

# Margaret Wise Brown and Jean Charlot

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Not long ago, as I was sorting through a pile of books that belonged to me as a child, I picked up one of my favorites and something extraordinary occurred. By just holding the book in my hands, I was able to relive the delicious first experience of reading it. The musty yellow smell of the pages brought back the summertime and the lazy days when I sat on the hot stone steps in front of my house, absorbed in the lives of the Prince and the Pauper—the streets quiet except for the singsong of the old-clothes man making his way from back yard to back yard: “Buy old clothes! Buy old clothes!” *The Prince and the Pauper* and the singsong of the old-clothes man are forever one in my memory. And the illustrations in the book are so much a part of the story that I can’t remember one without the other.

This book was a miracle to me when I was a child. Now, as a working illustrator, I realize how hard it is to bring about one of these “miracles” of bookmaking. Now I know that it was a combination of things that made *The Prince and the Pauper* such an intense experience: the story, the size of the type, the illustrations, the weight and shape of the book, the binding,

the shiny colored picture on the cover, the very smell of the pages.

A more recent book that has achieved this miracle is Margaret Wise Brown's *Two Little Trains*. The story is a little masterpiece of understatement. Jean Charlot is completely in tune with the story. His pictures do not merely enhance the look of the book. They live with the words in sweet harmony. They go off into playful elaborations and amplifications of the text. His choice of colors is a breathing into life of the very color of Miss Brown's words. The poignancy and drama of the journey to the West are felt by Charlot, as in:

*Look down, look down  
Below the bridge,  
At the deep dark river  
Going West*

where his picture of the black waters is filled with an eerie sequence of fishes all devouring one another.

The story reveals so much more than it actually says. It is a perilous journey to the West, with rain and snow and dust storm. The two little trains chug-a-chug their way up the steep mountains that come beyond the plain, and a Charlot mountain goat arches its back in terror at the sight of them.

What I love most is the humor with which Charlot draws his sturdy little children completely undaunted by the severities of the trip. It rains and out come the umbrellas and wrap-around blankets. No fear is written on the children's faces. They sleep in undisturbed innocence under the fat half-moon while the trains hurry on. On reaching the edge of the West, the children promptly climb out of their clothes and jump into the ocean, which is big and which is blue.

I relish, too, the bobbing heads of the cattle and geese aboard the two little trains. The marvelous black-and-white snow scene, with the cattle ducking their heads down, so that only their horns show, and the passive geese with snow dripping from their bills, is perhaps my favorite. Yet, for all that, I have no favorite in the whole book. No picture could be separated from its text; they are made for each other.

The strong square look of the book is just right, and the firm black type couldn't be better. There is nothing "prissy" about this book. How easy it would have been to misunderstand Miss Brown's intentions and to make it a "cute" book! It is a rugged saga of our expanding country on one level and, for me, a very personal experience on the other. I heartily recommend it to anyone interested in the little miracles of bookmaking.

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