Our Neighbor the Moon

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The Moon as a Theme in Picture Books

We on the earth enjoy a very close, personal relationship with our moon. It is so close it seems almost attainable. On nights when the moon is full and glowing, we feel as if we can almost reach out and touch it. The moon can also seem very strange and mysterious. A full and bright moon has within two weeks time waned to nothing. Then it returns, changing nightly until it is bright and full again. The image of the jolly man on the moon is a familiar one. And we all know that the moon is made of green cheese.

The mystery of the moon brings the thrill of exploration. The dream of traveling to the moon has become reality in our day. We have been there, we know what it is like, we know what it is made of. We have high-powered telescopes on earth and in space that can give us accurate information about the moon. Although we have firsthand knowledge of what the moon is really like, children's imaginations are still fed by the mystery it hides. Their dreams of exploration still extend to our glowing neighbor.

The moon and its mysteries have been a part of children’s literature since the beginning of the genre until today. The wonder of the moon in the sky, the mystery of the moon’s phases, and the desire to journey to the moon are popular themes in children’s picture books. This article will examine just a few stories that bring the moon closer to the child. Keep in mind these are picture books; and text cannot be fully appreciated without the captivating artwork that draws readers in and makes them part of the story.

The Wonder of the Moon

I see the moon,
And the moon sees me;
God bless the moon,
And God bless me.
(Opie, 1996, p. 82)

An early picture book, Goodnight Moon by Margaret Wise Brown, is still loved and memorized today. Young children can relate to its simplicity. It is the story of a young rabbit’s bedtime routine, which includes saying goodnight to all his familiar surroundings. “Goodnight room, goodnight moon... goodnight light and the red balloon” (Brown, 1947).

To children, the moon can seem to be one of the family, especially during the summer months when nights are warm and the grass is green and soft. In The Moon Jumpers by Janice May Udry, a group of siblings go outside to play on a warm summer evening. As the moon gets brighter in the sky, the children try to jump as high as they can to reach the moon. But no one has ever touched the moon. As they run around the house the “balloon of a moon grows and grows.” Then it’s time to go in, and they say good night to the moon. “The moon sails on up the sky. And we fall asleep and dream of tomorrow’s sun” (Udry, 1959).

In Night Goes By, Kate Spohn tells a delightfully simple tale of what might happen after the sun goes down. The sun is sleepy and is ready for a nap; he goes to sleep as moon is waking up. Moon is refreshed and ready to dance all night with his favorite star. Later, moon and star are tired and ready for a rest. Sun is rested and is ready to take over the sky (Spohn, 1995).
Full Moon Birthday by Jeff Sheppard tells of a group of faithful animal friends who want to give owl the moon for his birthday, because “Owl likes the moon most of all.” They make many attempts to reach the moon, including climbing on each others’ shoulders to make a tall tower. Unable to reach the moon, they discover another way to give owl the moon for his birthday.

Dinosaur puts red paper on the window. Monkey ties a big red ribbon into a big red bow and puts it on the window. “Come on over, dinosaurs.” “Come on over, monkeys.” “Come on over, Owl.” “Come and get your birthday present.” Owl is delighted to see all his friends. Owl unties the big red bow. Owl tears off the red paper. The bright full moon is perfectly framed by the window. Happy Birthday, Owl. (Sheppard, 1995)

The Mystery of the Moon

The man in the moon came down to soon,  
And asked his way to Norwich;  
He went by the south and burnt his mouth  
With supping cold plum porridge  
(Opie, 1996, p. 90)

One night Bear looked up into the sky and for the first time he really saw the moon. It was love at first sight. Night after night he came out onto his front step just to admire it. But even with glasses he had to admit the moon was growing smaller. Bear was afraid that the moon would grow smaller and smaller, disappear, and never come back. (Asch, 1978)

Moon Bear by Frank Asch tells of a sweet, endearing bear’s attempts to help the moon. Moon Bear fears that the moon must be getting smaller because it is not getting enough to eat. Each night he puts out honey for the moon. It seems to work, because the moon gets bigger. But a little bird informs Bear that birds have been eating his honey. The moon gets bigger and smaller all by itself. “Bear never stopped loving the moon, but he felt sad because it no longer needed him. ‘Don’t feel sad,’ said the little bird. ‘We still need you’ ” (Asch, 1978).

A small duck loves to paint pictures in Laura Jane Coats’ Marcella and the Moon. One night she decides to paint a picture of the big round moon. The other ducks want Marcella to come play and splash with them. She, however, continues to paint night after night. The ducks ask Marcella, “Aren’t you tired of painting the moon?” But Marcella wasn’t tired of painting the moon, because it was constantly changing. Each night it came up a little later, and each night it looked a little thinner.” When the moon completely disappears the ducks go to Marcella and ask her where it went. She assures them that it will return after the next sunset. It does indeed return. “At first the moon was quite thin, but each night it filled out a little more. At last is was as big and round as on the night Marcella had first painted it” (Coats, 1986).

Journey to the Moon

Hey diddle, diddle, the cat and the fiddle,  
The cow jumped over the moon;  
The little dog laughed to see such fun,  
And the dish ran away with the spoon.  
(Opie, 1996, p. 34)

A Trip To The Moon, published in the 1890s by the Faultless Starch Company, tells the story of a boy named Robbie who was taken by elves to the moon on a moonbeam. Jules Vern also wrote of a trip to the moon in From Earth to the Moon, published in the 1800s. Vern explored the real possibility of space travel rather than the fantasy element (Children’s Space Books database).

In the 1950s, Else Holmelund Minarik wrote a series of tales of a little bear, his family, and his friends. In one of the tales, Little Bear decides to take a trip to the moon. Little Bear makes a new space helmet and tells his mother of his plans.
I am going to the moon,” said Little Bear to Mother Bear. “How?” asked Mother Bear. “I’m going to fly to the moon,” said Little Bear. “Fly!” said Mother Bear. “You can’t fly.” “Birds fly,” said Little Bear. “Oh, yes,” said Mother Bear. “Birds fly, but they don’t fly to the moon. And you are not a bird.” “Maybe some birds fly to the moon, I don’t know. And maybe I can fly like a bird,” said Little Bear. “And maybe,” said Mother Bear, “you are a little fat bear cub with no wings and no feathers. Maybe if you jump up you will come down very fast with a big plop.” “Maybe,” said Little Bear. “But I’m going now. Just look for me up in the sky.” (Minarik, 1957)

Chris Babcock tells the story of a cow who refuses to give milk until she has had a chance to walk on the moon. After all, her great-great-grandmother jumped over it, so she should at least be able to walk on it. No Moon, No Milk! follows Rob and his cow Martha on a delightful adventure. Martha is tired of being just a cow. She wants to walk on the moon. Rob tries taking her many other places, but she is just not satisfied. They finally end up in New York at the museum of natural history, where Martha can walk on a replica of the lunar surface. When they are back home in the pasture, Rob asks Martha about her experience.

“So how was it to cow around on the moon, Martha?” Rob asked as he squirted milk into his bucket the very next morning. “Oh, it was okay,” Martha said. “Okay!” Rob exclaimed. “Just okay?” “Yeah. Now I know why my great-great-grandmother didn’t stop to cow around up there.” “Why?” asked Rob. “There’s no grass,” Martha said. (Babcock, 1993)

Martha Alexander’s You’re a Genius, Blackboard Bear couples the sense of adventure with the desire to be safe in familiar surroundings. Anthony’s friend Blackboard Bear helps him build a spaceship to travel to the moon. They pack the spaceship full of all the necessities for the trip. Anthony begins to think of all the unknowns, including the possibility of monsters on the moon. Blackboard Bear takes the trip alone and brings back a special surprise for Anthony (Alexander, 1995).

The Future
Jon Agee gives a scenario of future possibilities in Dmitri the Astronaut. Dmitri is depressed when he returns from an extended trip to the moon, because no one remembers him. The Museum of Intergalactic Exploration has all but deserted the moon exhibit in favor of more exciting displays, like a fragment of a ring of Saturn. Dmitri throws away his sack of moon rocks without knowing that there is more in the bag than just rocks. A moon creature is discovered. The public is fascinated. Dmitri is delighted to be reunited with his moon friend (Agee, 1996). The moral of the story is that the more we think we know about something, the more new and exciting things there are to discover.

There is always room to dream and fantasize. Literature gives us an outlet for this wonderment. Anything is possible in the pages of a book. Even as technology and understanding expand, the wonder and fascination of our neighbor the moon will always be with us.

References:


*Children’s Space Books Database.*