

# Goodnight Nobody: Comfort and the Vast Dark in the Picture-Poems of Margaret Wise Brown and Her Collaborators.

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## "Goodnight Nobody": Comfort and the Vast Dark in the Picture-Poems of Margaret Wise Brown and Her Collaborators

Joseph Stanton

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**"Goodnight Nobody":  
Comfort and the Vast Dark in the Picture-Poems of  
Margaret Wise Brown and Her Collaborators**

Many of the best known books of Margaret Wise Brown and the artists with whom she collaborated are famous for the comforts they are thought to offer. I believe, however, that it is the understatedly dangerous contexts in which those comforts are offered that gives them their poignancy. The kinds of dangers and the comforts so quietly presented in Brown's books are, it seems to me, powerful contraries that resonate at the psychic core of the parent-child bond. The simplicity of Brown's picture-book-length poems and the lightness of the pictures that visualize them have made these unpretentious little books into important artistic events in the lives of innumerable children and their parents.

Two motifs that occur again and again in Brown's work are the runaway-child and the child-alone-in-the-wide-world. Although they obviously overlap, and the second motif is always at least partially present whenever the first motif is in operation, it is important to distinguish them because the plots driven by these two motifs polarize the parent and the child figures in two different, but strangely complementary, ways. The runaway-child plot involves the rescue or return of the child, whereas the child-alone-in-the-wide-world plot leaves the child by him- or herself while finding a satisfactory resolution within that aloneness.

Brown had a passionate yet un sentimental view of children and childhood. One important aspect of the dynamics of the parent-child relationship in Brown's books is the rebellious aggressiveness of the child. It was remarked, by Brown as well as others, that she saw herself as a child. Her identification with the child—often presented in her book as a furry or fuzzy little animal, a rabbit more often than not—was declaredly unpretentious. To underscore that her identification with children and bunnies was not sentimental she would tell partially facetious stories about her exploits as a rabbit-hunting "beagler." As she explained to a

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.

(Bliven 68)

When questioned about the oddity of this hobby for one who writes of "the hopes and aspirations of small furry creatures," Brown's joking reply would be worthy of a Woody Allen:

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.

(68)

Despite her rigorous resistance to all tendencies that she perceived to be romanticizations of the Child, she considered herself a staunch defender of the powers and prerogatives of children. Since she spent a considerable amount of time observing children and talking with them—especially during her years at Lucy Sprague Mitchell's Bank Street School—she had great confidence in her ability to understand and speak to children's needs and interests. One of the main themes of her comments about children is that they are too often underestimated by adults. She felt strongly that children are perceptive in ways adults are not. She saw the simplicity necessary in children's books to be a demanding discipline. In an oft-quoted line, she declared the goal of her art: "I hope I have written a book simple enough to come near to that timeless world" (Bechtel 186). Her invention of the "noisy book" genre and her desire for strong visual and tactile qualities in books were related to her belief that children are, in some important respects, more aesthetically sophisticated than adults. Brown liked to relate an anecdote in which a teacher expressed astonishment when confronted with an abstract painting. To a teacher's "My goodness, what's that?" a

child replied impatiently, "It's a picture, you dope!" (Bliven 64).

The runaway-child motif...

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[muse@press.jhu.edu](mailto:muse@press.jhu.edu)



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