff. Her special duty was testing child reaction to writing for children, including some things of her own that Mrs. Mitchell had encouraged her to write.

It was not hard, when listening to one of her own stories read aloud, to tell when something adult or overwritten had crept in. In their own storytelling, moreover, "the little guinea pigs" suggested hundreds of ideas of things that they liked to hear about, favorite phrases and intriguing patterns of words. A certain Mollie, for example, aged two, dictated this classic poem* to a Bank Street staff member:

Remember the goldfish?
Remember?
Remember the Goldfish?

Goes round and round!
Umn!
Swims?
Umn!
Sleeps!
Umn!

Remember the goldfish?
Has no hands.
No.
Has no feet.
No.

Remember the goldfish?
Has no hands!
Remember the goldfish?
Has no hands.

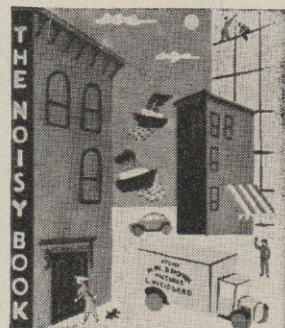
If it hadn't been for Bank Street and Mrs. Mitchell, Miss Brown might never have drifted into writing for children, yet her first solo

* From *Another Here and Now Story Book* edited by Lucy Sprague Mitchell. Published by E.P. Dutton & Co. Price \$2.50

CHILD'S BEST SELLER CONTINUED

book represented a protest against Bank Street doctrine. Mrs. Mitchell believes fervently that a child's first six years of literary experience should be entirely in accord with his personal experiences; that he should be read stories about the familiar sights, smells and sounds, postponing the traditional myths and classics, fairy tales and fables, for later on.

That premise pinched a little on Miss Brown's carefree imagination. Out of a Chekhov plot she made a story about an old, old lady with 17 cats and one little blue-gray kitten who lived alone by the



PUBLISHER: WILLIAM R. SCOTT, INC.

side of the sea and who, when the cold wind blew, was comforted by her kitten. Miss Brown tossed off the text, put it in the bottom of her desk and went off to Virginia for a week's vacation. While she was away one of her colleagues found the manuscript and took it to Harper & Brothers. They published it in 1937 without changing a word under the title, *When the Wind Blew*.

That was the first of Miss Brown's 53 books. Harper immediately published another of her stories, and at the same time Mr. Macrae of Dutton asked her to come and see him. "I had never seen a publisher before," Miss Brown says. "I was never more impressed." Mr. Macrae asked her to do a book for him. "How big a book?" Miss Brown asked. Mr. Macrae looked puzzled. "I mean," she explained, "how thick would it have to be?" Mr. Macrae said he thought a book of just ordinary thickness would do, and he sent an assistant for a sample.

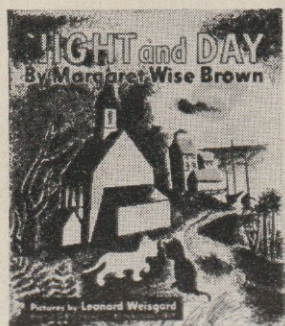
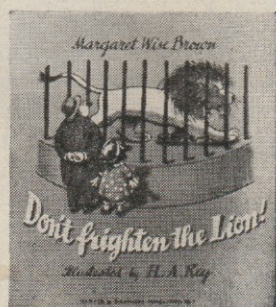
Miss Brown looked at it thoughtfully and decided it was all right for size. She was on the point of accepting the commission when Mr. Macrae brought up the subject of money by offering an advance and a 12½% royalty on retail sales. She didn't have the slightest idea what the figure meant, but instinctively asked for 15. That negotiation ended in the best contract Miss Brown has ever signed. In later deals, despite far greater bargaining power, she has always settled for less.

In 1938 a fledgling publisher, William R. Scott, went to his friend Mrs. Mitchell and asked her to be children's book editor for his firm. Mrs. Mitchell was too busy, but she suggested Miss Brown. "I went to lunch," Miss Brown says, "and stayed for four years." As a Scott editor Miss Brown quickened the pace of her output. Within a year four Brown books appeared. Miss Brown also worked on a remarkable volume, *Cottontails*, designed for children as young as 18 months. It was a tactile book, meant to be handled rather than read; the apple tree had red-glass buttons for apples, the bunny had a tuft of cotton for a tail and there was a bell on the cat's collar that really tinkled. In case the child, tired of playing with the book, tried to eat his literary fare that was quite all right because *Cottontails* was printed on untreated cloth with non-toxic dyes.

The "feely book" (as *Cottontails* was called) illustrates one of Miss Brown's writing principles: that it is valuable to appeal to all the senses of a very young audience. Five-year old children, she maintains, reach a peak of sensory awareness and she therefore likes the challenge of writing for them. After five, she says, the average child's perception, especially in touch, taste and smell, begins to dull. "Once in a great while," Miss Brown says, "a five-year-old retains his awareness and then he becomes either a painter, a writer or a poet."

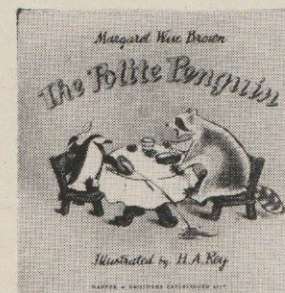
Miss Brown also knows from experiment that many children are more appreciative of art than their sense-blunted parents. Children do not feel obliged to interpret or explain and destroy thereby a painting's emotional content. Once Miss Brown was testing a series of abstract paintings by showing reproductions to a class of 4-year-olds. The teacher, coming in suddenly, gazed in astonishment at a big bold abstraction and said, "My goodness, what's that?" To which one small boy, with characteristic progressive school manners, replied impatiently. "It's a picture, you dope!"

William R. Scott, acting on Miss Brown's inspiration, asked



CHILD'S BEST SELLER CONTINUED

Gertrude Stein for a juvenile manuscript and got, as a result, the charming *The World Is Round* published by Stein command on rose-colored paper with blue ink. The day the manuscript arrived the Scott editors, Miss Brown, Mr. Scott and John McCullough, met at Miss Brown's Greenwich Village apartment to see what Miss Stein had produced. Miss Brown had forgotten to pay her electric bill and just as they were starting to read the lights went out, so she lit candles. As they read on it got late, so Miss Brown suggested that they eat something. The only thing in her kitchen was a giant cake in the shape of a boat which she had ordered for a sailing enthusiast friend.



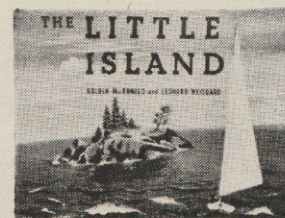
Miss Brown set the cake down before her friends and they had eaten well into the prow when her brother-in-law, Basil, a sober economics professor at Barnard College, arrived to return a borrowed vacuum cleaner. He opened the door and saw by the flickering light the three figures huddled around the boat. Miss Brown was reading aloud: "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 . . ." Basil dropped the vacuum cleaner and bolted out the door.

The first draft of a Brown book is usually written in wild, enthusiastic haste in almost unintelligible soft pencil on whatever scraps of paper are available; the backs of grocery bills, shopping lists, old envelopes. "I finish the rough draft in 20 minutes," Miss Brown says, "and then I spend two years polishing." She is currently polishing 23 books more or less simultaneously.

"A picture book," Miss Brown says, "must be dramatic, and much of the drama is in turning over the pages." One dramatic device, recurrent in the collected Brown works, is contrast. The biggest noise on the street, the fire engine, is immediately followed by the sound, if any, of the sun shining. The foghorn is followed by the flutter of little birds' wings, the whistle of the ocean liner by a sailboat sailing by. Miss Brown also thinks a book should include at least a couple of words too big and cumbersome for her youthful listeners, a theory which drives many child psychologists, teachers and librarians, professionally committed to safe and sane age-level word lists, into shocked outrage. Miss Brown loves to tuck in words like "sanctimonious" and "ruminating," phrases like "by the incredible velvet that grows on your nose, you are a rapscallion cat." "I once read a book in French to the Threes," says Miss Brown with a note of triumph in her voice. "They couldn't understand a word. They loved every syllable."

The success of a picture book depends heavily on its design and illustration. Often text is entirely subordinated to pictures. Part of Miss Brown's job is working with her illustrators, making sure that their work matches her idea and mood. An outsider, eavesdropping on such a conference, might hear something like this: "I like the rabbit, he has real sleepiness," "Yes, but I'm worried about the yarn; it loses personality and softness." "The chicken is fine. So many chickens have no feathers. But I'm afraid you've got buttons for daisies." "Let's drop a verse because that will give you a chance to move out into the color double-spread; we want plenty of air for the horses."



This kind of doubletalk is essential, probably, to Miss Brown's work. Perhaps her hobby of painting in oils, which she pursues with enthusiasm and incompetence, helps her understand the artist's problems. But she can be tough in demanding that the illustrations live up to her preconceptions and thinks relatively little of insisting that an entire set be redone.

In recognition, possibly, of the fact that her standards are high, Miss Brown voluntarily splits her royalties with the illustrator, a larger share of the kitty than most artists expect or writers will grant. Her only financial records are laboriously awkward penciled notes in the end pages of her desk-size check books. She draws



PUBLISHER: WILLIAM R. SCOTT, INC.

CHILD'S BEST SELLER CONTINUED

royalties on nearly 50 books, but has no idea when the checks are due and is surprised, whenever one arrives, as if somebody had given her an unexpected present. Her income, which currently is about \$10,000 a year, would be considerably larger if it were not for a series of spectacularly bad bargains she has made, selling her rights for token amounts or giving them away for nothing. She sold *Baby Animals* outright for \$150 because at the time she needed \$150 to buy a gray wolfskin jacket.

Except for clothes, champagne and flowers, Miss Brown hasn't much interest in spending money. She lives alone in a miniature 18th Century wooden farmhouse, Cobble Court, hidden away behind the houses in the East 70s in New York City and, in the summer, in a ghostly, isolated old house at Wharf's Quarry, Vinal Haven, Maine, which, because it is the only one of a few granite cutters' houses left standing, she calls The Only House.

It is hard to decide which place is more unlikely. No one would expect to find Cobble Court in the midst of Manhattan's bustle and brownstone. On the other hand it takes a flexible imagination to conceive of anybody voluntarily living in The Only House from May to October, considering that it might fall down any moment, that it has no bathroom, electricity, gas, heat, telephone or road and can only be approached by small boat or airplane. Cobble Court has a living room furnished in fur and a polished brick floor. But The Only House can match that with a second-story door which, from the inside, opens without warning onto a sheer drop of 20 feet into the sea.

Miss Brown also likes to grow trees indoors. For a while she had a green bay tree in her Greenwich Village apartment which she decorated like a Christmas tree with white gardenias or fruits in season, fooling many an arboreal ignoramus into thinking it, successively, a cherry tree, an orange tree, a pear tree, etc. Her favorite outdoor sport is beagling, an esoteric form of hunting. It consists of running cross-country in pursuit of a pack of beagles who, in turn, are supposed to be hot on the trail of Oklahoma jack rabbits especially imported for the chase. A beagler's object is to run fast enough to be in at the kill when the hounds finally catch up with their prey and, assuming that the pack has not torn the rabbit to bits before anyone can interfere, a successful beagler is rewarded by getting a rabbit's foot suitable for mounting. Miss Brown has several such gruesome trophies as evidence of her stamina and fleet-footedness.

Whenever anybody points out that beagling is an odd hobby for a girl who lives by writing books about the hopes and aspirations of small furry creatures, Miss Brown is likely to counter with: "Well, I don't especially like children, either. At least not as a group. I won't let anybody get away with anything just because he is little."

