

Remember Dick and Jane?

by Reed K. Bilz

For four decades, most Americans and many Canadians learned to read with Dick and Jane. I am spotlighting the first pre-primer of the Dick and Jane books because that is the book that people remember as their “first book.”

The first book to feature the title children and the Scott Foresman method of teaching was entitled “Elson Basic Readers” published in 1930. Dick and Jane had a sister named Baby, a terrier dog named Spot, a cat named Little Mew, Mother and Father. Different versions of the readers were prepared for parochial schools under the guidance of the Catholic church. The content was identical to the Elson reader.

This first pre-primer was reprinted in 1936 with the same contents, but a new title, “Dick and Jane.” In 1934, a second pre-primer entitled “More Dick and Jane Stories” was added to the series.

Three pre-primers were published in 1940, the first of which, “We look and See” is probably the most familiar book in the curriculum series. Little Mew is now Puff and Spot is a cocker spaniel, reflecting the popular breed of the day, and Tim, Sally’s teddy bear is added. There are 17 words introduced in this edition. Only the third pre-primer, “We Come and Go” had a Cathedral edition published in 1941 “with Ecclesiastical Approval.” The content of some of the stories is modified to include religious messages and surroundings.

The Scott-Foresman series was published in Canada by W.J. Gage & Co., Limited. The content is identical to the American version of 1940 with the exception of one new word, “may” substituted for “can” incorrectly used in the American version.

The primer was updated for a 1946-47 Edition. Tim was removed and a toy duck was added to the cover in a different picture. Texas had its own edition of the 1946-47 edition, paired with the second pre-primer “We Work and Play.” The “property of Texas” stamp is printed on the inside front cover with a contract date running from 9/46 to 8/48.

A “Collection Cathedral” edition was published in the late 40s for French-

Canadian Catholic children.[6] The title translates to “Viens Voir” and the characters are Paul, Jeanne, BeBe Lise, Fido, Pompon, mama and papa. Content is similar to the American Cathedral Edition, although the word count is 28.

A complete revision of the basic readers was published in 1951 with “The New” added to each title. Baby has become Sally, and the stories vary from the earlier version using the same vocabulary. The original illustrators have updated the pictures which makes the characters appear the same, but with more modern clothing and cars. The illustrator, Eleanor Campbell, used Sears catalogues to replicate current styles.

In 1952 a Cathedral edition changed the names of the characters to John, Jean and Judy, which are saints’ names. The religious content is limited to a few “statues” in the pictures.

As in the 40s, the 1951 version is updated for a 1956 Edition. Over 85% of American first graders are using this book by this date. A version of the 1951 edition was published in Great Britain in 1956 as part of the “Happy Trio” Reading Scheme. The title drops “The New,” the type font is sans serif, and pictures of cars were reversed to show the driver on the right side.

A print shop in Gordonville, Pennsylvania published an edition of the 1956 version for the Amish Parochial Schools. The printer apparently used plates from Scott-Foresman because there is no change in content, such as elimination of cars. The pictures are poorly printed. These “reproduced” versions of the Dick and Jane books are now flooding the collectible market and apparently were never used by the Amish schools.

The 1960s brought still another version of the first pre-primer; new title, “Sally, Dick and Jane”; new illustrators (the characters are more cartoonish, especially Spot); 18 words. Mother and Father are in fewer stories, and when they are, they appear in less-stereotyped roles. In 1963, Gage published the new version for Canadian first graders. The Catholic version, “Judy, John and Jean” has one story with religious pictures.

By 1965 the effects of Rudolf Flesch’s book, “Why Johnny Can’t Read,” and the contemporary irrelevance of Dick and Jane to inner city classrooms was felt by Scott-Foresman. In an effort to keep its monopoly on reading texts,

the publisher added a black family to the updated edition.

The 1965 pre-primer is called "Now We Read", and features, in the back of the book, Mike, twins Pam and Penny and their parents. This updated version of the primer was published by the Pacific Press Publishing Association as "Friends We Know" for the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists for use in their church schools. The stories contain religious references, and Jesus appears on the cover with Dick, Jane and Mike in the primer "Fun with Dick and Jane."

An experimental language called i.t.a. was introduced in the mid 60s, and the Scott-Foresman pre-primer was published in this language as "nou wee reed." These books are very scarce perhaps reflecting the popularity of this phonic experiment which never caught on in this country.

Still struggling with relevancy, Scott Foresman put out one final edition of "Now We Read" in response to complaints from Southern families who objected to having black children in their children's text books. The 1966 version has a politically neutral kite on the cover and Mike has been removed from the title page at the front. The black children are still in the book, but not as visible to the world.

One final "special" edition of the 1962 first pre-primer was published for sight-impaired children in 1975. American Printing House for the Blind printed a Large Type Edition with black and white pictures; presumably saving money on color that could not be readily seen.

Interest in Dick and Jane books increased in 1995 when HarperCollins published "Growing up with Dick and Jane" a retrospective of the familiar readers. An included replica booklet has a cover and 7 pages from "We Look and See" and a punch-out "doll" of Dick and Jane. After publication of the retrospective, greeting cards, calendars and dolls came on the market to capitalize on the nostalgia. I have a pair of Madame Alexander dolls and a "Barbie & Ken" version of Dick and Jane.

Apparently Grosset & Dunlap acquired a copyright from Scott Foresman this past year, because they are publishing sets of "first readers" and Dick and Jane activity books. The books are a cobbled version of the 1956 pre-primers, poorly reproduced.

Peripheral items were provided for the teacher of the Basic Curriculum Series such as guidebooks, teacher editions of the readers, workbooks called "Think & Do" books, large display books, picture and word flash cards, books on teaching techniques, and picture cut-outs. In addition, the publisher sent calendars, greeting cards, newsletters and even Christmas ornaments to the classrooms as promotional tools. The peripherals will make a future presentation on Dick and Jane.