

BOOKS

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'Lassie' and other old favorite children's books come home again to a new generation

By CECELIA GOODNOW SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER

Lillie, Sawyer and Hunter Brown are time travelers, sailing on their mother's gently animated voice as she reads to them in the shade of a backyard apple tree.

This lazy summer day they're finishing "The Time Garden," written in 1958 by Edward Eager -- playwright, lyricist and children's author known for witty wordplay and magical adventure.

"I tend to stick with the classics because I'm really excited to share those with my kids," says their mother, Paula Becker, whose wavy auburn bob and sinuous frock give her the look of a 1930s literary heroine.

She's singing a common refrain as publishing enjoys a retro revival that's bringing once-forgotten favorites, from "Little Golden Book Classics" to "Trixie Belden" to a new generation of young readers.

"This is something that's been going on for a few years now, but I think it's reached its zenith," said Laura Backes, editor of Children's Book Insider, a national newsletter that follows trends in the field.

Backlist stars such as "Babar" and "Curious George" have always been in style. It's the loved but lesser-knowns that are back from the crypt. Fun, uncomplicated and well-suited for read-alouds, these timeless tales are comforting fare in a world gripped by post-9/11 anxiety.

"These are kind of scary times, and these books are very innocent," said Shanta Small, publicist for Henry Holt.

Last year Holt delighted fans with its revival of Elizabeth Enright's four-book "Melendy Quartet" of the 1940s. This spring it reissued Eric Knight's 1938 classic,



Karen Ducey / P-I

Five-year-old Lillie Brown, right, responds as her mother, Paula Becker, reads aloud from the novel "The Time Garden" by Edward Eager. Restored classics bring back times that seem friendly and secure to today's children and parents.

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"Lassie Come-Home," with new cover art that looks doggedly old-fashioned. Although Beverly Cleary's "Young Love" titles of the late '50s and early '60s never went out of print, HarperCollins is boldly asserting their retro appeal with new paperback covers that evoke an era of malt shops and bridal magazines. Originally aimed at 12-year-olds, they're now pitched to less worldly 10-year-olds -- and nostalgic middle-aged moms.

"I know, from the kind of mail we get, that there were parents longing for innocent tales of first love," said editor Elise Howard.

Even Little Golden Books, that never-ending staple of dime-store childhood, is celebrating its roots with a new line of Little Golden Book Classics. Random House launched the revival in 2001 as a lead-in to the series' 60th anniversary last fall. Three old favorites, including "The Saggy Baggy Elephant," are back this summer in a new, larger format.

Anniversaries are one of many reasons to reprise old favorites. Adult collectors drive demand for certain titles, such as Simon's newly restored "Raggedy Ann" books of the 1920s and '30s. Sometimes editors revive a personal favorite -- the case with last year's reissue of "The Charles Addams Mother Goose."

Or the link might be a movie tie-in. When Dodie Smith's "I Capture the Castle" beguiles audiences, can a new print edition be far behind?

Restored classics are "sort of a sure thing," Backes said, "and in this economy, publishers like that. They're not willing to take a lot of risks right now."

Golden oldies can even become born-again best sellers, such as Kay Thompson's three "Eloise" sequels. First up was 1957's "Eloise in Paris," reissued four years ago.

"There was this incredibly pent-up demand," said Simon & Schuster publicist Tracy Van Straaten. "You could not get these books for over 35 years."

This summer's retro success is Trixie Belden, the 13-year-old Everygirl who starred in a long-running mystery series that debuted in 1948. It was out of print for 15 years before Random House revived it this summer, with four titles published and two in the wings.

Editor Jennifer Dussling, 33, said the stories were already dated when she read them in the '70s but she loved them anyway. "Trixie felt like a real kid to me," she said. "I think that's why she holds up."

Three weeks after their July reissue, the first two titles were already in their second printing.

Despite their success, classic titles are just one niche in a children's book field that still produces many contemporary "issue" books.

In fact, the Young Adult category, traditionally aimed at kids 12 and up, is harder-edged than ever. Some titles venture so bluntly into sex, drugs, family dysfunction and street language that they're considered appropriate only for older teens.

"They're really getting edgy," Small said. "I think the general trend is still to push

**OUR AFFILIATES**



the envelope."

Laurie Amster-Burton, 27, a devoted fan of Maud Hart Lovelace's "Betsy-Tacy" books, which debuted in 1941, said edginess is something some readers can do without.

"Some people have a perception that current children's books are too serious or too scary for kids," she said. "I don't think that's true, but there are people who think some children's books are not appropriate."

The Betsy-Tacy books, set in small-town Minnesota of the early 1900s, occasionally touch on difficult subjects, such as the death of a baby sister or prejudice toward Syrian immigrant neighbors. But their enduring appeal stems mainly from a focus on gentle fun and adventure.

The full series returned to print through the lobbying efforts of the Betsy-Tacy Society, a grassroots fan club that has grown to 1,500 members since its 1990 founding.

Amster-Burton, who co-founded an unofficial Seattle branch seven years ago, read the books as a child and later shared them with her students at Whitman Middle School, where she taught seventh and eighth grade English. Now studying to be a school librarian, she looks forward to passing them on to her five nieces.

"These books may be old, and old-fashioned," she said, "but they're really good stories."

For all their charm, classics have their own shortcomings. They weren't all literary gems, and some reflect racial, cultural and gender sensibilities that are out of step with today's values.

Amster-Burton sometimes ponders, "What does Betsy-Tacy have to offer modern girls? Is it sexist because it's set back in time?" She finds reassurance in Betsy's dreams of going to college and becoming a writer.

Becker said that when sharing classics, she addresses stereotypical or uncomfortable passages head-on. Even "The Time Garden," the family's favorite du jour, has a brief fantasy depiction of cannibalistic natives who speak pidgin English.

"That's the kind of thing you run into in old books all the time," Becker said. "You use that as a teachable moment, that this is something that used to be accepted by many people in our society and now isn't."

For Becker, a contributing editor to Historylink, classics are part of a longstanding love affair with the past. She says she fell in love with her future husband because, in college, he read aloud to her from the "Little House" books.

Today she and husband, Barry Brown, a family doctor, live in a modest, Maple Leaf cottage with 1930s furniture, a cramped kitchen and, by choice, no dishwasher.

"I'm as modern as I have to be -- but no more," Becker said with a laugh.

And that's fine with her kids Hunter, 11, Sawyer, 8, and Lillie, an elfin 5-year-old. The homeschooled trio seem as calm and sweetly old-fashioned as the characters in their read-aloud classics.

Hunter, who reviews new titles for All for Kids, loves "Harry Potter" and the best-selling "Artemis Fowl" techno-thrillers. But that doesn't mean he can't also enjoy the gentler magic of a bygone age. If some passages seem quaintly out of touch, well, he's cool with that.

"It doesn't bother me. Actually," Hunter said with a quiet smile, "I kind of like it."

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