

Skip the Classics

By Tim Lehnert

May I propose a heresy for the children's book writer as children's book consumer? Skip the classics. That's right, give GOODNIGHT MOON, CAT IN THE HAT, and WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE a pass.

You can't argue with buying such treasured titles, and that's just the problem. Many of us would rather go with what we know than take a chance on something new. But where will tomorrow's classics come from if not today's writers? It's fine to load up your arms (or on-line shopping cart or iPad) with CHARLOTTE'S WEB, BABAR and WINNIE THE POOH but consider saving some space for newer titles by less well-known authors and illustrators.

No, we don't want shelves (or bytes) of the latest gimmicky titles while WHERE THE SIDEWALK ENDS is consigned to the dustbin of history. But we don't have to choose. People (myself included) will always buy the classics, but we can also be a little more adventurous. And in this time of slashed library budgets, copies of CURIOUS GEORGE aren't going anywhere (they are on the shelves right now); but as for that first book from an up-and-comer, I wouldn't be so sure.

True, buying a classic makes shopping a snap; the classic, by definition, has the imprimatur of the ages. Purchasing a recently published children's book is more difficult: you actually have to open the thing up (or at least read some reviews in the case of middle-grade and YA titles) to see if it is any good.

Typically, we apply our critical faculties to new books, but with classics we check them at the door (the "work" has been done for us by generations of critics and readers). It's a little bit like those coveted award stickers: "Hey, it won an award, it must be good." But not every "award-winning" book works for everyone, and not all classics are

a good fit with the contemporary reader. I recently reread STUART LITTLE 35 years after my first go-round, and found some parts fantastic as ever (Stuart gets rolled up in a window shade), but others lame and labored, including a detailed chapter on sailing, which could only be of interest to adult sailors (a small subset of the readership, I imagine). But it's a classic; who am I to argue otherwise?

Everyone has heard about problems in the publishing industry, children's books included. The "mid-list" author is a dying breed. It's harder and harder to get a first book published. Only agented authors need apply. You know the drill. Children's book sales are top heavy with movie and other tie-ins, the classics, and a small number of new books by superstar contemporary writers. Who has not despaired at the grim ratio of manuscripts submitted to books published? Unless you are a celebrity of some sort, it's a tough climate. Knowing this, it is incumbent on those working in the field, or aspiring to do so, to support today's writers and illustrators.

Some of the biggest boosters of new writers and illustrators are veteran (and founding) members of the SCBWI whose own work has achieved the status of classic. But how did they get there? They worked hard, an editor and publisher took a chance on their manuscript or illustration, and then book buyers liked what they saw, plunked down their money and started the ball rolling.

True, it is up to today's writers and illustrators to produce tomorrow's classics, but contemporary book consumers are the ones who create a demand for fresh work. We need to honor the past, but also support our contemporaries.

Tim Lehnert is an SCBWI member who lives in Rhode Island with his wife, two daughters, and dog, Zeus. He has published articles for young people in Highlights, Australia's The School Mag, and Canada's YES Mag. He is also the author of RHODE ISLAND 101.

