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Gertrude Stein as Children's Book Author

On my title slide you see a portrait of **Gertrude Stein** by Pablo Picasso. When he was told that Stein did not look anything like that portrait, he said, “she will.”



Let me take you back to the turn of the century, and I mean the turn to the 20th century, when psychology became a science and claimed education as a subdiscipline. A central issue in psychology at the time was where the dividing line was between automatic behavior and conscious behavior, or even if there was a dividing line. Electricity was supposed to be responsible for *everything*, from movement to conscious thought. A German professor was famous for both his demonstrations and his publications, **Emil du Bois-Reymond**.



He was the first to measure naturally occurring electricity in living tissue. Here we see **his brother** heroically volunteering for just such an experiment. Du Bois-Reymond concluded that *all* behavior was automatic, even what we think is conscious behavior.



One of his students, who in 1867 had come all the way across the Atlantic to take a course with him, was **William James**. William James could not find any fault in du Bois-Reymond's logic, except that it left him depressed. Later, in his famous *Principles of Psychology*, he wrote that we are not automata, and that such reductionism is “an unwarrantable impertinence in the present state of psychology” (1890:129). William James experimented in his lab at Harvard with automatic behavior, including automatic writing, where you distract someone with a task and tell that subject to let their hand scribble away.



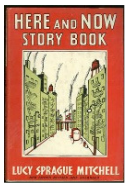
William James had two students who were both deeply impressed with his experiments with automatic behavior and made its findings central to their careers. It is unclear whether they knew each other during their student time at Harvard. One was **Lucy Sprague Mitchell**, who founded the Bureau of Educational Experiments in New York City in 1916. The other one was Gertrude Stein, who was not only a subject in automatic writing experiments, but actually conducted such experiments herself at Harvard and published the results in the Harvard *Psychological Review* (Solomon & Stein 1896, Stein 1998).

And this is where we pick up the threads to how Gertrude Stein came to write children's books.



It begins with **Lucy Sprague Mitchell**. In her Bureau of Educational Experiments, she brought together experts from medicine, psychology, and education to study child development first-hand; they had their own nursery, which was their lab. Mitchell herself was the lab's applied linguist. They kept detailed records on each

child: growth, weight, motoric development, problem solving ability, language acquisition. And they outlined a model of child development that was deeply indebted to William James, because it was based on children's automatic behavior. One automatic thing that children do is to observe their environment keenly, and to extract information from multiple channels simultaneously. The other automatic thing they do is to learn with their whole bodies. They act out what they think, and they learn by *doing*. To cater to those automatic abilities, there were frequent field trips, there were hands-on learning materials, and the kids acted out with role play what they had seen on the field trips. After a trip to a dairy farm, for instance, the kids reenacted how a cow was milked. Mitchell volunteered to be the cow.



Those experiments and detailed observations led to the first *Here and Now Story Book*, published in 1921. Mitchell's lab had researched how children narrate and documented how they reacted to stories at each developmental level from 2 years to 7 years, and she published those age-optimized stories in that book. The stories were about the here and now because they were all about interacting with the environment. They rehearsed sensorimotor scripts like getting one's hair brushed, putting things into a bucket, observing what animals and machines do. That is why the language of those stories is deliberately repetitive, because motoric sequences need to be rehearsed, physically or mentally.

Those premises of how a child uses automatic sensorimotor behavior for discovery gave the language of *The Here and Now Storybook* a very distinctive linguistic profile, especially for the younger children. Mitchell used high-frequency everyday words, mostly describing things from the child's environment, what they do, and what the child can do with them. Thus, the language is very heavy on nouns and verbs, the sentences are short and simple. The stories have an unusually low type-token ratio, so for every 100 words, you would find about 25 different ones, which reflects a tightly constrained vocabulary and enormous repetitiveness.



One of the young assistants at 69 Bank Street who later became a children's book author herself was **Margaret Wise Brown**. So now you know why *Goodnight Moon!* is so repetitive. Her responsibility at the lab was to document children's developing narrative competence and performance. It also happens that one of the kids in the nursery had very affluent parents (well, actually most of them did). His father was William R. Scott, a publisher. Bill Scott, his wife Ethel McCullough Scott, and his in-law John C. McCullough became the in-house publisher for Bank Street, and Margaret Wise Brown became their first children's book editor. Brown was in love with Gertrude Stein's work – and probably with her bohemian life style as well. Stein had quite some popularity in the US even though she lived in France. Brown had read works like *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, which was really Gertrude Stein's autobiography. She even went to Brooklyn in 1934 to hear one of Stein's touring lectures; it may well have been the one on narrative, given Brown's work at Bank Street. She suggested to Scott that they should solicit manuscripts for children's books from famous authors like Ernest Hemingway, but they were all contractually bound to their publishers. One wasn't:

Gertrude Stein. Stein had not published anything in years; she had even sold one of her Picasso's from her collection in Paris to finance the self-publication of some of her works. So Stein responded when Scott Publishing sent her that solicitation. This is how *The World is Round* came about in 1939.



If you have not seen the book, it is striking. It is printed in blue ink on rose-colored paper, with dreamy, one might say erotic illustrations by Clement Hurd. It's essentially a dream quest by a young girl called Rose, who drags her blue chair in a walkabout to the top of a mountain to contemplate who she is. And yes, she does



carve **Rose is a Rose is a Rose is a Rose** around a tree trunk. By that time, that had become sort of a trademark for Gertrude Stein, and she had that famous sentence embossed on the top of her stationery.

What not many people know: Stein had already published a shorter piece in the same year, 1939, entitled "The Autobiography of Rose" in an avant-garde journal, *The Partisan Review*. The piece was dated 1936. She had been working on a longer version before the offer came from Scott Publishers.

So Gertrude Stein let Bill Scott know that she would love to write a children's book; in fact, she had almost finished one already. When the manuscript arrived, Bill Scott was put off, but Margaret Wise Brown pushed him into accepting it, supported by Bill's wife Ethel. Why?



Gertrude Stein, remember, had also studied with William James before, on his recommendation, she went on to **med school**. (Here we see her looking into a microscope; the picture was made at Boston Medical School around 1892). She had participated in automatic writing experiments, and she had conducted her own at Harvard and published the results. She continued to write in the style of automatic writing when she became an author. That played well with the surrealists who came to her house in Paris for conversation, tea, and maybe some other substances. And this is the important part: Her automatic-style of writing resulted in simple words, simple and incomplete sentences, and her trademark repetitiveness. That's the same linguistic profile as the *here and now* stories of 1921. Like Mitchell's writing, Stein is heavy on nouns and verbs, especially nouns. In her lecture on narrative, the one that Margaret Wise Brown may have attended, **she said**:

Think of all that early poetry, think of Homer, think of Chaucer, think of the Bible and you will see what I mean you will really realize that they were drunk with nouns, to name to know how to name earth sea and sky and all that was in them was enough to make them live and love in names, and that is what poetry is it is a state of knowing and feeling a name. (1935:233)

I am working on a book on Bank Street in which I provide the exact linguistic profiles of samples from Mitchell and Stein, and they are strikingly similar. But for all that similarity, there is one profound difference that Bill Scott might have picked up on when he originally hesitated on

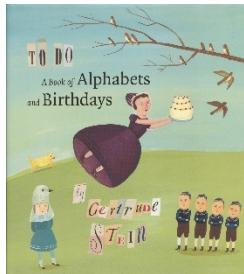
Stein's manuscript for *The World is Round*. Margaret Wise Brown was too much in love with Stein to think it through clearly. The difference lies in cooperation.

Children's books are cooperative. Mitchell wanted her language to trigger sensorimotor reflexes of discovery in the child. Stein also wanted to set off automatic processes in her reader or listener. She wanted the audience to immerse themselves in the automatic esthetic of language, without the impositions of rational thought, of literary taste, or of anticipatory suspense. Just the language. When Stein was asked how a child could understand *The World is Round* when even adults couldn't, she responded: 'If you have any trouble, read faster and faster until you don't' (quoted by Timothy Young's 'Introduction' to Stein's *To Do* 2011:8).



Stein's writing was by design uncooperative. In the same year she was working on *The World is Round*, the *Partisan Review* published a series of responses to the magazine's questions about how to write literature in modern times. One of the questions was about how a modern author writes for an audience. Her **response** was: "An audience is pleasant if you have it, it is flattering and flattering is agreeable always, but if you have an audience the being an audience is their business, they are the audience you are the writer, let each attend to their own business."

That was totally anathema to the mission of Bank Street. Mitchell was a pioneer – *the* pioneer – in scientific audience design for children's literature. She used scientific methods to tailor and optimize the language to her audience, the children. Gertrude Stein had not been writing a children's book, in spite of what she told Bill Scott. The linguistic profile of *The World is Round* is in fact identical to some of Stein's earlier work, including the "Autobiography of Rose" in the avant-garde *Partisan Review*.



Stein's book did not make a profit for Scott Publishing, but Stein now felt encouraged to really try to write a children's book, which was entitled ***To Do: A Book of Alphabets and Birthdays***. It is so far removed from a child's imagination and sensibility and, in parts, so relentlessly brutal that it did not find a publisher in Stein's lifetime. Bill Scott certainly put his foot down when the manuscript arrived. Yale University Press published it as a historical curiosity in 2011.



The World is Round was and is marketed as a children's book. It was solicited by a children's book editor, Margaret Wise Brown, who surely saw the similarities in the linguistic profiles of here and now stories and **Gertrude**



Stein's writing. Thus, it looked like Stein would be a shoo-in for a children's book, and Stein herself misled Scott Publishing into believing that she was already at work on one. But the purpose of Stein's writing is not the same as a children's book author's purpose is. Where Mitchell was striving to optimize language and story design for developing children, Stein is expressly non-cooperative and does not even pretend to be interested in how her audience reacts to her writing. That's their business.

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