

# IN THE GREAT CEDAR TRUNK



**From a dusty attic, unpublished work by Margaret Wise Brown, the mastermind behind *Goodnight Moon*, surfaces in a new book**



**A**LMOST 40 YEARS AFTER Margaret Wise Brown's untimely death at age 42, dozens of her unpublished writings were found in 1990. The papers, preserved in a cedar-lined trunk and stored in the attic of a Vermont barn belonging to Brown's sister, had sat largely untouched since the early 1950s. Their discovery, which revealed a whole new dimension of the iconic author, rocked the children's literature world.

Brown, who penned the children's classic *Goodnight Moon* (Harper & Brothers, 1947), is among the most storied figures in literature. She was a contemporary of authors Ludwig Bemelmans, Robert McCloskey, Virginia Lee Burton, and Dr. Seuss, and she was a central figure in the "golden age of the American picture book," wrote children's book historian Leonard Marcus in his 1992 biography *Margaret Wise Brown: Awakened by the Moon* (HarperCollins).

**By Kiera Parrott**

## A treasure trove of songs

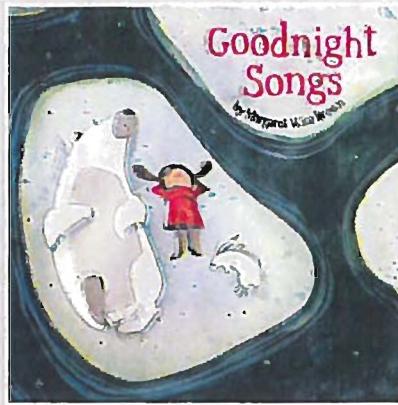
Publisher Amy Gary, then president of Watermark Press, a small company that specialized in reprinting vintage children's books, unearthed the incredible collection that contained unfinished manuscripts, stories, poems, and songs. Working closely with Roberta Brown Rauch, Brown's sister, Gary was eventually named editor of the Margaret Wise Brown estate and managed the sales of rights to many of the works found in the cedar chest. The song lyrics, however, proved to be a more personal project for Gary, and it has taken her more than 20 years to find the right collaborators to bring them to life. "Before her death, Margaret became very interested in music and songs for children. Influenced by her education at Bank Street [College of Education in New York City], she recognized that children are natural musicians," says Gary. "Children sing throughout the day about all the little things they do. Margaret penned many poems and song lyrics that capture that spirit."

Arriving almost 80 years after the publication of *Goodnight Moon*, *Goodnight Songs* (Sterling, 2014) presents the discovered work by Brown with the artwork of 12 award-winning picture book artists, including Jonathan Bean, Carin Berger, Sophie Blackall, Linda Bleck, Renata Liwska, Christopher Silas Neal, Zachariah OHora, Eric Puybaret, Sean Qualls, Isabel Roxas, Melissa Sweet, and Dan Yaccarino. *Goodnight Songs* also includes a CD; each song has been set to music and interpreted by folk singers Emily Gary (Amy Gary's daughter) and Tom Proutt. In this package, Brown's writing continues to inspire artists, writers, and readers.

## A charmed life, cut short

Brown was a prolific writer who penned over 100 published works during her short life. Born in 1910, she grew up in the affluent neighborhood of Greenpoint, Brooklyn, and later attended Hollins University, a small women's college in Virginia. Brown then enrolled at the Bank Street Experimental School, as it was then called, where she studied under Lucy Sprague Mitchell and learned about an exciting new theory of childhood education. Mitchell's *Here and Now Storybook* (Dutton, 1921) and the Bank Street teaching philosophy that emphasized the importance of direct experiences for children eventually influenced Brown's picture books.

Brown soon became the toast of the New York literary scene. Her first book, *When the Wind Blew*, was published by Harper & Brothers in 1937, and the following year she began working as an editor for William R. Scott & Company. In addition to publishing her own children's books—some under the pseudonym



"Golden MacDonald"—Brown was highly influential across the field of children's literature. According to Marcus, she helped launch the careers of illustrators and writers such as Clement and Edith Thacher Hurd, Garth Williams, Leonard Wisegard, Isphyr Slobodkina, and Ruth Krauss.

Brown was also remarkable for her extravagant lifestyle, complicated love life, and legendary parties. She used her first royalty check to purchase

an entire street vendor's cart worth of flowers to decorate her Upper East Side apartment and invited all of her friends to celebrate. Brown maintained several apartments and homes, including Cobble Court, the little 19th-century farmhouse located smack-dab in the middle of Manhattan. She was linked romantically to several well-known figures, including Juan Carlos, the prince of Spain; Michael Strange (also known as Blanche Oelrichs), the poet, playwright, actress, and wife of John Barrymore; and James "Pebble" Rockefeller, to whom she was engaged. Brown straddled the bohemian world of Greenwich Village and the upper crust, jet-setting life of the East Coast elite.

In 1952, at the age of 42, Brown underwent routine surgery for the removal of an ovarian cyst. Recovering in a hospital in Nice, France, she was about to be released to rest up at a local chateau, when she kicked up her leg in an exuberant display to show the nurse and doctors just how well she was doing. Tragically, Brown suffered an embolism because of an undetected blood clot that had formed in her leg after surgery. She died moments later.

## From Cobble Court to cedar trunk

After her death, Brown's estate was divided according to her will and a codicil that she drafted while hospitalized in France. Rockefeller, her fiancé at the time of her death, was given title to Only House, her home in Maine, and to Cobble Court—he renounced any ownership or rights to personal property and papers housed within those locations. In a rather surprising provision, Brown bequeathed all future earnings from works published during her lifetime to her eight-year-old neighbor, Albert Clarke III. Her sister, Roberta Brown Rauch, and her friend Bruce Bliven Jr. were appointed co-executors of her estate.

It fell to Rauch and Bliven to sort through the hundreds of documents in Brown's studio at Cobble Court. They agreed that any unpublished works would not be edited or deeply revised posthumously. As a result, Rauch and Bliven found themselves with dozens of unfinished manuscripts and stories that the majority of publishers at the time were unwilling to buy. Although a great many of Brown's personal papers were

## THE MOON BALLOON

On the Moon "Baloon  
Will be leaving soon  
For the sun or the moon  
And wherever it goes  
It will get there too soon

Aboard was a monkey  
And a crazy baboon.  
On the Moon Baloon.  
A ston, a trell,  
And a half mad mole,  
On this trip to the moon.  
On the Moon Baloon  
And to land far away  
From everyday  
Where they could arrive  
But never stay  
For long.

On the Moon Baloon  
Is returning soon  
From the sun or the moon  
And whenever it comes  
It will get here too soon.

*The Moon Baloon*

Above: A page found in the cedar trunk with notes and revisions to "The Moon Balloon." Right: Margaret Wise Brown.

donated to various library and university collections, such as the Westerly Library in Rhode Island and the de Grummond Children's Literature Collection at the University of Southern Mississippi, her sister wound up storing almost 100 papers in the cedar trunk and bringing them to her home in Vermont.

### The songs come to light

Around 1990, Gary contacted Rauch, expressing an interest in reprinting some of Brown's out-of-print titles. "Mrs. Rauch had some bad experiences with trying to sell Margaret's works. She liked that we [Watermark Press, Gary's publishing company at the time] were small," says Gary. The publisher was soon invited to Rauch's Vermont home and, on a hunch, asked if Rauch was in possession of any unpublished writings. "She says to me, sort of offhand, 'Oh, sure. I have a whole trunk full of Margaret's papers and stories and such. It's up in my barn.'"

"It took me more than six months of gentle cajoling to get her [Rauch] to bring down the trunk. It was quite heavy!"

Upon opening the chest, Gary found dozens upon dozens of delicate onionskin papers, held together with rusty paperclips. "There were so many papers, all in such fragile condition. And so many songs! I was enthralled. But I didn't have a copy machine. I had to take the papers to my hotel room, get rolls of quarters, and drive over to the local library to use their copy machine." While those close to Brown knew of her love of music and interest in composition, as well as her interest in television, the discovery of so many songs was a revelation.

The original papers were donated to Hollins University, Brown's alma mater. In the intervening years, Gary has pre-

pared many of the trunk manuscripts for publication. As Gary explains, translating Brown's musical writings proved a unique challenge. "The songs were tricky. I had to find the right publisher who could handle the text, the artwork, and the music," she says. "It took about 20 years to get it right, but we came together with Sterling, and now we have *Goodnight Songs*."

Meredith Mundy, the editor for *Goodnight Songs*, credits art director Merideth Harte with the idea of commissioning various picture book artists to illustrate Brown's text: "The songs are all on the theme of bedtime. She [Harte] wisely knew that having just one artist might be too 'one note' for the material. We asked illustrators who we love and admire and almost every one of them said 'yes.' The name 'Margaret Wise Brown' has that effect."

Dan Yaccarino, who illustrated "Sounds in the Night," a gentle lullaby featuring a father holding a sleeping child, says, "Being part of this collection is being part of children's literature history.... Margaret Wise Brown's work is so

deeply rooted in childhood, I was transported back to my childhood as I was creating my piece for the book."

A striking collage piece for "When I Close My Eyes at Night" was created by artist Carin Berger. "I adored *Goodnight Moon* when I was little. I not only loved the story but was entranced with Clement Hurd's illustrations of the room itself. The images perfectly mirrored the words and had such presence—an evocative combination of warmth, quiet, and mystery. As you can imagine, it was a thrill and honor to be asked to contribute an illustration to *Goodnight Songs*. I wanted the art to harken back to the room in *Goodnight Moon*, but instead of peeking in, this time I wanted to imagine peering out. I wanted to show all of the other rooms in all of the other houses in which good night stories were being read," says Berger.

As Gary notes, "People think writing for children is easy. But not only do you have to carry over the depth of emotion, you must do it in a way that speaks to children, their understanding, their sensibilities. When you consider what Brown was able to do—and the sheer volume—in her short life, it's simply brilliant."

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