



PHOTOGRAPH OF LOUISE BECHTEL, FROM *THE BOY WITH THE STAR CAPTION: EDWIN BECHTEL'S BOYHOOD YEARS*.  
A Memoir by Louise Seaman Bechtel (New York: The Thistle Press, 1960).

# The Legacy of Louise Bechtel

NANCY LARSON SHAPIRO

BASED ON AN INTERVIEW WITH LEONARD MARCUS

*“Children—catapults of energy, dynamos of ideas, summer suns of affection, lonesome dark dreamers. Children—flaunting borrowed plumage, desperately flying ancient flages, laboring herculean-wise at nothing. Singing, grimacing, wide-mouthed, informative, earthy, ethereal, combustible, secretive, acrobatic.... To trust this power of childhood—that is our challenge.”—Louise Bechtel, “The Giant in Children” (1927)*

Without editor and critic Louise Seaman Bechtel (1894–1985), the history of American literature for children might have been quite different. Some background is in order. In the late 19th century, the American Library Association (ALA) finally concluded a longstanding debate over whether or not libraries should serve children. Some believed that libraries should be for adults only, that the presence of children would fatally disrupt the sanctity of the hallowed reading rooms. The ALA did not concur, however, and special sections for young people were created in libraries around the turn of the century. This laid the groundwork for the development of a new children’s literature that would meet the library world’s standards. World War I delayed the publishers’ response, but in 1919 Bechtel (then Louise Seaman) and the Macmillan Company made the daring move of establishing the first children’s book department. Many other major American publishers followed suit.

Bechtel, however, soon found herself at the center of further debate. Two primary “camps” expounded differing views on the course children’s literature should take: librarians on the one hand, and progressive educators on the other. The majority of the librarians espoused the romantic idea of the child. They saw their children’s rooms as secret gardens where young people could enjoy a few years of innocence exploring fairy tales and fantasies, safe from all the pressures of modern world—they could develop imaginations that would serve them later in life. The librarians were par-

ticularly interested in “the book beautiful”—exquisitely produced story books and fairy tales. Partly because the books were so elegant, libraries were at first compelled to impose entrance restrictions on children: They were allowed in only if they could write their name in a book and present a clean set of hands.

The progressive educators, meanwhile, considered the modern world to be magical in itself. The progressives—influenced by theorists such as Freud, William James, and John Dewey, and practitioners such as Lucy Sprague Mitchell (founder of the Bank Street School)—wanted children to be active participants in contemporary life. They felt children would be confused at an early age by things they could not relate to in terms of their own experience. They favored “here-and-now” children’s literature—e.g., board books with pictures from everyday life that kids could handle even with sticky hands. Margaret Wise Brown was a student at Bank Street, and many of her books reflect this interest in real world experiences and sounds on the streets.

Bechtel was in the unusual position of having an allegiance to both camps. While she embraced high production values (her book catalogues were works of art in themselves), she wanted children’s books to be used, not put on a pedestal. In terms of content, she did not feel that the modern world and the secret garden of childhood were mutually exclusive. Among the most enduring titles Bechtel published at Macmillan were *Pinocchio*, with the now-classic illustrations of Attilio Mussino, and the contrastingly “here-and-now” *Men at Work*, with photographs by Lewis W. Hine. (The head librarian at the New York Public Library, incidentally, refused to purchase the latter book.)

Bechtel elevated the field of children’s literature, setting a standard for publishing “up,” not “down,” to children. She was also very much a “doer,” putting theories into practice and changing with the times—she embraced the new technology of radio, for instance, and read stories to children on the air. After leaving Macmillan, she served as children’s book review editor for the *New York Herald Tribune* from 1949 to 1957, frequently contributing to *The Saturday Review* and *The New York Times* as well. Her advocacy of a children’s literature that was sophisticated (e.g., children’s primers that were not “carefully selected and word-counted material [that] has lost that strong tang”) can be seen not only in her editorial legacy, but in her book reviews. “Gertrude Stein for Children,” for example, written in 1939, proffers the expat author as a modernist Mother Goose for children. (Macmillan published a collection of Bechtel’s speeches and essays, *Books in Search of Children*, in 1969.)

During her long career, Bechtel accrued an incomparable collection of children’s books. Her collection (later donated to Vassar College and the University of Florida in Gainesville) exceeded 3,500 volumes, among them rare folk tales, Asian and African legends, Greek mythology, Aesop’s fables, tales from Shakespeare, and volumes featuring noted early 20th-century children’s book illustrators such as Arthur Rackham, Kate Greenaway, and Boris Artzybasheff.