Some Children’s Books by Iowa Writers

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Although the situation may have been different in past years, the children’s book market today is alive and vital; it boasts excellence in both literature and art. Many of its writers and illustrators have achieved success in other or related fields and have found in work for children a deep and lasting satisfaction. This is not to say, of course, that all works published for children have literary value. Standards have been established and awards are now given for excellence in literature and illustration. Each year for more than thirty years a committee of the Children’s Services Division of the American Library Association has singled out new books which exemplify high standards of literary and artistic quality. To the outstanding illustrator goes the Randolph Caldecott Award, named for a nineteenth-century English artist who did notable work in illustrating children’s books. The outstanding writer for children receives the John Newbery Award, named for a publisher of eighteenth-century England who had a particular interest in issuing books especially intended for young readers.

In the Iowa Authors Collection at The University of Iowa Library are works by more than fifty individuals who have written books for children. To select a few representative authors is a difficult task, but sixteen Iowans have here been chosen to represent different types of writing and literature for pre-teenagers and to illustrate a half-century in the development of literature for children.

One of the foremost authorities in children’s literature is May Hill Arbuthnot, a native of Mason City now living in Illinois. She is considered outstanding not for any original stories for youngsters, but because she has edited very fine collections and anthologies for teachers, librarians, parents, counselors, and others who work directly with children. In her long and noteworthy career as an educator, lecturer, and writer at Western Reserve University, she has been the recipient of many awards and honors, including the Constance Lindsay
Skinner Award of the Women’s National Book Association in 1959 and the Regina Medal of the Catholic Library Association in 1964, awarded for distinguished contributions to children’s literature. Her books *Children and Books* and the *Arbuthnot Anthology* are used as textbooks or major reference works in colleges and universities throughout the country. *Children's Books Too Good To Miss*, now in its fifth edition, coauthored by Mrs. Arbuthnot, Margaret Mary Clark, and Harriet Geneva Long, is a collection of over 250 titles with annotations and selected illustrations, proven by their popularity with children themselves, for use in selecting good reading material for the library or for developing a child’s personal collection.

**Legends and Folktales**

Another Iowan, Natalia Belting, is essentially a children’s author, though her books are enjoyed by adults also. Born in Oskaloosa, Miss Belting was reared in Iowa and attended Coe College in Cedar Rapids. She received her degrees, however, including the doctorate, from the University of Illinois. Her widely-acclaimed books deal mainly with folklore, especially Indian legends and with the history of North America during the period of French colonization. Her poetry is a type of free verse particularly suitable to the tales which she retells. Some of these tales are interpretations of legends from many countries of the world, and most of them have celestial themes. *Calendar Moon*, an ALA “Notable” book, is an almanac of stories of the seasons and the names of the months. Its illustrations by Bernarda Bryson have an ethereal, mystical quality in colors of gray and blue. *The Sun is a Golden Earring*, also illustrated by Miss Bryson, was a runner-up for the Caldecott Award in 1963. This collection of poetic interpretations includes legends of the sun, the rainbow, and the Milky Way. Stories of the constellations are retold in *The Stars are Silver Reindeer*, in which the illustrations by Esta Nesbitt resemble cave drawings. Miss Belting writes most of her books in prose, however, and three books which illustrate her fine prose are *The Moon is a Crystal Ball*, *Three Apples Fell From Heaven*, and *The Earth is on a Fish’s Back*.

Another collector of legends is Harold W. Felton, a lawyer who was born in Neola, Iowa. Mr. Felton now lives in New York, where in his leisure time he writes for young people. Probably his best-known book is his collection of *Legends of Paul Bunyan*, which contains over 100 stories of the great logging hero. Mr. Felton has also written books about such other legendary heroes of America as John Henry, Mike Fink, and Pecos Bill. All of these stories are told with good taste but
reflect the strength, wildness, and humor of the then-untamed frontiers of our country. Among many other books that Mr. Felton has to his credit is *Cowboy Jamboree, Western Songs & Lore*, a collection of cowboy songs with accompanying legends.

**Biography**

One of the most popular types of books for children, yet one of the most difficult to write well, is the biography. Mrs. Arbuthnot states in *Children and Books* that “For a long time it was difficult to find any biographies for children that were not stereotyped, stuffy, and unpopular.” Even today with the plethora of biographical series coming from the publishers’ presses, it is often difficult to find a biography that rises above a standardized technique. The biographer must trace the accomplishments, activities, and contributions of a real personality and remain within the framework of factual events. To do this accurately and yet keep the story fresh and interesting to youthful readers necessitates a special kind of creativity and skill.

The Iowa Authors Collection includes some excellent biographical writers. Cornelia Lynde Meigs, though born in Illinois, was associated from early childhood with the Iowa cities of Keokuk and Davenport, first as a student and then as a teacher. Like May Hill Arbuthnot, Miss Meigs is an acknowledged authority on children’s literature. Both gained recognition as historians and educators, but Miss Meigs is also noted for the many children’s books she published at a time when good literature written primarily for children was less abundant.

For her sensitive portrayal of Louisa May Alcott in *Invincible Louisa*, she received the John Newbery Award in 1934. This book, wherein the reader becomes intimately acquainted with the biographee, the immediate and remote members of her family and her many acquaintances, all of whom in some way shaped or influenced her destiny, is perhaps somewhat lengthy for the average young reader. Some editions of *Invincible Louisa*, older ones mainly, include photographs of family members, Louisa at various ages, and the old homestead, plus a six-page chronological table of important dates and events in Miss Alcott’s life. Were it not for Miss Meigs’s superior literary style and her skill in bringing Louisa May Alcott to life, the book today would probably be considered “stereotyped, stuffy, and unpopular.”

Alberta Powell Graham (1875-1955) is one of three Iowa authors who wrote biographies almost exclusively. Her book *Thirty-Two Roads to the White House* briefly chronicles the lives of the first thirty-two presidents. She also contributed four books to the Abingdon Press “Makers
of America" series: La Salle, River Explorer; Lafayette, Friend of America; Clara Barton, Red Cross Pioneer; and Christopher Columbus, Discoverer. Although her books draw upon American history, Mrs. Graham's formal training was in the field of music. She moved with her family from Delaware to Ottumwa, Iowa, when she was a small child, was graduated from Ottumwa High School, and studied with private teachers in some of the major schools of music in the country. She was the author of over 300 published songs, and from 1910 to 1921 was supervisor of music in various public schools of Iowa. In 1949, when she was in her seventies, she published Strike Up the Band! a collection of short biographies of thirty-five popular American band musicians from the jazz era to the late 1940's.

Biographies of Thomas Alva Edison, John Paul Jones, Leif Ericson, and Benjamin Franklin have appeared in the "Makers of America" series from the pen of another Iowa author, Ruth Cromer Weir. Mrs. Weir has also authored short biographies of Marco Polo, John Paul Jones, and Christopher Columbus for Row, Peterson's "Real People" series. Mrs. Weir was born in Union, Iowa, attended The University of Iowa in 1924, and has served as nature editor of Childcraft and biography editor of the World Book Encyclopedia. In the Iowa Authors Collection will be found manuscripts of many of Mrs. Weir's books along with extensive correspondence between this author and her publishers.

Meridel Le Sueur, a native of Murray, Iowa, is primarily a short story writer whose works have appeared in many magazines and literary anthologies. In her younger years she acted in motion pictures, wrote for newspapers, taught school, and in 1927 was director of the Children's Theatre of Sacramento, California. She has also written four biographies for young readers: The River Road, a Story of Abraham Lincoln; Chanticleer of Wilderness Road, a Story of Davy Crockett; Nancy Hanks of Wilderness Road, a Story of Abraham Lincoln's Mother; and Little Brother of the Wilderness, the Story of Johnny Appleseed.

Science

Probably no other area of children's literature has shown such marked improvement as that evident in scientific writing, with scientists now offering young readers a great deal of factual information. Carroll and Mildred Fenton, husband and wife, both of them native Iowans, have contributed in good measure to the high quality of writing found in current scientific literature for children. Dr. Fenton taught for many years in universities in this country and with his wife has

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traveled extensively throughout the western hemisphere. Most of the books by the Fentons are illustrated, many with drawings by Dr. Fenton, others with photographs by Mrs. Fenton. Among their collaborations are The Land We Live On, Worlds in the Sky, and In Prehistoric Seas. Mrs. Fenton has said that when her husband began to write popular books for children and adults, she acted as critic, research assistant, typist, and photographer. They are both trained geologists, and together they have inspired other scientists to direct some of their efforts to children.

Lynn Poole, a native of Eagle Grove, Iowa, has authored some excellent books in the field of science for children. These include such titles as Your Trip Into Space, Diving For Science, and Ballooning in the Space Age. Much of his work is the result of experiments done by Johns Hopkins University research teams, some of this material having been the basis for the televised “Johns Hopkins Science Review,” of which Mr. Poole was creator and host. Both the Fentons and Lynn Poole have covered a wide range of scientific subjects, including geology, biology, astronomy, and medicine, for the middle and upper elementary grade and junior high school students.

**Fairy Tales**

Cornelia Meigs’s first published book was a fairy story centering around “The Beggar,” a flute-playing Robin Hood sort of individual with magic in his touch. The book is called Kingdom of the Winding Road and was published in 1915. May Hill Arbuthnot collected over 150 fairy stories, old and new, including folktales from various countries, fables, and myths. These were published under the title Time for Fairy Tales. Elves and Ellefolk, Tales of the Little People, by Natalia Belting, contains stories of Leprechauns, elves, korrigans, and goblins. A relative newcomer to the field of children’s literature is Mary Calhoun. Miss Calhoun is a native of Keokuk, a graduate in journalism from The University of Iowa, an ex-newspaper reporter, and now a housewife and mother living in Colorado. Among her recent books are the following fairy tales: The Runaway Brownie, The Hungry Leprechaun, The Thieving Dwarfs, and The Witch of Hissing Hill.

**Animals**

Stories in which an animal is the protagonist or is a leading character are popular with children. This is evident in the long life of some television shows which feature dogs, dolphins, and bears in starring roles. Natalia Belting’s Indy and Mr. Lincoln is the story of a “most remark-
able pig," supposedly based on a true incident in the life of Abraham Lincoln. In *Verity Mullens and the Indian* by Miss Belting, Verity, the dog owned by Priscilla Mullens, sets out to discover a turkey but finds an Indian instead. In 1947 Ruth Weir published a little story about a dog, *Rags, An Orphan of the Storm*, and Mary Calhoun wrote about a coon dog called *Houn' Dog*, humorously illustrated by Caldecott-Award-winning artist Roger Duvoisin.

Phil Stong (1899-1957), best known, no doubt, for his book *State Fair*, wrote some sixteen books for young readers, most of them illustrated by Kurt Wiese, noted artist for children's books. Among these are two books about dogs, *No-Stitch: the Hound* and *Positive Pete!* Mr. Stong was born in Van Buren County, Iowa. His work is humorous and sensitive, and so universally appealing that some of it has been translated into other languages. His great imagination gave us characters like *Honk: the Moose; Captain Kidd's Cow; Censored, the Goat*; Mexico, a mule in *High Water*; and Prince and Tam O'Shanter, a horse and pig in *The Prince and the Porker*.

A new luminary on the Iowa literary scene is Eleanor Pownall Simmons, who until three books ago was known primarily as an artist. She has illustrated the works of several other children's authors and her drawings have also appeared in women's magazines. To Iowa City's very young generation, Ellie Simmons is best known for the exciting and imaginative mural that decorates the Story Hour room in the Iowa City Public Library. In recent years she has become an author under the aegis of David McKay Company, publishers. Born in Des Moines, she was graduated from The University of Iowa, and she is currently living in Iowa City, where her husband is on the staff of the University. One of her latest books is a true picture book, having no words save the title, *Dog*. The pictures by Mrs. Simmons recount the story of a little boy who acquires and cares for a curly-haired white pup.

Other animals prominently featured in stories by Iowans include *A Horse Named Justin Morgan*, Harold Felton's factual and sensitive story of a boy whose great fondness for a plucky little work horse effects the perpetuation of a respected breed of American work horses. Cats are featured by Natalia Belting in her book about legendary cats called *Cat Tales* and by Mary Calhoun in her book, *Wobble, the Witch Cat*.

*Other Children*

Children of all ages are interested in stories about other children, particularly of their own age. They want to know if their problems are similar and how such problems are faced and solved by others. They
are interested in knowing how other children live, play, and work. Ellie Simmons wrote two books about a little girl named Mary whose sensitivity and femininity create the action in *Mary, the Mouse Champion* and *Mary Changes Her Clothes*. As in *Dog*, the illustrations are appropriate to the subject, and in the latter book a touch of femininity is suggested by the pink pages, cover, and jacket of the book. Mary Calhoun's heroine stars in three books about a 10-year-old girl in the awkward phase of growing up and having to adjust to changes around her and within her. *Katie John, Depend on Katie John*, and *Honestly, Katie John!* are books written for the pre-teenage girl. In another book, Miss Calhoun recounts the meeting of Sarah and the Cat Woman and their subsequent adventures in *The House of Thirty Cats*.

Crowell-Collier has published a series of children's books by famous authors of adult literature under the title "Modern Masters Books for Children." One of these, written by Paul Engle of Iowa City and illustrated by Ray Prohaska, is called *Who's Afraid?* It is about a small boy alone on his grandfather's farm who dares to face the animals and to walk through the tall corn all by himself. In *Cowboy Cal and the Outlaw*, Mary Calhoun writes about a determined boy and an equally determined wild horse, and in *River-Minded Boy*, she relates a lad's experiences on the "Black Hawk," a Mississippi towboat. Duane Bradley, a native of Clarinda, Iowa, has recently written *Meeting With a Stranger*, a book in which a boy confronts a present-day social problem. Tefera is a young Ethiopian shepherd boy who sees the ancient and traditional ways of his African village changed by a smiling stranger from America. Mrs. Bradley's book is illustrated with excellent black and white drawings by E. Harper Johnson. Ruth Cromer Weir's *The Great Big Noise* is a mystery story in which two preschool boys, visited by their adventurous grandfather, seek the source of a loud, growling sound which startles them in the night. Three offerings of this kind in the Iowa Authors Collection that can be recommended are *Mystery at the Red House* by Cornelia Meigs, *Mystery at the Shoals* by Duane Bradley, and a rollicking misadventure by Phil Stong called *Way Down Cellar*.

**Christmas**

Christmas time is the setting for several books by Iowa authors. Grace Noll Crowell, a native of Inland, Iowa, wrote five books about boys and girls at this special time of the year. One of these, *Rebecca, The Little Serving Maid*, takes place in Bethlehem at the first Christmas. Three of her other books feature a presumably early-nineteenth-century lass who is introduced to us in *Happiness for Sale* as "Little
Prudence Parker of long ago. . . .” In this and the two other books of less than fifty pages each, *The Shining Hour* and *The Glory of Giving*, Prudence illustrates certain Christian virtues which triumph over wrongdoing and evil thoughts. In Mrs. Crowell’s *Little Boy Down the Lane*, Noel Hanson learns the meaning of Christmas as he performs his simple, everyday tasks for his widowed mother and their neighbors. Prudence, Noel, and Rebecca are faintly reminiscent of the children portrayed in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century morality stories. They are good children, unyielding to besetting temptation, but have a somewhat unreal quality.

Paul Engle has written a Christmas book which is excellent fare for adults and children. *An Old Fashioned Christmas* is a collection of stories which had earlier appeared as a short book entitled *Prairie Christmas*, here supplemented with related poems. Making this volume a special item in the Iowa Authors Collection are its illustrations by Ellie Simmons, whose technique is in perfect harmony with the text. It is a warm and beautiful book which contains much traditional Christmas Americana. An older Christmas story by Cornelia Meigs, *Mother Makes Christmas*, was published in 1940. Lois Lenski, illustrator and author, drew the pictures for the book. It, too, is a good look at the Christmas-time of another era.

**Historical Fiction**

*The Dutch Colt* and *Fair Wind to Virginia*, by Cornelia Meigs, both have their setting in Revolutionary America. *The Dutch Colt*, a story of two Quaker children in the early days of Pennsylvania, has this year been reprinted by Macmillan. Miss Meigs’s *The Willow Whistle* is a story of Indians and pioneers which was first published in 1931 and is still popular enough to keep in print.

Harold Felton’s *William Phips and the Treasure Ship* is based on historical events and concerns the search for a fortune aboard a sunken Spanish galleon by a young sea captain, Mr. Phips, who later became a governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Two books by Natalia Belt ing that relate to the early history of the United States are *Pierre of Kaskaskia, Pioneer Boy of New France* and *In Enemy Hands, a Story of the French and Indian War*.

Madeline Darrough Horn, an Iowa City author, is a writer of pioneer stories. Although born in Illinois, she has lived in Iowa for many years, much of the time in Iowa City, where her husband taught at the University until his recent death. Most of Mrs. Horn’s books are set in the Midwest, and she writes with great understanding and real-
ism. *Farm on the Hill* has a special made-in-Iowa quality because the illustrations are by Grant Wood, a personal friend of the Horns who expressed the wish to do the pictures for this book. *Log Cabin Family* is a humorous and charming story of the Midwest, good for reading aloud. Its drawings by Francis McCray are faintly reminiscent of Grant Wood, but they have a softness not characteristic of Wood's technique.

By no means all the books by these sixteen authors have been mentioned above, but those of their books that are suitable for children are included in the following list. Some of these books are out of print at the present time, but hopefully publishers will continue to reprint older works of good literary quality.

Arbuthnot, May Hill


*Children's Books Too Good to Miss,* by May Hill Arbuthnot, Margaret Mary Clark, and Harriet Geneva Long. Cleveland: The Press of Western Reserve University, 1966.


Belting, Natalia


Bradley, Duane

Calhoun, Mary

Crowell, Grace Noll

Engle, Paul

Felton, Harold W.


Fenton, Carroll Lane


Graham, Alberta Powell


Horn, Madeline Darrough


LeSueur, Meridel


Meigs, Cornelia


Helga and the White Peacock; a play in three acts for young people. With a frontispiece by Ruth Bingham, photographs by Margaret Browne, and


Poole, Lynn


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Simmons, Ellie

Stong, Phil


Weir, Ruth Cromer


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Jacket design of a children's book from the Iowa Authors Collection, Madeline Darrough Horn's *Farm on the Hill*, illustrated by Grant Wood and published in 1936 by Charles Scribner's Sons.