

The New York Times

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February 6, 2005

HABITATS/Port Washington, on Long Island; Of Nursery Rhymes, and Reasons for the Suburban Life

By PENELOPE GREEN

"HEY, Mama Goose," Jane Breskin Zalben's 50th children's book, casts Ms. Goose as an obliging real estate broker to the Old Woman, the Three Little Pigs, Snow White and the whole nursery rhyme crew, all of whom have found that their houses don't quite suit them.

Beds pinch, outlooks pall and a great house swap ensues, to disastrous results in the book, published by Dutton and with illustrations by Emilie Chollat. Homesick and bewildered, the nursery stars repair back to their own homes at last, and then wonder why they ever left them in the first place.

"Why, our shoe is enormous," the Old Woman declares, and then says to herself with a sigh, "There's no place like a shoe."

Regret and real estate -- these are themes Ms. Zalben has more than just a nodding acquaintance with. At home in her own "shoe" a few weeks ago -- a rangy, shingled, mostly one-story house in Port Washington on Long Island that she shares with her husband, Steven Zalben, an architect, Ms. Zalben described a marriage made from studs, drywall and spackle -- a tale of houses loved, refashioned and left, and the road not taken.

Ms. and Mr. Zalben have lived in the leafy Sands Point section of Port Washington for 23 years, renovating this house -- originally built in 1928 by the composer John Philip Sousa for his daughter -- stud by stud, all on their own. But, they said, they are still changelings in this suburban nest, urban hippies still unsettled by their landing in a neighborhood that feels so far from Manhattan.

"When we first moved, Steven's hair was a lot longer than it is now," Ms. Zalben said, nodding at her husband's thick gray mane, "and a kid came up to him at the train station and said, 'What are you doing here?'"

That question has more than one answer, and it takes a bit of time travel to find it.

The temperature on Jan. 17, 1977, was a record 2 degrees, a statistic much quoted by weather folk last year when temperatures neared that figure, flooding Ms. Zalben with memories. Back then, they were still city people -- she had gone to the High School of Music and Art, he to Bronx Science -- who had fallen in love at Queens College and married during winter break her second year.

She was an artist, he a mathematician turned architect. They were living in a \$300-a-month top-floor floor-through loft on West 36th Street in a former button factory. They had no lease and not much plumbing. They bathed in a tiled pickle barrel two lofts down the street, in the home of an artist friend who took pictures of rock stars' refrigerators and collected (and then framed) dryer lint.

On 36th Street, they learned to renovate, building rooms and a mezzanine level for their drafting tables, stripping a wall to the bare brick, planting a rooftop garden. They rode through Manhattan on a tandem bike: downtown to Murray's Cheese on Bleecker Street and to Chinatown for vegetables, or east to a Laundromat in Kips Bay.

His practice was in Upper Manhattan, and she was an art director at Scribner's, making children's books in her lunch hour and when her workday ended.

The morning of Jan. 17 brought that record cold, and a raging fire in their building, which had been unheated all week. The landlord had not bought enough oil and was spending the winter in Florida.

The tenant on the second floor, a pornographer -- who is now a real estate developer, Mr. Zalben said as he raised eloquent eyebrows -- had built a roaring fire in his illegal fireplace and kept it roaring for two days.

The beams below him caught fire, and so did the cardboard-box distributor's wares on the ground floor. Mr. and Ms. Zalben escaped to the roof with their cat and the children's book she was working on, and took refuge in the home of the lint artist.

"I was pretty traumatized," Ms. Zalben said. "I didn't want to move anywhere with an elevator, anywhere I couldn't get out a window." This is how a quintessential loft dweller and city girl found herself in suburban Long Island, in a ranch-style house in Port Washington with flocked wallpaper and hot pink fluorescent lights, embarking on a life of nearly constant renovation. (Westchester was out of the question, Ms. Zalben said, "because the rye bread there didn't have seeds.")

"We both hated that ranch," Mr. Zalben said, "so we gutted it and turned it into a Manhattan loft."

In Ms. Zalben's first young-adult novel, "Maybe It Will Rain Tomorrow," written long ago in that ranch house, its main character, Beth, is wracked by homesickness and thoroughly unenchanted with a new home in suburbia, "on the most perfect block in the world," with houses on "neat cemetery plots," Ms. Zalben wrote, "with blacktop driveways, electronic garage doors, underground sprinkler systems and wall-to-wall sod."

"I was so unhappy there," she said. "I put it all in the book."

Ms. Zalben was spackling when she went into labor before the birth of her eldest son, Alexander. (She was mowing its lawn when she went into labor a few years later; that night, her son Jonathan was born, like his brother, in New York City.) When Alexander was a year old, they took all their money out of the bank, she said, and bought a second house in Port Washington, a two-family colonial with a porch built in the 1930's near the train station. Each house cost about \$75,000. They gave the colonial the Zalben treatment, a meticulous renovation right down to the studs.

"You could eat off my studs," Ms. Zalben said proudly. And they did, nearly: after five years in Port Washington, they sold both houses, for about \$140,000 each, and bought this one, a near-wreck with an interior skin of fiberboard and knotty pine, a colony of termites and not much roof. It cost less than \$300,000, still a huge amount in 1981.

At night, Mr. Zalben said, they'd sit with the doorknobs strewn over the floor, stripping off the layers of paint. "We'd get in our old clothes after the kids had gone to sleep and go to work," he said. "We'd try not to make too much noise."

The house is a light, bright collaboration, as spare as the illustrations in Ms. Zalben's books are elaborate, each corner holding a story: windows that were uncovered, doors recycled, a pond unearthed. Loftlike in feeling, its furniture is urban-familiar, taken from city streets or harvested from their old loft. He made her a light table years ago, using an old Singer sewing machine as its base. Their kitchen table, its butcher block found in a restaurant supply store on the Bowery, has a similar folksy-industrial base.

Though city-bred and oriented, Mr. Zalben splits logs and harvests his own maple syrup each year, and Ms. Zalben's organic gardens range about the house's two acres.

The last chink of their renovation is a bathroom off the only room on the house's second floor, which Mr. Zalben uses as his home office (he still has an office in Upper Manhattan). It is -- you guessed it -- stripped to its studs and newly insulated. There's an enormous two-person bathtub in the garage, awaiting deployment in the bathroom as a Zen soaking spot, Ms. Zalben said.

Then her eyes welled up. "I think about our building this bathroom, and how great it's going to

be," she said, "and then I think, 'Am I building myself further into this house?' There is a part of me that still envisions a loft and me painting there, or remembers the loft we didn't buy way back when. It's just something I have to come to a kind of peace with."

And really, it's an awfully nice shoe.

Photos: THE BOOK OF LIFE -- Steven and Jane Breskin Zalben in their house, which they totally renovated. She writes children's books, he is an architect. Her latest, "Hey, Mama Goose," is filled with regret and real estate -- two themes in her life. (Photographs by Kirk Condyles for The New York Times; illustration courtesy of Dutton Books)

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