

# Ex Libris

## Little Lambs and Aeroplanes: Bookplates for Children

POPULAR BOOKPLATE DESIGN in Canada was long dominated by heraldry and the simple and practical designs used by circulating libraries to make sure that *their* books would find their way back to *their* shelves. These bookplates were designed to appeal to adults. They ranged from intricate and impressive armorial designs that showcased the skill of the artist (and occasionally his or her imagination) to the rather mundane, and sometimes even scolding, textual bookplates preferred by libraries.

Towards the end of the 19th century, a much greater variety of styles, subjects and formats started to become generally popular. As a result, any collection of late-19th- and 20th-century bookplates is a wonderful mixture of styles and subjects, including humorous, erotic and abstract designs that appeal to adults.

At the same time that the art nouveau and art deco movements were beginning to influence popular bookplate design in Canada, children's bookplates also began to gain popularity. Books and bookplates for children increased in number throughout the 19th century, but during the 20th century they became widespread. Not surprisingly, this rise in popularity corresponds with the expansion of libraries and library services for children.

Like bookplates for adults, children's bookplates come in a variety of styles. They can be created by adults or by children, and quite frequently adult creators will attempt to blur this distinction by using a naive style, one that mimics the wobbly lines and simple subjects of children's drawings. Though the styles vary, the subjects tend to centre on children reading, toys, and themes from children's stories and rhymes. Some bookplates are very realistic, featuring children using books and toys, while others are wholly fantastical.

The Toronto Public Library's bookplate originated from the Boys and Girls House branch, which opened in 1922. The Boys and Girls House is now the famous Lillian H. Smith branch, the oldest children's library in Canada. Like many children's bookplates, it features both a boy and a girl—one



*Alexander Fawcett Reid*

avidly reading and the other looking for books on a library shelf. The bookplate also features a mixture of children's images that reflects subjects for older children, such as ships and medieval knights, as well as Canadian symbols like the beaver, maple leaf and trillium.

Group of Seven artist J.E.H. MacDonald likely created the original design in 1919 or 1914 for either the Boys and Girls House or the Toronto Public Library's Canadiana Collection. It is a combination of realism, symbolism and fantasy, where symbols of childhood, books and Canada surround the children on every side.

The bookplate collection at UBC Library's Rare Books and Special Collections includes two bookplates owned by siblings, Nancy Stuart Reid and Alexander Fawcett Reid. Nancy's bookplate features two children, a girl and a boy, which likely represent Nancy and Alexander. Like the bookplate from the Boys and Girls House, Nancy Stuart Reid's bookplate focuses on children enjoying books. Alexander's bookplate is a little more abstract, picturing instead a ship and some rather playful borders. Both bookplates look as though they may have been created by children, or by an artist attempting to replicate a child's perspective and style. The naive style adds charm, humour and a unique character to what is otherwise fairly typical subject matter.



*Nancy Stuart Reid*

Farkas László's bookplate and the Boys' and Girls' Library bookplates from Montreal are even more playful. Here we see bookplates filled with toys and images from children's books. Farkas László's is particularly delightful due to the potted, thorny roses that wind through a collection of books and toys, including an ABC book, a rocking horse and a striped ball.

The Boys' and Girls' Library bookplate explodes with images from fairy tales and books on history, adventure and science. Here we have a charging horse, fairytale characters, a train, an aeroplane, and the moon falling from the pages of a book. The Boys' and Girls' Library was also known as the Elsa and Joseph Hopmeyer Boys and Girls Library in Montreal; it was founded in the late 1940s by the National Council of Jewish Women.

Bookplates for children allow bookplate designers the opportunity to use subjects and styles that are fanciful, varied and entertaining. They have a tone and feel that is quite different from most bookplates for adults. More importantly, however, they cater to the tastes of young readers, a major consumer of books throughout the past century. Children's bookplates encourage children to connect to books, to claim books as their own, and to interact with them on a very fundamental level by literally adding something of themselves to their books.

Among the first words children learn to read and



*Boys' and Girls' Library, National Council of Jewish Women*

write are their own names, and through bookplates children can attach their words to the words in their favourite books (and in a rather more contained way than your typical collision between books and crayons!). Such connections to books encourage engagement, interest and early literacy. As a result, bookplates aimed at children have become very popular.

Countless websites now exist where parents can download or order bookplates for their children. The American Library Association even sells "Born to Read Bookplates," a package of bookplates aimed at encouraging early literacy. As someone who enjoys bookplates, I hope that parents and educators continue to use bookplates to connect children with reading and that the effects reach beyond early literacy to include a lifelong love of books, art—and bookplates!

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The Rare Books and Special Collections Bookplate Collection can be accessed from the UBC Library Digital Collections and Services site, <http://digitalcollections.library.ubc.ca>.