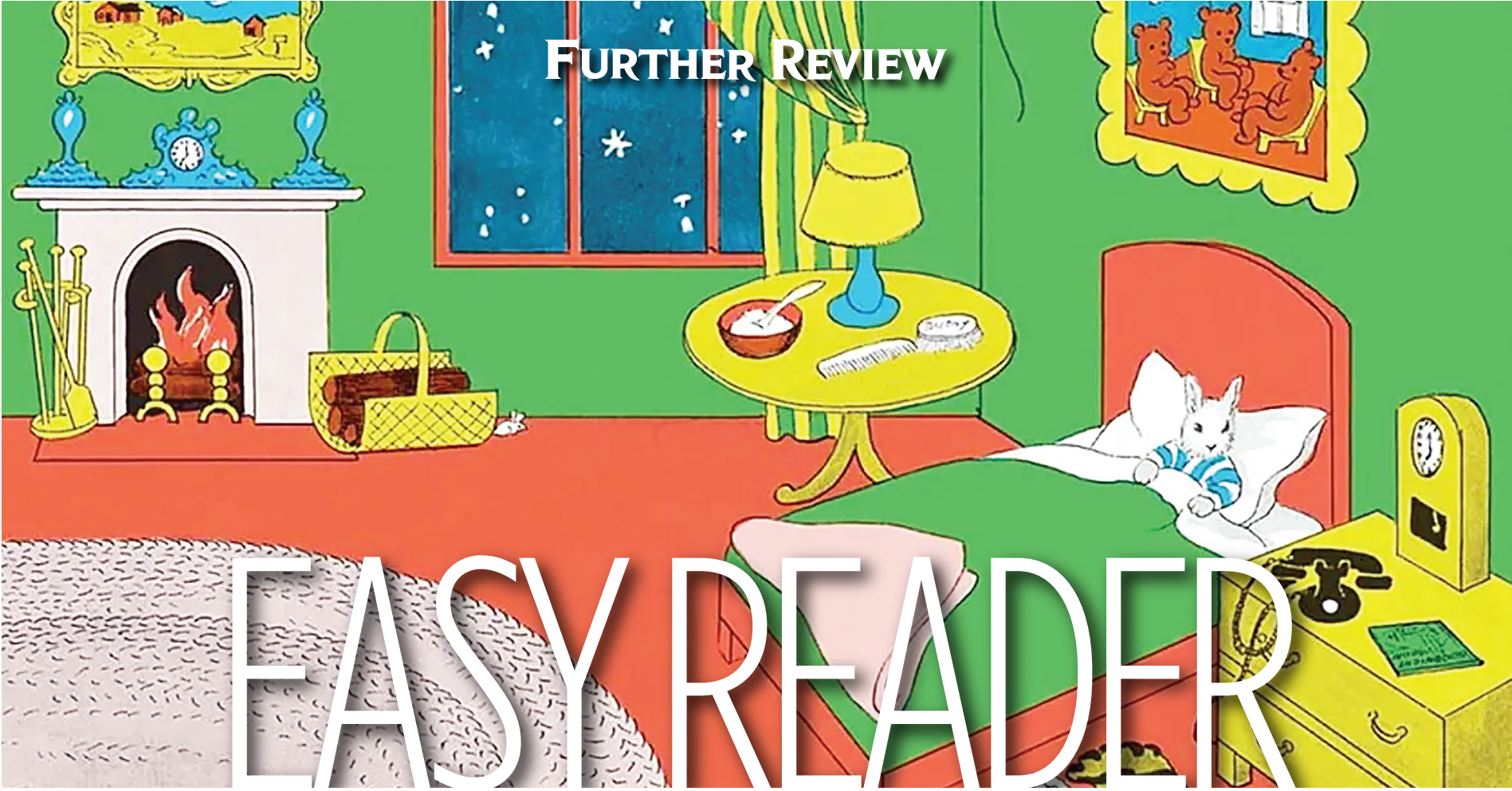




FURTHER REVIEW

EASY READER

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

If you have ever been tasked with reading to young children at bedtime, then, most likely, you saw the artwork above and can cite the words by heart: “Goodnight comb. And Goodnight brush. Goodnight nobody. Goodnight mush.”

“Goodnight Moon” by Margaret Wise Brown was published 75 years ago. It’s been a nightly ritual for millions of preschoolers ever since.

SHE PUSHED BOUNDARIES — WITH BOTH HER ART AND HER LIFE

As a young child, Margaret Wise Brown developed the custom of bidding goodnight to all the toys in the nursery she shared with her sister.

So perhaps it isn’t surprising that, 37 years later — after Brown had established herself as a prolific children’s book writer, publishing dozens of books under multiple publishers and some of them under pen names — Brown would return to that theme.

“Goodnight Moon” went on sale on Sept. 3, 1947, for \$1.75. The New York Times wrote it “should prove very effective in the case of a too wide-awake youngster.”

But the book wasn’t terribly successful at first, selling only 6,000 copies. By 1951, the publisher was considering letting it fall out of print.

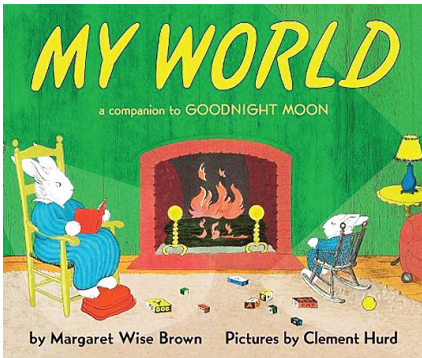
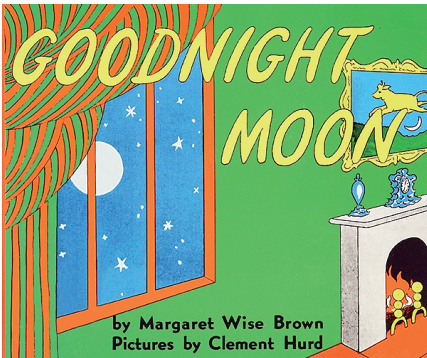
A big reason for the poor reception was opposition by Anne Carroll Moore, head of the children’s division of the New York Public Library and an enormous figure in children’s literature at the time. A traditionalist, Moore pushed books like those by Hans Christian Anderson and Beatrix Potter and scoffed at newer, more modern children’s fare that was invading the market. She dismissed “Goodnight Moon” as “overly sentimental.”

It wasn’t until the post-war baby boom — all those babies needed a soothing, hypnotic bedtime tale — that sales of “Goodnight Moon” took off. Five years ago, Smithsonian magazine reported sales had surpassed 48 million copies.



Margaret Wise Brown and a friend

BROOKLYN MUSEUM VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



The covers of “Goodnight Moon” and its 1949 sequel, “My World.”

Brown herself was a most interesting figure. She was a strong-willed woman who quit her day job at age 22 to write children’s books full-time.

She was also attracted to both men and women in an era when such a thing was unheard of for a public figure. In 1940, Brown met playwright

and poet Michael Strange — whose birth name was Blanche Oelrichs and who was the former wife of actor John Barrymore — while they were both visiting the home of a married man with whom they were each having an affair.

They soon moved into adjacent apartments and openly lived and entertained as a couple until Strange’s death from leukemia in 1950.

Not long afterward, Brown met James Stillman Rockefeller Jr., great-nephew of J.D. Rockefeller of Standard Oil fame. They made plans to get married and then to celebrate with a trip around the world.

She never got to enjoy that honeymoon. First, Brown had to travel to France on business. While she was there, she developed appendicitis, was hospitalized and recovered.

On Nov. 13, 1952 — the day she was to be released — a nurse asked Brown how she felt. “Grand!” Brown said, kicking up her feet to show how much energy she had.

This sudden activity dislodged a blood clot in her leg. Within hours, Brown was dead. She was 42.

Brown left her entire estate — including all her royalties, rights to her dozens of books and her unpublished manuscripts — to the 9-year-old son of a neighbor. In 2000, the Wall Street Journal reported how that man squandered that inheritance by not finishing school, never finding stead work and by committing petty crimes.

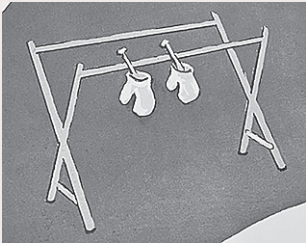
THINGS TO WATCH FOR THE NEXT TIME YOU REREAD ‘GOODNIGHT MOON’



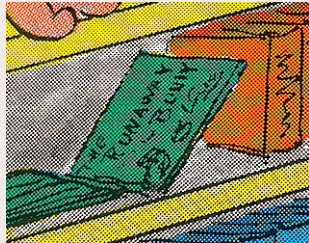
When Brown and her publisher were struggling to get libraries to carry her book, they made a small change to the cow jumping over the moon — which appears on eight pages, plus the cover: They had the cow’s udders taken out in hopes of avoiding offending “important ladies.” Cancel culture existed, even in 1947.



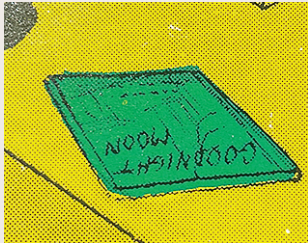
The red balloon — presumably filled with helium and floating along the top of many of the pages — disappears in the spread on pages 5 and 6. It reappears on pages 9 and 10 and 13 and 14 but disappears again on pages 17 and 18, 21 and 22 and 25 and 26 before showing up on the final spread on pages 29 and 30.



Beneath the window on the side of the room near the quiet old lady whispering “hush” is a small drying rack on which hang a pair of socks and a pair of mittens. Until page 17, when the socks suddenly disappear for just one page. This and the balloon’s disappearing trick reportedly amuse kids but upset others.



Evidently, Brown had no problems at all with what we now call “product placement.” On the top shelf of the bookcase on the far left of the great green room is a copy of “The Runaway Bunny” — Brown’s 1942 children’s book. If you’re familiar with that book, then have a carrot.



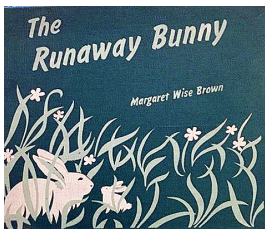
And there, by the clock and the telephone on the little bunny’s nightstand: another book. This one is — wait for it — “Goodnight Moon,” making this a meta moment in a most meta example of children’s literature.

OTHER BOOKS BY MARGARET WISE BROWN

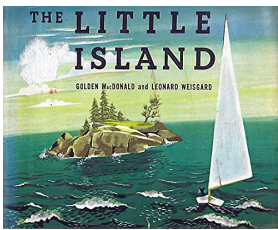
Between 1937 and her death 15 years later, Brown wrote well over 100 children’s books, published by seven different publishers and some under a pen name. Dozens more have been printed using the stacks of manuscripts she left. A few highlights:



The Noisy Book
1939
A puppy must learn to get around using only his ears.



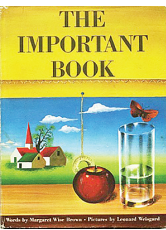
The Runaway Bunny
1942
A restless young bunny expresses how much he yearns to run away while his mother showers him with unconditional love.



The Little Island
1946
A wise old island tutors a young kitten in the ways of the world. Pen name: Golden MacDonald.



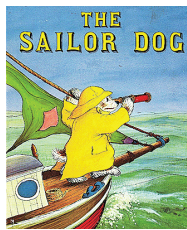
Little Fur Family
1946
A young bear has fun playing in the woods.



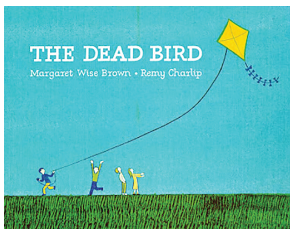
The Important Book
1949
Brown describes common items in poetic terms.



The Color Kittens
1949
A pair of kittens attempt to mix green paint.



The Sailor Dog
1953
A scrappy dog satisfies his urge to travel on the open sea.



The Dead Bird
1958
A group of children find a recently deceased bird and decide to give it a fitting burial.