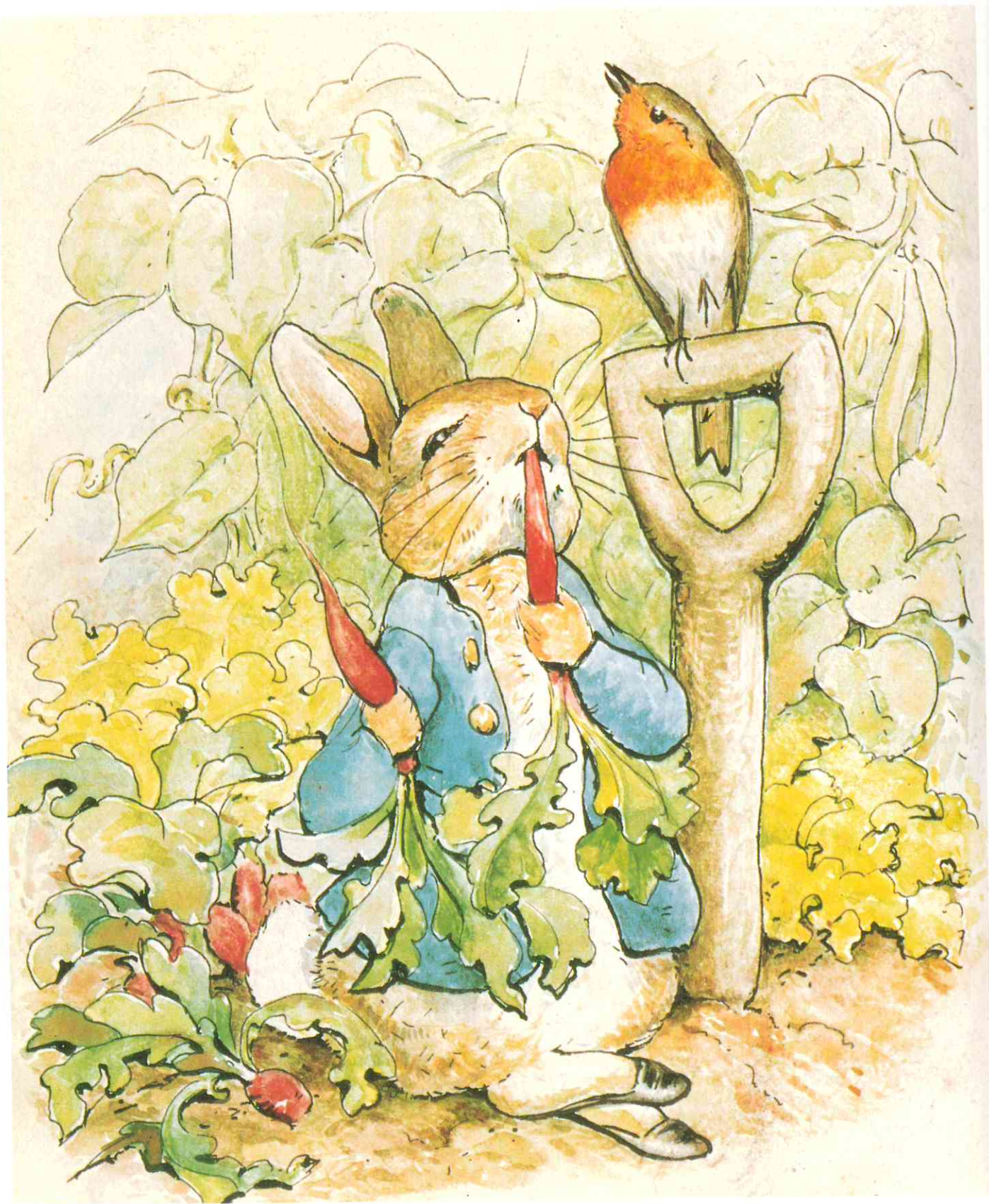




“No teeth, no teeth, no teeth!” The speaker is Mr. Jackson, a toad and an uninvited visitor down the yards and yards of soft sandy passages that are the underground home of Mrs. Tittlemouse. People are always dropping in on her, and they’re ever so much trouble to clean up after. Mr. Jackson, for one, drips. When she offers him some savory cherrystones, his toad-mouth gapes and he points out—three times—what is rather obvious: he has no teeth.

The characters are from *The Tale of Mrs. Tittlemouse* (1910), one of Beatrix Potter’s best. Potter (1866–1943) lived a long and productive life turning out 46 children’s books that have been reprinted around the world. Her trademark is a startling combination of delicate watercolors and a prose style that features some big words set in short sentences and very short paragraphs.

The first page of her early story *The Tailor of Gloucester* (1902–03), for example, contains no fewer than five words for types of cloth—taffeta, satin, pompadour, lutestring (watered silk), and padusoy (Padua silk). What we all learned from Potter is that children, even very small ones, will absorb the tough bits as long as they are charmed along by the narrative flow. The big words give a taste of the adult world they know they all must someday face.

Oh, how young listeners squirm with excitement at the prospect of adventures and scares in the great outside world: the nice gentleman “with sandy whiskers” who offers to help Jemima line her nest with feathers he has stashed in his fox-den (*The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck*,

1908). Or, Peter Rabbit’s mother, who abruptly announces: “. . . don’t go into Mr. McGregor’s garden: your Father had an accident there; he was put in a pie by Mrs. McGregor” (*The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, 1901–02).

The process by which books for children achieve classic status stands in refreshing contrast to that of adult books. Kids don’t respond to literary trends. Potter or Maurice Sendak or Dr. Seuss are only as good as their next book. To succeed with kids, a book must simply hold their attention, delight them, teach them something they can use, give them a hairs-breadth escape once in a while, and show them something of the adult world, the thing they’re most interested in anyway.

The first children’s books concentrated on teaching. Johann Amos Comenius (1592–1670) is credited with publishing *Orbis sensualium pictus* (*The Visible World in Pictures*), the first illustrated book for children, printed in Nuremberg in 1658. It featured 150 woodcuts depicting birds and other animals, jobs and morality, games and law, war and magic, and the text listed the Latin words for everything in the pictures.

Spelling books, primers, ABCs, and books of morality—including tiny “thumb” Bibles—constituted the bulk of children’s reading in the 17th and 18th centuries. This is true for both England and America. The Colonial Williamsburg library holds a well-worn 1789 book, *Entertaining Fables for the Instruction of Children*, whose frontispiece cautions:

*Observe this book, here fix thine eyes,
The mother to her darling cries,*

MOTHER GOOSE AND COMPANY

BOOKS FOR THE
YOUNG—AND THE YOUNG
AT HEART

A charming original watercolor from Peter Rabbit celebrates Beatrix Potter’s love and knowledge of nature. Her classic story, composed originally as a picture-letter to a child, was first published—in black and white and at her expense—in 1901.

Prudence.

Prudentia.



Prudence, 1.
looketh upon all things
as a Serpent, 2.
and doeth,
speaketh, or thinketh
nothing in vain.

She looks backward, 3
as into a looking-glass, 4
to things past;
and seeth before her, 5.
is with a Perspective-
glass, 7.
things to come,
to the end; 6.
and so she perceiveth

Prudentia, 1.
omnia circumspectat,
ut Serpens, 2.
nihilq; agit,
loquitur, & cogitat
in cassum.

Respicit, 3.
tanquam in Speculum, 4.
ad Præterita;
& Prospicit, 5.

tanquam Telescopio, 7.
Futura
seu Finem: 6.
atq; ita perspicit

what

This little BOOK will make thee wise.
Thou here as in a glass wilt find,
The faithful image of the mind,
From hence thou'lt learn betimes to know
Those proper duties thou shalt owe
To God, to man, to friend, to foe.

Clearly, this is the sort of advertisement that appealed to parents, not children. Yet the fact is that throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, children were considered to be small adults. They were dressed as adults and were expected to behave like them—as much as possible, anyway—and both their play and their books sought to inculcate socially desirable conduct.

We now realize that children are much smarter than we ever thought. They size up social realities and family dynamics instantly, and are fully capable of diving beneath the surface reality of a tale to bring up a usable pearl of wisdom. Consider the simple nursery rhyme:

Pussy cat, pussy cat, where have you
been?
I've been up to London to look at the
queen.
Pussy cat, pussy cat, what did you there?
I frightened a little mouse under her chair.

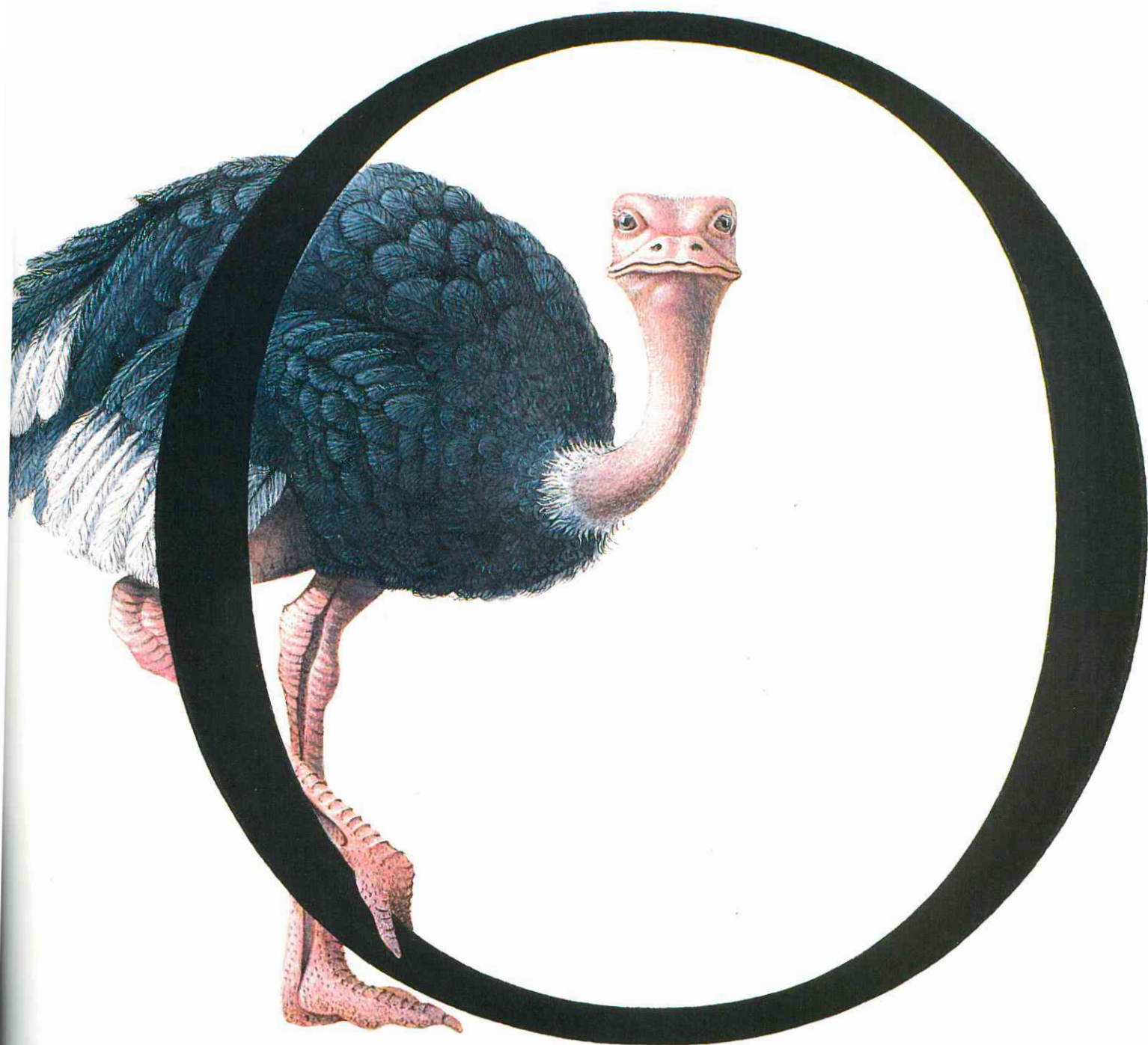
Even the smallest child can understand this. Adults see it as merely quaint. Yet it also carries a serious message: if you're going to do the same thing in London as you did at home, why bother? Pussycat might just as well have saved her train fare. The rhyme was published in *Songs for the Nursery* in 1805, but probably circulated orally for centuries before that, handed down from generation to generation.

To French poet Charles Perrault (1628–1703) goes credit for mining the oral literature of the nursery. His

The lessons of Prudence are not lost in this woodcut, opposite, from a 1685 English translation of Johann Amos

Comenius's Orbis sensualium pictus (1658), the first picture book for children. Today the tradition continues, only in a

less didactic, more entertaining style: below, O is for ostrich in Bert Kitchen's 1984 Animal Alphabet.





The world of fantasy has long been the special domain of children's literature and the illustrations that accompany it. Water fairies disport among the water lilies, above, in one of a set of pictures by Richard Doyle that inspired verses by Irish poet William Allingham. Pictures and text were united in 1870 for the publication of *In Fairyland: A Series of Pictures from the Elf-World*. Opposite, one of Arthur Rackham's exquisite watercolors from "The Old Woman in the Wood" in the 1917 edition of the Grimm brothers' *Little Brother and Little Sister*. Rackham worked his magic in dozens of children's classics in the early 20th century.

Contes de ma mere l'Oye (1697), or *Mother Goose's Tales* (1729), showed that children's tales were worthy of serious study.

The brothers Grimm, Jacob (1785–1863) and Wilhelm (1786–1859), are credited with founding the modern science of folklore, chiefly in a multi-volume edition of folktales called *Kinder-und Hausmärchen* (*Nursery and Household Tales*, 1812–1822), known in English as *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. Though their academic interests were in linguistics, they came to that work mainly through collecting fairy tales, which they said reflected our simple, primordial past—a past that can be revisited in children's stories.

Because of the popularity of books like Perrault's, publishers began to consider a regular trade in entertaining, illustrated books for children. The London publishing firm of John Newbery (1713–1767) turned out some 400 titles specifically for children up through 1815, including *The History of Little Goody Two-Shoes* (1765), the story of the education and travels of an orphan girl. It is said to

be the first long piece of fiction just for children.

Since 1922, the (John) Newbery Medal has been awarded annually for the "most distinguished contribution to American literature for children." The first prize-winner was Hendrik van Loon's *The Story of Mankind*. The Caldecott Medal, by contrast, has been awarded each year since 1938 to the best American picture book for children. The medal honors Randolph Caldecott (1846–1886), the celebrated Victorian illustrator whose *A Frog He Would A-Wooing Go* (1883) became a best seller. The book deeply impressed a young Beatrix Potter, who was especially influenced by Caldecott's portrayal of dressed-up animals.

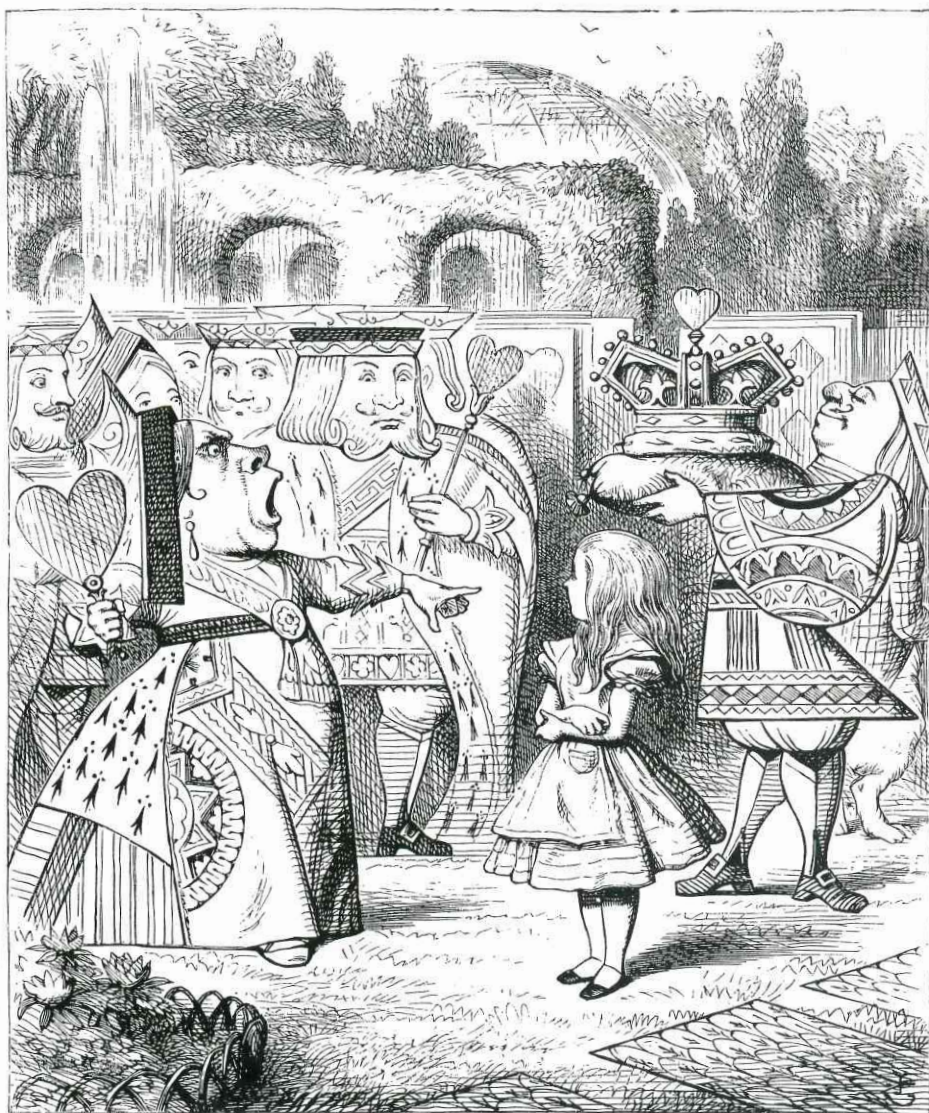
The ultimate children's story, of course, is *Hamlet*, a cautionary tale about what can go wrong if you run away from home (to university) and return to discover your parents utterly changed. It's amazing how much adult literature seems to be about this kind of choice. From *The Odyssey* to *Paradise Lost*, they all suggest "There's no place like home."

For a child, there are really only





Young Alice Liddell, above, was the muse for whom Oxford deacon Charles Dodgson, better known as Lewis Carroll, created *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). Artist John Tenniel worked with Dodgson to create indelible images for this classic, such as the Queen of Hearts and her entourage with Alice, above right.



two choices, after all: to stay or to go. Childhood itself is a time of trying out strategies for life. Shall I be aggressive or passive, independent or domestic, good or bad? And, whichever I choose, will someone still love me? Approve of me? The best of children's literature deals with the consequences of these tough choices. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *Pinocchio*, *The Wind in the Willows*, *Winnie-the-Pooh*—all are about getting away from home.

Even Graham Greene, when he came to write his first children's story, *The Little Train* (1946), made it about

the struggle for independence that every creature must go through, even if it is a locomotive.

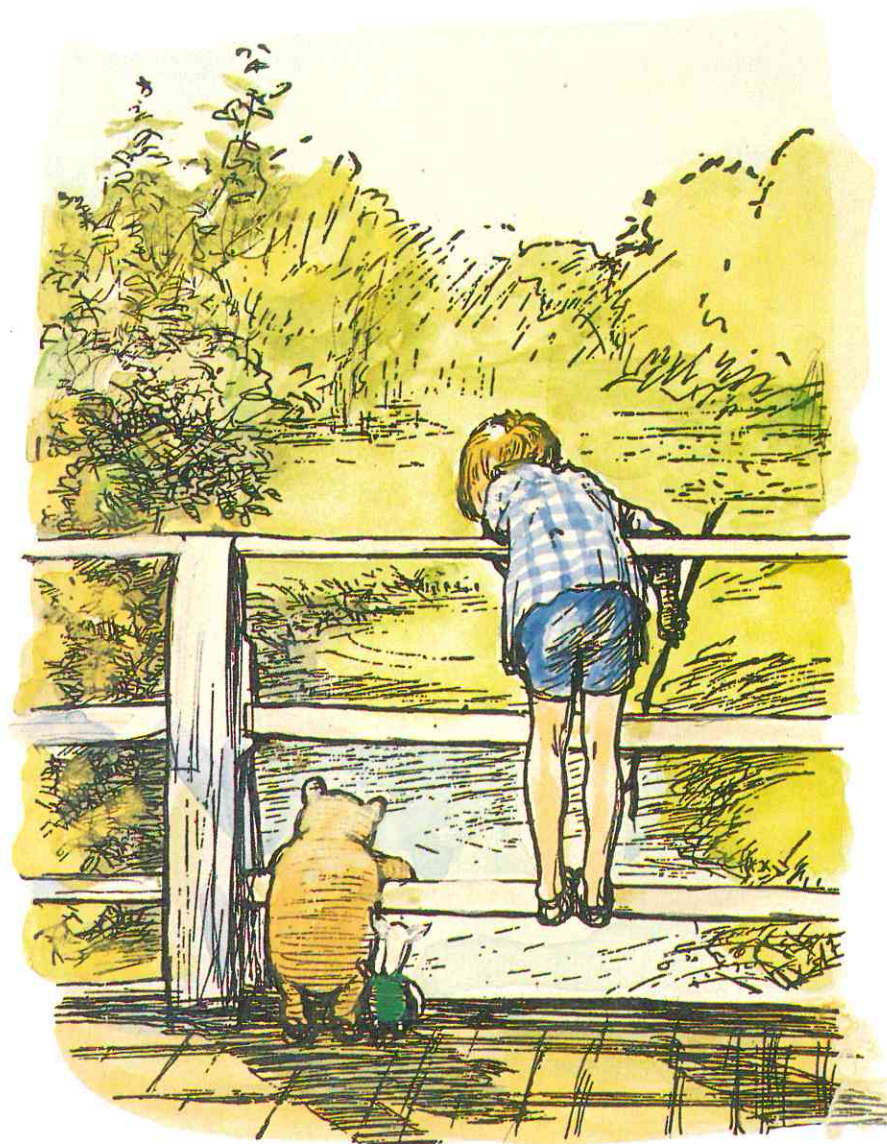
The Reverend Charles Dodgson (1832–1898) taught mathematics at Christ Church, Oxford, and was a family friend of Dean H.G. Liddell of the college, himself a great bookman and co-author of Liddell and Scott's *Greek-English Lexicon* (a book still in print). As an 1864 Christmas present for Liddell's young daughter, Alice, Dodgson presented her with a manuscript of stories he had been inventing for her over the past two

years. The book, illustrated by his own hand, was entitled *Alice's Adventures Underground*.

Dodgson financed the book's publication himself, adopting the pen name Lewis Carroll and employing the *Punch* cartoonist John Tenniel to redo his drawings. Although printing was complete in June 1865, Tenniel was disappointed with the way his art was reproduced, and the entire 2,000-copy edition was suppressed. (It was altered and later distributed in America.) By Christmas 1865, reprinting was complete and the world at large at last was treated to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Carroll's final choice for a title.

Alice's voyage of discovery takes her to many strange places, but in every case she learns about herself and home. In 1927, the novelist Hugh Walpole sized up *Alice's* impact: "I have never seen anywhere sufficient emphasis laid upon the greatest of its powers, namely, the extraordinary resemblance of the figures in it to a child's everyday relations. A child of six or seven sees its elders as 'trees walking.' . . . These resemblances did not strike me as in any way odd; it simply was that the people in *Alice* behaved more normally and more reasonably than the people at home."

The next great runaway child came from the imagination of Carlo Collodi, the nom de plume of Carlo Lorenzini (1826–1890), a journalist who turned to writing for children. Between 1881 and 1883 he wrote installments of "La Storia di un Burratino" ("The Story of a Puppet") for a children's journal. Its opening illustration showed Pinocchio as the pathetic single-string kind of puppet that's held in one hand while



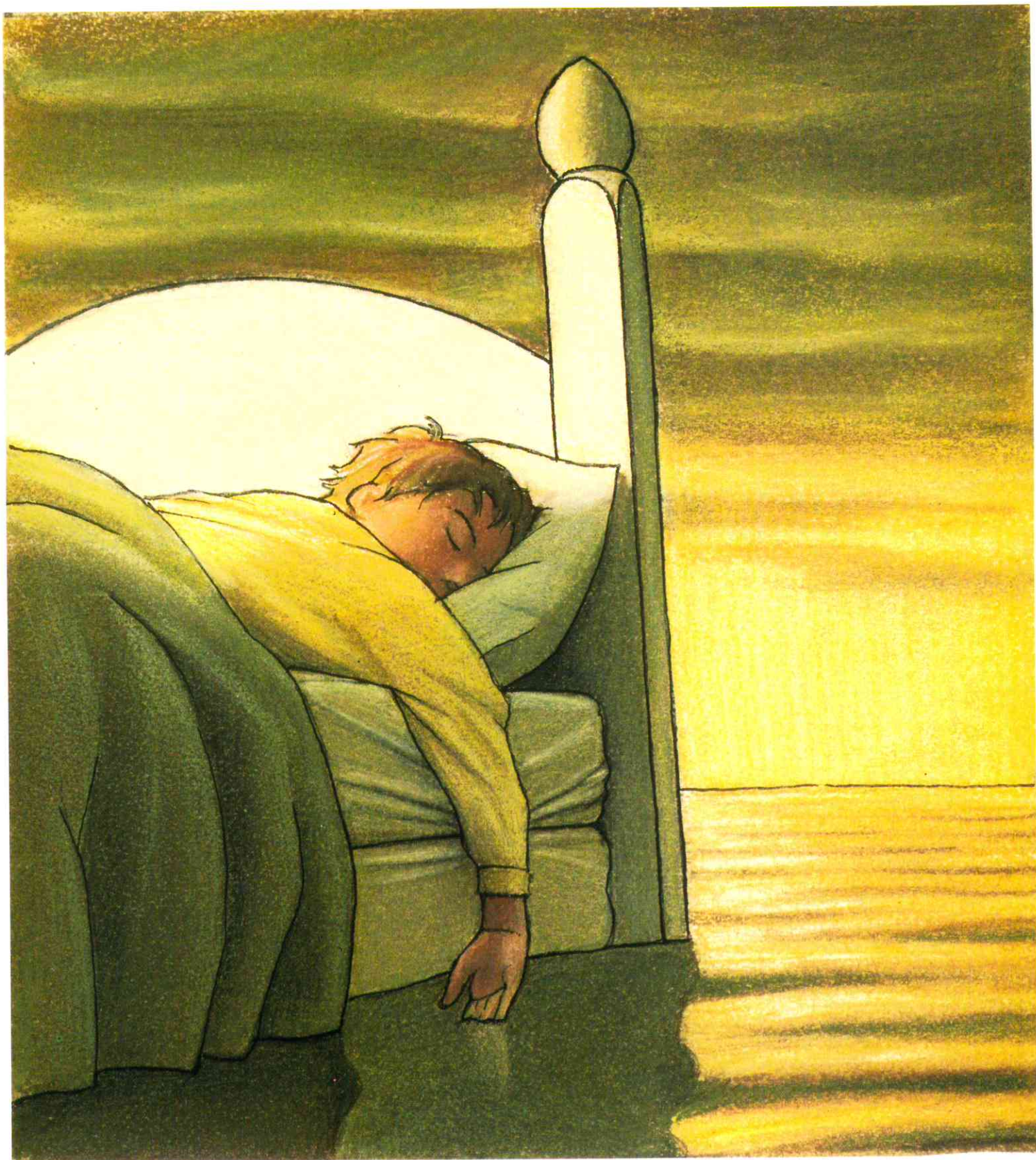
the string is pulled from below. By the time of the book version, *Avventure di Pinocchio* (1883), the puppet had acquired the Mazzanti illustration—the boy with the wooden peg nose—that is still used.

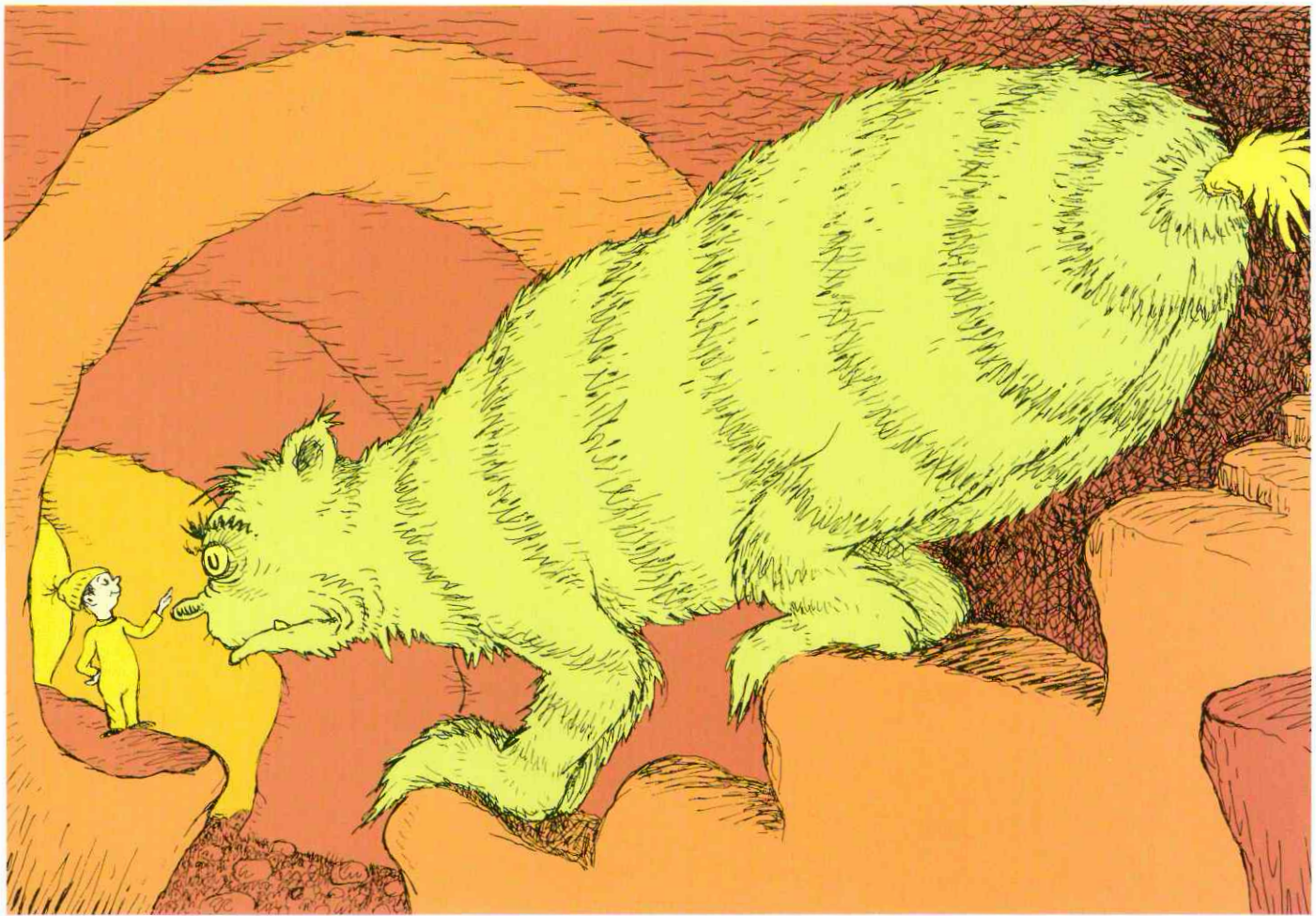
Like the *Alice* books, Kenneth Grahame's *Wind in the Willows* (1908) and A. A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* (1926) were written with a particular child in mind, the respective authors' sons—Alastair "Mouse" Grahame and Christopher "Robin" Milne. The wonderful line drawings by Ernest H. Shepard played a large part in the

Christopher Robin on an outing with Winnie-the-Pooh and Piglet, above. Ernest Shepard rendered the drawings for A. A. Milne's Pooh stories, including this one, originally published in *The House at Pooh Corner* (1926), and hand-colored them 30 years later. Overleaf: "Let the wild rumpus start," declares Max, King of the Wild Things, in Maurice Sendak's perennial favorite and Caldecott-award-winning *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963).









success of both books: Mole lost, cold, and afraid on his ill-advised venture into the Wild Wood; or Christopher Robin, Pooh, and Piglet, masters of all they survey.

Today, after the pioneering work of Maurice Sendak and the late Dr. Seuss (Theodor Seuss Geisel), the world open to children through books seems limitless. And advances continue to be made, not only in illustration but also in language. Dr. Seuss certainly expanded these new horizons with a half-century of publishing hilarious books that celebrate the wackiness of words. His stock in trade was confidence in language and life. The character in his recent book

Oh, the Places You'll Go! (1990) is very much in the tradition of Alice, Pinocchio, Mole, and Christopher Robin. The book is a guidebook to life's pitfalls, but directed at the whole family—new college graduates as well as children and parents.

In the Annunziata Church in Florence is Andrea del Sarto's fresco "The Virgin of the Sack," a Holy Family scene in which Mary holds the wriggling babe while Joseph reads to them both. (It's an anachronism, because Joseph reads from a codex, which had not been invented yet, instead of a scroll.)

I long to know what children's book it is.

Today children's books abound, with engaging stories and illustrations for all. In Chris Van Allsburg's *Just a Dream* (1990), opposite, dreams of the future stir the slumber of a boy. Above, a small person faces down a potentially big problem in *Oh, the Places You'll Go!*, a 1990 offering by the late, great Dr. Seuss.

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