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Contents	Page
You Can Take The Boy Out of Michigan, But . . . Edward J. Recchia	1
Women Critics and Marianne Moore Bernard F. Engel	18
Sherwood Anderson, Diarist David D. Anderson	23

YOU CAN TAKE THE BOY OUT OF MICHIGAN, BUT . . .

By

Edward J. Recchia

Under any circumstances, John Bellairs might well have grown up to become a successful writer. Certainly, the short, pudgy child who spent summer afternoons on his porch, pouring through encyclopedias and history books, seemed better suited for intellectual pursuits than for the physical activities of the playground. But it certainly didn't hurt that he grew up in Marshall, Michigan, one of the most picturesque towns in his home state and a town perfectly suited to nurture the imagination of a future writer of children's literature.

First of all, Marshall had the advantages that any small town would have for a growing boy: with a population of less than 10,000 it was small enough, its landmarks familiar enough, its local legends well-known enough, to provide an uncertain boyhood ego with a sense of stability, of continuity, that must have offset some of the internal anguish caused by one's sometimes cruel playmates, occasionally thoughtless teachers, or consistently nagging fears of inadequacy. Within those secure town boundaries, a boy's natural penchant for imagining could be indulged, and the town's landmarks--its cemeteries, its parks, its schools and churches--could be transformed into battlegrounds with the traditional imaginary enemies like pirates, robbers, and ghosts. Beyond these small-town advantages, though, Marshall had the additional virtue of being a community that had long cherished and sustained its traditions, so that every street, every building within the town had an additional level of suggestiveness that worked upon the future writer's developing consciousness.

Marshall has worked conscientiously to preserve its heritage. As a result, it contains today what is arguably the finest collection of nineteenth-century small town architecture in the state--not as historical artifacts, but as practical abodes in which people work and live. At the end of a working day, a present-day inhabitant of the town might well leave one of the elaborately-fronted nineteenth-century commercial establishments on Main Street to go home to a residence originally built a century before to house the family of one of the wealthy merchants involved in the railroad or patent-medicine businesses that had helped build the town. Even as early as the 1940's and 50's, a young John Bellairs had to walk only three or four blocks from his family home, at 802 E. Green Street, to find himself in the midst of an architectural wonderland: austere Greek and Roman revival homes sat nestled in the shadows of towering Gothic structures, which in turn might be neighbors to rambling Queen Anne or imposing Italianate mansions. The homes would line streets named after the country's forefathers: Jefferson, Madison, Washington, and Chief Justice John Marshall, after whom the town itself was named. Frequently Bellairs would stay with his aunt and uncle at a home on Madison, just opposite the Cronin House, at 407 North Madison, a foreboding Italianate structure whose mansard-roofed tower rises sixty feet into the air--the highest point in all of Marshall. Although Bellairs never set foot in the house, it must, like the rest of his home-town setting, have had a profound effect on his imaginative powers, for it later became the primary focus of his first children's novel, The House with a Clock in Its Walls (1973). He recreates its look and feel so effectively, in fact, that today the home is referred to by many Marshall residents as "The Clock Mansion."

Eventually, Bellairs would incorporate many Marshall locales and legends into his stories, whether his narrative adventures took place in

"New Zebedee," Michigan (the name Bellairs gave to his fictional version of Marshall), or in the imaginary New England town of Duston Heights, Massachusetts, where Bellairs located his later tales after he had moved to Haverhill, Massachusetts. However, the town fountain in New Zebedee, the Catholic church in Duston Heights, Massachusetts--they are both actually born in Marshall. The adventures that take place at those settings actually know no real geographical boundaries; they exist in the collective imagination of boys and girls everywhere who have suffered private anguishes and dreamed universal dreams. Bellairs can touch this youthful consciousness because the factors that comprised his boyhood development were so intense that they sustained themselves even into his adulthood.

I once wrote him and asked what formula he used to create a blend of the natural and supernatural that would appeal to his young readers' minds. This is his reply:

. . . many of the things in my books that you think may result from conscious strategies are there . . . well, because they're there. Sometimes when someone asks a writer why he did this or that, all you can say is, it seemed like a good idea. My books combine my strong childhood memories with the books I've read, and, yes, lots of the the characters (especially in the early books) are based on people I knew when I was young. . . .

. . . The heroes of my books are loners and outsiders because that's the way I felt when I was a kid: if you're fat, brainy, can't play sports, and are physically cowardly, you don't fit in. . . . I do the kind of scary stuff that turns me on, and it succeeds with kids because I have their kind of imagination.
1
I don't have a formula to follow.

Apparently, however painful Bellairs' isolation from his playmates, it sharpened his own sense of the texture of a child's life to the point where he can recreate it in his present-day writings, and at the same time it built within him an imaginative strength that allows him to touch responsive chords within his young readers' imaginations. Reinforced by the suggestive ambience of the town he grew up in, his multiform childhood reactions to life would survive to be recreated for a new generation of youthful readers.

His earliest works reflect the ambivalent perspective that would finally find a form in children's fiction. The first published work, St. Fidgeta and Other Parodies (1966), is a mild satire of the early Catholic training that Bellairs had abandoned in adulthood. His treatment of St. Fidgeta herself (patron saint of fidgety children); St. Adiposa, who devoted a life of being intentionally overweight to God; and St. Floridora, who is illustrated wearing an off-the-shoulder shift, makes mild fun of the intricate system of rules, regulations, and hagiography which might have made life complicated for him as a child. He does ridicule Catholicism's fastidious proscriptions: "Q: Does the olive in the martini break the Lenten fast, or is it considered part of the drink?" (39) And he is willing to make it a target of puns: "Q: Why does a Christian cross himself? A: To get to the other side" (12). But it seems a very gentle humor, even here, and in his later children's novels, Bellairs' heroes find that the infrastructure provided by the comforting routines of catechism classes, morning masses, and evening benedictions helps them withstand the ravages of childhood. Therefore, even as he attempts to deflate what he sees as the pretentiousness of his childhood religion, Bellairs seems to find a comforting warmth in its rituals and its practices.

It is an ambivalence that will appear in other of his writings. In his third work, The Face in the Frost (1969), for instance, he creates a grandiose Tolkien-like world as a battleground upon which two powerful wizards will pit their magical abilities, with the fate of that world's inhabitants riding on the outcome. Yet it is also a world populated with inept rulers, bumbling soldiers, sarcastic peasants--and even a wisecracking magic mirror. Bellairs finds a way to bring the grandiose down to earth through humor, so that the grand, the suggestive, finds itself at home with the common, the everyday.

Perhaps the most overt example of his attempt to reconcile those elements, though, is provided by the middle of those first three works, The Pedant and the Shuffly (1968). In this short, fairy tale-like story, Snodrog, a pedant who ambushes wandering travelers and badgers them into nonexistence with syllogisms that are obvious parodies of the formulas we suffered to learn in Formal Logic 101, is defeated by the Shuffly, an undefined and undefinable mound of animal/ vegetable energy whose motto is, "WANNA PLAY!" (47) Bellairs says that the tale "is a fable pitting logic against chaos. I am on the side of the latter, since I know no one who uses logic who does not use it as a hammer. And chaos is more the rule in life anyway."² He affirms that belief by allowing the Shuffly's good nature to foil all of Snodrog's destructive ploys before the Shuffly eventually conquers the master of perverted knowledge.

It is therefore not merely "chaos" that defeats the pedant; it's youth, innocence--an authentic perspective towards life based on wonder rather than perverted knowledge, an approach that promotes appreciation for the good things of life rather than the manipulation of power for destructive ends. Even the figures of speech Bellairs uses in The Pedant

and the Shuffly reflect this desire for a fresh view of reality: "a ghastly grin that looked like the ragged hole in the top of a badly opened beer can" (10); "a little cry that usually sounded like air escaping from a leaky valve on an automobile tire" (14); ". . . his voice was ominous, like soapy water drizzling from an overflowing bathtub" (27). The children who see castles and knights on horseback as they stare at the clouds overhead, who know what monsters lie with the dust bunnies under their beds, and who firmly believe that the blankets pulled over their heads will protect them from the beasts that roam the bedroom as soon as mom or dad turns out the light--those children can connect with the mind that gives rise to such images. For there is a sense of childish wonder in such apparent nonsensimiles. The man who created them reveals a dichotomous mentality: a learned mind which has come to terms with the rules of everyday existence, yet a child's appreciation for the wonder which always lies just below life's surface--just waiting for mom or dad to leave the room before it springs out from under the bed. Strengthened by memories of his own sometimes painful, sometimes pleasurable boyhood, Bellairs will blend that dichotomy into gothic tales that, far from horrifying their young readers, will instead find responding minds that want to believe that everyday life can harbor great mysteries and that everyday children are capable of great achievements.

When Bellairs creates a world for these young readers, he therefore invests the world of the commonplace with an aura of mystery, of heightened significance, by adding the ingredient of magic, of the other world that lies beyond the everyday. It is a perfect world to appeal to the child's mind: a surreal world, where the supernatural flits in and out of what might otherwise be a normal childhood existence, creating dramatic situations not unlike the strange word links that inhabit The Pedant and the

Shuffly; but to any young reader who has fantasized or feared, who has wondered what the real limitations of his or her existence might be, it is a world that is recognizable and eminently conceivable. There is so much there for the child to identify with: the fears, the insecurities, the little hurts that bedevil a child's everyday existence; the compensating pleasures--as simple as a warm meal, as profound as a loving family--that make life good. Beyond the "real," though, there are those elements that appeal to the world where children spend so much of their time--their imaginations. Ghosts, wizards, magic spells, and miraculous feats defy those laws of everyday life which seem to children to have been designed to repress any human being who just happens to be ten or eleven or twelve years old. In Bellairs' world, such repressive laws will be suspended, and eventually the real-life values that his readers have been taught to believe in--love, friendship, loyalty, family--will somehow be affirmed, as one small, pudgy protagonist faces the powers of the netherworld and somehow comes out on top.

Lewis Barnavelt is one such protagonist. He is the "hero" of the first of Bellairs' children's novels, The House with a Clock in Its Walls (1973) and co-protagonist of the second, The Figure in the Shadows (1975). As do all of Bellairs' children's tales, these two novels take place in the 1950's, when Bellairs himself was growing up. Their action is located in New Zebedee, and Lewis' shares his adventures in the second novel with a diminutive, thin, bespectacled girl with the unromantic name of Rose Rita Pottinger. She becomes the heroine of the third of the Michigan-based novels, The Letter, the Witch, and the Ring (1976), whose story ranges across the northern part of lower Michigan and into the state's upper peninsula. Throughout all the novels are woven recognizable place names,

ranging from real towns like Big Rapids, Ironwood, and Petoskey; through reminiscent landmarks like The City of Escanaba ferry, which used to ply the Straits of Mackinac between Mackinac City and St. Ignace; to fictional locales, like Heemsoth's Drug Store on Main Street in New Zebedee, which is obviously named after Hemmingsen's Drug Store on Marshall's Main Street.

But these real-life counterparts are secondary to a more significant one that Bellairs defines. His sense of the texture of childhood is sharp, and his recollection of it in his writings strongly evocative. He recreates the bittersweet memories of his childhood through reminiscent passages which recall both the perils and the pleasures of childhood. Here, in an early passage from The Figure in the Shadows, he recreates the kind of anguish that any young person victimized by the cruelty of a peer can identify with, as Lewis Barnavelt must submit to having his favorite "Sherlock Holmes" hat confiscated by the town bully:

"Come on. Lemme see the hat." Woody sounded impatient. Lewis's eyes filled with tears. Should he run? If he did, he wouldn't get very far. Like most fat kids, Lewis couldn't run very fast. He ran out of breath in a hurry, and he got pains in his side. Woody would catch him and take the hat and pound on his shoulders till he was sore. Sadly, Lewis lifted the hat off his head. He handed it to Woody. . . .

[Afterward] Lewis stumbled blindly down the street. He was crying hard. . . . How come he hadn't been strong like the other kids? Why did everybody have to pick on him? It wasn't fair.

(8-10)

"Why does everybody have to pick on me? It isn't fair." It's an anthem played in every little boy's heart; and there, place-names, are

unimportant. In fact, after Bellairs moved to Haverhill, he shifted his stories' locale to Duston Heights, Massachusetts, and created a new hero named Johnny Dixon; but Johnny is actually just Lewis relocated. Like Lewis, he is pudgy, nonathletic, cerebral--and often unhappy. Like Lewis, he is deprived of parental guidance but supplied with a more-than-adequate parental substitute:³ Lewis' parents had been killed in an auto crash; so he moved in with his Uncle Jonathan, an extraordinarily understanding and sympathetic man--who just happened to practice "white magic," a benevolent form of witchcraft, and who, fortuitously, just happened to have as a friend an eccentric neighbor named Mrs. Zimmermann, also a "good" wizard. Johnny Dixon is not quite orphaned--his mother is dead, and his father, a pilot in the Korean War, has been shot down and taken prisoner. Johnny is therefore living with his grandparents; his version of "Uncle Jonathan" is Professor Childermass, a history professor at a nearby university. The Professor has a penchant for baking chocolate cakes and then sharing it with his young neighbor; he displays an unflagging allegiance to Johnny and his grandparents; and he has the uncanny knack of becoming involved in occult adventures which will test the limits of his and Johnny's loyalty and courage--all of which, of course, makes for exciting narratives for Bellairs' readers.

Wise adults like Uncle Jonathan and Professor Childermass provide the Lewises and the Johnnies with the occasional sanctuaries of love, warmth, and understanding that compensate for the inequities Bellairs' young heroes often encounter in the classroom, in the schoolyard, or on the streets. A sense of the value of that consoling warmth is an integral part of the fictional life Bellairs weaves for his readers. The sensations Johnny Dixon experiences as he sits down to dinner in The Curse of the Blue

Figurine (1983), for example, have been shared by all Bellairs' readers, old as well as young:

Johnny smiled happily as Gramma spooned mashed potatoes onto his plate. It was snowing outside, but it was warm and comfy in the big old house. A coal fire was roaring in the furnace in the basement, and the register in the floor breathed warm air into the room. The black Sessions clock on the sideboard ticked quietly and reassuringly. The dining room table was covered with a white linen cloth, and on it were good things to eat: roast beef, cabbage salad, mashed potatoes, and plenty of thick dark-brown gravy. And for dessert there would be either chocolate pudding or lemon meringue pie. The food that Gramma Dixon made tended to be the same, day after day, but it was always good. (6)

But there is something else that fleshes out a young person's existence; and that, too, Bellairs remembers--obviously fondly--and can communicate to his own young readers. The passage continues:

Johnny . . . munched and drank and went back to living in his own little dream world. He thought about how great it would be to be an archeologist. That was what he wanted to be, right now, more than anything in the world. He imagined himself with a pith helmet on his head and a pickax in his hand, wading through sand while the hot sun sizzled in the sky. Or exploring by moonlight, which was much more dramatic. Johnny saw himself wandering among the columned walls of the temple of Dendur or Karnak at night, when a pale, silvery sheen fell upon the mysterious hieroglyphs and the carved shapes of pharaohs and beast-headed gods. Was

there danger here? Who could tell? What if a shape wrapped in
tattered bandages stepped from the shadows and confronted him?
. . . Of course there was the large British Army service revolver
in the holster that hung from his belt. But it would not be much
use against . . .

The doorbell rang. (7)

And so the plot begins. But not before Bellairs has recreated for his
young readers exactly the warm sensations of home and hot meals that they
have shared with their families--and, as importantly, not until he has
rekindled memories within them of the wild imaginings that they sometimes
had in private but perhaps did not know that they shared with all the other
Johnny Dixons and Lewis Barnavelts across America.

In contrast to his detailed descriptions of the warm, reminiscent
experiences of adolescent life, Bellairs' treatment of occult adventures
tends to be less concrete. He relies much more on his readers' imagina-
tions--those same imaginations that can call up images of young boy-heroes
stalking amid the pyramids in the desert moonlight--to do the work of
envisioning the more frightening ingredients of his supernatural adven-
tures. By making his descriptions of supernatural occurrences more sugges-
tive and less specific, Bellairs thereby avoids the double danger of becom-
ing so detailed that his stories will actually become overpowering for his
young readers, while at the same time allowing their own imaginations to
work for him. For example, in The House with a Clock in Its Walls, when
Lewis and his friend, Tarby, try to raise a body from a grave one midnight,
their success exceeds their expectations:

From deep within the the tomb came a sound. Boom! A deep hollow
sound. The iron doors jolted, as if they had been struck a blow

from inside. The padlock had fallen off. And now, as the boys knelt, terrified, two small spots of freezing gray light appeared. They hovered and danced before the doors of the tomb, which now stood ajar. And something black--blacker than the night, blacker than ink spilled into water--was oozing from the space between the doors.

Tarby shook Lewis and squeezed his arm harder. "Run!" he shouted. (87)

In its own way, it's a terrifying scene--the drama is there. What isn't is concreteness. You don't feel or hear or touch the physical sensation of the experience; you feel, hear, and touch the imaginative moment. How much blacker than black is the black that is blacker than night, after all? How much blacker is ink that is spilled into water than ink that is not spilled into water? Our senses don't perceive that kind of blackness; only our imaginations do. And that, I think, is the key to the attractiveness of Bellairs' gothic "horror." Like the kind of ghost stories we used to tell each other around the camp fire at night, his descriptions of the "horror" part of his tales does not have the kind of physical repulsiveness that actually might repel a young (or even an older) reader; he alludes to horror and repulsiveness, but he doesn't actually describe it. Not only does his technique enable him to avoid repelling his young readers, it actually encourages their imaginations to work as fully as they're capable of doing. "Something black . . . was oozing from the space between the doors." What is that "something"? Let the imagination decide. Likewise, in The Curse of the Blue Figurine, Johnny Dixon and Professor Childermass are confronted by the ghost of an evil priest, which emits "a horrid, sickening odor, the odor of corruption" (174). Certainly words like "hor-

rid" and "sickening" convey the idea; what they do not (thankfully) convey is the reality in such palpable terms that the young mind cannot avoid it. The terms are broad enough to accommodate themselves to the requirements of the young imaginations. And that is the kind of flexibility required to make a children's "ghost story" exciting without being repellent.

Of course, the fact that ghosts exist at all in the world that Bellairs creates, that one's uncle just happens to be a wizard, that a pre-teenager just happens to stumble across enchanted objects and reawaken old curses, that that same adolescent just happens to live in a haunted house--such coincidences should, no doubt, violate any adult's sense of reality. But these novels are not aimed at an adult's world; they're aimed at a child's. And that is a very different thing. If you're eleven years old, you haven't been schooled in Aristotelian theories of probable impossibilities or improbable possibilities. The important thing to you is that Lewis Barnavelt, when he is called upon to do so, summons up the courage to face the most horrifying demonic power imaginable to save the world from destruction; that in the next novel, Rose Rita Pottinger returns the favor by saving Lewis when he faces certain destruction; that in later novels Professor Childermass saves Johnny Dixon, and that Johnny, in turn, later saves the Professor.

Finally, Bellairs' children-heroes triumph. They may not do so in a very glamorous manner; but that, I suspect, constitutes much of Bellairs' attractiveness to his readers. They do not want a larger-than-life heroes; they want somebody they can identify with. If that somebody triumphs, despite being afraid, despite being unattractive, despite being clumsy--and if that triumph affirms the traditional values of family, friendship, loyalty, and personal integrity that all children are brought up to believe

in--then Bellairs has provided fare for his youthful readers that is both satisfying and uplifting.

Examples of such bravery, such caring, abound in Bellairs' novels. In The Figure in the Shadows, for example, Rose Rita Pottinger is willing to brave the direst consequences in order to save her friend, Lewis Barnavelt, from being led by a malignant spirit to his death at the bottom of a well:

Lewis's feet were touching the rock rim of the well. A slight push would send him plunging head first into darkness. With a loud screech Rose Rita ran forward. "Get away from him! Get away from him, don't you dare touch him, you filthy rotten thing!" she yelled.

The shadow turned and faced Rose Rita. And now it changed. Before, it had been a hooded, muffled shape. Now it was a ragged, spindly silhouette. A blackened, shrunken corpse with living eyes. It moved toward her with outstretched, hungry arms. And Rose Rita heard what it was saying. She heard the words in her brain, although no sound was uttered. The thing was saying that it would wrap its arms around her and dive with her to the bottom of the dark, icy well. And there they would be, face to face, forever.

Rose Rita knew that if she thought, she would faint, or die. She clenched her teeth and rushed forward The fearful shape rushed at her, and for a moment there was blackness all around her and the sickening, stifling smell of wet ashes. And then she was past it and standing by Lewis's side. [Rose Rita then dispatches the spirit by throwing a magic amulet down the well, making the spirit vanish.]

. . . Rose Rita was caught in a sick convulsive shudder. She trembled from head to foot. But when she stopped trembling, her mind was clear. She stepped back from the edge of the well and turned to see if she could help Lewis.

Lewis was sitting on the ground, crying. His face was red and raw from the wind and snow and cold. his gloves were gone, his hat was gone, and there was a big piece torn out of his trouser leg. The first things he said was, "Rose Rita, do you have a handkerchief? I have to blow my nose." Weeping with joy, Rose Rita threw her arms around Lewis and hugged him tight.

(136-140)

"I have to blow my nose" is consciously anti-romantic. It is the kind of prosaic response to the trials that life imposes upon us that any adolescent (and any post-adolescent) can understand: defeat our ghosts, we blow our noses. Then we move on to the next dilemma, counting on our own fortitude--and a little help from our friends--to get us through.

Two of Bellairs' novels, The House with a Clock in Its Walls and The Treasure of Alpheus Winterborn (1978), have been adapted to television for the Public Broadcasting System's Wonderworks children's series. But the strength of Bellairs' tales is that they ennoble the human personality, even when that personality is ensconced in a body other than the type usually depicted in Hollywood films or on television features. Likewise, the significance of the kind of drama Bellairs forges for his youthful readers lies in something deeper than the fact that some of the characters involved in those dramas have ties with his childhood home town. It is of incidental interest to us that New Zebedee bears a remarkable physical and geographical resemblance to Marshall; and Marshall's citizens, proud of

their town's heritage, are pleased to note that even after Bellairs moved to New England, he carefully packed precious memories of local folklore to travel with him to use in his later "Massachusetts" tales. They will point out, for example, that Father Higgins, Johnny Dixon's co-hero in The Spell of the Sorcerer's Skull, was not an actual Massachusetts figure, even though the 1984 novel is placed in Duston Heights, but was a real-life Marshall priest who said said mass at St. Mary's in Marshall. Bellairs' memory of that priest's reputation is certainly more favorable than his memory of the rumors he must have heard about the occult practices of Father Baart, who was pastor of St. Mary's in Marshall back in the nineteenth century. Bellairs made Father Baart--or, at least, his ghost--the villain of The Curse of the Blue Figurine, even though Bellairs again moves the location of the action from real-life Marshall to imaginary Duston Heights.

The church in The Blue Figurine, Main Street in The Figure in the Shadows, the town fountain and the Cronin mansion in The House with the Clock--any novelist will turn the material of his own personal experience to the service of what he feels is a palpable drama, one that his readers will find worthwhile. One day in Minnesota, John Bellairs saw a woman dressed all in purple. She became Mrs. Zimmermann, a major character in his first three novels. Although Michiganders--and Marshall inhabitants in particular--can take some pride in the fact that a nationally known children's novelist makes topographical references to identifiable places in their home state and town, they may well take greater pride in the knowledge that a native son has used that small town heritage to create a fictional world that represents the best blend of reality, imagination, and idealism for a nation's worth of young readers.

Michigan State University

BELLAIRS' WORKS: A CHRONOLOGY

- 1966: St. Fidgeta and Other Parodies. New York: MacMillan.
- 1968: The Pedant and the Shuffly. New York: MacMillan.
- 1969: The Face in the Frost. New York: Grossett & Dunlap
(Ace Science-Fiction Series).
- 1973: The House with a Clock in Its Walls. New York: Dell (Yearling).
- 1975: The Figure in the Shadows. New York: Dell (Yearling).
- 1976: The Letter, the Witch, and the Ring. New York: Dell (Yearling).
- 1978: The Treasure of Alpheus Winterborn. New York: Bantam (Skylark).
- 1983: The Mummy, the Will, and the Crypt. New York: Bantam (Skylark).
- 1983: The Curse of the Blue Figurine. New York: Bantam (Skylark).
- 1984: The Spell of the Sorcerer's Skull. New York: Bantam (Skylark).
- 1984: The Dark Secret of Weatherend. New York: Bantam (Skylark).
- 1985: The Revenge of the Wizard's Ghost. New York: Bantam (Skylark).
- 1986: The Eyes of the Killer Robot. New York: E. P. Dutton (Dial).

NOTES

¹

Letter of April 27, 1987. I am indebted to Ms. Anne LaPietra, proprietor of The Kids' Place in Marshall, who has become the local expert on Bellairs' fiction and who provided me with valuable background knowledge about the author, as well as putting me in contact with him.

²

Something about the Author: Facts and Pictures about Contemporary Authors and Illustrators of Books for Young People, vol. 2 (1971), 20.

³

When I asked Bellairs why he created substitute father-figures like Uncle Jonathan and Professor Childermass for his novels, he answered, "My heroes have elderly eccentric friends because my grandfather was very close to me when I was little; he taught me to read and was a model of kindness and friendship that inspires me even now" (April 27 letter).

Women Critics and Marianne Moore

by

Bernard F. Engel

Though in the present exuberance of feminist criticism women have been generous in embracing the work of members of their gender, they have not until recently been quick to value the work of Marianne Moore, the St. Louis-born writer who became a poet-celebrity of Brooklyn and Manhattan. Some women critics were enthusiastic during Moore's lifetime. But at least as many rejected her work because, as Margaret Anderson of The Little Review put it, poetry should not be "made from, nor read with, the mind." The book-length studies of the 1960s that finally convinced the academic world that Moore was a readable poet were all by men.

Suspicion of Moore on the part of women continued into the 1970s. I remember in that decade hearing Moore's work dismissed as "elitist" by panel discussion groups of women at conventions of both the Modern Language Association and the Midwest Modern Language Association. As late as 1977, Emily Stipes Watts in The Poetry of American Women showed pleasure that, as she saw it, Moore's work, was disappearing from the canon.

Attitudes began to change, however, as feminists started to take seriously their own argument that women need not live up to the stereotypes that made Millay and H. D. acceptable because they wore their hearts on their sleeves but Moore suspect because she was seemingly calm, rational, and disciplined. Moore, indeed, was determined not to be a "lady poet." She clearly thought that Dickinson and she herself were the only American women who had made the effort to write first-rate poetry.

The change was signalled by Laurence Stapleton's Marianne Moore: The Poet's Advance (1978), the first book to make use of Moore's "papers," now available in the Rosenbach Museum & Library in Philadelphia (additional material is in the Beinecke Library at Yale). Stapleton's readings are perceptive, though she makes the unusual argument that the poetry of Moore's last decades, seen as a decline by most readers, is an "advance" over her earlier work.

In the 1980s, books have begun to pour out. Women now recognize not only that a woman need not devote her career to sighs and swoons over love affairs, but also that Moore, despite the absence of direct sociopolitical observation from her verse, was in fact a suffragette and in her prose essays and reading diaries made note of the work of other women and, sometimes, of difficulties they faced.

Even in the present flood of studies by women, however, no thoroughly feminist interpretation has appeared. Two recent books by women give sound academic readings that use traditional approaches, rather than specifically feminist arguments.

Taffy Martin's Marianne Moore: Subversive Modernist (Texas 1986) is advertised as a feminist study, but is in fact a good reading that is feminist only in taking an occasional dig at "male critics." Martin argues that Moore differed from other Modernists in perceiving what she termed "confusion" in our civilization. Certainly Moore recognized fragmentation; it can scarcely be declared, however, that she saw more of this than Eliot, Pound, Williams, or Stevens, the men whose poetry she recognized to be the best American work of her time (and whose company she sought, successfully, to join).

Martin also tries to read Moore as subverting the stability of language and thus anticipating the work of the postmoderns. I would argue that Moore's

work is neither more nor less anticipatory of the postmodern than is that of other Modernists.

But, such efforts at hifalutin criticism aside, Martin gives imaginative, evidence-based understandings of a number of Moore's poems. She is at her best in her recognition that Moore's view of the "confusion" in our lives sees our inability to comprehend the dangers in existence, our persistence in taking the optimistic view, in devising romantic fictions that blunt what Moore in her poems "The Hero" calls the "rock/crystal thing to see."

Discussing the poem "A Grave," for example, Martin remarks on the warning in the opening lines of this well known presentation of the ocean, and notes how the lines go on to intensify the premonition of danger by "turning orderly beauty into reserve, then to repression, and finally to active . . . vengeance." Martin observes that Moore makes the sea attractive to us, fascinates us, indeed, to the point that we overlook its danger.

Martin sees, moreover, that Moore's exact use of particulars forces her readers to face "not just the insufficiency and the error of their perceptions, but their inability . . . to abandon hope" in them. The discussion succeeds in showing how Moore goes beyond surface realism to reveal deception and threat as elements not to be overlooked in our existence.

Martin contrasts Moore with Stevens, the contemporary whose work she most admired. Stevens, she notes, would at times escape into romance, take refuge in such romantic fictions as those offered by music. Moore stays with her amalgamations of multiple realities: she will not produce, Martin discerns, "either a transformed or a transcendent analogue" to experience.

Less inclined to call up tags of feminist or postmodern criticism, Grace Schulman in Marianne Moore: The Poetry of Engagement (Illinois 1986) also draws

on perceptive readings to show how Moore attempts to preserve integrity in a world of "confusion."

Most notable in Schulman's readings of poems, however, is her ability to apply Freudian insights without resorting to the tired jargon of most practitioners of psychological criticism. Discussing "The Pangolin," for example, Schulman sees that the way the poem uses particulars of the anteater's appearance and behavior to work toward a definition of man follows Freud's remarks that in most dreams thoughts are transformed into visual images and often combine two or more beings--here, the anteater and man--in such a way as to cause a new image to emerge.

Using such devices as self-correction and an enactment of the fusion of the experiential and the envisioned, Schulman points out, the poem succeeds in employing "techniques of the unconscious" not only "as form but as theme." The result is the poem's ending recognition that man's limitations make possible his potential excellence. The point has been stated before, but Schulman gives the best explanation I have seen of the way Moore employs her imagery.

Martin and Schulman are the latest in the growing number of women critics to recognize that Moore was the leading woman writer of poetry in our century, an artist ranking with the men she compared herself with.

The best work yet to appear on Moore is Bonnie Costello's Marianne Moore: Imaginary Possessions (Harvard 1981). One could cite also Elizabeth Phillip's Marianne Moore (Frederick Ungar 1982), useful as a handbook even though it relies on Stapleton's findings in the papers, and Patricia Willis's Marianne Moore: Vision in Verse (Rosenbach Museum & Library 1987), an expanded catalog of

a Moore exhibition, as contributions to understanding. If studies today threaten to become voluminous, at least they demonstrate that the delayed recognition of Moore by members of her own gender has at last arrived.

Michigan State University

Sherwood Anderson, Diarist

by

David D. Anderson

Sherwood Anderson was one of the most autobiographical of writers, frequently re-telling and re-ordering in ostensible fact and purported fiction the twin myths of his life, those of his escape from stagnation in a small Ohio town and of his escape from the corruption of a business career in a small Ohio industrial city. Furthermore, he was one of the most prolific of literary letter-writers, the more than five thousand of them extant in three published volumes of letters, in other anthologies and collections, in private and library collections, and in the Sherwood Anderson Papers in the Newberry Library providing the substance of a literary and spiritual biography of a very high order.

With Anderson's almost constant concern with the wonder of his own life, with his dedication to his craft of writing, and with his conviction that, as his epitaph points out, "Life, not death, is the great adventure," it was perhaps inevitable that Anderson would be a diarist, a keeper of the day-to-day record of his own life.

Yet, perhaps feeling that his work and his letters, the means by which he reached out to others, were the best possible means by which to keep the record of his life, only during two periods of his life did he regularly write immediate records of his experience in anything resembling a diary, a journal, or a notebook. The first covered the Summer of 1921; the second, the last five years of his life.

The first period covered almost three months in the summer of 1921, when

Anderson, with his second wife Tennessee Mitchell and his friend, Paul Rosenfeld, spent almost two months in France and two weeks in England. Anderson had just published Poor White, his fifth book, and had a modestly successful show of his watercolors at the Sunwise Turn, a New York book store, but his artistic success had not yet -- nor was it ever to be -- translated into financial success. He had not been abroad since his brief stay in Cuba in the Army during the Spanish-American War, and his trip and that of his wife was made possible by the sale of two of his paintings for \$200.00 each to his friend Marietta D. Finley and by the generosity of Paul Rosenfeld.

In France and England Anderson sat at cafés; he met American expatriates, including Gertrude Stein, thus beginning a lifelong friendship and mutual admiration; he walked for miles through the streets; he admired Chartres and magnificent French draft stallions; he met Joyce and predicted that Ulysses might well be "the most important book that will be published in this generation;" he met Ezra Pound and Ford Maddox Ford. He returned to the United States in August 1921, refreshed and renewed and more confident of himself and his art than he had ever been before.

During his brief experience Anderson kept neither a dated dairy nor a formal journal but a notebook in which he wrote his observations and ideas, ranging from observations of Paris street life to ideas for and fragments of short stories, bits of poetic prose, and the framework of a play. Thus, at one moment, he wrote,

To stand on the Pont Arcole at night, when there is a new moon. In Paris in summer the darkness comes late falling softly. Along the wharfs boys are playing. Three tall boys are teaching a youngster to fight with his fists. They run laughing... Little prostitutes decked out in cheap feathers hurry away out of streets behind you on the right bank... There is a drunken man whose wife is scolding. He laughs loudly...

And again,

When beauty comes off it seems to justify always the terrible cost. What would it mean if every American child could see Sainte Chapelle, Chartres cathedral, the library in the palace at Fontainebleau....

And again, the story fragment that begins, "Mother Winters had got suddenly old. She did not understand what had happened and perhaps did not try. She was only 36 but how long her life had been," and that may be the beginning of "Death in the Woods," perhaps the greatest of Anderson's stories.

Anderson returned from Europe to further success, including winning the Dial prize of \$2,000.00; he published The Triumph of the Egg that Fall, and in the next year he broke with Tennessee and with Chicago and began a new life.

Fourteen years later, after another failed marriage, another sixteen books published, the purchase and temporary editorship of two weekly newspapers in Marion, Virginia, having established a permanent home in the stone and timber house he built at the convergence of Ripshin and Laurel creeks near Troutdale, Virginia, and for three years had enjoyed his last, happy marriage to Eleanor Copenhaver of Marion and New York, Anderson began once again, this time with daily entries, to record his experiences and observations. The first entry, perhaps the result of a New Years resolution or a promise to Eleanor, is dated January 1, 1936; the last, February 28, 1941, was written aboard the S.S. Santa Lucia, on his way, with Eleanor, to South America. He fell ill almost immediately, and eight days later, on March 8, 1941, he was dead.

The record of the last five years of his life was to be Anderson's most consistent attention to any of his projects for such a long period of time, and it was at the same time, although inevitably subjective, his most objective appraisal of his own experiences, ideas, and impressions. Unlike the earlier

notebook of his French visit and unlike his earlier autobiography, A Story-Teller's Story (1924) or posthumous Memoirs (1942) Anderson's diary, kept in six small bound volumes, commercially produced in diary form and given as advertising favors by a Marion Insurance agency, could serve as a model for the genre.

Although Anderson had written in A Story Teller's Story that "In the world of fancy... no man is ugly. Man is ugly in fact only," that one must be true to the essence rather than the facts of human life, his diary provides the factual outline of those last five years of his life, recording details of weather, health, encounters, work accomplished or not, opinions, literary gossip, moods, misfortune, even tragedy. Thus, on November 7, 1937, in New York, he wrote,

Lazy day. Beautiful weather. We slept later and went to walk. Got a room in which I will work when I return here after Charleston trip. Broadway Central Hotel, lower Broadway. Went to see Bill Faulkner, Algonquin Hotel. He had fallen against a hot radiator and burned himself. Went to Newspaper Guild Cocktail party. Broun got \$5 out of E, \$10 out of me. Went to dine with Burton and Hazel Rascoe. Burton's tragedy has aged him terribly.

One occasion he wrote about his own work, once commenting in wonder that "In writing you often start one thing and it turns into another. It is happening to me in the present story....," and upon the death of his mother-in-law, Laura Lu Copenhaver, only months before his own, he recorded that "The house at Marion stunned, the center of all life here gone," and again, "The savage and barbaric long waiting....," "another dreadful day of waiting....," and then "A very beautiful day, as though nature were welcoming Mother...."

More than anything else the diaries record the aimless wandering, the restless movement that characterized those last five years -- from Risphin to New York, to Florida, to Michigan, to Clyde, Ohio, to California-- the

illnesses that so often interfered with his work, the occasional bouts with despair. Yet flashes of the old Anderson recur: "A fine day at the races.... It's nice in the morning, seeing the horses run....," and "The first real spring day. It was difficult to stay at the desk."

The diary ends as it had begun, casually, clearly, in the course of a life more dramatic than most and too soon to end. As the Santa Lucia thrusts out to sea, "The sea got so rough that everything in the room flew back and forth...." Tomorrow, I'm sure Anderson thought, would be better

Anderson's Paris notebook had been edited, introduced, and interpreted by Michael Fanning in France and Sherwood Anderson: Paris Notebook, 1921, and published by the L.S.U. Press in 1976, Anderson's centennial year, and now happily, the diaries, skillfully and thoroughly edited by Hilbert H. Campbell, have been brought out of the Newberry's vault and published by the University of Georgia Press. Anderson has been dead for nearly half a century, but in the diaries he lives, sometimes confident, sometimes confused, at times commonplace, at others touching, even poetic. Because of the faithfulness of his editing, Professor Campbell has us all in his debt, just as Anderson continues to hold us in thrall.

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