

A Permanent and Significant Contribution

The Life of May Hill Arbuthnot

SHARON MCQUEEN



May Hill Arbuthnot

May Hill Arbuthnot (1884–1969) was not a children’s librarian, nor did she teach children’s librarianship. She was not a scholar of children’s librarianship. How, then, did she come to have an entry in the biographical dictionary *Pioneers and Leaders in Library Services to Youth* among the pantheon of youth services legends that included Anne Carroll Moore, Augusta Baker, Mildred Batchelder, and Charlemae Rollins?¹ Why did *American Libraries* include her among one hundred of the most important leaders of librarianship in the twentieth century?² And why did ALA’s Children’s Services Division (now ALSC) agree to administer a lecture series named in Arbuthnot’s honor?³

Early Influences and Career

Born in Mason City, Iowa, where her parents were visiting friends, Arbuthnot spent her happy, early years in Massachusetts, Minnesota, and Chicago, where she graduated from Hyde Park High School.⁴ Her mother nurtured a love of music, poetry, and books, and as Arbuthnot recalled, “provided us with the Alcott books and swung us into Dickens and the Waverley novels at an early age.”⁵ Arbuthnot and her brother were read to by a father with a fine voice who enjoyed reading aloud. As Arbuthnot approached her eightieth year, she looked back on her father’s readings and rereadings of *Robinson*



Sharon McQueen is an Assistant Professor in the Library Science Program of Old Dominion University, in Norfolk, Va. Her research has received multiple awards from the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE) and the American Library Association (ALA), including the Phyllis Dain Library History Dissertation Award and the Library Research Round Table Jesse H. Shera Award for her dissertation, *The Story of “The Story of Ferdinand:” The Creation of a Cultural Icon*. Her biographical work on May Hill Arbuthnot received the 2014 ALISE/LMC Paper Award.

Crusoe, *The Swiss Family Robinson*, and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* as influential. *The Book of Common Prayer* was “beautifully spoken every Sunday and... made a great impression” on the Hill children.⁶ Arbuthnot felt it was this book that had given her “a sensitivity to the beauty and power of words.”⁷

After high school, Arbuthnot found herself perfectly positioned to take part in the kindergarten movement, which by that time was flourishing in Chicago and Wisconsin. The first kindergarten in the United States had been founded in Wisconsin in 1856 by German immigrant Margarethe Meyer Schurz, and the concept was quickly adopted throughout the state.⁸ John Dewey had founded the University of Chicago Laboratory School, a landmark of progressive education, in 1896. His ideas on education had been influenced by Friedrich Froebel, creator of the kindergarten concept.⁹

Arbuthnot worked as a kindergarten teacher, but by 1912, she was on the faculty of the Superior Normal School (now University of Wisconsin–Superior).¹⁰ During her five years in this position, she received her kindergarten-primary supervisor’s certificate at the University of Chicago, where she earned a bachelor’s degree and taught children’s literature courses. Though Dewey was no longer at the University of Chicago by the time Arbuthnot arrived, it is likely a propitious meeting occurred between Arbuthnot and reading expert William S. Gray, who later became her coauthor of children’s textbooks.¹¹

When Arbuthnot moved to New York City to take a teacher trainer position at the Ethical Culture School (now Ethical Culture Fieldston School) while pursuing a graduate degree at Columbia, she was once again well positioned. Before graduating in 1925, Arbuthnot took courses from progressive and influential educators, including John Dewey, who was now a professor at Columbia and Teachers College.¹² The nursery school movement was in its formative stages, and Teachers College was an early pioneer.¹³ Arbuthnot also worked with influential social and educational reformers at the Ethical Culture School, including the school’s founder, Felix Adler.¹⁴

Case Western Reserve University

With her formal education completed, Arbuthnot settled in Cleveland, where she became principal of the Cleveland Kindergarten-Primary Training School. The school had been founded by the Cleveland Day Nursery and Free Kindergarten Association. This association had founded and maintained numerous free kindergartens and day nurseries (now commonly known as day care).¹⁵

Under Arbuthnot’s leadership, the school was radically reorganized and a new staff hired that included four additional University of Chicago graduates.¹⁶ Though the day nurseries provided food, clothing, medical care, and a safe environment for children of working mothers, Arbuthnot brought an awareness of the educational needs of young children. She is credited with establishing the first nursery schools (now



Book cover and page from *The Child's Treasury*. May Hill, ed. Chicago: Foundation Desk Company, 1923. Inset photo: The Foundation Desk and Library. Murray (1966) p 46; Used with permission from World Book.

commonly known as preschools) in the City of Cleveland and the State of Ohio.¹⁷ In 1927, the Cleveland Kindergarten-Primary Training School merged into the School of Education of Western Reserve University (now Case Western Reserve University), and Arbuthnot was made Associate Professor of Education, a position she retained until her retirement in 1950.¹⁸

In 1929, Arbuthnot founded The University Nursery School on the Case Western Reserve campus. Parental involvement was an important element of the nursery school movement, and Arbuthnot made it clear that nursery schools were not “a parking place for the children of bridge-playing women.”¹⁹ Arbuthnot understood that parents did not suddenly become experts in early childhood education at the moment of their child’s birth, and thus, early childhood education training was necessary not only for teachers but also for parents.²⁰ Parental education became a hallmark of The University Nursery School, and Arbuthnot spread the concept by publishing articles, teaching a course at the University, embracing local outreach, and supporting parental education throughout the City of Cleveland.²¹

Arbuthnot’s work earned national recognition and made Cleveland a center of early childhood study.²² Arbuthnot served as national vice president for the International Kindergarten Union (now the Association for Childhood Education International) from 1927 to 1929 and in 1930 participated in the White House Conference on Child Health and Protection under President Herbert Hoover.²³ In 1933, when the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (later the Works Progress Administration or WPA) created the emergency nursery school program to aid children and create jobs for teachers during the Great Depression, Arbuthnot served as a committee member under President Franklin D. Roosevelt.²⁴ In addition, Arbuthnot was speaking at conferences and publishing papers.²⁵ In the interest of parent education, she wrote for popular publications as well as scholarly.²⁶

In the midst of this flurry of activity, in 1932, at age forty-eight, May Hill married Charles Crisswell Arbuthnot, a professor



Clipping from "News-Reserve Lecture to Show Trends in Children's Books" by Wallace R. Katz, *Cleveland News*, Jan. 25, 1940. The Cleveland Press Collection, Cleveland State University.

and chair of the Economics Department at Western Reserve University; it was a "notably happy" marriage, dog and all.²⁷

The Curriculum Foundation Readers: AKA Dick and Jane

As progressive educational movements and reform continued and educational theory and research increased, publishers competed for liaisons with university-based academics.²⁸ Dr. William S. Gray of the University of Chicago, arguably the preeminent reading researcher of the period, was hired by the publishing house Scott, Foresman and Co., for which he developed The Curriculum Foundation Series, "one of the most successful textbook series of the mid-twentieth century."²⁹ Scott, Foresman subsequently hired Arbuthnot who, with Gray, wrote and edited stories specifically for The Curriculum Foundation Series, including *Fun with Dick and Jane*.³⁰

Though an advancement for their times, today the Dick and Jane books, as they have come to be known, are greeted with nostalgia at best and, at worst, scorn. The books have been criticized for their lack of literary merit, and their ideology has been questioned. Though there is some truth in the criticisms, failing to view the past as part of a continuum and failing to view books within their own context as well as through our eyes today masks what is truly extraordinary about both the books and their authors. In fact, current reading programs can trace their focus on early literacy and prereading skills back to Gray's work, and parent education initiatives can be traced back to Arbuthnot. From *The Cat in the Hat* to Elephant and Piggie, easy readers trace their literary heritage back to Dick and Jane.³¹

Children and Books: "Happily Together"

Arbuthnot was a prolific and distinguished educator, author, editor, anthologist, critic, lecturer, advocate, consultant, and scholar in education (nursery school, kindergarten, and reading instruction) and children's literature, but it is through her many associations with children's literature that she is

remembered—if she is remembered at all—by children's librarians today.

Arbuthnot's earliest book, *The Child's Treasury*, is an illustrated collection of stories, poems, songs, and plays published in 1923 by the Foundation Desk Company, a department of W.F. Quarrie & Co., of *The World Book Encyclopedia* fame.³² The Foundation Desk and Library consisted of an actual child's desk—complete with scrolls, a blackboard, and a secret drawer—and a set of three books to be used in the education of young children at home.³³

The second volume in the set, *The Home Educator*, was edited by Minnetta Sammis Leonard and Patty Smith Hill.³⁴ Hill, a highly-regarded academic, is most widely known today as the composer of the song, *Happy Birthday to You*.³⁵ Leonard and Hill's volume was designed to be used by parents, in the spirit of parental education. Over a dozen contributors were selected for their expertise in areas such as childhood development, physical fitness, nutrition, music, art, and reading. The third volume, *The Foundation Library Juvenile Artist Workbook*, was edited by Hill, Leonard, and Arbuthnot.³⁶

The flimsy desk never sold well. The salesman who inherited responsibility for the Foundation Desk and Library later blamed the desks for making the project "the worst headache a man could imagine."³⁷ Still, the set of books was well received and laid the foundation for *Childcraft*, a six-volume set that included works by Laura Ingalls Wilder, Alice Dalgliesh, Kurt Wiese, Anna Sewell, and Beatrix Potter in volume three alone.³⁸ Now a twelve-volume set, *Childcraft* is still sold by World Book today.³⁹

During the 1930s and 40s, Arbuthnot turned her attention to reading and children's books, writing and lecturing on these topics for academics as well as for more general audiences.⁴⁰ Always an advocate for public and school libraries, Arbuthnot encouraged teacher-librarian communications, lecturing on the resources available to children and teachers through the elementary school library and its librarian.⁴¹ She served as children's book review editor for *Childhood Education* and *Elementary English*.⁴² In 1947, Arbuthnot published her landmark college textbook, *Children and Books*.⁴³ Primarily designed for use in children's literature courses taught in teacher's colleges and library training schools, it was embraced for that purpose at such a high rate that by 1970, an article in *Wilson Library Bulletin* referred to *Children and Books* as "the classic text."⁴⁴

Many in children's librarianship are under the mistaken impression that the first edition of *Children and Books* was "not warmly welcomed" and that the "library world was not kind" when the first edition was published.⁴⁵ Ironically, these comments were written by Arbuthnot's admirers and coauthors shortly after her death. For many years, these notions were further perpetuated by a biographical sketch of Arbuthnot contained in a pamphlet created by ALSC and handed out to lecture attendees along with locally produced May Hill Arbuthnot Honor Lecture programs.⁴⁶ Such was the influence of the formidable superintendent of

the Department of Work with Children of the New York Public Library, Anne Carroll Moore.

Although most, if not all, other reviews were positive, Moore's scathing review in *The Horn Book Magazine* of May–June 1948 would have been read by many children's librarians. Certainly, Arbuthnot read it. In her review, Moore praises the use of illustrations in *Children and Books* and acknowledges the many years the textbook must have been in the making, giving a quick nod to the author's sincere and obvious love of children and enthusiasm for teaching, then spends the rest of the nearly two-page review detailing the books, people, and facts Moore would have included had she written Arbuthnot's 626-page work. Moore's final paragraph begins with a fair criticism of the book's index and concludes:

The many excellent features of *Children and Books* I shall leave to others to point out. I am concerned primarily with the lack of sustained historical and critical consideration of children's books, their authors, editors, and illustrators, in their total contribution to the subject.⁴⁷

Arbuthnot found Moore's "arraignment" of *Children and Books* "something of a shock" and said so in a letter to the editor, published in a subsequent edition of *Horn Book*. Arbuthnot concedes the weak index but states that Moore completely missed the book's purpose, writing, "It would seem only fair to judge a book, at least partly, upon how well it accomplishes the purpose which it sets itself." Arbuthnot wryly points out, "When the complete history of children's literature is finally written, it will fill more than one volume."⁴⁸

Arbuthnot's colleague and friend Dorothy M. Broderick (who, with her partner Mary K. Chelton, founded *VOYA Magazine*)⁴⁹ would later write, "Mrs. A never forgot the *Horn Book* review, which struck her as unfair and which rankled to the very end."⁵⁰ But other reviewers did not share Moore's opinions, nor did Arbuthnot's targeted audience, who adopted the book in such high numbers that Arbuthnot brought out a supplement in 1950, revised editions in 1957 and 1964, and another supplement in 1966—all published by Scott, Foresman.⁵¹ Zena Sutherland carried out the revision for a fourth edition published in 1972. Arbuthnot had given her approval for Sutherland's proposed revisions prior to her death, and the two were listed as coauthors.⁵² Sutherland was given first authorship for all subsequent editions until she appeared as sole author for the ninth and final edition in 1996. When the ninth edition was published, a review in *The Library Quarterly* noted, "It is impossible not to be in awe of a work that has established and held its advantage for fifty years."⁵³

A year after the first edition of *Children and Books* was published, Arbuthnot published the first edition of *Children's Books Too Good to Miss*, an annotated list of "the irreducible minimum of books which every child should be exposed to and helped to enjoy."⁵⁴ Titles included in this publication were selected by a committee comprised of Arbuthnot and a number of her acquaintances from the Western Reserve Library School, the



May Hill Arbuthnot with Tippy the cat. From "Still Busy at 77 with Book Program" by Marie Daerr, *The Cleveland Press*. 13 June 1962. p C6. Photo by Ronnie Sherman. The Cleveland Press Collection, Cleveland State University.

Cleveland Public Library, and Cleveland Public Schools. This title was also updated regularly, with revised editions published in 1953, 1959, 1963, 1966, 1971, and 1979. Arbuthnot was listed as first author in all editions, even after her death.

In 1950, Arbuthnot retired from her faculty position to devote her time to lecturing and writing. And write and lecture she did! Throughout the 1950s, Arbuthnot compiled a series of anthologies for children, published by Scott, Foresman, entitled, *Time for Poetry* (1951), *Time for Fairy Tales, Old and New* (1952), and *Time for True Tales and Almost True* (1953). Combined, they were sold as *The Arbuthnot Anthology of Children's Literature* (1953). All of these works were revised and published in subsequent editions, sometimes with coauthors and new titles.⁵⁵ In 1965, Arbuthnot wrote the introduction for an anniversary edition of Rand McNally's perennial favorite, *The Real Mother Goose*, with illustrations by Blanche Fisher Wright.⁵⁶ And in 1969, the year of her death, Scott, Foresman published Arbuthnot's final book, *Children's Reading in the Home*.

Following her retirement, Arbuthnot embraced lecturing with such gusto that by decade's end she had crisscrossed the United States and had spoken in more than fifty major cities.⁵⁷ When Arbuthnot was in her late 70s, *The Cleveland Press* reported: "In the past 18 months Mrs. May Hill Arbuthnot, 77, has lectured

in 35 major cities or universities—sometimes to audiences of 1000.”⁵⁸ Arbuthnot had always been a strong believer in oratory and oral communication. She fondly remembered having been read to as a child and felt that reading aloud to children was crucial for their development. She viewed oral interpretations as especially helpful in a child’s understanding of, and appreciation for, poetry.⁵⁹

Arbuthnot valued storytelling highly. Educator and famed Norwegian storyteller, Gudrun Thorne-Thomsen, a faculty member of the University of Chicago’s School of Education, made a great impression upon Arbuthnot. When Arbuthnot told Norse tales, they were always delivered in Thorne-Thomsen’s strong Norwegian accent.⁶⁰ Arbuthnot included storytelling in her own university courses and included sections on the topic in *Children and Books*.⁶¹ Her many years of experience with storytelling no doubt contributed to her skill as a lecturer. Arbuthnot had a strong reputation as a lively, engaging lecturer. In fact, she first came to the attention of her husband through her public speaking. “He heard me make a speech and thought I was funny.”⁶²

As Arbuthnot’s reputation as an expert in children’s literature grew nationally and internationally, she received offers for work as a consultant. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, for example, hired her to suggest which children’s books would lend themselves to television adaptations.⁶³ In 1962, Arbuthnot wrote a letter in support of budget and personnel recommendations to the Library of Congress for a department of children’s literature.⁶⁴ This letter was read into the record of the House Committee on Appropriations.⁶⁵ Virginia Haviland was subsequently appointed the first head of the Children’s Section.⁶⁶

In time, Arbuthnot was showered with a number of prestigious awards for her accomplishments. In 1959, she was presented with the Constance Lindsay Skinner Award of the Women’s National Book Association (WNBA). Now known as The WNBA Award, this award is presented by the members of the Women’s National Book Association to “a living American woman who derives part or all of her income from books and allied arts, and who has done meritorious work in the world of books beyond the duties or responsibilities of her profession or occupation.”⁶⁷ In 1961, Western Reserve University, which had never seen fit to promote Arbuthnot from Associate Professor to Professor, awarded her an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters “in recognition of her years as scholar, teacher, lecturer, and writer.”⁶⁸

In 1964, Arbuthnot was the winner of the Regina Medal, established by the Catholic Library Association “to honor an individual whose continued distinguished contribution to children’s literature might be considered to exemplify the words of Walter De la Mare, inscribed on the medal, ‘ . . . only the rarest kind of best in anything can be good enough for the young.’”⁶⁹ Naturally, Arbuthnot’s acceptance speech, delivered in Detroit, was a lecture on children’s literature, a lecture in which Arbuthnot discussed the influence of children’s books on what the child of today becomes in the future.⁷⁰ Upon her return to Cleveland, the local press announced that Arbuthnot

had received the Regina Medal for a lifetime spent in bringing “children and books happily together.”⁷¹

The May Hill Arbuthnot Honor Lecture

Arbuthnot was in her eighties, still writing and lecturing, when representatives of Scott, Foresman—who wished to honor Arbuthnot during her lifetime—began discussions with the ALA Children’s Services Division.⁷² The result was the May Hill Arbuthnot Honor Lecture.

Though the lecture has become, by and large, a lifetime achievement award for children’s book authors and illustrators, it was originally established “to honor May Hill Arbuthnot annually by selecting someone to prepare a paper which shall be a significant contribution related to the field of children’s literature.”⁷³

When Arbuthnot learned of the lecture series established in her honor, she wrote to the Children’s Services Division to express her thanks saying, in part, “I am a strong believer in the efficacy of direct speech, the spoken word. . . . So I am more than pleased that this honor take the form of an on-going series of lectures. That means we shall be hearing new voices speaking with new insight and new emphasis in this field of children’s lectures.”⁷⁴

Virginia Haviland, Chief of the Children’s Section at the Library of Congress, was appointed the first chair of the May Hill Arbuthnot Honor Lecture Committee. The committee chose internationally renowned British literary critic Margery Fisher as the inaugural lecturer. Appropriately, the first lecture site chosen was the School of Library Science, Case Western Reserve University.

On April 10, 1970, Jesse Shera, then dean of the School of Library Science, gave the welcome and, as has been the custom ever since, the chair of the Arbuthnot Honor Lecture Committee introduced the lecturer.⁷⁵ Sadly, Arbuthnot was not in attendance, as she had died the previous October. ☹

*A wise and blithe spirit, she has made a permanent and significant contribution to children’s literature.*⁷⁶

—Zena Sutherland

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59. May Hill Arbuthnot, "Some Clues to the Interpretation of Poetry: From Mother Goose to T. S. Eliot," in *Promoting Growth Toward Maturity in Interpreting What Is Read: Proceedings of the Annual Conference on reading held at the University of Chicago, 1950, Volume XIII*, ed. William S. Gray (Supplementary Education Monographs, no.74, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 185–89.
60. "WNBA Honors Marchette Chute and May Hill Arbuthnot," 25–26.
61. See for example, "When to Read and When to Tell Stories" and "Learning and Telling a Story" in Arbuthnot, *Children and Books*, 240, 245.
62. Wes Lawrence, "She's Too Busy to Loaf," *The [Cleveland] Plain Dealer* (June 23, 1966): 17.
63. Arbuthnot made a number of trips to Toronto for this purpose. See Daerr, "Still Busy at 77 with Book Program," C6.
64. "WNBA Honors Marchette Chute and May Hill Arbuthnot," 24–26.
65. Harig, *A Bio-Bibliography of May Hill Arbuthnot*, 12; 87th Congress (2nd Session, March 26, 1962), 358–59.
66. "LC Appoints Virginia Haviland to Head New Children's Section," *Library Journal* LXXXVIII (February 15, 1963): 840.
67. "WNBA Award Information," Women's National Book Association, www.wnba-books.org/wnba-awards/wnbaawards (accessed May 3 2013) ; "WNBA Honors Marchette Chute and May Hill Arbuthnot," 26.
68. Beatrice Vincent, "She Devotes 60 Years to Books and Children," *The Cleveland Press* (April 8, 1964): D2; The citation read aloud at the 1961 commencement reads, "inspiring teacher, gifted scholar, popular lecturer, lucid

writer. . . Hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of children have found the delights of literature under the guidance of your books and the spell of your enthusiasm.” Webster Godman Simon, “Citation for the Honorary Degree of Humane Letters presented to May Hill Arbuthnot,” (Cleveland, OH: Western Reserve University, June 14, 1961), Case Western Reserve University Archives.

69. Corrigan and Corrigan, “May Hill Arbuthnot: Regina Medal Award Winner, 1964,” 337.
70. May Hill Arbuthnot, “Today’s Child Tomorrow,” *Catholic Library World* (September 1964): 18–22.
71. Vincent, “She Devotes 60 Years to Books and Children,” D2.
72. “ALA Executive Board Minutes,” (January 27–31, 1969):

11–12, Subject File, 1910–12, 1915–99, 2009, Record Series 2/4/6, Box 15. ALA Archives at the University of Illinois.

73. “ALA Executive Board Minutes,” (April 30–May 2, 1969, Exhibit 5, Children’s Services Division), Transcripts of Proceedings, 1909–1946, 1951–, Record Series 2/1/1, Box 16, ALA Archives at the University of Illinois.
74. Arbuthnot, “To All the Kind Friends,” 14.
75. In 2014, there was a break from tradition when multiple Newbery Medal–winning author Kate DiCamillo, rather than Committee Chair Susan Moore, introduced Arbuthnot Lecturer Andrea Davis Pinkney.
76. Sutherland, “About May Hill Arbuthnot,” np.

Winners Announced in Ezra Jack Keats Bookmaking Competition



Earlier this year, the Ezra Jack Keats Foundation, in partnership with the New York City Department of Education, announced the winners of the 29th annual Ezra Jack Keats Bookmaking Competition for grades 3–12. The books were on display at the Brooklyn Public Library Central Library earlier this year. City-wide winners received \$500 and the borough winners, \$100.

“These talented young writers and illustrators have worked hard over many months to bring their ideas and creative spirit to life through their books,” says Deborah Pope, Executive Director of the Ezra Jack Keats Foundation. “It was at public school that Ezra first received recognition for his talent, which encouraged him to pursue his dreams. Our hope is that this award will inspire these young people to follow their dreams, too.”

“Each year, we have the pleasure of showcasing some of New York’s most talented young people,” says Rachel Payne, Coordinator, Early Childhood Services, Brooklyn Public Library, and one of the judges. “This year’s city-wide winners were inspired by their history, surroundings, and experiences to bring Coney Island’s Ferris wheel to life, to celebrate the seasons, and to bring a civic need to light in the form of a protest book!”

The competition begins with a full day of professional development at the Metropolitan Museum of Art for art teachers and librarians working in New York City’s public schools. Students

are then invited to come up with intriguing themes, create engaging text, and integrate illustrations created in a range of media. The process is integrated into classroom instruction with a strong emphasis on the study of picture books. Student books are created under the supervision of a teacher and/or librarian.

City-wide Winners

Grades 3–5

When Fall Turns to Winter, by John Lee (Grade 5)
PS. 193, Alfred J. Kennedy, Queens

Grades 6–8

The History Wheel of Coney Island, by Amelia Samoylov (Grade 8)
I.S. 98, The Bay Academy for the Arts and Sciences, Brooklyn

Grades 9–12

The Brown M Train, by Kevin Zeng (Grade 12)
PS. 77, Brooklyn

The judging panel comprised New York-based librarians, artists, teachers, and others involved in promoting diversity in children’s literature. The panel focuses on the quality of writing, illustrations, and presentation. This year’s judges included:

Jennifer Baker, *We Need Diverse Books*; Pat Cummings, children’s book author and illustrator; Barbara Moon, former youth consultant, Suffolk Cooperative Library System; Nicole Deming, senior communications manager, The Children’s Book Council, Inc. and Every Child a Reader, Inc.; Melissa Jacobs-Israel, coordinator, New York City School Library System; David Mowery, former division chief, Youth Wing, Central Library, Brooklyn Public Library; Melanie Okadigwe, Lower School learning specialist, Greene Hill School, Brooklyn; Barbara Ornstein, former children’s specialist, Central Library, Brooklyn Public Library; Rachel Payne, ex officio, coordinator, Early Childhood Services, Brooklyn Public Library; Jo Beth Ravitz, artist, art consultant; and Susan Straub, founder, The Read to Me Program.