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Children's Book Publishing in the 21st Century: A Children's Literary Salon

By Matia Burnett | Dec 09, 2014

The main branch of the New York Public Library provided respite from the drizzle and crowds of umbrella-carrying holiday shoppers, as children's book professionals gathered on Saturday, December 6, for a panel discussion on the state of the publishing industry. The speakers were Neal Porter, editor, Neal Porter Books at Roaring Brook Press; Susan Roth, artist; Leonard S. Marcus, children's literature historian; Caroline Ward, librarian, Ferguson Library, Stamford, Ct.; Laurent Linn, art director, Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers; and Elizabeth Harding, v-p, Curtis Brown Ltd. Author-illustrator Jane Breskin Zalben served as moderator. The speakers focused specifically on picture books and how the stories of today are being discovered, published, marketed, and consumed by readers.



(From l.): Jane Breskin Zalben, Neal Porter, Susan Roth, Leonard S. Marcus, Caroline Ward, Elizabeth Harding, and Laurent Linn discuss children's books at the New York Public Library.

Zalben opened the discussion by offering a short overview of some of the ways that the children's book market has changed over the years. She cited the rise of "really successful" independent bookstores in the 1980s, and the impact of Barnes & Noble

and Borders chain stores on indie stores, followed by the subsequent closing of Borders in 2009. Today, she said, Amazon clearly poses a significant threat to the indie book market. Children's bookstores are frequently relying on toy sales to gain revenue, and chains like Barnes & Noble are reluctant to carry picture books; subsequently, publishers must also strategically select the books they champion. Considering the discoverability challenges that picture books face, Zalben posed this question to the panelists: how likely is it that a classic like *Goodnight Moon* (which took around 10 years after its publication to even develop notoriety) would be published today at all?

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"*Goodnight Moon* created an awareness of the value in picture books," Marcus said, paving way for authors like Eric Carle. "It helped open up an entire new

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genre.”

For Linn, it’s a very difficult question to answer, because *Goodnight Moon* was “of its time.” Could we assess whether Judy Blume’s books would be published today or *Gone with the Wind*?, he wondered. But speaking to the larger point about where value is placed in today’s industry, he believes that there is still an opportunity for all types of picture books, from those “deemed quiet to very commercial.” He is gratified to see “so many different kinds of picture books” published at Simon & Schuster. Within today’s publishing model, if a particular book is a huge commercial success, “we can afford to put something out there that we know won’t sell well,” he said.

Harding feels that, while any new children’s book faces hurdles to success, “this is an exciting time for picture books.” Part of what she enjoys about the industry today is that it is “very unpredictable.” In many cases, all bets are off

about whether one book over another will surpass sales expectations or be welcomed in the cache of classics. “We are right 40% of the time,” Harding said, in terms of making such predictions. She also commented that she doesn’t feel that the market is purely “driven by Fancy Nancy” and other books featuring familiar, crowd-pleasing characters. There are a lot of those quieter books being published. Nevertheless, for those “quiet books,” there’s a lot of crossing of fingers that they will “sell right out of the gate” so that they can remain on bookstore shelves and readers will have a chance to discover them.

To that point, Ward noted that someone on this very panel – Neal Porter – “has done pretty well with the quiet books.” For example: *A Sick Day For Amos McGee* by Philip C. Stead, illustrated by Erin E. Stead, which won the 2011 Caldecott Medal.



(From l.): Jane Breskin Zalben, Neal Porter, and Susan Roth.

While Porter couldn’t have anticipated that the book would win the Caldecott or sell 350,000 copies, “I had a sense it might be a sleeper.... Sales were very slow but steady,” he said. In Porter’s experience, books like *Amos McGee* still have a strong and critical presence; “very

quiet, very gentle books strike a chord in this very noisy world we live in,” he said.

From the library market perspective, Ward also believes that “publishers are not just publishing tried-and-true favorites.” And though the 2008 recession had an impact on the industry, she is frequently impressed by what she calls “amazing risks that publishers take.”

On the illustration front, Linn also reports that this year’s Original Art exhibition, held annually by the Society of

Illustrators, saw more than 600 submissions this year, which “shows there is so much art,” with a great deal of variety in terms of subject matter. But also speaking to one of the many ways that the business of book making and illustrating has evolved, Porter pointed out how digital art on display at the Original Art exhibit isn’t technically in its “original” art form, because it’s not presented digitally. “Everything is fluid” in the book world today, Porter emphasized, including the definition of the school library market and even the definition of a picture book itself. “We are always in a state of flux, which is both exciting and scary.”

On the subject of new media, specifically e-books, apps, and digital library subscription models, the panelists agreed that they have a valuable niche in the book world, and the willingness to adapt to new forms of entertainment and technology is key for those in the book industry.

Ward, for one, described the thrill of the constantly evolving library landscape. E-books are in high demand at libraries, particularly for YA books, she said. Ward also noted that when she can’t find an older title that has gone out of print, she is grateful to find it in e-book form. In her experience, librarians have been particularly willing and eager to adopt new technology as the world demands it. “Librarians are pretty nimble,” she said. “Our history has shown that we do change.”

Harding agrees that e-books can be tremendously valuable assets. At Curtis Brown, converting many of their old print titles to e-books has been worthwhile. She sees the process of converting them as “taking something we all admire but that is rather dusty” and making it “vibrant.”

But the panelists don’t see the print picture book going anywhere. Marcus believes that the digital revolution hasn’t made the printed picture book an artifact of the past. And it’s not a question of gatekeepers being resistant to new forms of technology. Linn believes that “the book is not broken,” and though it is useful to be able to load up a device with books for a trip to the beach, for print picture books vs. digital books, “It’s not an equal experience,” he said.



Leonard S. Marcus and Caroline Ward.

With the changeable size of a screen depending on the reading device, the story itself can often be altered. One of the essential aspects of the picture book art form is the way in which a reader’s eye scans the images on the page, gleaning information as the pictures and words present

themselves. As Linn put it, “It changes everything for the storytelling aspect” when the size of the frame can be altered with the swish of a screen. Ward agreed, saying that the illustrations provide the “scaffolding” for a picture book, which can easily be compromised on a device.

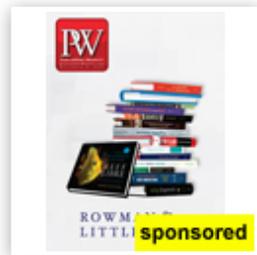
Porter added that while Roaring Brook makes e-book versions of many picture book titles, “the reality is that no one wants them. No platform is as effective as a hardcover picture book,” he said.

Who better to demonstrate the preference for print over digital picture books than children themselves? Zalben shared that she read *Goodnight Moon* to her grandson recently and with each turn of the page, he kept laughing at the bears in the picture on the wall, “like it was a Seth Rogen movie,” she said. She couldn’t be sure what it was that he found so especially funny, but she could relate to his appreciation of the physical book, as he repeatedly ran his hand along the book’s endpapers. “Ah, that’s my boy,” she thought.

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