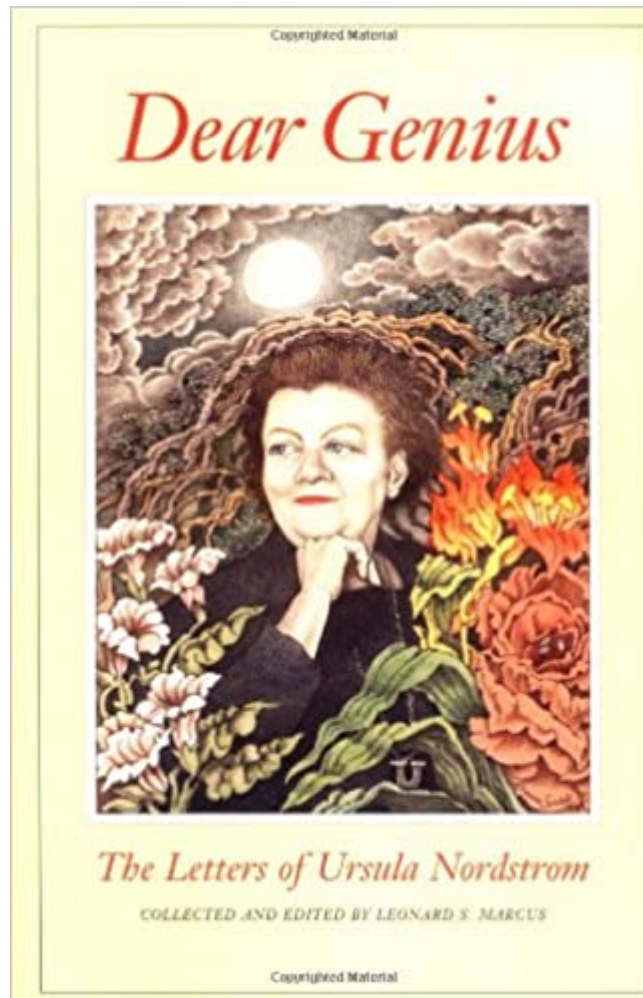




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# Dear Genius: The Letters Of Ursula Nordstrom



## Synopsis

She trusted her immense intuition and generous heart--and published the most. Ursula Nordstrom, director of Harper's Department of Books for Boys and Girls from 1940 to 1973, was arguably the single most creative force for innovation in children's book publishing in the United States during the twentieth century. Considered an editor of maverick temperament and taste, her unorthodox vision helped create such classics as *Goodnight Moon*, *Charlotte's Web*, *Where the Wild Things Are*, *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, and *The Giving Tree*. Leonard S. Marcus has culled an exceptional collection of letters from the HarperCollins archives. The letters included here are representative of the brilliant correspondence that was instrumental in the creation of some of the most beloved books in the world today. Full of wit and humor, they are immensely entertaining, thought-provoking, and moving in their revelation of the devotion and high-voltage intellect of an incomparably gifted editor, mentor, and publishing visionary.

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## Customer Reviews

Ursula Nordstrom, editorial director of Harper's Department of Books for Boys and Girls from 1940 to 1973 and a formidable creative force in 20th-century children's book publishing, was responsible for polishing and shepherding countless dog-eared classics from *Where the Wild Things Are* to *Charlotte's Web* to *Harriet the Spy*. One of the most remarkable things about this extraordinary woman was her prolific correspondence with her cherished team of children's book authors and illustrators, all of whom she liked to call "Genius." Fortunately, many of her letters--warm, witty, temperamental, flattering, extravagant, self-deprecating, sympathetic, and always human--have been culled from HarperCollins's archives, gathered from many generous individuals, and arranged in chronological order by the noted biographer and critic Leonard S. Marcus. The result is *Dear Genius: The Letters of Ursula Nordstrom*, complete with black-and-white photographs, extensive footnotes, a bibliography, and an index. In this fascinating behind-the-scenes look at children's book publishing, letters to Shel Silverstein, Maurice Sendak, Laura Ingalls Wilder, John Steptoe, and Kay Thompson reveal a woman on an unorthodox quest to wrench children's literature from the stultifying clutches of sentimental illusion and false piety. Her dedication to creative, honest, original, non-condescending books for children changed the landscape of children's literature forever. As Marcus writes in his introduction, "...her letters have much to tell about the arts of writing, illustrating, and editing; the social history of the twentieth century; and the pivotal role that books, and a love of books, can play in children's lives. To read the letters is to receive a many-faceted education from a teacher of rare insight, good humor, and lively humanity. I am glad that readers will now be able to share in the experience." --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Although her name may not mean much to the general populace, few adults have influenced the lives of children as deeply as has Ursula Nordstrom. As the editor of *Where the Wild Things Are*, *Charlotte's Web* and *Goodnight Moon*, she instilled in generations of readers a love of books and imagination. Here Marcus (*Awakened by the Moon*) takes readers behind the scenes to view the inner workings of the creative process. Like A. Scott Berg's biography *Maxwell Perkins: Editor of Genius*, this meticulously researched collection offers the lay reader a rare view of the writers and artists who have largely defined American children's literature, and the woman who helped shape it.

Although he has the deepest respect for his subject, Marcus is not awestruck and includes letters that show her more human side (e.g., in a letter to writer Janice May Udry, she says "I may have tried to have you understand that I am surrounded by moon-flowers. That is balderdash, dear... I am a real mess.") For the modern minions of corporate publishing, Marcus also offers evidence that Nordstrom, the first woman vice-president to head a Harper publishing division, also struggled to keep her books above the bottom line (e.g., from a letter to Robert Lipsyte, "I am going to stop going to a lot of budget meetings, sessions about inventory revaluation?and this summer will become an editor again"). An epistolary history of some of the highlights of children's literature, this extraordinary volume speaks to anyone who loves words, books or children. Photographs not seen by PW. Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I stumbled upon the existence of this book at an exhibition of illustrations of Maurice Sendak. Ursula Nordstrom was his editor and she is credited with transforming children's literature, mentoring authors such as Sendak, Shel Silverstein, Margaret Wise Brown, etc. She wrote letters as a mainstay of her relationships with budding authors and this collection brings it all to life. When I'm finished with it, the book will be shared with others who love children's literature.

Fascinating behind-the-scenes peak into the foundational cornerstone of the world of kid lit. Inspiring if you're writing for children & YA. You can even riffle through the book and glean comments and splice them together for your own "you can do it!" letter from Ursula Nordstrom.

To know of Ursula Nordstrom is to long for an editor worth writing. Nordstrom, the director of Harper's Department of Books for Boys and Girls from 1940-1973, is responsible for the careers and celebrity of many writers and artists during her tenure. From Maurice Sendak, who she "discovered" in an FAO Schwartz window, to E.B. White, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Shell Silverstein, and more, there are her collected letters in *Dear Genius*. Thanks to Leonard S. Marcus, the title is apt, as review of a few of the telegrams, dictations, and hasty directions show. Nordstrom's words and sentiments are the stuff of balm and gust. From a letter to E.B. White, October 23rd, 1952: Dear Andy: Thanks for your letter...I am absolutely sure that most children will love the book, even more than *Stuart Little*. The children I know love it, including one tough nine-year-old boy who states it is his favorite book. Please don't worry at all about the children. Rumors have reached me that Miss Anne Carroll Moore has certain reservations about *Charlotte's Web*. As her reservations about

Stuart Little preceded a wonderful success for that book I am taking all this as good news for Charlotte's Web. (I would not mention this but someone may quote Miss Moore to you.) Well, Eudora Welty said the book was perfect for anyone over eight or under eighty, and that leaves Miss Moore out as she is a girl of eighty-two. I will stop writing you so many letters soon. Yours, Nordstrom was not only quelling the criticism of Miss Carroll Moore, then, a powerful voice from the American Librarians Association, but also dropping a bit of a plum from Welty's positive review in the New York Times of Charlotte's Web from four days earlier. E.B. White, we know living somewhat isolated at this time, may or may not have seen Welty's review so quickly. I've read the entirety of Dear Genius, and while Nordstrom was obviously being paid to cajole and communicate, her artful compliments leave me shame-faced. I suspect I write quadruply longer emails and find not half so much opportunity to hone my skills at complimenting others. Expanded review of the written letter as book format: [...]

In "Dear Genius: The Letters of Ursula Nordstrom," biographer Leonard S. Marcus allows his subject to speak for herself. By doing so Marcus mirrors the woman he profiles and the symmetry between biographer and subject sets the dynamic tone for this book. Nordstrom's editorial prowess is evident in the correspondence she carried on with her authors during a publishing career that spanned over 30 years. She provided gentle and insightful guidance to Margaret Wise Brown, Syd Hoff, Maurice Sendak, and E.B. White among many others. Nordstrom's genius was that she recognized and fostered it in others. Her letters reveal her to be an editor who respected but didn't pander to her sometimes temperamental talent. She knew when to cajole, inspire or reprimand them; she was awed by their gifts without being infatuated by them. Nordstrom forged a bond of artistic integrity with her authors and illustrators that gave rise to some of the best voices to be found in children's literature between 1940-1973. This is an insider's look at someone's life work and abiding passion - classic literature for children.

Ursula Nordstrom may not be a household name, but the pantheon of children's books she had a hand in publishing surely contains some of the greatest literature for young people ever written. In her charming, funny, and insightful letters, we see a great mind at work, a skilled editor, confidant, and cultivator of talent, and a true risk-taker and innovator through a time of great change in the world of children's books. Some of the best letters are the ones she writes to children themselves who have questions or concerns about the books of her authors. She never ceases to see the value of their opinions, the wisdom in their reading of the work, and the beauty in their imaginations. In

addition to the letters themselves is Leonard Marcus' wonderful introductory essay and accompanying notes. He has been careful to provide context everywhere it's needed, and it makes reading the letters that much more enjoyable. This book is a wonderful gift to anyone who writes or reads books for children. But it is also more - it is a how-to book of sorts of how to work with people to get their best out of them. If Ursula Nordstrom teaches us nothing it's that you must show love for the work and the creator, a shared sense of purpose, and an unending respect for the artist's process. Treat yourself or your friends to Dear Genius!

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