

Curious George Gets Branded: Reading as Consuming

SCHOLASTIC, ALWAYS A TRUSTED NAME in schools, has in the last twenty years become a strong brand known to millions of parents and children, connected to literacy and learning. The goal of the present generation is to expand Scholastic's brand worldwide, to build the strongest global children's book publishing and distribution business, to expand further our outstanding position in education, and to meet the needs of children everywhere for improved learning at school and at home through technology, including the Internet, while increasing profitability and building shareholder value. Richard Robinson, Chairman, President, and Chief Executive Officer, Scholastic (Scholastic Inc., 2000)

When I was a young boy, I loved *Curious George* (Rey, 1941). He was so spontaneous and sincere, yet also so naughty. Back then I had to satiate my Curious George desires by checking the books out of the library and reading the stories over and over until I had to return the books.

If I were a young boy today, I'd have an unimaginable range of choices through which to experience Curious George. In the morning I could wake up to the sound of my Curious George alarm clock ringing. Disbelieving it was already time to arise, I could turn on my Curious George lamp and check the time on my Curious George wall clock. Then I could throw off the Curious George comforter and kick down the Curious George bed sheet.

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Shuffling around the room, I might accidentally step on the toys I forgot to put away the night before: my Curious George drum, Curious George spinning top, Curious George jack-in-the-box (or more accurately George-in-the-box), and a host of Curious George puzzles. I'd slip on a Curious George T-shirt and my blue jeans.

Making my way to the kitchen, I'd find that my mother had placed a plate of scrambled eggs on my Curious George place mat. I'd reach for the Curious George salt and pepper shakers to season the eggs and then gobble them up. Mom would hand me my lunch, packed in my Curious George lunch box, which I would then stuff in my Curious George backpack. At school I'd find that my teacher had put up a Curious George alphabet wall hanging and had set up the flannel board with Curious George felt characters. Next to the computer, I could see a Curious George mouse pad and a stack of Curious George CD-ROMs.

Coming home after school, I'd sneak a cookie from the Curious George cookie jar, look at the Curious George calendar, and count the days until Halloween. Then I'd grab my Curious George plush doll, put the *Curious George Flies a Kite* video in the VCR, snuggle into a comfy chair, and dream about wearing my Curious George costume on Halloween and collecting candy in my Curious George pail. My parents could have purchased all these things at Amazon.com, with the blessings of

many educators because the merchandise promotes a book that in turn fosters the habit of reading.

What is so different today from the 1950s, when I was a young boy? In the '50s you could buy an even wider range of products with Mickey Mouse stitched, stamped, or printed on them. Walt Disney was active in making films, TV programs, theme parks, and negotiating a variety of licensing agreements with companies who wished to use one of Disney's characters on their products. Disney understood that he wasn't selling television programming or feature films. What he was selling was himself and the characters he and his associates had created. It didn't matter if Mickey Mouse was in a feature film, a short cartoon, on TV with the Mickey Mouse Club, or stamped on a watch. The point was getting Mickey in front of as many people as possible.

Today's book publishers look much more like the Walt Disney Corporation than they look like the publishing houses that existed in the '50s and '60s. These publishers understand that they are not in the book business; rather they sell ideas they call "brands," and they market their brands through "synergized" goods designed to infiltrate as many aspects of a child's life as possible. In this article I look at who is publishing today's children's books, how they create brands, and what their attempts at synergy are doing to children's books and children's reading.

The Big Players

In the late 1960s the children's book publishing industry had hundreds of distinct, independent companies publishing children's books with no one company or small group of companies dominating the market. Thirty years later the field had changed dramatically. In 1967, 87 publishers had books reviewed by the selective *Horn Book Magazine*; by 1997 that number had dropped to 30. A staggering 60 percent of the books reviewed in *Horn Book* in 1997 came from only five publishers (Hade, 2000). What these numbers reflect are the results of three decades of company merging and acquiring in the publishing industry.

Today among the dominant children's book publishers, none is strictly a publishing house. The largest children's book publishers are all owned

by some of the largest corporations in the world. What follows are brief, thumbnail sketches of the major players.

Viacom

Viacom is the parent company of Simon and Schuster, which is the publishing umbrella for several imprints, including: Atheneum, McElderry, Little Simon, Aladdin, and Simon and Schuster. Viacom also owns CBS, MTV, Nickelodeon, Blockbuster Video, and Paramount Pictures. Simon and Schuster publish much of Brian Pinkney's work. Atheneum has published Phyllis Reynolds Naylor's *Shiloh* as well as books by Ursula Le Guin and Susan Cooper. Simon and Schuster produce over 200 new children's books a year and have a backlist running into the thousands (Children's Book Council, 2000; Hade, 2000). Viacom's sales for 1999 totaled nearly 13 billion dollars (Viacom, 2000).

Pearson

Pearson is a British-based company that owns what it calls "The Penguin Group," a giant publishing house under which the imprints Viking, Dial, Dutton, Putnam, Philomel, and DK are located. Pearson is also a major player in the textbook industry, holding such imprints as Prentice Hall, Allyn and Bacon, and Addison Wesley. Pearson also holds major interests in television production, television networks, television channels, and business services and information. Well-known children's books published by Pearson-owned publishers are Eric Hill's *Spot* books and Beatrix Potter's picture books. Penguin Putnam produces over 300 new children's books a year and has a backlist of thousands of titles (Children's Book Council, 2000; Hade, 2000). In 1999 sales for Pearson totaled 5 billion dollars (Pearson Corporation, 2000).

News Corporation

The News Corporation is a world-wide media Goliath. Best known perhaps for its CEO, Rupert Murdoch, the News Corporation owns HarperCollins publishing. In 1999 the News Corporation purchased William Morrow publishing and folded it into its HarperCollins operation, retaining Greenwillow and HarperCollins as its imprints. This company also owns Twentieth Century Fox,

Fox Broadcasting, *TV Guide*, major newspapers all over the world such as *The Times* (London) and the *New York Post*, and the Los Angeles Dodgers.

The News Corporation boasts on its web page that half a billion people each day read or view a News Corporation product. Maurice Sendak and Jean Craighead George publish with HarperCollins. Beverly Cleary is a HarperCollins author now that William Morrow, the sole publisher of Cleary's work, has been absorbed by HarperCollins. HarperCollins publishes around 200 new children's book titles a year and has a backlist in the thousands (Children's Book Council, 2000; Hade, 2000). Sales for the News Corporation in 1999 totaled approximately 22 billion dollars (News Corporation, 2000).

Bertelsmann

Bertelsmann is a German-based company. Its publishing holdings are huge and include Random House, Delecorte, Dell, Bantam, Doubleday, Knopf, and Crown. Bertelsmann is also heavily into European television with productions of British comedies, newspapers and magazines such as *Parents Magazine* and *YM*, record companies such as Arista Records and Windam Hill Records, the internet search engine Lycos, and a controlling interest in BarnesandNoble.com. Christopher Paul Curtis and Robert Cormier publish with Delecorte, Philip Pullman with Knopf. Its Random House group of publishers produces approximately 100 new children's books a year and carries a substantial backlist (Children's Book Council, 2000; Hade, 2000). Bertelsmann's sales for 1999 totaled around 11.5 billion dollars (Bertelsmann, 2000).

Scholastic

In some respects, Scholastic is the odd one among this group. Scholastic is family-owned, unlike Viacom, Pearson, the News Corporation, and Bertelsmann, and has focused its work in the area of literacy and learning. Scholastic believes it is now the largest children's book publisher in the world, having under its umbrella the imprints Blue Sky, Grolier, Franklin Watts, Children's Press, Orchard Books, and, of course, Scholastic (Milliot, 2000, July 24). Scholastic also operates a thriving book club and book fair business, distributing books in virtually every school in the country. The company publishes a variety of magazines on current events and

on literature for school use in grades K-12. Scholastic's education division publishes curriculum materials, textbooks, and professional books.

Recently, Scholastic has added entertainment to its repertoire, producing television programs based on its *Dear America* (1996-2001) series, *The Magic School Bus* (Cole, 1988), *The Babysitters Club* (Martin, 1986-2001), and *Goosebumps* (Stine, 1992-2001) "properties." Scholastic also produced the movie version of *An Indian in the Cupboard* (Banks, 1981). Scholastic has many of the all-time, best-selling children's books, led by Rowlings' *Harry Potter* books. With the recent acquisition of Grolier, Scholastic has the potential to publish well over 300 new books a year, along with holding a backlist running in the thousands of titles (Children's Book Council, 2000; Hade, 2000). Sales in 1999 for Scholastic were roughly 1 billion dollars (Scholastic, 2000).

The business of children's book publishing, with the exception of Scholastic, is but a small part of the total business of these Goliath-sized, multi-national media corporations.

"Merch"

The mega-corporations that dominate children's book publishing demand ever-increasing profits and profit margins. There are basically three ways for them to make more money: they could cut costs by employing fewer workers, or they could sell more of what they already make by taking their books into new markets. However, the large corporations have nearly done all they can in these two areas. As other industries have done, the publishers now subcontract the work of printing the books. For that work, publishers have turned primarily to Asia, where labor is much less expensive for the actual printing of the books. Through mergers they have cut staff, editors, and marketing personnel as operations are consolidated.

The publishers have saturated the bookstores—the few remaining independent stores as well as the big box superstores. They're also selling their books in less conventional places such as grocery stores, department stores, Wal-Mart, Sam's Club, and Hallmark (Mehren, 1998, December 23; Roback, 2000, July 17). Virtually every child in the United States has been offered several Scholastic Book

Club order sheets. The market for books is beginning to level off.

So what's left? Well, merch (short for "merchandise"), for one. The publishers sell licenses to toy companies to make products based upon a particular book character carried by that publisher. The book publisher is paid up front, generating profit with very low overhead, while the toy company hopes that the toy will sell well enough for it to make a profit.

After 10 minutes of searching on the Internet I found merch, dolls, backpacks, zipper pulls, and key chains for more than 40 book characters. Some examples are: Frederick (Lionni), Sylvester (Steig), Maisy (Cousins), Lily (from *Lily's Plastic Purple Purse* by Henkes), George and Martha (Marshall), Stuart Little (White & Williams), Arthur (Brown), Madeline (Bemelmans), Stellaluna (Cannon), and Eloise (Thompson & Knight). And this just includes the plush toys and backpacks. The list grows much larger when the rest of the toys, clothing, games, videos, and CD-ROMs are added.

How important is merch? The *Los Angeles Times* reported that some bookshops, especially independent children's bookshops, were dedicating as much as 30 percent of their shop space for merch. Some shop owners claimed that it would be very difficult for them to stay in business without the merch to sell alongside the books (Mehren, 1998, December 23).

What the book publishers have realized is that they aren't really selling books any more. What they are selling are the ideas and the images *in* those books. The book, to their sensibilities, is only a container for the ideas and the images, one of many possible containers. The question then becomes, "Into how many different containers can you put an idea?" From the point-of-view of the mega-corporations the goal shifts from trying to sell as many copies of, say, *Madeline*, to as many people as possible, to how many different containers of *Madeline* can they sell to one person (Klein, 1999). This is what Disney has been doing for decades, putting Mickey Mouse on watches, games, toys, clothing, and books, as well as television shows and films.

The five companies listed above are "broadband" service providers. They are involved in all

aspects of entertainment. They provide public access to all forms of communication, the pipelines through which ideas flow. They supply a full range of educational materials—from textbooks, supplementary materials, tests, and training. In short, these "storytellers" are packaging and selling culture. They are, in effect, "meaning brokers," selling ideas and access to ideas (Klein, 1999).

Branding

Now that the big corporations are out of the printing business, they can focus their attentions onto something that is much more lucrative. They work on creating stand-alone meaning for their properties, meaning that transcends a particular type of product. In other words, they work on creating brands (Klein, 1999).

Modern corporations strive to create brands because it is through brands that the true value of the corporation is made. Companies such as Nike and AOL actually don't own much physical stuff. Nike licenses the making of all of its sneaker and active wear merchandise to subcontractors; they own no factories. What Nike really sells is its image, marked with its familiar swoosh and the slogan "Just Do It." Nike's value is based, then, not on its physical assets, but rather on the cultural value of its name and how prolifically it can spread its swoosh (Klein, 1999). If a company is fortunate, its name may become the generic name for all products similar to its own: Kleenex, Xerox, and Cheerios, for example.

A brand carries meaning. A Curious George doll represents those virtues we would ascribe to George from reading his stories. Someone who owns a Curious George doll owns not so much soft, plush cloth and stuffing, but the opportunity to continue experiencing the feelings, ideas, and virtues that go along with reading the Curious George books. The doll, like the book, is merely a container, a means of accessing "Curious Georgeness." Financially, it doesn't matter to the corporation if the experience is with a toy, a book, or a video. If a child is taken by a Stellaluna doll and then discovers there is a book about her, that's all right.

Taken together the stories and the merch begin to take on a mythology all their own. In a crass sort of way, brands are spiritual. In a culture

such as ours that is starved of meaning, people often find meaning in life through the things they own. As a means of transportation, a BMW isn't necessarily a better car than a Geo. Both vehicles will get you where you need to go. However, a BMW in your driveway represents a different set of images and meanings and cultural value that a Geo could never wish to approach. Brands represent ways of living. The brand doesn't represent the product, the product represents the brand. Thus, a book becomes one more kind of product that carries the brand's meanings.

It's more than a little jarring to hear of children's books and characters being labeled brands, as if stories are nothing more than breakfast cereal. But in today's hyper-capitalistic world, where large corporations are selling meanings and images as opposed to actual physical items, children's books seem a natural source for brands. On its web pages, Penguin Putnam speaks glowingly of the wide recognition some of its book characters/brands hold—Madeline, Spot, and Peter Rabbit to name just a few. Viacom, the parent company of Simon and Schuster, speaks little in its annual report about literary prizes won by its books, but details the financial success of its *Blue's Clues* and *Rugrats* brands instead.

Synergy

You've got to understand your property and push out the ones that make the most sense in formats that are most desirable. Susan Katz, President and Publisher, HarperCollins Children's Division (Philips Business Information, 1998, December 23)

When ideas, or in our case more specifically stories and characters, are carried in different products and brought to the public through different media, the effect is that each product is a cross-promotion of all the other products. When Disney brought out the movie *Mulan*, it also showed on the Disney Channel "The Making of *Mulan*." ABC, a Disney-owned company, aired an ice ballet version featuring Michelle Kwan in the title role. The Disney-owned publishers Disney Press and Hyperion each brought out versions of the *Mulan* story in book form. When a company cross-promotes its product, it is known in the business world as *synergy*.

Scholastic gets right to the point in the following quote from its 1998-1999 Annual Report:

These television programs enhance The Company's book publishing franchises and have helped build these properties as important media brands worldwide. (1998/1999 Annual Report, Scholastic Corporation; Raugust, 2000)

Scholastic went into the business of making television shows and films for the express purpose of promoting its books. Scholastic Entertainment accounts for a relatively small percentage of sales and an even smaller percentage of the profits generated in 1998-99. However, Scholastic's book sales have improved dramatically, accounting for the majority of sales and profits. The annual report boasts that the strategy of promoting books through television and film productions is working brilliantly in increasing book sales and profits (Scholastic, 2000; Raugust, 2000).

Sometimes companies form alliances. Scholastic has an alliance with Warner whereby each has first right of refusal on licensing the other's material. Warner gives Scholastic the first opportunity to publish books based on Warner shows, and Warner has the first option to produce film and television shows based on Scholastic's books. Such relationships assure each company of a steady flow of content (Raugust, 1998, March 16).

A recent trend in children's book publishing is licensing snack products and toys in order to make children's books. From Simon and Schuster you can purchase *The Sun Maid Raisins Play Book* (Weir, 1999), the *Cheerios Counting Book* (Bolster, 1998), and the *Oreo Cookie Counting Book* (Albee, 2000). Scholastic has made arrangements to bring out *The Hershey's Milk Chocolate Bar Fractions Book* (Pollota, 1999) and the *Reese's Pieces: Count by Fives Book* (Pollota, 2000). HarperCollins, not to be left out, has *The Pepperidge Farm Gold Fish Fun Book* (McGrath, 1999).

The covers of these books bear striking resemblances to the packaging of these food products. In some of the books there is even a coupon for money off the purchase of the food. The book publishers benefit by being associated with popular brands of candy, crackers, and cereal. The food companies in turn benefit by bringing their product into a different market, the book market, which creates greater awareness of their products (Raugust, 2000, May 1).

The benefits of a successful synergy can be staggering. Marc Brown's character, Arthur, was

brought to television a few years ago. Marketing surveys showed that the children who watched the Arthur programs wanted to read about Arthur, not just look at the numerous picture books that already existed. Surveys also showed that the audience included not just primary-aged children, but substantial numbers of preschoolers. So Brown began writing short chapter books and allowed some of his picture books to be released in board book form. Since the advent of the *Arthur* TV program, the *Arthur* books in all their various forms have sold over 20 million copies (Raugust, 1999, May 17).

Educational networking

One of the goals of the modern corporation is to become as much of an all-service provider as possible. If a corporation's business is entertainment, then the corporation attempts to be active in as many aspects of the entertainment business as possible. If a corporation's business is education, it attempts to be active in as many education markets as possible. To accomplish this goal, book publishers are now providing teacher's editions and discussion guides for certain children's books free of charge. Publishers can afford to give away these materials because they promote the purchase of multiple copies of the novel by schools for reading groups.

A prime example of networking is observed in how Scholastic has positioned itself in the field of literacy and learning. Scholastic makes children's books available through their monthly book club ordering sheets and school book fair business. In effect, Scholastic will bring the store right into your home or school. Scholastic also sells a variety of reading programs, some of which they have indexed to your particular state's standards. If you need lesson plans, they have those at their web site, and you can download them without cost. They also offer a wide array of classroom magazines on current events and literature. Scholastic is also extending their brand into school supplies, stationery, and even school uniforms (Raugust, 1999, June 28). Their goal is to offer such an array of services and products that teachers, parents, and children have a substantial portion of their educational needs met by the Scholastic Corporation.

How are we to think of this hyper-marketed, synergized stuff? Is the *Arthur* television series entertainment or an infomercial? Are *The Magic School Bus* books really just bound advertisements for the television program? Could it be that what seems to be the reading of literature is really just one of many cross-promotions? The lines between advertising and entertainment, and advertising and education are very blurry lines. It seems we are at a point where we have advertising that thinks it is entertainment or education, and entertainment and education that are really advertising in disguise.

Perhaps these cross-promotional books are but a small part of the entire children's book world. And perhaps not. In 1998, 13 of the 16 top-selling front list hard covers were licensed properties (Raugust, 1999, May 17). Licensed books sell very, very well.

The Bottom Line

Many teachers throughout the United States can testify to the increasing presence of corporations in public schools. Why? Time spent at school is a huge chunk of a child's total time, time that could be used for advertising, getting the company's logo displayed where all in the school can see it. Soft drink companies have been quite aggressive in this. But the publishers aren't far behind.

Can't sell books while a child is eating? Combine eating with reading in licensed books. Better yet, get the teacher to teach math through branded candy and branded books. Make t-shirts of your book characters, so a child can become a walking billboard for your books. Walking to and from school with an Arthur backpack is an opportunity for corporations to make their brands better known. Quiet time cuddling with parents holding a stuffed *Goodnight Moon* bunny becomes an opportunity to market a branded storybook character during the most intimate moments between a parent and child.

It is only fair to note that there are many children's book publishers who believe deeply in children's literature and the potential of great writing and illustrating to show children the diverse possibilities of human living. And the big corporations do continue to publish excellent literature. It is, however, becoming increasingly difficult to maintain this belief in literature in a corporate culture that is focused on sales, market share, brands, and profits.

It also becomes more difficult to find the truly great new literature among the piles of licensed books. Corporations view a book as merely one of many possible containers for their branded intellectual property. It may be that the smaller, independent publishers will become the primary outlet for the best writing while the large corporations produce the books that will sell the most copies.

When my youngest daughter was seven, she enjoyed playing with Barbie dolls. One day she brought home from school a Barbie chapter book she had purchased through the book club. I don't remember the title or much of the plot, but it had something to do with Barbie saving the prom. What I do remember is that the most detailed parts of the book were when Barbie was picking out her clothes and accessories and when she went shopping at the mall. Then the book described in great detail what Barbie was wearing and what she was purchasing, whether the items had much to do with the plot or not. This kind of commercialized text is increasing.

Clearly, children today are viewed by the large corporations who make children's books not as readers of books, but as consumers of ideas. The time a child spends reading, from their point of view, is little different from time spent watching television. Each is an opportunity to sell their branded, synergized wares to the child, an opportunity to expand their brand's presence beyond story time into nearly every part of a child's life. Children come to school already read by these large, multimedia, multinational corporations as consumers. In our highly commercialized culture, children reading becomes one more instance of children consuming.

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