

# What Must I Give Up in Order to Grow Up? The Great War and Childhood Survival Strategies in Transatlantic Picture Books.

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## **What Must I Give Up in Order to Grow Up? The Great War and Childhood Survival Strategies in Transatlantic Picture Books**

Mary Galbraith

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[Figures]

The Great War was absolutely beyond human imagination . . . [T]here can never be enough books, plays, films, accounts of the war, never enough means of impressing imagination.

--Paul Cohen-Portheim, a German noncombatant interned 1915-18 (1-2)

[O]ne is inclined to believe [that] the creative writer perceives his world once and for all in childhood and adolescence, and his whole career is an effort to illustrate his private world in terms of the great public world we share.

--Graham Greene, "The Young Dickens" (106)

The Great War of 1914-18, now known as World War I, is a psychohistorical legacy carried by all Europeans and European-Americans (Fussell). An estimated eight million men at arms, many as young as seventeen, and at least nine million noncombatants of all ages died in this war, and tens of millions were wounded (Keylor, Shermer). Survivors directly affected by the war had to cope with the shock and grief of primal losses even as they scrambled to orient themselves in an alien world. Even those Europeans and European-American immigrants who were not directly traumatized by the war were compelled to revise their view of existence based on this cataclysmic historical break.

Artists for whom the Great War was a part of childhood or adolescence and who produced picture books in the late twenties and thirties were inevitably working with themes of security, internationalism, and the predicament of being a child in the midst of adult danger. But these **[End Page 337]** global threats interacted with each artist's intimate history of loss, lack of adult understanding, violation, and fear in childhood, producing images that fused both levels of experience.

The universe of the picture book must, according to prevailing editorial requirements, be optimistic, light-hearted, and just. These mandates, derived from social norms as well as protective concern for what a child can bear, dictate that childhood trauma be presented in picture books only in such a way that upbeat and culturally sanctioned messages are promoted, while raw and threatening content remains latent or suppressed. Serious writers and artists working in this genre and expressing truths about their own childhood experience thus face the seemingly impossible task of revealing their own pain without dismaying children or their parents (Galbraith, "Agony," "Primal").

A group of picture books that have attained the status of classics in the United States was produced by artists in the aftermath of one world war and in the prodromal stages of another. Their evocation of serious and grand themes in the "small" world of the picture book makes these books stand out from those coming before or after. *Millions of Cats*, the original *Babar* trilogy (*The Story of Babar*, *The Travels of Babar*, and *Babar the*

*King*), *The Story about Ping*, *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street*, *The Story of Ferdinand*, *Madeline*, and *Curious George* were all published after World War I and before the entry of the United States into World War II. Their publication dates range from 1928 to 1941. All the books' creators were born near the turn of the century; most were adolescents at the outbreak of World War I in 1914. In several cases, the books were their authors' first works for children, published when they were between thirty and forty years old, and all the books are both autobiographical and allegorical. Finally, all the books are distinctly transatlantic in theme, origin, or publication history; one was even composed to the rhythm of an ocean liner's engine during an Atlantic crossing (*Mulberry Street*).

In each book, a child figure is confronted by murderous, abandoning, interrogating, or dismissive adults and must make a profound decision: what needs must I sacrifice in order to keep my (original or adoptive) mother or father...



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