

Highlights for Children

CAROLINE ADDERSON

WHEN I WAS SIX OR SEVEN MY MOTHER USED TO DRIVE ALL THE WAY TO Edmonton so she could get in the decent sort of shopping that was not available in our town. Along with reading, shopping was one of two consistent pleasures for her and, even at the end of her life, stricken with lung disease and barely able to walk a block, she would perk right up if we were walking where there was decent shopping. Back in 1970, we went to the Bonnie Doon Mall, home to a fine store called Johnson Walker, located, conveniently, right next to a branch of the Edmonton Public Library. There she would leave me so that she could indulge herself without distraction. How guiltless those seventies mothers were! I would have left my six year-old unattended at the library as easily as I would have handed him over to slave-traders, but times were different then and I didn't mind. Far from it. I wanted to go. I wanted to look at *Highlights for Children*.

Highlights for Children was first published in 1946 and is going strong today as simply *Highlights*. The cover still promises “fun with a purpose,” and many of the contents remain the same, though modernized. Back in 1970 the magazine looked quite different.

Highlights
THE MONTHLY BOOK for Children
INCLUDING Children's Activities
fun with a purpose
Hello!

It was displayed, along with other periodicals which have not survived in my memory, child-level, on low, angled shelves. The covers varied from month to month only in their two feature colours (in 1970 such combinations as turquoise and mint, lime and shamrock, butterscotch and crimson) and the small graphic in the corner. The best part of *Highlights for Children* was “Hidden Pictures” wherein small pictures were cleverly disguised in the lines of a larger one. “In this big picture find the bird, tepee, heads of two fiddlers, fish, pocket comb, two cups, letter S, bell, toothbrush...”

I took such exquisite pleasure in finding the pocket comb and the fish and the letter S, and I so clearly remember that pleasure, that it must have some larger meaning, a meaning quite obvious as soon as you see it, like the hidden picture itself. A story or a novel is a picture of something too. It satisfies as a rendering of whatever it represents, but if you look closer, you might find more in it. There are unexpected delights embedded there, surprising juxtapositions that give the picture a different, deeper meaning. You might find all the hidden pictures, or just a few, but each one gives that thrill of recognition, of a larger truth revealed. As a child I developed a strange sense of this activity being somehow daring, even risky. A frisson of near-shame still runs through me when I think of it, and this is why: something happened to me once while my mother left me at the Edmonton Public Library looking at *Highlights for Children*.

Though this theory is entirely anecdotal, I have noticed that childhood trauma is linked to a future in the arts. The least conducive upbringing you can have if you hope to be an artist is a happy one. Trauma is relative, of course. The more important factor is *sensitivity*, so lack of frequent beatings need not impede your gifts. Your reaction to the shame of a once-in-a-lifetime slap might do the trick, for example. Or some



Caroline Adderson, age 6

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seemingly innocuous interaction at the library.

My mother dropped me off and, before she left, I asked, “Do you have a pencil?” She didn’t ask what I wanted it for, just dug around in her purse and

gave me one; in her mind she was already childless and shopping at Johnson Walker next door. I took the pencil, trotted eagerly over to the shelves and retrieved what I wanted, postponing the pleasure of “Hidden Pictures” with other favourite features like “Goofus and Gallant.” In Goofus and Gallant, two young boys behave very differently in similar, pleasingly illustrated situations. “Goofus asks for things to eat at his playmate’s house,” contrasts with, “Gallant eats at his playmate’s home only what is offered.” I also enjoyed “The Bear Family” made up of Mother, Father, Woozy, Poozy and Piddy, Piddy being the littlest bear who always gets the witty last word. There was also “The Timbertoes,” a comic strip featuring a family of stringless, wooden marionettes. In the “For Wee Folks” section, there were probing questions to ponder each month.

What Makes You a More Interesting Person?

Eg. Being able to play games well or being able to eat many pancakes?

Most of *Highlights for Children* I would have skipped over, like the stories. “Some People Like Pigs,” “Jeremy Jamison’s Birthday”—too many words! Also the science articles, like the one that showed how a water filtration plant works. Too difficult! Ditto “Science Letters” answered by Dr. Jack Myers Ph.D. (Dr. Myers, by the way, is still going strong at *Highlights*.)

Question: In a past article (October 1969) you left me wondering about the chemical reactions that occur when electricity passes through a salt solution. What happens?

I would not have read the biography of that month’s composer, nor the musical score that accompanied it. I

was not interested in famous explorers or outstanding African Americans. Sadly, I probably skipped, “Try This! How to Make Quicksand” and the Haiku submitted by 6th grade readers.

My dog is a mutt,
But she is so beautiful!
And she eats a lot.

Bruce Saar, Colonial Drive Elementary
School, Miami, Florida

I would certainly have pored over the crafts: Paper Napkin Snowman, Spaghetti Pictures, Tissue Fun.

From scraps of colored tissue paper cut designs that interest you. Paste them on waxed paper and tape the picture on your window. When the light shines through, it gives a pleasing effect. Flowers are always pretty.

Highlights for Children was an astonishingly broad magazine. There was literally something for every child no matter his or her age or interest. Its worthy mandate declared:

This book of wholesome fun
is dedicated
to helping children grow
in basic skills and knowledge
in creativeness
in ability to think and reason
in sensitivity to others
in high ideals
and worthy ways of living—
for CHILDREN are the
world’s most important people

Moral development was stressed, but sometimes the



Hidden Pictures

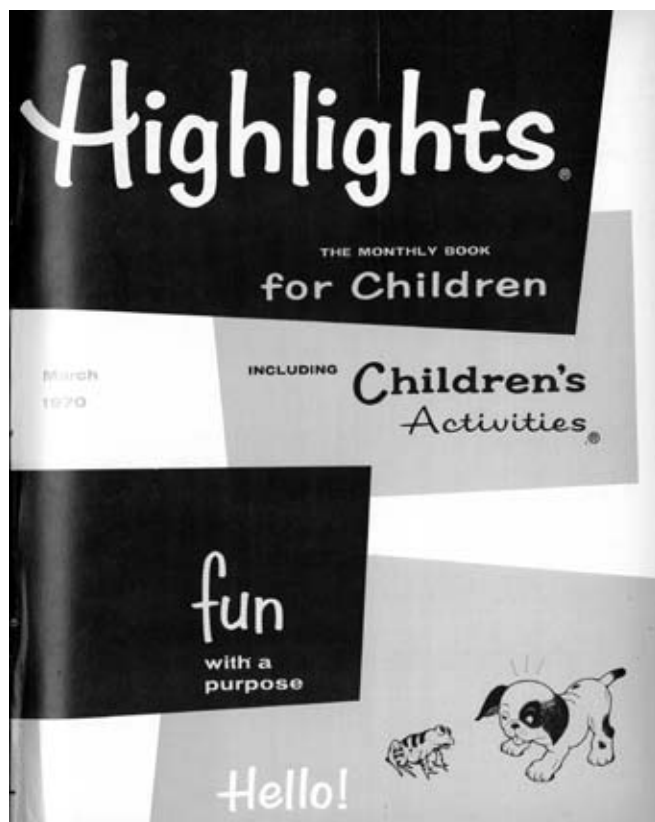
Alice in Wonderland

Can you find these objects in the large picture above?

white kitten
black kitten
perfume bottle

walrus
lobster
carpenter

Tweedledum
Tweedledee
mock turtle



lesson did not fully take. For example, I preferred lippy Piddy Bear. While I wanted to be like Gallant, Goofus with his steady scowl was funnier, so I liked him better. I did not so much as glance at the phonics lessons. I thought being able to eat a lot of pancakes would make a person fascinating. And this: when I finally turned to my favourite page, “Hidden Pictures,” when I leaned over the page and felt the pulpy texture of the paper, I had something verboten in my hand. (Today I picture my ready tongue in the corner of my mouth and that, before I used the pencil, I licked its point... but this is embellishment.) I read the list of

pictures I had to find then began digging, digging with my eyes. Sometimes something popped right out, other times it was elusive, in which case it was usually sideways or upside down. I concentrated fully, deaf to all distractions (like my mother next door riffling through the sale rack), and when I found the toothbrush or the letter S, I pounced. I pounced and, in triumph, I circled.

And then a hand came out of nowhere and seized me by the wrist. “We do not write in books! We do not! We do not!”

I cowered. Above me an eye-glassed, rage-contorted face. A clearly childless children’s librarian who had never been a child herself, twisting the pencil out of my hand and taking it with her as she marched back to the desk so I could never, ever deface a book again. And then the long shameful wait for my mother. For every second that I sat, miserable, aching for her to come, the librarian likewise sat, one terrible all-seeing eye fixed on me lest I transgress again. I couldn’t go to my mother—I probably had instructions not to—so for an eternity I sat, a child, one of the world’s most important people, utterly still at the little round table, sucking in my sob. My shame attached itself to *Highlights for Children* and, in particular, “Hidden Pictures,” and, blending with the pleasure I had taken in the task, became defiance. So that now, forty years later, I believe that for writing to be any good it should be at least a little bit subversive. Little moral bombs must be hidden in it, unanswerable questions asked. I’m never going to write about Gallant. Gallants don’t interest me except when their own inner Goofuses get the better of them. If you’re not pushing against the boundaries, if you’re not making at least one librarian mad, what’s the point?