From an Audi commercial to celebrating the end of the second Bush presidency to the ghost of Mama Cass presiding over a dead Keith Moon, to the ubiquity of the iPad, Good Night Moon has been and no doubt will continue to be parodied or invoked for generations to come. Songwriters reference it, the television show The Wire gives an urban twist to its constant refrain of “good night-----” with “good night, po-pos, good night hoppers, good night hustlers...” What makes this story so much a part of the collective consciousness, a veritable cultural meme? How did Margaret Wise Brown’s life and her influence in children’s publishing result in the longstanding enchantment of Good Night Moon? Recent political and cultural parodies of the go to bed genre all ultimately hearken back to this one simple story painted in green and orange, and the intrinsic comfort it provides to children as a go to bed ritual.

Born in New York in 1910 to a wealthy family, Brown was a middle child whose parents’ many moves within the Long Island area required that she change schools four times while growing up, including a stint at a Swiss boarding school. As a child, she made up stories (in her family, a polite way of saying she told lies) and then challenged her siblings to look up the answers in the multi-volume Book of Knowledge, for which she later penned two entries on writing for small children. She attended Hollins College, where in the manner of the time, she affected nicknames, a lifelong habit—hers was Tim, for Timothy Hay, as she had bright blonde hair and was athletic. Over her lifetime, she affected Brownie and Bunny, among others, as well.

After graduating, Brown studied at the then-innovative Bank Street’s Cooperative School for Student Teachers in New York City, part of Lucy Sprague Mitchell’s Orwellian sounding Bureau of Educational Experiments. There, student teachers were tasked with writing down exchanges between themselves and the children—Piaget developmental theory grounded the teaching. Mitchell and Brown, with others from the school, ushered in a new era in children’s literature as part of the experimental Here and Now series of books. These were compilations of stories written to appeal to children in their own language, reflecting their own developmental stages, and based in their everyday experiences, rather than the fairy tales and imaginative stories endorsed by teachers and librarians at that time. In fact, what came to be called “The Fairy Tale Wars” ensued, when Mitchell tried to interest Anne Carroll Moore, Head Children’s Librarian at the New York Public Library in the Here and Now stories. Moore supervised children’s librarians, “oversaw book purchases and planned children’s rooms for many neighborhood library branches constructed by NYPL during this period” (Anne Carroll Moore n. pag.). Her endorsement of new titles for her Children’s Books Suggested as Holiday Gifts was critical to book sales to libraries and schools, at that time the major purchasers of children’s books. Moore was dismissive of the “faddishly newfangled and subliterary” Bank Street offerings, and suspicious of Brown’s books nearly up until the latter’s death, believing that children required a fantasy world that included classic fairy tales and myths (Marcus, “Making” n. pag.).
Recommended by Mitchell, Brown began writing for a small publisher just getting started, William R. Scott, Inc. Scott himself was a Bank Street parent. Margaret began long-standing collaborations with Clement Hurd, Leonard Weisgard, Esphyr Slobodkina, and other artists of that era. She was on the editorial staff when Gertrude Stein submitted her Bank Street influenced manuscript, *The World is Round*. Brown always anticipated growing out of being a children’s author, and wanted to build a relationship with Stein, citing Stein’s experimental writing as an influence on her own work. Even though Brown was the children’s editor, Scott and his cohorts fell over the not especially child friendly manuscript, and Margaret had little chance to correspond directly with Stein. Eventually Brown wrote for multiple publishers—Harper and Brothers with editor Ursula Nordstrom, Doubleday and Doran & Co. Doubleday, and Simon and Schuster’s Golden Book series.

Margaret Wise Brown is credited with bringing about a golden age in children’s publishing, and her loyalty to her collaborators included contracts listing them as royalty recipients, a practice not done previously. She was quirky and imaginative as well as classist and anti-Semitic. Her hobby was beagling, running with hounds (no horse) to pursue rabbits. As a child she skinned a deceased pet rabbit, and as an adult, she wrote *The Fur Family*, a story literally bound in rabbit fur. Additionally, she covered many of the rooms in two of her houses in fur rugs and blankets. Her interviewers would comment on her contradictory nature. Most provocatively, Brown had a lesbian affair that lasted ten years with Michael Strange, the stage name of Blanche Oelrich, former wife of John Barrymore. Brown played “Bunny” to Strange’s urbane, jaded “Rabbit.” Characterized in her biography as a very destructive relationship, the older woman belittled Brown’s talents and profession. Strange herself was a melodramatic, pretentious poet of negligible talent. This relationship ended with Strange’s death by cancer.

Ever quixotic, Brown took over an abandoned quarry master’s house on Vinalhaven Island, off the coast of Maine, and made it into “The Only House,” where artists, writers, and high society would come visit her. One door opened onto a fifty foot drop to the shore below, the wooden staircase having been destroyed years earlier by a gale. She fitted the facing wall with multiple mirrors so the light and water and anyone who looked, were always shifting and fractured, ‘plural’ in her word. In her last year of life, she met Andrew Rockefeller, fifteen years her junior, and fell in love. She was making plans to accompany him on part of a transpacific sailing trip when she died suddenly at the age of forty-two in a hospital in France, where she had been recovering from surgery. In an act of *joie de vivre*, she kicked her leg up can-can style to show her doctor she was well, and an embolism in her leg reached her brain, killing her quickly. Brown wrote over one hundred books for various publishers, and scores of manuscripts in varying stages of completion were found after her death. Of these, the more complete were published.

During her life, Brown moved away from the “Beep beep crunch crunch school” of *Here and Now* Bank Street empiricism as characterized by writer Anita Brenner, integrating mystery and lyricism with such titles as the *Runaway Bunny*, based on an ancient French ballad, and *Good Night Moon* (Marcus, Margaret 161). In his biography *Margaret Wise Brown, Awakened by the Moon*, Leonard Marcus describes his first encounter with the “great green room,”

As I read the book for the first time, unaware of the author’s legendary status within her field (or indeed of anything about her) I was forcibly struck by the
realization that the quietly compelling words I was saying over in my head were poetry and, what was more, poetry of a kind I prized: accessible but not predictable, emotional but purged of sentiment, vivid but so spare that every word felt necessary. Her words seemed to be rooted in the concrete but touched by an appreciation of the elusive, the paradoxical, the mysterious. There was astonishing tenderness and authority in the voice, and something mythic in it as well. It was as though the author had just now seen the world for the first time, and had chosen to honor it by taking its true measure in words. (3)

Indeed, Brown wrote in a letter to Michael Strange, “The first great wonder at the world is big in me. That is the real reason that I write” (Marcus 158). Leonard makes a connection to the poetics of French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, mentioning Brown’s penchant for polishing her household objects, and for rubbing cooking grease into her furniture and floorboards at The Only House, quoting from The Poetics of Space:

> When a poet rubs a piece of furniture—even vicariously—when he puts a little fragrant wax on his table with the woolen clothe that lends warmth to everything it touches, he creates a new object; he increases the object’s dignity; he registers this object officially as a member of the human household. (67-8)

Brown had other deep connections to Bachelard, illustrated in her post-Bank Street championing of dreams. In The Dream Book, children, animals and inanimate objects have fulfilling dreams; and in her extreme personification of her dwellings, particularly “The Only House,” which conjures Bachelard’s oneiric house. The oneiric house begins as that of our birth, the house of memories, from which psychological interiority is derived in childhood. It is the wellspring of creative reverie, “[w]hen one knows how to grant to all things their exact dream potential, one lives more fully in the oneiric house than in the house of memories. The oneiric house is a deeper theme than that of the house of our birth; it corresponds to a more profound need “(Bachelard, On Poetic 98).

Interestingly, Brown’s first draft of Goodnight Moon was written under the pseudonym Memory Ambrose, the name of a friend’s housekeeper, and was written one morning upon waking up. She often said she “dreamt” her books (Marcus 184). In her article for the Book of Knowledge, “Creative Writing for Very Young Children,” Brown wrote that “[a] child’s own story is a dream; but a good story is a dream that is true for more than one child or that can suggest his own dream to him, or start him dreaming” (79-80). Her major writing influences were Gertrude Stein and Virginia Woolf, both of whom she attempted to contact, though in Woolf’s case, her procrastination prohibited it. While she was anticipating a trip to England in spring of 1941, she read of Woolf’s suicide in the New York Evening Post. Brown had walked by Woolf’s home in 1937, and later written her a letter hoping to form a literary relationship with her, which was never mailed. (Marcus 144-5)

Since its publication in 1937, Goodnight Moon has sold over 14 million copies, been translated into numerous languages, including Hebrew, Swedish, Korean, and Hmong, and remains a classic children’s book. Often referred to as a litany or child’s goodnight prayer, its
immense popularity is generally attributed to its ability to rehearse going to sleep and how it conveys object constancy to young children. The story is a means of putting a child to bed using hypnotic rhyme, repetition, and a child’s centering of him/herself in the comfort of a known space (the room) before battling the temporary self abnegation of sleep. Critics regularly weigh in on its psychological worth. “Learning to be alone (individuation) in the company of a reading parent is a dress rehearsal for the real thing” (Rivinus 10). Spitz writes that, “[t]he psychological function of the surviving objects in Goodnight Moon is profound. They teach young children that life can be trusted, that life has stability, reliability, and durability” (1). Joseph Stanton views the story as a reverse creation myth as the room darkens and the objects are obliterated from sight, leaving the child bunny “securely present in the center of his universe, yet he is completely alone in that godlike eminence” (71-2). Alone, but unafraid. There are two voices present: that of the child naming the objects, and that of the omniscient narrator, whom Stanton characterizes as Brown “at her poetic best.”

Critics question whether the quiet lady is an artistic homage to Gertrude Stein (Susina) or to Wanda Gag’s old lady in Millions of Cats (Marcus). On a psychoanalytic level, some conflate her presence with parental neglect. Much has been made about the lack of a parent (read: mother) figure in the actual story. The quiet old lady in fact, Mary Galbraith notes, is seemingly objectified at the expense of all the items in the room as they are being bid goodnight. “Indeed, in the list of goodnights, only the old lady is not directly addressed: ‘and goodnight to the old lady whispering hush’ rather than ‘and goodnight old lady whispering hush.’ The old lady is defamiliarized and deflected while the objects in the room are spoken to as persons, thus raising their ontological status and lowering hers” (175).

In contrast, Judith Robertson offers a viable argument more obviously reflective of both Bank Street pedagogy and Brown’s aesthetic. She believes that the rabbit child’s naming ritual lends

[a] sense of commensurability and earnestness...through language pattern, through the author’s profuse laying on of indefinite articles (where every object gets its own ‘a’), and conjunctions (where consolidation and amalgamation proceed through the unwavering logic of the child’s own priority system of enumerating her objects democratically through simple additives: ‘and…and…and…and’......The use of ‘and’ talks back to faintly lingering adult superstitions about beginning a sentence with “And,” thus reproaching adult certainty and privileging instead the child’s sense of reality in a way that gives his simple declaratives epistemological authority. (207)

Here the quiet old lady is one of a number of entities, and the real work of psychological attachment is done semiotically in “the force of repetition, which makes manifest a scenario of fulfillment in which bunny child continually seeks and re-finds his mother...act[ing] as impetus that translates into terms of recovery (as opposed to dismissal)” (207).

Galbraith argues from an attachment parenting perspective, positing that the parental agenda behind the bedtime story genre is to ignore the child’s need for closeness and enforce separation as a goal. These stories leave the child or child proxy contently asleep on the final page, and serve a double function of teaching and describing bedtime rituals of separation and prescribing expected behavior of the young audience, while at the same time providing physical
closeness to the parent/caregiver reading it (173-4). Bedtime books are a vehicle to “transition from parental presence to the use of ‘self-soothing’ fantasy objects and rituals of protections. Further, the book itself often becomes a ritual object in this transition...reading shifts attention from the here-and-now situation of leave-taking to a fantasy situation in a book” (173). (italics mine)

Galbraith divides bedtime stories into four categories. In “Dismissive” stories attachment figures ignore the child’s need for physical contact during the night, but in the context of a safe, kindly environment, protective on the surface, but ultimately alienating and lonely for the child. She includes Goodnight Moon in this category. “Hostile” stories, such as Where the Wild Things Are and The Velveteen Rabbit) assume the adult world is fundamentally hostile to children, and the protagonist child endures abandonment or rejection by fantasizing attachment with dream figures or toys, while physically alone in his or her own room.

“Displacing” stories comprise “a category of works notable for its sensual pictures of children sleeping with large furry animals.” Examples are works by Nancy Tillman such as It’s Time to Sleep My Love. Finally, in “Unconscious Acceptance” stories the child falls asleep with sleeping or sleepy parents. In the last, the “tone is relaxed and warm [and] ...represents a growing empathy with the child’s need for contact with the parent’s body through the night, though the unconsciousness of the depicted parents points out continued tension about the parents initiating or approving this practice, especially in pictures.” (174) One can hardly resist applying this rubric to three cultural/political parodies of Goodnight Moon.

Goodnight Bush by Eric Origen and Gan Golan, Goodnight Keith Moon by Bruce Worden and Clare Cross, and Goodnight iPad written by David Milgrim under the pseudonym Ann Droyd all rest upon the vehicle of the original’s familiarity. They honor it while providing popular commentary, with ranging levels of verisimilitude to the original. Goodnight Bush is most intentional in this, and truest of the three to the artwork and essence of Goodnight Moon. An epilogue by the authors gives background details of their overtly political motivation, and lionizes Margaret Wise Brown and Clement Hurd as the creators of such a timeless work. It also goes to the most effort, offering touches such as books by Ann Coulter on the child rabbit’s bookshelf, and meta-satire in the series of paintings of the three little pigs/war profiteers who in the final frame unmask themselves and are revealed as Condoleezza Rice, Donald Rumsfeld, and another Brownie, Michael Brown of FEMA disaster notoriety.

The red phone with its nuclear symbol rests on the bedside table, next to a copy of My Pet Goat, read by then-President Bush for a full seven minutes after being informed of the first 9/11 attack. The scales of justice on the mantel are tipping egregiously, and Osama bin Laden is crawling behind a box of 2000 Florida ballots on the floor. Behind the flaming oil wells of Kuwait, and the lines of cocaine and birthday cake that by the end have been substantially depleted, leaving Bush wide eyed and paranoid while instead of the young mouse, a turbaned bin Laden gazes out the window of the great green room, there is a drumbeat of despair.

A Youtube video filmed at the time of its publication shows random citizens visiting Washington D.C. reading it page by page, most with palpable gusto. The quiet old lady is replaced by Dick Cheney in bunny slippers cradling a shotgun, a patently hostile image. More than just conforming to Galbraith’s dismissive category, placing a needy Bush in an ostensibly safe room continually breached by dangerous elements, Goodnight Bush is a sobering adult work that inverts with its content the calming rhythms and comforting repetitions of the
original, leaving the reader in a state of thoughtfulness long past the initial chuckle at its wit. Below is the opening scene, which begins “In the situation room/There was a toy world/ And a flight costume/ And a picture of--/A refinery plume.” (Origen n. pag.)

Moving from the political to popular culture, in Goodnight Keith Moon the pictorial elements of the original remain intact: two paintings on adjacent walls (Townshend jumping over the moon and four gents pissing on cement), the blown back curtain sports a Union Jack design, lamp, table, tiger throw rug by the bed, dresser, and telephone. But it’s a seedy hotel room now, cracks in the walls, and rock star paraphernalia strewn about; a broken pinball machine, Moon’s destroyed drum set with dead fish in leaked out water, vomit and beer cans on the floor and bed covers. Truly this is a hostile setting of the protagonist’s own making. Worden and Cross invoke the ghost of Mama Cass as the quiet old lady pensively sitting on a folding chair regarding the dead drummer. Melancholy pervades this satire, punctuated with wry details that Who fans can best appreciate. There are aspects of Galbraith’s hostile category in that by attaining the role of cultural superstar, Moon psychologically becomes his own ‘dream figure’—leaving him open to societal rejection if his stardom should fade. The accompanying lifestyle brought an abnegation of his authentic self, culminating in fatal addiction. Goodnight Keith Moon offers backhanded respect to Moon, playing on the obvious allusions to Brown’s iconic work, while integrating cultural inside knowledge.
In contrast, *Goodnight iPad* lacks parodic sensibility, neither imitating the artwork nor plumbing the depth of feeling and thoughtfulness of the previous two works. It is a simplistic re-rendering using the conceit of technology replacing the bedtime reading ritual, leaving an electronically exhausted, large bunny family that exemplifies Galbraith’s unconscious acceptance type as they co-sleep in various beds. The great green room isn’t even green anymore, and the few sketchy details—the young mouse is now robotic—do little to invoke the original. So many unused electronic devices litter the floor while each bunny is solipsistically engaged with his/her own – even the baby has an iPad with a virtual rattle—that a sense of chaos reigns. There is no interiority, no parallelism to *Goodnight Moon*. It is only when the Grandmother bunny becomes frustrated and throws the gadgets out the window that the colony is forced to disengage and goes to bed.
Enlarging the discussion to include other bedtime titles, the most popular example of parody on the displacing type of goodnight book is of course Go the F**k to Sleep, which one assumes could also be characterized as openly hostile based on its chosen signifier. Author Adam Mansbach is a fiction professor and writer, who collaborated with illustrator Ricardo Cortés to create this off color send up which pre-sold tens of thousands of copies before it was even in galleys. The publisher moved the release date up four months and had the run increased to 150,000 from the original 10,000. (Carpenter n.pag.) In an interview, Cortés said:

I wanted to create an homage to classic children’s literature: idyllic landscapes, serenity, even cuteness. I didn’t think I needed to chase the jokes at every turn with “funny” pictures—I knew Adam had already covered that base so well that it was my job to simply create a fantasy bedtime story that would be lush and dreamy. It was very fun to draw, steeping myself in the traditional template of sweetness that we are all so familiar with (but at the same time knowing Adam’s words would reign in the sappiness that I afforded myself). (Meltzer n.pag.)

The storyline is simple: parents continually attempting to put their children to bed, only to have them up and about moments later offering various excuses. The controversy and publicity engendered gave rise to a child-friendly sequel in 2012, Seriously, Just Go to Sleep, which omits the expletives and reworks the original illustrations. Mansbach received negative feedback from parents who thought its intended audience was children, due to the book’s physical size and appearance, while others read it to their children without the expletives, or simply found it a hilarious relief, and praised it. Go the F**k to Sleep, regardless of the reader’s personal response fulfills the aims of parody by mimicking while honoring the go to bed genre while exposing its limitations in real life, an intention Galbraith might grudgingly find worthy. And Margaret Wise Brown would have loved it.
Works Cited


