

*The*

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# Literature

## *Stories to be Sung and Songs to be Told*

By MARGARET WISE BROWN

*Author of THE LITTLE ISLAND and other books for children*

IN the natural impulse to amuse and to delight and comfort very young children the song came first, I believe, and it still comes first. The picture book is but a recent development of those early songs that told a story.

A good picture-book story clearly shows its musical origin, for it can almost be whistled. I am speaking of the cadence and lilt that carries the story along from page to page. *THE THREE BEARS*, *THE THREE BILLY GOATS GRUFF*, *MILLIONS OF CATS*, *THE SING SONG OF OLD MAN KANGAROO*—all have their own melodies behind the storytelling. When such stories are told well, really told, their cadence and rhythm are a large part of their meaning.

A story with this quality that can almost be whistled is *THE STORY OF FERDINAND*, by Munro Leaf. It has a rhythmic pattern that I have heard little children echo in their own stories. Ferdinand, you remember, is a bull who, instead of being ferocious, loved quiet and gentleness and flowers. And his story is a plea for quietness, a plea as old as the Orient, and as young as children.

In this modern world where activity is

stressed almost to the point of mania, quietness as a childhood need is too often overlooked. Yet a child's need for quietness is the same today as it has always been—it may be even greater—for quietness is an essential part of all awareness. In quiet times and sleepy times a child can dwell in thoughts of his own, and in songs and stories of his own. Tranquillity is needed for that essential creative force in children that is behind their play and hence behind the growth of their thought. And so to come back to song.

The cradle, the rocking chair, the crooning mother holding her baby or comforting him through those endless griefs and joys of babyhood before he can communicate in that later rhythm called speech, the father jogging his children on his knee, the child swinging through endless years of rhythmic reflection in his swing, the breeze blowing children long ago in little hammocks under the fluttering leaves of trees, even the old-fashioned spanking had a rhythm all its own. Like these and a part of these were the little melodies in rhythm and words invented by Mother Goose. Mother Goose was perhaps but a name for

that affectionate instinctive nonsense of all mothers in amusing their little children. Ride a cock horse to Banbury Cross, or Hey diddle diddle—what is a riddle but the fastest rhyme in time? This last is nonsense which, if one wanted to translate into meaning, might mean that the perennial secret of Mother Goose is simply rhythm with a few simple rhymes and images thrown in. And in Mother Goose her meanings are one with her rhythms, safe in their own nonsense and so cannot be explained away.

But along with Mother Goose, what are some of the old rhymes that told a story?

SWEET AND LOW

THE LORELEI (my favorite at the age of six)

FORGET ME NOT

ONCE A LADY HAD A PIG

ONCE THERE WAS A LITTLE KITTY

YANKEE DOODLE

CHILDREN GO WHERE I SEND THEE

The list could be endless and each of us has his own list.

The song DIXIE was also a favorite story of mine. I thought Dixie Land and Sandy Bottom were two little girls. I envied them and cherished them, as a child does imaginary playmates, and I never understood why Dixie Land kept looking away, but that was just the way she was. I tell this story to show how unexpected and utterly different from an adult's is a child's enjoyment of a song.

A good song may be long but, taking our clue from Mother Goose and from children's own dictated songs and poems, most songs for children should be short. At the same time, they should have all the overtones of any real piece of writing or music. That is the only possible way they could come to mean something to the many different individuals that grownups and children are; and it is perhaps the reason adults have remembered so many of the

old songs to sing to their children.

And since a child is a person, with his own differences and uniqueness, there is a need for many songs. Children make their own journeys in their own way over that long road we call growth. But, although children differ widely from one another, they have been in this world only the same length of time and so they will always have much in common.

The old forms and songs have come down to us because they are still the easiest to catch and remember and sing.

Sally go round the stars,  
Sally go round the moon,  
Sally go round the chiminy pot  
Every afternoon.  
Boom!

This seems a charming form to me, as it must have to the children who have sung it for so many years.

Folk songs are the last stronghold of the singing story; and they are charming to children when sung by a folk singer of the caliber of Burl Ives, who has the genius and the simplicity always to sing a song

From Margaret Wise Brown's *The Little Fur Family*. Illustrator, Garth Williams. Harper's.



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for its own sake.

Too many children's records nowadays are done in a NOW WE ARE TALKING TO CHILDREN tone of voice. Children detect the sincerity or lack of it in a human voice very quickly. Burl Ives sings for children the same way he sings for anyone; that is why he is so good. He is interested in the song he is singing, and consequently the children who listen are interested in it too.

A song, whether it is one that you sing or one that you write, must come straight from the heart if it is to touch the hearts of others. Picasso once said that in order to paint a really good picture of a lemon you had to be in love with that lemon while you were painting it. This, I think, is true of the making of songs and poems.

I have always since I was a child written songs or sung poems to old tunes. Recently two or three musicians who read some of my poems asked if they might set a few of them to music and if I had any more poems they could choose from. I let them see a scrapbook in which I have hundreds of poems and doggerel, good and bad, that had come to mind when I was touched or amused or saddened by something.

A poem is the quickest thing you can write. It comes bursting out like a dream and the chief difficulty is to get it written down quick enough. As Keats said: "Let it come naturally as the leaves to the tree. Or let it not come at all."

The thing to do is to write it down no matter how silly it seems at the moment. For instance, driving down a road in Vermont:

Apple trees as pink as pie  
Like strawberry ice cream  
In the sky  
Burst on my  
Delighted eye.

I may read this again in a year or two

and tear it up. And so might you, with your own poem, but write it down anyway.

Sad songs are the ones most often put to music. Russell Patterson came in one day and found his wife, Ruth Cleary Patterson, sitting at the piano with tears streaming down her face as she played THE LOVE SONG OF THE LITTLE BEAR, for which she had just composed the music. I had written it originally for an old French Canadian folk melody and had marked it "already set to music." But she liked it so much that she made her own music for it, which I like better than the original folk tune.

Here is a Secret Song. It has no music yet and maybe it never will, but it is what I just wrote. And any author is usually more curious about what he has just written or is going to write than he is about his older writings.

### THE SECRET SONG

Who saw the petals  
drop from the rose  
I, said the spider  
But nobody knows

Who saw the sunset  
flash on a bird  
I, said the fish  
But nobody heard

Who saw the fog  
come over the sea  
I, said the sea pigeon  
Only me

Who saw the first  
green light of the sun  
I, said the night owl  
The only one

Who saw the moss  
creep over the stone  
I, said the grey fox  
All alone

I once started out to write a musical story for young children, which I called

# LOVE SONG OF THE LITTLE BEAR

WORDS BY  
MARGARET WISE BROWN

MUSIC BY  
RUTH CLEARY PATTERSON  
(ASCAP)

Handwritten musical score for the song "Love Song of the Little Bear". The score is written on ten staves. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 3/4 time signature. The melody is written on the upper line of each staff, while the accompaniment is written on the lower line. The lyrics are written below the melody. The song is in a simple, folk-like style. The lyrics are: BY THE CLEAR WA - TERS ONE MORN - ING IN MAY A LIT - TLE BEAR WAS SING - ING IN WORDS THAT SEEMED TO SAY IT'S A LONG TIME THAT I'VE LOVED YOU NEV - ER NEV - ER GO A - WAY IT'S A LONG TIME THAT I'VE LOVED YOU AND IF I SEEM TO STRAY IT'S ON - LY THAT I'M WATCH - ING THE FLOW - ERS BLOOM IN MAY IT'S A LONG TIME THAT I'VE LOVED YOU NEV - ER NEV - ER GO A - WAY THE BIRDS ARE SING - ING SWEET - LY THE ROB - IN AND THE JAY IT'S A LONG TIME THAT I'VE LOVED YOU NEV - ER NEV - ER GO A - WAY IT'S A LONG TIME THAT I'VE LOVED YOU NEV - ER NEV - ER GO A - WAY.

BY THE CLEAR WA - TERS ONE MORN - ING IN  
MAY A LIT - TLE BEAR WAS SING - ING IN WORDS THAT SEEMED TO  
SAY IT'S A LONG TIME THAT I'VE LOVED YOU NEV - ER  
NEV - ER GO A - WAY IT'S A LONG TIME THAT I'VE  
LOVED YOU AND IF I SEEM TO STRAY IT'S  
ON - LY THAT I'M WATCH - ING THE FLOW - ERS BLOOM IN  
MAY IT'S A LONG TIME THAT I'VE LOVED YOU NEV - ER  
NEV - ER GO A - WAY THE BIRDS ARE SING - ING  
SWEET - LY THE ROB - IN AND THE JAY IT'S A  
LONG TIME THAT I'VE LOVED YOU NEV - ER NEV - ER GO A -  
WAY IT'S A LONG TIME THAT I'VE LOVED YOU NEV - ER  
NEV - ER GO A - WAY

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MARGARET WISE BROWN and RUTH CLEARY PATTERSON

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THE FIRST STORY. This turned into a picture book with no music, but maybe there will be music set to it some day. In it I made the child's songs very simple and inconsequential, hoping that kind of song would make children feel like making up their own songs because they could do just as well or even better. I quote one the little girl sang to herself as she was going to sleep.

Close my eyes  
And go to sleep  
Bugs no more  
On grassblades creep  
Bugs no more  
And birds no more  
In the woods will  
Come no more.

I wrote the same intentionally casual kind of song at the end of *THE LITTLE FUR FAMILY*. The last line in it emphasizes this casualness and inconsequence.

Sleep sleep our little Fur Child  
Out of the windiness  
Out of the wild  
Sleep warm in your fur  
All night long  
In your little fur family  
This is a song.

From *The First Story*, by Margaret Wise Brown. Published by Harper & Bros.

These are silly simple songs that might make any child feel that he could do just as well himself. For though we give children songs and poems, the important thing is to encourage them to make up their own songs and poems. A child often calls a poem a song. And what is the difference, often, except that one is spoken for lack of music, while another is sung because there is some music?

The saddest thing I have heard for a long time is an old fisherman's remark: "What a pity it is to never hear anymore a woman singing at her work."

Yet the time may come again when people make up their own songs and sing them, when that oldest impulse of joy and sorrow is not so prefabricated as it is today. I should like to see strolling ballad singers go into the nursery schools, to show up suddenly at Story Time. I should like to hear singing stories, long ones that go on and on, stories that are sung as well as read to children. Maybe television will bring back the ballad singer. But most of all, how wonderful it would be to walk along the street and hear children putting their own thoughts to music, making up their own songs.

Its songs include the one beginning "Close my eyes." Illustrated by Marc Simont.

