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## The Role of Quilts in Children's Literature

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When we think of the heritage of quilting, we often envision scenes of mothers and grandmothers sharing their love and knowledge of quilts with their daughters and granddaughters who, in turn, pass that legacy on to the next generations. This may be a valid image in many cases. However, a child also may grow to love quilts, without ever coming in contact with a real quilt, by entering the world of children's books. While books do not allow children the immediate experience of quilting, an author can prompt a child to imagine that process, imagine the colors and textures, imagine the warmth of a quilt and imagine the love that goes into the making and giving of a quilt.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the role of the quilt in children's literature. I will concentrate on published works for children which include quilts as a major focus as opposed to stories which might mention a quilt in a couple of sentences or a paragraph. To distinguish quilts from other bedcoverings such as bedspreads or coverlets, I have selected works in which the bedcoverings described include at least one of the following techniques: applique, patchwork, and/or quilting.

To date I have found 35 fictional, quilt-related works written for children. They include picture books, short stories, chapters from longer books, novels, and a play. In terms of appropriate age levels, these works span the entire childhood range, from preschool to young adult. The first works were published in the latter half of the 1800s. While at least one work has been published in almost every decade since that time, over 50% of the works I have located have been published since 1976.

In addition to the classification of these works by their literary

form and the chronology of their publication, they can be divided into categories according to the role of the quilt within the story. Two major categories emerge: 1) the process of quiltmaking and 2) the use of completed quilts. My goal for the remainder of this paper is to provide an overview of the stories within these two categories.

### *Quiltmaking*

The first category includes stories which focus on the process of quiltmaking. Several different aspects of the process are addressed including the selection of fabrics, doing patchwork or applique, and collaborating in quilting bees.

Four stories underscore the significance of the fabrics in the creation of a patchwork or appliqued bedcovering. The emphasis is not so much on the type but rather the source of the fabrics. In *The Poky Little Puppy and the Patchwork Blanket* by Jean Chandler, for example, the squares and rectangles of fabric in the Poky's patchwork blanket are tangible symbols of the love and concern his brothers and sisters have for him.<sup>1</sup> His old blanket was torn to shreds after he insisted on dragging it along during all his outdoor adventures. When his brothers and sisters realize that Poky's blanket has become so ragged that it will no longer cover him, they generously offer portions of their own blankets which his mother then sews together into a colorful patchwork.

The grandmother in *The Patchwork Quilt* by Valerie Flournoy appreciates the value of a quilt made from fabrics contributed by family members.<sup>2</sup> She persistently collects scraps—a plaid from Papa's old work shirt, blue corduroy from Jim's old pants, and a multi-colored piece from Tanya's African princess costume—to put into her masterpiece. Her granddaughter Tanya demonstrates the valuable lesson she has learned from her grandmother's example when she adds squares of fabric to represent her grandmother to the quilt. The grandmother had forgotten to put herself into the family quilt, but her granddaughter knew she belonged.

At times the search for just the right fabrics can require great dedication. In *The Happiness Quilt* by Kate Douglas Wiggin, five young girls industriously put together a quilt to give to a very lonely and sad, old woman.<sup>3</sup> In this quilt, scraps of "every conceivable stuff

had been employed—calico, gingham, silk poplin, percale, alpaca, Henrietta cloth, delaine, velveteen, challie, and cashmere.” Obviously, the goal was not to join fabrics of the same weight or texture. Instead, the criterion for inclusion in this quilt was that the fabric had to have been associated with a very happy occasion. Thus, the girls’ teacher contributed the skirt she was wearing when she received a proposal of marriage, and an aunt donated squares from the “cherry-colored glacé silk” which she wore when she danced with the governor of Maine. Somehow the girls knew that some happiness would enter the life of the old woman when she used a quilt associated with so much happiness.

In two stories, the quiltmaker receives unexpected help in obtaining the fabrics she needs for the quilt she has envisioned. In “The Patchwork Stage Line” by Beth Thompson, an overland stagecoach driver helps a young girl who has decided she will make a quilt for her mother.<sup>4</sup> The driver tells the women along his route of her plan, and they send bundles of fabric scraps and completed blocks as contributions to her project. The old woman in *O The Red Rose Tree* by Patricia Beatty has dreamed of making one special quilt with a design of roses for over 63 years.<sup>5</sup> She had decided she would need seven different shades of red to make it as beautiful as her dream, but at the time of this story, the 1890s, reds which would not bleed were extremely difficult to find. Consequently, the old woman had just about given up when four 13-year-old girls take on her dream as their cause. After a variety of exciting escapades and adventures, the girls eventually succeed in finding the required fabrics and help the woman make the quilt she has dreamed of for so many years.

The second group of stories within the quilting category focuses on the process of piecing patchwork or doing applique. Three of the stories, “Prudy’s Patchwork” by Sophie May, “Patty’s Patchwork” by Louisa May Alcott, and *Katy’s Quilt* by Ruth Holbrook tell of a time when young girls were expected to do a daily “stint” of piecing patchwork.<sup>6,7,8</sup> One has the impression after reading these stories that completing a “stint” was almost a moral obligation and quite a challenge. For example, In “Prudy’s Patchwork,” after watching her older sister doing patchwork, three-year-old Prudy decides that it is time for her to begin such work. Her intentions are admirable, but she is constantly distracted from her task by her baby sister and her dog, losing or breaking needles and

pricking her fingers. After being interrupted over and over again from her own work, her mother finally comes up with the idea of putting Prudy into an empty hogshead, a kind of barrel, until she completes her stint. Prudy is delighted with the idea, for she discovers she can make all sorts of wonderful sounds in the barrel and work on her patchwork at the same time.

Ten-year-old Patty in "Patty's Patchwork" may be older than Prudy, but she too is struggling with the challenge of patchwork. In contrast to Prudy, however, Patty is not at all interested in doing patchwork and, in fact, hates doing it until her aunt shows how she is able to tell what kind of day Patty has had by "reading" the patchwork. A "dingy, puckered, brown and purple square," for example, provides clues of a bad day; whereas a "funny mixture of red, blue, and yellow with the big stitches in a merry day." Her aunt's prompting to see how much "patience, perseverance, good nature, and industry" Patty can put into her quilt encourages her to continue to struggle with piecing. In the end, her quilt becomes a special record of the joys and sorrows of her life during the time in which she worked on it.

Similarly, Katy in *Katy's Quilt* has a strong aversion to "Mr. Patchwork" initially. She would far rather stack wood with her brother than do her stint. Her attitude about patchwork gradually improves, however, as she is introduced to the variety of patchwork designs possible, the excitement of a quilting bee, and the thrill of receiving a beautiful quilt made just for her. Just as she is conquering the challenge of patchwork, she is faced with another challenge, the possibility of having to sacrifice her cherished quilt. When a forest fire threatens her family's new home, she and her mother wet down all the family's quilts and place them on the roof to protect it from flying sparks. Their effort pays off, and the home is saved. A portion of Katy's quilt is burned, but its role in saving the family home is commemorated when a silk patch bearing the inscription "the fire of 1868" is put over the hole.

While the children in these stories easily would have been led away from their patchwork, adults in two other stories turn to applique and patchwork to relieve their boredom. *The Bedspread* by Sylvia Fair is the story of two elderly sisters who live at opposite ends of a bed.<sup>9</sup> To counter the boredom of their monotonous existence, they decide to decorate their white bedspread with depictions

of their childhood home in applique and embroidery. They think that they are working on the same picture; however, their working styles are very different. One is very tidy and precise; whereas, the other is more spontaneous and perhaps a bit haphazard. When they see the other's finished work, they are shocked at the differences in what they have produced. The rather untidy sister apologizes because she has forgotten her stitches, but in turn, the tidy sister replies, "But I had forgotten the happiness."

In "The Patchwork" by M. Natalie Crumpton, another adult, in this case a British soldier, turns to patchwork to relieve boredom.<sup>10</sup> The soldier is convalescing in the home of a family in Philadelphia when the maid in the household suggests that he piece squares for patchwork to help the time pass. Initially, he is a bit wary, not knowing what piecing squares is all about. He decides to give patchwork a try, however, when it is agreed that two young women, chaperoned of course, will sit with him while he puts in his time piecing. This arrangement leads to many enjoyable hours for the young soldier who through his piecing efforts is able to be productive and socialize with the young women at the same time.

The social aspects of quilting also are addressed in two other stories. In "Quilt of Many Stars" by Carolyn Sherwin Bailey, a quilting bee provides a young girl with the opportunity to meet the people in the new community to which her family has just moved.<sup>11</sup> When the other women and girls see her beautiful star and crescent quilt, they are prompted to accept her as a valued member of their community. In *Sam Johnson and the Blue Ribbon Quilt* by Lisa Campbell Ernst, quite a different response awaits Sam Johnson when he decides he would like to become a member of the Rosedale Women's Quilting Club.<sup>12</sup> The women in the group simply and ungraciously laugh at his request. In retaliation, Sam decides to form the Rosedale Men's Quilting Club, and the two groups pit themselves against each other to see whose quilt will win first prize in the county fair. A reconciliation occurs after disaster strikes both quilts, and in a somewhat miraculous ending, a quilt made by the "just plain Rosedale Quilting Club," made up of men and women, wins first prize.

A special appreciation for the process of quiltmaking and its possibilities for collaboration are illustrated beautifully in a wordless

story found in *Ed Emberley's ABC* written and illustrated by Edward Emberley.<sup>13</sup> In a series of four pictures, a quail family is shown working together on an applique quilt. The mother works on the applique while the father uses a template to trace shapes on fabric, cuts out the next pieces to be used in the design, and finally joins in on the quilting. The baby quail help by selecting fabric, picking up scraps, and helping the mother to thread a needle. In the end, their work completed, the entire quail family sleeps under their beautiful quilt.

### *Using Quilts*

As the books in the second category demonstrate, the life of a quilt has just begun when the process of making it has been completed. At that point it is time to put the quilt to use. The following stories address three different aspects of the use of quilts: 1) the quilt as a special gift; 2) the quilt as a medium for storytelling; and 3) the quilt as a prompt for fantasy.

The first group of stories emphasizes the importance of sharing quilts and the appreciation for quilts with others. Frequently the quilt becomes a gift from the quiltmaker to a special person. In *Stories from a Snowy Meadow* by Carla Stevens, Mole, Shrew, and Mouse have been working together on a quilt, but they find they cannot agree on what should be done with the finished quilt.<sup>14</sup> Eventually, they agree to give it to old Vole who is ill and confined to her bed. In exchange for their generous gift, she tells them stories. When Vole dies, the three friends are faced with another decision involving the quilt. Should they wrap her in it when they bury her or give it to someone else? In the end, they decide to give it away to someone who would "love and need it as she did" since that is what she would have wanted.

In two stories, the quiltmaker is a mother who has created a special quilt for her child. In *The Quilt Story* by Tony Johnston, Abigail clearly cherishes the quilt her mother made for her.<sup>15</sup> She demonstrates her love by using it not only on her bed but also in her play. Tea is spilled all over it when she and her dolls have a tea party with *real* tea, and a hole is ripped into it when she uses it as a gown, but her mother patiently repairs it over and over again. The quilt becomes a familiar comfort to Abigail, especially when her family

moves into a new house, so alien to the little girl. After much love and use, the quilt is retired to the attic where mice make a nest in it, and later a raccoon uses it as a hiding place for an especially delicious apple. The quilt survives to be found and cherished years later by another little girl.

In contrast to Abigail, Kate in *Kate's Quilt* by Kay Choroa does not readily appreciate her mother's gift of a quilt<sup>16</sup> At first, Kate is thrilled when she receives a package from her mother. Her excitement turns to anger when she realizes that instead of the doll she was hoping for she has received a quilt made by her mother. Throwing a temper tantrum, she stomps all over the beautiful quilt and then crawls into bed leaving the quilt behind her on the floor. During the night, she becomes frightened and pulls the quilt over her so that she will be able to hide from the scary images she thinks she sees. Only then does she discover the warmth and love within the quilt and decides that receiving a quilt is a very special gift.

Another quilt is given away in *A Gathering of Days* by Joan W. Blos. However, in this case, the daughter gives away a quilt made by her mother to a stranger.<sup>17</sup> Thirteen-year-old Catherine has found a mysterious note saying, "PLEEZ MISS TAKE PITTYS I AM COLD." She suspects that the note is from a fugitive, perhaps a runaway slave or an escaped thief. After an intense struggle with her conscience, she and her friend Cassie decide to respond to the request. They take one of the family quilts and leave it in the woods for the fugitive to find. When the disappearance of the family quilt is discovered, Catherine is told she must make another quilt to replace the one she gave away. The long hours she spends making the quilt are rewarded, however, when almost two years later she receives another message from her mysterious fugitive, "SISTERS BLESS YOU. FREE NOW. CURTIS. IN CANADA."

The potential for sharing quilts with strangers also is explored in *The Berenstain Bears and Mama's New Job* by Stan and Jan Berenstain.<sup>18</sup> Mama loves quilts. She has made quilts for her family, but has fantasies of making more. One day while airing her quilts on the clothesline, she discovers that others appreciate her creations, so much so that they would like to buy them. Given that encouragement, Mama decides to devote much more of her time to quilting and to open a quilt shop. Despite the nervousness of her family (they are afraid she won't have enough time to help them with their



projects), Mama carries through with her plan and makes her venture a success, thus sharing her love for quilts with a broader audience.

Sometimes even though the quiltmaker may be unknown, the user of the quilt develops a strong appreciation for it and is able to demonstrate that appreciation to others. In *The Patchwork Cat* by Nicola Bayley and William Mayne, a cat has a very strong attachment to her quilt, but unfortunately the family with whom she lives does not share this attitude.<sup>19</sup> The mother of the family, viewing the quilt as old and dirty, throws it away. In an attempt to save it, the cat jumps into a trash can. The cat and the quilt are tossed into a garbage truck and hauled away to the city dump. In a show of unflinching loyalty, the cat manages to save the quilt. The family responds to this demonstration of love by washing and mending the quilt, making the cat's contentment complete.

Each of these stories suggests that the gift of a quilt is not only a gift of physical warmth but also of emotional warmth from the quiltmaker to the user. Thus, the quilt is a gift to be used but cherished and cared for at the same time.

In addition to giving them away or selling them, a love for quilts also may be shared by passing on the stories a quilt has to tell. In "The Parlin Patchwork" by Sophia May, for example, an older woman invites a group of children in to see the quilt on her bed.<sup>20</sup> The children immediately recognize fabrics from their own clothing in the quilt. That recognition prompts a flood of shared recollections of childhood adventures such as "here is the dress Prudy had on when she tried to go up to heaven on a ladder. It was a wonder she didn't break her little neck." and "... here is a piece of your pink wrapper, that you had on when you got lost in the snow..." In this case, the children already know the stories, and the quilt serves as a memory device to encourage them to relive a series of memorable events in their lives.

More often, however, the children do not know the stories the quilt has to tell. A common format includes a child, generally a granddaughter who has come to stay with her grandmother. The grandmother puts a special quilt on the child's bed. This quilt has been lovingly put together from scraps of material from a dress, a shirt, a curtain, or a variety of other fabric items, each with a story

to tell. Each day before the child takes a nap or goes to bed for the night, the grandmother tucks the quilt around the child and asks her to choose a block or fabric. The grandmother proceeds to tell that particular fabric's story. As in "The Parlin Patchwork," the story is frequently a special childhood memory. The quilt becomes a medium through which family stories are passed from one generation to the next. In a sense, the written work becomes a patchwork quilt of those stories.

This format with slight variations is found in books published from 1936 to 1984. In the book *In Grandma's Attic* by Arleta Richardson, for example, the fabrics in a quilt and the contents of a button basket share the role of memory prompter.<sup>21</sup> The quilt, which is described as being "better than a magic carpet into the past," is used to tell stories with a religious message from the grandmother's childhood and young married days. In *Patchwork Tales* by Susan L. Roth and Ruth Phang, the stories the grandmother shares with her granddaughter one evening are prompted by the different blocks in her sampler quilt, including Granny's Star, Bridal Wreath, Pine Tree and Fish Block.<sup>22</sup> The book *Apricots at Midnight* by Adele Geras, provides an English version of this format using a Grandmother's Flower Garden quilt as the focus.<sup>23</sup> Again, childhood visions are shared by an elderly woman with a young girl; however, in this case, the woman, Aunt Pinny, is a distant relative rather than a grandmother.

In two books, the stories held by the quilt serve the invaluable function of entertaining a child who is ill or convalescing. The little girl in *The Patchwork Quilt* by Adele DeLeeuw has the measles and is aggravated because she has to spend so much time in bed and is not allowed to read or sew to pass the time.<sup>24</sup> The grandmother helps the days to pass and encourages the continuation of tradition through the stories from a quilt made from dresses from her childhood. In the end, the little girl asks her grandmother to make a quilt out of material from her own dresses. In *Grandma's Album Quilt* by Helen Albee Prince, a teenaged girl stays with her grandmother while convalescing from what appears to be exhaustion after trying to accomplish four years of study in three.<sup>25</sup> The stories her grandmother tells her are prompted by the names recorded on her album quilt and include a wide range of moods from pleasant family stories to unsettling stories of the supernatural.

The unsettling mood of unanswered questions pervades two mysteries in which a quilt is critical in filling in the missing pieces of a family story. The story the grandmother has to tell in *The Secret of the Crazy Quilt* by Florence Hightower is such a painful memory of personal tragedy that she has never been able to tell the story to anyone.<sup>26</sup> Instead to ease her torment and to respond to the urgent need she feels to record the story in some way, she stitches a chronicle of the events into a quilt using shorthand symbols. After her death, her daughter and granddaughter work together to come to an understanding of the message the quilt holds. *The Secret of the Patchwork Quilt* by Margaret Sutton also involves the resolution of painful family memories.<sup>27</sup> Using the matching fabrics from a pin cushion and a patchwork quilt, girl detective Judy Bolton is able to help a friend discover who her real mother was and that Judy and her friend are actually cousins.

The stories held by the quilt in *Polly Patchwork* by Rachel Field not only introduce a young girl to family history but also help her academically.<sup>28</sup> In this story which has been published as a play as well as a short story, Polly's grandmother decides that Polly must have a warm dress to wear. They are too poor to buy new fabric, so the grandmother cuts up Great Aunt Mehitabel's silk quilt to make the dress. As she works on it, she tells Polly the family stories connected with the various fabrics in the patchwork. The dress is finished just in time for Polly to wear it to a spelling bee. Polly is mortified because the patchwork dress is far too bright and sticks out so far that it is rather like wearing a balloon. Her appreciation for the dress grows, however, as the patches remind her of her relatives from the past, and the stories her grandmother has told about these relatives help Polly to win first prize in the spelling bee.

Not only do quilts serve as a medium through which one can travel into the past to learn about family history, but they also can serve as a passport into a fantasy world. The use of quilts for this purpose within children's stories appears to be a relatively recent phenomenon with all seven examples located thus far having been published since 1965. In each story, a quilt prompts a child to imagine scenes and experiences beyond his or her present reality. Throughout *My Color Game* by Evelyn M. Begley, a young boy imagines himself in a variety of scenes using colors as a starting point.<sup>28</sup> For example, seeing green leads him to think of green fields,

trees and pea pods. At the end of the story, the reader discovers that these colorful images have been prompted by the quilt made by the child's grandmother which covers him as he lies in his bed.

*The Quilt* by Ann Jonas and *The Calico Jungle* by Dahlov Ipcar are two examples in which the use of a quilt leads to a fantastic journey in the child's imagination.<sup>30,31</sup> In *The Quilt*, a little girl searches for her stuffed dog through a dream patchwork landscape which includes a circus, a flower garden complete with gazebo, and a lake filled with sailboats. An appliqued quilt covered with exotic animals, fish and plants beckons a young boy on an exciting trek through *The Calico Jungle*.

In the three examples above, individual fabrics and designs within the quilt encourage the child to imagine experiences which exist in fantasy but have the potential to exist in reality as well; however, in the other four stories within this group, the quilt prompts the child to imagine truly fantastic experiences. In *Quilts in the Attic* by Robin Fleisher, two young sisters use quilts, during a gloomy, rainy afternoon, to pretend to be "the king," "the fast wind," "a star high in the sky," and finally "a quilt."<sup>32</sup> In *The Flying Patchwork Quilt* by Barbara Brenner, a daring young girl who has always wanted to fly and has experimented with a variety of unsuccessful techniques, including jumping off a porch while holding on to an umbrella and projecting herself from the top of a dog house with a balloon tied to her back, finally takes flight when she comes up with the idea of pinning an old quilt to her shoulders.<sup>33</sup> The theme of flight is continued in *The Patchwork Quilt* by Joan Aiken in which an evil wizard steals a quilt and uses it to replace a worn-out magic carpet.<sup>34</sup> The flying capabilities of the quilt are so great due to the magic that has been stitched into it that twelve camels are able to travel in style on it. The camels generously decide to return the quilt to the original owner, abandoning the thieving wizard behind them.

Finally, in *Lemon Moon* by Kay Choroa, a young boy tells his grandmother of the wonderful flights he has taken into the sky with the animals from the quilt she made for him.<sup>35</sup> At first she doggedly responds to his spectacular tale by trying to bring him back to reality. It was just a dream, she tells him. But as he continues to embellish the tale of his night voyage with descriptions of dancing stars and a star-eating cat, she begins to wish she could travel with him. She regrets she is too old for such things. The gentle tug-of-war

between reality and fantasy ends on the side of fantasy, for that night the boy and his grandmother go sailing through the sky holding on to a lemon moon balloon as the animals from the quilt wave farewell.

### *Summary*

To summarize, what images are conveyed by these stories about quilts, how they are made and how they are used? According to these stories, the selection of the fabrics is an important aspect of quilting. The inclusion of fabrics that are associated with special people or special events will make the quilt all the more meaningful. These authors remind us that piecing patchwork or doing applique will not always be easy, but if the quiltmaker persists, the effort will pay off in the end. Not only will the quiltmaker have a finished quilt, but boredom will be avoided, as well. The social benefits of collaborating with others in quilting are an additional bonus.

It is clear from these stories that what happens to the quilt once it is completed is also an important issue. The stories emphasize that quilts should be given respect, but the authors recognize that some will need to be instructed gently in the appreciation of quilts. Because quilts are valued, they are often given to special people as gifts, but not to be put on the shelf for safekeeping. According to these stories, quilts are to be used. They may become damaged, but often they can be mended and thus given an extended life. Finally, not only do quilts contribute both physical and emotional warmth to the user, but they also can introduce a child to family history and encourage voyages into fantasy.

These authors have offered their view of the multi-faceted role quilts have played in our culture. I have chosen to focus on their portrayal of the quilting process and of how the completed quilts are used. However, this overview is only a beginning. These stories can be a valuable resource in the effort of documenting quilt history. They are fictional, and therefore, it is necessary to determine which aspects are historically accurate and which are the product of the authors' imaginations. However, even story elements which do not prove to be factual can contribute to our awareness of how quilts were viewed at a particular time. Thus, these stories have

the dual potential of not only encouraging future generations to appreciate the quilting legacy but also to stimulate research leading to a more complete understanding of the history of quilting.

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