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## Margaret K. McElderry and the Professional Matriarchy of Children's Books

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### ABSTRACT

A MATRIARCHY IS DEFINED AS "a form of social organization in which the mother is recognized as the head of the family or tribe, descent and kinship being traced through the mother; government, rule, or domination by women" (*Webster's New World Dictionary*, 1995). Focusing on renowned editor Margaret K. McElderry, this article develops the idea of children's book publishing as a field dominated by strong, often subversive, matriarchal leaders who have advanced the status, and enhanced the quality, of juvenile literature through an intricate female kinship structure. The birth and development of a relatively new genre has required binding ties in the face of a powerful patriarchal business society that viewed children's literature as unimportant and unworthy of major investment or recognition. The values, codes, and consolidation of the profession are passed on in stories that serve the function of, and bear many resemblances to, family narrative. Quotes without citations are taken from two interviews, the first with Susan Cooper on May 5, 1995, and the second with Margaret K. McElderry on June 22, 1995.

### INTRODUCTION

In both the oral and printed traditions of western culture, women have been the principal storytellers during children's early stages of development and often during their later stages as well. Although men have achieved classic status as collectors of stories in the oral tradition, a close look at the work of pioneers such as the Grimm brothers and Andrew Lang reveals how much each relied on female sources—the Grimm

brothers on various friends and relatives from whom they collected tales, and Andrew Lang on his wife and a bevy of assistants who translated and adapted selections to which he gave an editorial glaze for "his" fairy tale series (*The Blue Fairy Book*, *The Red Fairy Book*, *The Green Fairy Book*, and so on). In the popular imagination, these works became the Lang series or the Grimm tales, and the women became invisible.

### THE DELIVERY OF CHILDREN'S BOOK PUBLISHING

As the printed tradition of children's literature grew in the twentieth century, a publishing industry dominated by men relied almost entirely on women to develop books for children. With very few exceptions, publishing and consuming juvenile literature has been a matriarchy of cultural activity that has received little recognition outside a small professional circle. The first and greatest editors of children's books were women, as were the children's librarians from whose ranks many of those editors were drawn. In fact, the close association between children's book editors and children's librarians has approached, over the years, a kind of collaboration fostered by kindred ideals and economic priorities.

Many of these women have been accorded a secondary place in literary and educational history, partly because children's literature was assigned a secondary place, partly because of institutionalized sexism, and partly because the women themselves have often been—outside of their professional commitment—self-effacing, a trait that may also reflect traditional female roles. Yet women such as Louise Seaman Bechtel (Macmillan), May Masee (Viking), Ursula Nordstrom (Harper), and Margaret K. McElderry (Margaret K. McElderry Books) are legendary among children's literature specialists not as creators or critics but as midwives who deliver creations to critics young and old. Historically, of course, midwives have never been accorded much attention unless the baby dies (in which case they might get the attention of being stoned or burned at the stake). Because children's literature is healthy and thriving, we have, ironically, too often neglected the midwives delivering it. Their capacity to nurture creativity without abandoning critical objectivity and economic reality—all the while keeping a low profile in service of their authors and artists—has accounted for the maturation of children's literature in the United States since Macmillan established the first juvenile trade department in 1918. These women had a strong sense of community; their training ground often involved apprenticeship with an inspiring elder who passed on ideals and introductions to a professional network.

### RITEs OF PROFESSIONAL PASSAGE

In Margaret K. McElderry's case, by the time she accepted her first editing position as head of the juvenile department at Harcourt, Brace

and Company in November 1945, she had already studied with two pioneers in children's librarianship (storyteller Elizabeth Nesbitt and children's literature historian Elva Smith) at the first institution to train children's librarians, the Carnegie Library School in Pittsburgh. She had worked for nine years under the direction of three other eminent pioneers in the field, Anne Carroll Moore, Mary Gould Davis, and Frances Clarke Sayers of the New York Public Library (Moore was the first director of children's services; Davis, head of the storytelling department; and Sayers, the successor to Moore). Within three years of becoming an editor, McElderry had been featured in a *Publishers' Weekly* article (Fuller, 1948, pp. 1887-90) as a leading children's book editor but was still maintaining an active involvement in the ALA Children's Library Association—primarily a women's network—through her work on the Book Production Committee (McElderry, 1948, pp. 58-60).

By 1952, McElderry became the first editor to have published both the Newbery and Caldecott Award books in the same year. Newbery winner Eleanor Estes, significantly, had also been a children's librarian for many years. In profiling her award winning book *Ginger Pye*, McElderry (1952) characteristically mentioned the influence of others on Estes's work, including "her mother's gift as a storyteller" (p. 484) (more on mothers later).

The 1952 Caldecott book was *Finders' Keepers* written by Will Lipkind and illustrated by Nicolas Mordvinoff, an adventuresome Russian emigre whose first picture book about a boy and a cat had already tested the importance of McElderry's supportive network. A daring, innovative, and unexpectedly controversial creation called *The Two Reds* (brash colors, Communist colors!), it "was accepted by people whose opinion I valued," said McElderry from a later perspective.

Louise Seaman Bechtel, who was reviewing for the *New York Herald Tribune*, wrote: "The publication of this book restores one's faith in the experimental daring of American publishers." That sentence is engraved on my heart. Ursula Nordstrom, children's book editor at Harper, called me on vacation in Nantucket to tell me about the review. (McElderry cited in Marcus, 1994, p. 34)

Although FAO Schwartz canceled a window display of the book merely because its title might be misconstrued as having Communist implications and because Mordvinoff's very name raised suspicion during a period of Cold War paranoia, McElderry's network of women—including editors, critics, and librarians—supported her aesthetic commitment in vocal and powerful ways. After all, "Louise Seaman Bechtel's . . . was a name to conjure with in the field, she having been the first children's book editor ever in this country at Macmillan, and subsequently children's book editor for the *New York Herald Tribune*" (unpublished speech from the Otter Award dinner, March 10, 1995, in Oakland, California).

The fact that Nordstrom was a fiercely competitive rival for awards did not interfere with the kind of goodwill generated by an important regular meeting among children's book editors. With the exception of Vernon Ives at Holiday House, all of them were women.

We were very close then. . . . We met once a month for lunch, 15 or 20 women. It was fun and you talked about all kinds of things. And if, for instance, an author of Ursula got disenchanted for a moment—as one did—and called me and said "I'd like to change and publish with you," I said "well, that's very nice and complimentary, but I think really you are a Harper/Ursula Nordstrom person." Or if an artist called, you'd call that editor and say, "what about this?" We always did that. . . . We used to call each other, send flowers of congratulation. . . . Then you were friends with everyone.

McElderry is not only aware of the importance of the women's web of children's literature, she herself has never failed to pay vocal tribute to it, as in these instances spanning almost two decades:

Her career, Ms. McElderry said, "was most deeply influenced and molded by women—women who had practiced the art of survival in a man's world with eminent success." She named, in this connection, Amy Hewes, economics professor at Mt. Holyoke College; Elizabeth Nesbitt, gifted storyteller and teacher of children's literature at Carnegie Library School; the first Skinner Award winner, Anne Carroll Moore, pioneer in work with children at the New York Public Library, and her successor, Frances Clarke Sayers; Mildred Smith, for 35 years coeditor of *PW*, and fifth winner of the Skinner Award [now called the Woman's National Book Association Award]. (Grannis, 1975, p. 26)

Fifteen years later, McElderry cites some of the same women and adds others in a litany of influences:

A high point in my own aesthetic experience was a college course in the French Impressionist painters. Dotty Graves, the professor, conveyed her own passionate interest in these artists to her students. She taught us how to look, how to analyze the qualities of a painting without destroying our instinctive pleasure in it as a whole, how to identify the characteristics of each painter's work that made it distinctive. Those lessons remain applicable to any picture one looks at today. . . . We were trained and encouraged by Anne Carroll Moore to look for the best. . . . Frances Clarke Sayers, who succeeded Anne Carroll Moore as head of work with children, set up a splendid extra-curricular activity one season that was a great boost to "educating the eye." In her office in the 42nd Street Library once a week, a small group of us gathered after hours to learn as much as we could about graphics and printing and illustrating. (Unpublished speech for "The Educated Eye" ALA Preconference June 21-22, 1990, Chicago, IL)

Over and over again, McElderry expands on the roles of powerful women who collaborated to develop children's book publishing:

what a remarkable critical mind [Anne Carroll Moore] had and how wise and astute her vision was. It was she who encouraged publishers to establish separate children's book departments with a children's book editor in charge, instead of sporadically publishing a book for children if a well-thought-of writer for adults happened to write one. It was she who pushed for and achieved regular reviewing of children's books in newspapers and magazines.

It was she who saw the need and the great opportunity to reach out to the waves of immigrants flooding into New York from Ellis Island, hungry for the chance to give their children better lives, better educations, to whom free public libraries were an enormous gift....

Into Room 105, Miss Moore's office, came . . . May Massee of Viking Press; Helen Dean Fish of Stokes which then merged into Lippincott; Peggy Lesser of Doubleday; Bertha Gunterman of Longmans; Louise Raymond and later Ursula Nordstrom of Harper; Alice Dalglish of Scribner; Louise Seaman Bechtel followed by Doris Patee of Macmillan.... Of course, prominent librarians from other cities, and reviewers and critics of children's books, like Louise Seaman Bechtel in her later years, and Bertha Mahoney Miller of the *New York Herald Tribune* and *The Horn Book*, respectively, visited from time to time. (McElderry, 1992, pp. 160-61)

In paying tribute to the women's web, McElderry also recalls how subversive were many of the individuals:

Elizabeth Nesbitt always frothed at the mouth because it was a period when young men were being made directors of libraries and women infinitely more competent were being passed over or put second in command. She was feisty. She made no bones about what she thought of this sexism, and she was right. We all loved it and we all felt the way she did and egged her on, of course.... I don't remember her saying anything like this in classes because she taught storytelling and children's literature, but in conversation with her—I can see her face now—she had a terrific sense of humor, very dry, and these remarks would come out all the time. And you knew precisely what she meant. She was irreverent and it was very refreshing.

#### INTERNATIONAL NETWORKS: A COMMUNITY EXTENDED

The women's web is a worldwide web. Beginning with McElderry's awareness of other cultures through her parents' immigrant experience and her childhood trips to Ireland, she has crossed cultural boundaries with lifelong regularity. She refers often to the international aspects of visitors in Anne Carroll Moore's office ("Dr. Valfrid Munch-Peterson from Denmark was one such visitor who came more than once. She spent a lot of time studying our ways of working and then started something similar in Denmark" [McElderry, 1992, p. 161]); the importance of observing young and old immigrant patrons who crowded the New York Public Library; and the refugee artists and authors whom she met prior to World War II. It was through an Italian-American storyteller, Maria Cimino, in the 42nd Street Library (now the Donnell branch of the NYPL) that she met the author of the 1952 Caldecott Award book; Will Lipkind was married to Cimino and was a close friend of Nicolas Mordvinoff's.

After her work with the Office of War Information in London and Brussels during World War II, McElderry became one of the first children's book editors to make regular scouting trips to European publishers, writers, and artists. She was the first woman ever invited to lunch in the board room of Macmillan's in London—and this was the 1950s (McElderry, 1994, p. 374). Once international book fairs, such as in Bologna, were established, she became an enthusiastic participant, but her co-publishing network had already been well established, as was her supportive involvement with the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) (she served as a member of the Executive Committee of IBBY for several years as well as vice-president and president of the U.S. national section).

A meeting with the Empress of Japan in 1995 serves as a good example of an honor preceded by years of active web-weaving with professional women. It started in 1975 when McElderry published *The Maggie B.* with lyrical illustrations by Irene Haas. In 1978, Haas's book won the Owl Prize, a Japanese picture book award organized by Hisako Aoki for the nationwide chain of Maruzen Bookstores. In 1981, Haas again won the Owl Prize for her art in *Carrie Hepple's Garden*, written by Ruth Craft (1979), and McElderry traveled with Haas to Japan, meeting children's librarians, publishers, and writers. Among them were Tayo Shima, whom McElderry later introduced to Sybille Jagusch and who subsequently cataloged the Japanese children's books in the Library of Congress for a special exhibit, and Chieko Suemori. Through the years, McElderry's friendships deepened with these women and with Yoko Inokuma, who served on the executive committee of IBBY. Based on this long-term association—McElderry also served as a UNESCO consultant in a Tokyo meeting for Asian children's publications—it was only natural that Tayo Shima approach McElderry at the 1990 IBBY Congress in Williamsburg and ask her to look at a collection of the well-known poet Michio Mado's work translated by the Empress Michiko, whom Tayo had known for about thirty years since childhood (the Empress was a commoner before marrying into the imperial family). McElderry was impressed with the translated poetry, which Mitsumasa Anno (who won the 1984 Hans Christian Andersen Illustrator Award and whom McElderry had previously met in Japan) wanted to illustrate. In 1992, she published the book entitled *The Animals*, which contributed to an IBBY jury's selection of Mado for the Hans Christian Andersen Author Award in 1994. McElderry's meeting with the Empress at an Ambassador's reception led to the honor of an invitation to Japan for a private meeting with the Empress in 1995, but the foundation had already been laid by twenty years of sisterly networking.

The commitment of these Japanese women to international publishing and to Margaret McElderry as a representative of international publishing is in turn based on McElderry's half-century of work with translations. In 1949, she published a collection of Japanese stories called *The Dancing Kettle*, retold by Yoshiko Uchida, who also wrote several novels about her family's experiences in U.S. detention camps. In 1953, she

undertook the first children's book from wartime Germany to be published in the United States, Margot Benary-Isbert's *The Ark*. These books represented a distinct risk in terms of reception and consumption by a public alienated from recent wartime enemies and unaccustomed to children's books representing social crisis. *The Ark* was not only translated from German, it was, as McElderry described it, "a story of postwar Germany, filled with starving, homeless people trying to stay alive amidst the rubble. It gives an honest, realistic picture of the terrible aftermath of war in a defeated country" (McElderry, 1987, p. 244). This was a subject neither common nor popular in children's literature when the translation was published, a good decade before the 1960s "revolution" overturned traditional taboos. Yet, as in the case of *The Two Reds* mentioned earlier, the women's web supported McElderry and transformed potential controversies into awards and notable lists.

#### JUVENILE PUBLISHING AND MATRIARCHAL KINSHIP

In fact, the story of *The Two Reds* and its reception is a favorite McElderry touchstone and a good example of the way stories are used as reference points for a value system shared in the matriarchal network of juvenile publishing. The professionals involved in children's literature function very much like a family, with stories serving as family narrative to pass on values; like all folklore, family narratives reaffirm the values of a defined kinship. McElderry stories, honed by repetition in many ritualistic settings (such as ALA conference luncheons) long before they were written down, represent an oral tradition akin to family narrative. McElderry, who told stories on the radio station WNYC during her time with the New York Public Library, is a captivating storyteller with total recall for vivid detail. Her anecdotes were often shared with mentors, colleagues, and protégés before being circulated as published speeches or interviews. In print, they reached a broader audience and, though slightly varied from one iteration to the next, became part of a standard repertoire of in-group professional lore. These stories prove valuable in analyzing the sum and substance of juvenile publishing's matriarchal kinship structure. Another story set during McElderry's assistantship to Anne Carroll Moore and published in *School Library Journal* after many informal retellings further serves to illustrate this phenomenon.

As you will have guessed, the situation was extremely formal, and Miss Moore expected perfect discipline. . . . Marjorie Burbank [Anne Carroll Moore's senior assistant] always brought jelly beans to the office around Eastertime, and it turned out she could perform a remarkable feat. She could balance a jelly bean on the tips of her fingers, palm upward, then hit the heel of the palm with her other hand. This made the bean jump up into the air. Marjorie would then skillfully catch it in her mouth. Well, could I do that? No! The bean would always shoot off in the wrong direction and I'd have to scramble after it. Naturally, I was determined to master this trick which, incidentally, we never did if Miss Moore or Miss Davis, or anyone else, were around.

One morning, with great concentration, I placed the jelly bean just so, hit the heel of my hand smartly, and opened my mouth wide. Miraculously, the bean fell right into my mouth, but also right down my windpipe—and there it stuck. For a few seconds, my breath was cut off, and I knew I might die if I couldn't dislodge the jelly bean, but even greater than that fear was the fear that Miss Moore might suddenly arrive and find me gagging to death in the corner. (McElderry, 1992, pp. 159-60)

A story with similar motifs details the time McElderry, in competition with Marjorie Burbank to be first into the office every morning, hid in a coat closet and jumped out yelling "Boo," only to find herself confronted by the redoubtable Miss Moore (retold by Susan Cooper in an unpublished interview). Both tales reveal McElderry's playfulness, still one of her most characteristic features, but the subtext of the tales is the seriousness with which Anne Carroll Moore (often referred to by the initials ACM, always behind her back) took her work and, by extension, children's books as a professional calling. Popping jellybeans contrasts sharply with Moore's expectations of her protégés, and McElderry's story passes on this value even as she seems to defy it.

Another implication of the jellybean and closet stories is the sisterly relationship between McElderry and Marjorie Burbank: "I loved her. She was a very very good and caring librarian and reader, but she also had this wonderful nuttiness, which of course I guess I tied into very easily and quickly. She was just wonderful to work with, very protective of me as a young thing who didn't know up from down."

This protection was all the more important because "ACM was tough and partly ruled by fear." *Matriarchal* should not be confused with *maternal*. Bonds can imply bondage, and a matriarchy can and usually does involve power play and manipulative control as does any other kindred or community structure. Although children's book editorship, especially in McElderry's tradition, does often involve maternalistic and nurturing elements, as we shall discuss, many of the matriarchal figures who pioneered the profession were anything but maternal. "ACM, like any woman of that generation, had had to fight hard to be recognized, to have this kind of work recognized, and she won her battle. It was deathly serious to her, and ACM's word was law and God forbid that anyone would cross her. . . . She was a stern taskmaster who could strike terror into one's heart," says McElderry of ACM, who had a habit of clearing her throat in disapproval if an assistant misstepped or spent more than a moment on personal phone calls. "She was never maternal, I'll tell you that. If she liked you, fine; if she didn't like you, God help you." And while children's literature is filled with model elders making way for the future generation (a la Miska Miles's *Annie and the Old One*), matriarchs of children's literature have been sometimes notorious for not letting go. After her retirement, Anne Carroll Moore haunted the Central Children's Room to see that Frances Clarke Sayers was doing things right.

Inherent in the relationship between matriarchs and protégés was a tension between independence and compliance. Independence was a desirable characteristic by which young women—and potential successors—were often identified. For instance, McElderry recalls applying for a job in the New York Public Library: “I saw Miss Moore late on that morning and then had to drive back to Pittsburgh, at once. Later on, Miss Moore told me the reason she hired me was because she thought anyone who could drive so far alone must be all right!” (McElderry, 1992, p. 158). Yet compliance was demanded in strict measure and to the point of petty detail: “Miss Moore expected perfect discipline. It turned out I was the first person ever allowed to wear a dress with short sleeves in the summer—and the sleeves came right down to the elbows” (p. 159). Still, yet, in her search for prospective talent, Anne Carroll Moore was not confined by the professional restrictions of today’s job search: “Mrs. Rodzianko was also on the staff—a beautiful White Russian exile whom Miss Moore had met in Lord & Taylor, where Mrs. Rodzianko was selling dresses, and whom Miss Moore had the great good sense to lure to the library” (p. 158). Anne Carroll Moore’s mentoring style combined charisma with tyranny, and it made her a powerhouse.

She set high standards that were challenging to a young person starting out. If you played by ACM’s rules, you could learn a lot. I learned what critical discussion could be through the NYPL annual list, which I was allowed to type. We worked till 11 or 12 at night after our regular work all day. It was very exciting. You felt you were at the center of a small universe.

McElderry herself, though strong-willed, broke away from the rigid modes of control operating during her apprenticeship. Her ties with authors, illustrators, other editors and publishers, librarians, and her own staff have been close, personal as well as professional, and marked with a levity informed perhaps by the jelly-bean trick. She speaks with affection as well as pride about her staff—i.e., Emma Dryden, currently an editor at McElderry Books and the assistant editor, Tracey Schatvet, who is the granddaughter of one of McElderry’s classmates at Mt. Holyoke College and who came highly qualified with experience as a college intern at various publishing houses.

Emma Dryden, who studied poetry at Vassar with Nancy Willard, is very good. These people have it in them. It’s not something you can give them. She becomes more and more sure of herself as she undertakes new writers and projects. She would perhaps do things differently from the way I would, but she makes very nice connections with European publishers, and with our authors and illustrators. It’s not so much what the editor gives to the assistant, but the editor has a chance to recognize in that person qualities that will make a good editor and then encourages her to feel more assured and get on her own feet. It’s a fine line to walk because I realize I’m a strong personality and I don’t want to hang over somebody too much because that would be terrible, but it’s very exciting to see someone come along that way. I’m so blessed with Emma and Tracey. It gives you such joy to see someone who cares this much. Tracey loves publishing and she works so hard and knows what she’s doing and I can trust her with everything.

McElderry nurtures her relationships as warmly as she recalls being nurtured—and it is clear from frequent allusions that her own mother played a significant role in shaping McElderry's aesthetic sensibilities, even in mundane everyday aspects such as dressing: "I feel sure that having clothes bought for a child by her mother is an important early factor in the development of taste. In my case, we bought clothes that were never gimmicky, that would not go out of style quickly. In other words, a certain sense of values underlay the decision to buy. Something classic was preferred over something faddish" (Unpublished speech for "The Educated Eye"). Although this remark refers to the foundations of McElderry's artistic perception, she also tells of early encounters with narrative while begging her mother to tell a story.

My mother was a real reader, meshed into this whole world of books and stories. She had been a teacher and loved working with children. She used to do volunteer work in New York in a settlement house. She somehow knew a lot of the old folktales, and when she would be gardening I can remember following her around, and she'd dig up worms, and I couldn't bear worms, and I'd have to get out of the way, and she'd tell a story, but it would be endless because she'd get involved in her digging and planting, and I'd say "*Go on, go on, what happens next?*" And then she'd pick up and go on.

### PROCESS AND PRODUCT

The question of what happens next is central to the literary process that McElderry so intricately negotiates and is more complex than it may seem. Just as readers often read to discover what happens next, writers often write to discover what happens next. The exception is formula fiction, in which it is all too clear what's going to happen next; writers receive tip sheets from publishers outlining the narrative requirements of a series and readers brook little variance. Most serious writers, however, experience surprise as the story takes on a life of its own, surprise as to what happens, how it happens, and to whom. It is perhaps this element of surprise to which McElderry refers when she singles out the element most important to her selection of manuscripts:

It's something that makes me sit up, not literally but figuratively. I feel myself suddenly sitting up very straight thinking oh, there's something here. That something obviously has to be different in each manuscript, and yet I suppose the criteria are basically the same: a quality to the writing, and then I suspect it's often a character who begins to catch your attention, so that you're interested enough to want to know who this person is and what's going to happen. And in fiction, which is mostly what I've published, there has to be very quickly a sense of involvement in some kind of a plot, although it doesn't have to be a dramatic plot. But then you go on hoping that whatever has caught you to begin with will continue and hold you through to the end. I'm always afraid it will fall apart somewhere down the line—and then what?

Good storytelling makes you care enough to be curious, whether you are the writer, the reader, or the editor. It is clear that for McElderry, the questing for what happens next survived the challenge of earthworms and developed into a lifelong pursuit guided by knowledge, experience, and spontaneous reaction.

It's a gut instinct, really. I am not an intellectual. I can't analyze and give brilliant reasons for anything. But I know these elements and then, when I've finished, think, yes, this has something to say for a certain group or for all ages, something that I can enjoy. . . . I found myself howling with laughter over a modest-looking book, *The Exiles*, sent to me by an English publisher. It's terribly funny and I thought, maybe I'm dopey and it just hit me the day I read it because I needed to be made to laugh; but I said yes, I would like to publish it in the U.S. I was so pleased because library people began calling me and saying who is this, where did you get it? So I knew it was touching other people, too.

Of course, *instinctive* should not be confused with *impulsive*. Editing, by its very nature, requires meticulous attention rather than impetuous abandon. There is a fine-honed craft involved. One of the intriguing points to emerge from McElderry's own discussion of her work is the degree to which creative editing and acquisition resemble creative writing and illustration. In describing the development of her artistic eye, McElderry shows the same vivid sense of childhood recall as do many of the best picture book creators.

The one movie I seem to remember . . . Way Down East . . . was hilariously funny in certain scenes and that sense of fun and laughter has stayed with me. Some people may be horrified to hear that the picture book that made the single strongest impression upon me as a child is one that has been criticized and condemned for years as harmful to children—*Struwelpeter* (or *Cruel Peter*) which I had in translation. I loved it! What cautionary rhymes they are—about Little Johnny Head-in-the-Air who walked along briskly, looking up and never down at where he was going and so walked straight into the river, or Harriet who would play with matches and one day was consumed by the fire she set. The illustration is clear in my mind still: a little heap of smoking ashes surrounded by a circle of Harriet's cats, each with tears dropping down from its eyes. Fidgety Phil who wouldn't sit still at table and ended up with his chair going over backwards while the tablecloth and everything on it was dragged down on top of him is also etched forever in my mind's eye. A detail from a Randolph Caldecott picture stays with me, too, but from which book I don't know. A little boy was bit in the leg by a mad dog. There, clearly, one saw a half-moon-shaped bite taken out of the boy's calf! And, of course, the Katzenjammer Kids! They were the comic book favorites of my childhood—always in trouble, always outrageous, always funny, to my friends and me. (Unpublished speech for "The Educated Eye")

As an editor, McElderry ascribes deep importance to early impressions and maintains a balance between intuition that is rooted in primary emotional experiences and critical acumen that is acquired through training and later cognitive development. Her perceptivity suggests a creative spectrum across activities that we often tend to categorize arbitrarily: artistry versus criticism; those who act versus those who react. In fact, the reaction can be just as creative as the action but takes a different form—and usually a different ego, one willing to work anonymously in relationship to the top-billed creator. There exists, of course, as great a variation of creativity among editors as there is among authors and illustrators, but here we are considering the most innovative and creative of each sector.

McElderry's editorial creativity involves drawing out other people—usually the best in other people—and she does this socially as well as professionally with courteous but intense conversational interest that attracts, almost extracts, stories. One of the traits most useful to her acquisition of new talent is empathetic curiosity (also crucial to the question of “what happens next?”). Curiosity leads her to uncovering new creators and taking risks on what they can or will do. Implied in the solicitation of stories is a mind open enough to hear them told. An editor's most critical task is active and informed listening or, in the case of illustration, looking.

The next step after acquisition and selection is articulating textual or artistic problems without necessarily telling the creator how to solve them, since creative works are apt to grow in new directions during the process of revision. Constructive definition requires acute interpersonal sensitivity of the kind that women traditionally—and according to recent research, scientifically—tend to excel in through genetic and socialization patterns. (Some of the most striking research on women's innate sensitivities to others' expression of feelings and to language itself has been done at the University of Pennsylvania by Ruben and Raquel Gur, using PET scans to track brain activity. Sally and Bennett Shaywitz at Yale, Richard Haier at University of California-Irvine, and other neuroscientists have also done brain-imaging studies that support or complement the Gurs' studies.) The trick of interacting with vulnerable writers and artists, identifying flaws in a supportive way without overdirection, and cultivating the development of creativity within the constraints of economy is all requisite diplomacy for egalitarian editors. It is a diplomacy to which women have proved particularly well suited after winning their way into a primarily male enclave, publishing, through the back door of publishing for children.

Nurturance is a prime element in the editorial process. Whether or not children's book editors had children—and many of the earliest did not—they seem to have viewed each book as a child to be developed, nourished, and then let go into the world to make its own way. McElderry describes this process with generative imagery: “In reality, the editor is a

midwife who assists the author in bringing the manuscript to life as a book. . . . each book that stems from a true creative impulse, a true desire to share knowledge or humor or adventure or joy in life and people, is endowed like a human being, in that it has its own particular life story, each as different and individual as are people” (McElderry, 1962, pp. 508, 514). Writers and artists fostered by such visionary editors, who are becoming fewer as corporate publishers increasingly value accountants over *littérateurs*, tended to stay with them in relationships marked by loyal trust on both sides and by a synergy of professional and personal involvement. “The relationship of editor and author or illustrator is—at its best—immensely close and personal, for one is dealing with the elusive stuff of creation closest to the creative person’s heart . . .” (p. 508). There was rarely an agent or lawyer involved at any stage, from submission to contract to publication, and the names on a backlist matched those of the latest season’s catalog with a few carefully chosen new arrivals from time to time.

Of course, the intense relationships between a fervent editor and individualistic authors/artists are fraught with larger-than-life encounters. Mordvinoff once went down on his knees before McElderry in a hotel bathroom to beg forgiveness for offending Eleanor Estes by not showing up at a celebration dinner for her and for him, the two award winners. McElderry had rebuffed his earlier apology on the phone with a brusque “I don’t care if you did” (when he reminded her that he had won the Caldecott [McElderry in Marcus, 1994, p. 39]). McElderry hastens to note that the bathroom locale, an unusual meeting place, was the only private and unoccupied spot at the crowded reception going on in the publisher’s suite.

Through McElderry as intermediary, authors/artists also got to know each other and develop stimulating friendships; or, as happened frequently, authors/artists led McElderry to promising new candidates for her list—Lucy Boston, for instance, introduced her to Warwick Hutton’s work and, more recently, Myra Cohn Livingston to Janet Wong’s. McElderry’s gift for friendship is braided with a gift for editorship that allows her to value each individual while maintaining enough detachment for the kind of objective evaluation critical to publishing.

#### STRANDS OF WEB: MARGARET McELDERRY AND SUSAN COOPER

Susan Cooper, a writer whose fantasy series, *The Dark Is Rising*, has garnered many awards (including the Newbery for *The Grey King* in 1976) and a worldwide readership, speaks dynamically about the kind of partnership she has had with McElderry for thirty years. After acquiring Cooper’s first children’s book, *Over Sea, Under Stone*, through her British publishing connections in 1965, McElderry received the manuscript of an adult novel, “The Camp,” from Cooper with a letter asking her to

assess it. "Could you tell me what's wrong with this? Nobody wants to publish it because it's about a kid." McElderry replied that there was nothing wrong; it was a children's book, which she would love to publish—and did in 1970 under the title *Dawn of Fear*. "After that," says Cooper, "I went to New York and we had lunch and fell in love instantly."

It was one of those sympathetic things where you just talk and talk and talk and it was simultaneously the beginning of the professional relationship and of friendship, which I imagine it is quite often with Margaret. The fabric of her life and of her emotions and imagination is woven of her authors and illustrators, who are also her friends. She has network upon network of friends. There are the IBBY friends, the author friends, the professional world friends. Her life is really work, and many of the friends have come to her through work. She has such a gift for friendship, and she shares the friends. You'll have lunch when you haven't seen her for a couple of weeks and she's met some new person and she knows their life story. She tells you their life story.

With McElderry on a tour through Australia, Susan Cooper met Patricia Wrightson, Joan Phipson, and—later, in New Zealand—another McElderry author, Margaret Mahy.

I think I'm just part of her family. We all are. . . . She's like my big sister, which is another way of saying maternal I suppose, but it's not a pushy nurturing. It's "I should be delighted if you do another book," but it's not push, push, push to do the next book. . . . It's as if she's a mother without any of those sinister connotations of strong mothers, not being able to let go. . . . She's a boat builder, into the business of launching and letting go.

McElderry has an interesting corollary view: "Editors," she says, "recognize that creative work comes out of a complex life and personality. A purely literary relationship is not enough to understand where writers and artists are coming from, what kind of support they need." Cooper's writing, of course, generated and continues to feed the personal friendship. Says McElderry of Cooper: "It's very hard for me to say where the professional ends and the personal takes over. It stems from that core of her creativity." Says Cooper of McElderry: "She wouldn't publish anyone whose writing she didn't love." McElderry is unerring in detecting problems and judicious in leaving corrections up to the writer. Often a crack reveals related problems that make a change obvious to the writer once the editor has identified stress points. McElderry's arguments with Cooper, however, are rarely over anything more substantial than punctuation. Nevertheless, punctuation can loom important to a writer and an editor. Says Cooper: "You score prose. It's like music, and copyeditors all make these academic changes and make it sound wrong. I don't give a hoot about the rule book, and Margaret's very tolerant of that." Says

McElderry, "She's impossible." Over every manuscript they sit down together with a list of questions.

Most of Margaret's lists are about punctuation and pointing out repetitions. When she first read *The Dark Is Rising*, she said, "Susan, there is much too much *weather* in this book. Voom, thunder and lightning and blizzards." There's still too much, but we took out some of it. . . . I write very slowly and I don't rewrite very much. I do a rough and a smooth and the smooth is what goes to Margaret. She has only once that I remember made a structural suggestion. It was in the last of the *Dark Is Rising* books, *Silver on the Tree*, where she said I think you need another couple of chapters elaborating *x*. And I went away and wrote the couple of chapters, slightly against my better judgment, but I thought, this is Margaret, I will do what she says. And when I had written them, she read them and said "No, I was wrong." . . . She has turned down two of my picturebook texts, though. She said "No, these don't work," and she was absolutely right. They didn't.

Cooper, who has succored McElderry through two knee replacement surgeries and a heart attack, attributes their successful relationship partly to humor. "When I think of Margaret, I think of laughter. We laugh like idiots." Stories about disastrous events suddenly seem funny in the telling. "You realize as you get older that there's a perpetual mythologizing. You watch real lives becoming stories. And people make their own stories by the things that they remember, the way they tell stories and the vision they have of themselves."

Like the close relationship McElderry nurtured with women in Japanese children's literature, the close relationship she nurtured with Cooper is based on the telling of stories, in person and in print—two traditions that continue to foster each other in the waning childhood of children's literature. "It's a tremendously rich exchange of life stories and personal stories and shared friendships," says McElderry. "Anything I have to say comes out of the creative people I work with. What I say is only what I've been given; it's riches that pour from them to me. I don't have anything to say that I haven't said 50 times over." Of course, good stories get better with repetition. Because McElderry is a teller of stories, an editor of stories, and a subject of stories, her personal anecdotes reveal unexpected and often funny scenarios of children's book history: "I met my husband, Storer Lunt, through Anne Carroll Moore. She and his mother were best friends and distant cousins. He would say, 'Good afternoon, Miss McElderry,' with ACM listening behind her screen."

#### CREATIVITY AND CRITERIA

The wealth of relationships to which McElderry constantly refers are reflected in her seasonal catalogs over five decades. Susan Cooper's works are particularly good representations of McElderry publications, which

are rich in fantasy by Nancy Bond, Clare Bell, Lucy Boston, Edward Eager, Andre Norton, Mary Norton, Margaret Mahy, Patricia Wrightson, and many others. Particularly in respect to folklorically influenced fantasy, the lore McElderry heard from her mother paid off, as well as in picture-book folktales illustrated by artists such as Felix Hoffman, Feodor Rojankovsky, Erik Blegvad, and Warwick Hutton. Of course, there has been much distinguished realistic fiction on McElderry's backlists—including Elizabeth Enright, Eleanor Estes, Virginia Sorenson, James Houston, Yoshiko Uchida, Joan Phipson, and the versatile Margaret Mahy—as well as nonfiction. The literary analysis of books published by McElderry is beyond the scope of this article, but the overall pattern has, like McElderry, a kind of legendary resonance. She attracts larger-than-life stories because she has a larger-than-life sense of story, which is coupled with a surprisingly humble sense of self. Susan Cooper—whose mother, like McElderry's, was a teacher—describes the paradox of women with contradictory personal and professional natures:

She's such a mixture of strong and modest—feeling that she's a shy, noncharismatic person of no great presence. She even does what my mother used to do, which used to make me crazy, saying oh well, they won't be interested in somebody like me, whereas Margaret's really this strong funny brilliant accomplished professional person. She does feel both things at the same time. She's the strong woman running the office and she's modest outside it. My mother was a teacher—I remember once when I was about ten, going into the classroom and watching her and thinking *that's not my mother!*

For all her cultivation of creativity, McElderry is as stern in her standards as ever was Anne Carroll Moore. She will reject a manuscript from her favorite and most famous and/or promising author if it falls short of high quality. "You gulp before you disappoint someone you've invested in, but a good writer will pick up on criticism and do something with it in a very intelligent way." One of her stories involves a confrontation with Carl Sandburg, early in her career during the mid-1940s, when he vented his fury on her for rejecting two stories for children. She offered her resignation to Mr. Brace (one of the founders of Harcourt Brace) who refused it, and Mr. Sandburg's stories went unpublished. During the 1990s, more than one editor has been swayed by best-seller figures to contract for a second-rate children's book from a first-rate writer of adult books (with exceptions such as Penelope Lively and Paula Fox, who have long track records in writing both juvenile and adult fiction, it is rare to find writers equally gifted in the two areas). Yet McElderry is a business woman who must turn a profit on her high standards. She is in the paradoxical position of selling dreams without selling them short or selling out, and she has been a commercial success by proving that, in the long run, good books make a profit.

William Jovanovich, whose ascension at Harcourt, Brace and Company triggered McElderry's leaving in 1971, badly underestimated her profit potential. Without a clue to the professional or financial nuances of children's book publishing, he fired her in spite of her successful twenty-six years as Editor of Children's Books at Harcourt, Brace (the two men delegated to dismiss her explained that "the wave of the future has passed you by"). She was forthwith invited to join Atheneum as Consulting Editor and Director of Margaret K. McElderry Books—the first children's book editor to have her own imprint. Naturally, the award-winning authors and illustrators with whom she had maintained such close ties, Susan Cooper among them, went with her from Harcourt to Atheneum. In 1985, Scribner/Atheneum (two independent companies that had joined forces to survive) was bought by Macmillan, which was bought in turn by Robert Maxwell and then sold in 1994 to Simon & Schuster, where McElderry is Vice-President and Publisher of Margaret K. McElderry Books. Corporate takeovers have characterized publishing in the more recent years of McElderry's career, but her imprint has remained stable throughout the transitions—a feat, considering most mergers involve firing squads. She has eloquently addressed the balance of the real and the ideal.

Publishing is a business, a commercial venture, which must succeed in selling the books it chooses to publish in order to continue to choose and publish more books. It cannot exist without paying its way; it is not an altruistic venture. An editor may be given his head to choose what he believes in, but he will also—in time—lose his head, figuratively speaking, if his choices too often end up in the red on the publisher's balance sheet. And yet, dollars and cents are by no means the total picture of publishing. It is a profession as well as a business—books are more than a commodity—and as such, publishing has certain responsibilities which it must accept. (McElderry, 1962, p. 505)

The most visionary of editors must survive in a fiercely competitive arena where there are few margins for error—costs are high, the market is tight, and print runs for hardcover children's fiction, nonfiction, and picture books are small.

It's harder than ever to develop new authors now because the market has gone down for hardcover YA and middle-grade fiction. The wonderful independent books stores are threatened by big chains. And competition from CDROMs makes an editor more selective. It may be harder to take a chance on a book that's a beginner's but is someone you think has a chance to develop.

In detailing her routine, McElderry (1962) says that "the editor's daily life is filled with detail and decision" (p. 506), but clearly hard-headed does not have to mean hard-hearted: "This is the realm of intangibles, of

aesthetics, of the evaluation of quality. There are no rules, no concrete criteria. . . . The pursuit of such experimental excellence, to give it a name, is perhaps the most hazardous, but the greatest adventure in publishing, for it is concerned with dreams rather than with dollars, perfection rather than profit" (p. 514).

#### A CONTINUITY OF COMMITMENT

Books that McElderry has edited or published have won the most prestigious awards in children's literature: the Newbery, Caldecott, Mildred Batchelder, Boston Globe/Hornbook, Hans Christian Andersen, Canadian Library Association Book of the Year, Carnegie Medal, NCTE Award for Excellence in Poetry, IRA award for best first novel—a number of these several times over. She herself has been selected for the Constance Lindsay Skinner Award (now called the Woman's National Book Association Award); an honorary doctorate from Mt. Holyoke College; a lifetime honorary membership in IBBY; the Literary Market Place Corporate Award; the Hope S. Dean Memorial Award by the Foundation for Children's Books; election to the YWCA Academy of Women Achievers; deliverance of the May Hill Arbutnot Honor Lecture; the Curtis Benjamin Award for Creative Publishing by the Association of American Publishers; and the Northern California Children's Booksellers Association Otter Award. At this last function, during which she was introduced by Susan Cooper, McElderry was given a standing ovation before speaking a word—patent homage to a half century of high quality. Her books had already spoken for her.

Perhaps the biggest tribute to Margaret McElderry's professional attainments is the significance they have for children's book publishing as a whole. It is difficult to write about one without considering the implications for the other. The fifty years that include McElderry's work at Harcourt and subsequent establishment of her own imprint at Atheneum/Macmillan/Simon and Schuster span the most dynamic period of growth in the history of children's literature. Her contributions to that literature have both reflected and shaped its development, a development largely dependent on the strong women who nurtured it. McElderry's commitment, work, and influence represent a pattern typical of the field's professional leadership, yet she is exceptional in her individuality and achievement.

"She is absolutely indomitable," says Susan Cooper. "Even when she has down times, there's always a positive side. She reminds me of that saying we used to have on the wall when I was a kid in England, a quotation from Queen Victoria: 'We are not interested in the possibilities of defeat. They do not exist.'"

#### CONCLUSION

What are the implications of identifying children's book publishing as a matriarchy? How does such a kinship function differently from the old boy network? The answer to these questions begins with the recognition of how

rare a professional matriachy is and how rarely it is acknowledged. In her essay "Biographical Research: Recognition Denied," Laurel Grotzinger (1983) documents the exclusion of women from the history of librarianship, a field dominated numerically, but not administratively, by women. How much more have women been excluded from publishing history, where attention has been focused on key figures such as Maxwell Perkins, Robert Gottlieb, Michael Korda, Frank Morley, and other editors and/or publishers who inherited a long-established, male-dominated occupation? The recognition of children's book publishing as a matriarchal enclave within a patriarchal system also shows the second-class citizenship of children's literature; women were allowed a domain of power that seemed unthreatening and, to some extent, unimportant. Children have always been "women's work" in a patriarchal society.

Beyond the importance of recognition is the analysis of effects. How has the literature itself been affected by a dominance of female writers, editors, librarians, and readers (girls read more than boys, especially more fiction, which is the canonical backbone of children's literature)? Are narrative patterns and social attitudes influenced by such a heavy gender dominance? Are there some differences between adult's and children's literature that may be attributable to gender differences in the two publishing arenas? To some extent, stories seem to affect, if not shape, us. If stories to a degree shape us, do young readers with innate and developing gender differences sense and respond to gender differences in a body of literature directed at them?

These questions matter profoundly in any consideration of social politics: "[E]ssential to a more liberating history is an understanding of the relationship between female and male roles at a given time that can only be achieved by writing women and men into library history together," says Suzanne Hildenbrand (1983, p. 389). That statement applies to more than library history but is certainly crucial to the history of children's book publishing, which developed in utero as a twin venture with children's librarianship.

Generalizing about gender differences is always a danger, but not one that should prevent us from studying them. In describing a region of Northeast India that has recently attracted media attention because of violent ethnic upheavals, *New York Times* writer Sanjoy Hazarika (1995) reports gender struggles as well:

The changes, fueled by a communications revolution that enables people to look into worlds thousands of miles away, is placing pressure on the Khasi community about the future of one of their revered traditions.

This is the matrilineal system under which the youngest daughter inherits the entire family estate. In addition, after marriage, the husband shifts to the wife's home and their children take the mother's surname.

Some Khasi men are questioning this tradition and seeking changes that will enable them to inherit property too. (p. A6)

Occasionally, the significance of sociocultural patterns is easier to see from a distance or from a reversed position. Can there be any question that changing gender roles will affect tradition bearers in the Khasi community? Can there be any question that gender roles have affected tradition bearers in our own?

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