

y Robert C. Lewis

About a year ago, I did a feature that dealt with multimedia storybooks. As I wrote, these types of programs turned out to be a great way to introduce your child to your computer and enhance that innate desire to read. If your child is like my son Alex, then you know that one of their favorite times is when you sit down and read a story to them. Multimedia books allow you to expand on that quality time and bring the rich world of children's stories to a whole new level.

When I wrote the original article, the variety of quality multimedia storybooks was dominated by the Living Books series. These books were the first ones to realize the potential of the CD-ROM revolution. Although catalogs were showing other types of multimedia stories available, most of these were very limited in their features. Remember, for any software to be considered multimedia, all they have to do is combine two or more of the following features: sounds, music, graphics, and animation. You could have a storybook that has drawn screens and someone reading the story aloud and it would be considered a multimedia storybook. It just would not be a very good one.

[All We want is... Information](#)

What should the well informed parent do? First of all, do not judge the storybook by a catalog's description. Sadly, some catalogs can be deceiving and limited in how they describe a given product. But they are good at letting you know what is out there. Once you have a good idea as to what you are interested in, take a trip to the local computer store (i.e.- Comp USA, Computer City, Micro Center, etc.) and first look at the box. Look at the requirements needed for the program to run smoothly. Although most education software will usually run on an LC II and up, some of the newer products may need Macs with an 040 CPU or PPC for best performance. When it comes to computers, the times are constantly changing and so are the demands for the programs

[Hey Look Me Over](#)

If the computer store has a try me before you buy me setup, then give the program a test drive and see if it satisfies the following criteria. The very first thing you should look for is if the program is too far over your child's head to use it or if your child has grown past the educational objectives it sets out to achieve. Although most companies give an age range on the box, this may not always apply to all kids and having a chance to test drive the package

will definitely help you tune in to whether it is right for your child.

The next the thing you need to examine is ease of use. Since most storybooks are geared to the 3- (maybe 2) to 7-year-old range, it is important that the story has a very user friendly interface when in the interactive mode. This also applies to the adult member since you can plan on (hopefully) spending some quality time with your young one(s) teaching them how to run it. My son Alexander is 4 years old and loves to read and watch the Living Books series with me. In the last few months I began to show him how to play within the different stories until he got to the point that he asked me to let him try to do it on his own. Now, all I have to do is cue up the story for him, set it to the play mode and he is ready to go. It also serves as his first lesson on how to use the point and click action of the mouse.

Other factors you should pay close attention to are the graphics, sounds and animation. As I have said before in other articles, these particular points can either make or break a program. Make sure the graphics have some depth to them and the sounds are fully digitized and have an inviting quality to help enhance the story. Then, take a hard look at the way the story is animated. Does the animation take the story to a new level or is it more like looking at short video bytes that does absolutely nothing to bringing the story to life? Believe me, there are programs like this waiting in the shadows.

[Cut to the Chase](#)

With the holidays nearly upon us, you may be wondering (and hoping) if there is an easier way to cut to the chase and locate the ideal multimedia storybook for you child. Well, unlike like a year ago, there are a wide variety of storybooks available with their own unique styles and educational features. For the remainder of this article I shall try to empower you with what I think are some of the better products on the market.

Living Books

Publisher: Brøderbund/Random House

500 Redwood Blvd.

Novato, CA 94948

Street Price: \$39.95

Mac Requirements: LC or higher, 256 Color Monitor or better, CD Reader, System 7.x, 4 Mb of RAM

Protection: None

PPC Native- No

[Cutting Edge](#)

When it comes to multimedia storybooks, the world of Living Books set the standard that most other story programs are measured against. It showed (and still does) how sight and sound could be gracefully combined to produce a tale for the young that truly lives up to the name Living Books. Basically, Living Books has three modes of operation: language, reading the story and interacting (or playing) within the story.

In 1992 Living Books released their first title, called *Grandma and Me* by Mercer Mayer.

Unlike later Living Book releases, *Grandma and Me* does the story in English, Spanish, and Japanese. Although other stories also offer a multi-language approach, the thing that makes this feature unique is how the text changes to match the language chosen. This automatically makes these books an excellent candidate for elementary ESL classes.

Regrettably, the number of languages offered on future stories was reduced to two with the elimination of Japanese.

Since that initial release of *Grandma and Me*, the library of Living Books has swelled to 10 titles. For reviews of some of their earlier titles, please refer to the Jan/Feb '95 issue of IMG.

For the purpose of this article, we shall look at their two latest releases called “The Bernstein Bears Get In a Fight” and “Dr. Suess’s ABC.”

Bernstain Bears Get In a Fight
5 Joysticks

[Lions Tigers and BEARS, Oh My!](#)

Over 100 Bernstein Bears books have been written by Stan and Jan Bernstein and now this lovable bear family comes to Living Books. Of all the Living Books I have seen, Bernstein Bears Get In a Fight is one of the finest. Not only does it tell a very entertaining story, but it also teaches a valuable lesson about how to settle disputes peacefully. In a world that is so filled with violence it is nice to see a story that shows children that there are non-aggressive alternatives to solving conflicts between siblings and friends.

[ew Features](#)

Unlike other Living Books, this one comes with several embellishments. First, there is the addition of a soundtrack that can be played on your home stereo of the original songs from the story. A special parent’s handbook is included to help extend the experience and imagination of your child. Six different activities are included in this booklet to help reinforce what your child learns from the story. There are also additional recommendations for follow-up reading. It is a pity that Living Books do not include such follow up booklets with their other stories.

Another unique feature is Meet the Authors. A separate QuickTime video has been included on the disk that introduces you to Stan and Jan Bernstein. It shows how they go about

putting a story together and shows children what writing is all about. Unlike other Living Books, this one allows you to go much further with your child and spend some quality time teaching that two wrongs do not equal a right.

ABC by Dr. Seuss
4 Joysticks

[The World of Seuss](#)

When ever the name Dr. Seuss is mentioned, people young and old alike know that they are in for a story that is sure to entertain. One of my son's favorite stories is 10 Apples Up on Top, while mine was Yurtle the Turtle. When the review copy of Dr. Seuss's ABC came, my son Alex got very excited and just about pleaded with me to see it. As soon as I booted up the disk, the magical world of one of the more popular Dr. Seuss stories began to come to life with our tour guides Icabod and Izzy.

[Who Goes There](#)

As with all Dr. Seuss stories you never know who (or what) you may bump into. In some ways, this is a great way to introduce your child to a unique world that was woven by a master story teller. As Icabod and Izzy guide you through the alphabet, you will be delighted by over 600 words that have been incorporated into your journey of the ABCs.

[As Easy as ABC](#)

Besides teaching kids the alphabet, some basic grammar has been integrated into the interactive mode. Clicking on a noun will show a picture of it while clicking on a verb will trigger the appropriate action. This is a unique way to introduce your child to parts of grammar. It also has a great soundtrack that can be played on any home audio system. Regretfully, there is no follow up activity book to help reinforce what the CD teaches and help add to the experience. Even with this one flaw, I still found it to be entertaining and a wonderful way to introduce children to the world of Dr. Seuss and their ABCs.

Learning Company
Reading Development Library
6493 Kaiser Drive
Fremont Ca 94555
1-800-852-2255
Mac Requirements: LC or higher, 256 Color Monitor or better, CD Reader, System 7.x, 4 Mb of RAM
Street Price- 45.95
Protection: None
PPC Native- No

The 3 Little Pig and Goldilocks & the Three Bears- 5 Joysticks
Jack and the Beanstalk & TownMouse CountryMouse- 5 Joysticks

[Point of View](#)

As I wrote in the last issue of IMG, the Learning Company is one of the more creative companies. The Reading Development series takes the concept of the Living Books to a whole new level. Besides telling children some classic tales and allowing them to read along with different characters, it also offers a variety of different options not found in other multimedia stories. First, each disk offers two different stories that can be read from three distinct points of view. Usually the choices consist of the classic version and two alternative perspectives as told by two different characters from the story. Just imagine how the Three Little Pigs would go when told from the viewpoint of one of the pigs or the wolf or how the giant would tell the tale in Jack and the Beanstalk.

Extending the Experience

Other educational related activities include matching key words from the stories to colorful pictures, developing sequencing skills by placing elements of the story in correct order, and learning how to write letters and expressing how they feel to their favorite storybook characters. The thing I love most about this feature is how every letter gets a personal response. The manual also includes a section that helps the parents in extending the experience. It includes suggestions and activities that can build on a child's imagination and natural curiosity. As I said, these stories take the concepts developed in the Living Books series to a whole new level. If you are looking for stories that go further than just telling a story and allowing kids to play within the stories, then the Reading Development Library may be right for you.

EA * Kids

Published by Electronic Arts

Story Painting Adventure

PO Box 7586

San Mateo CA 94403-7586

415-513-7292

Mac Requirements: LC or higher, 256 Color Monitor or better, CD Reader, System 7.x, 4 Mb of RAM

List Price- 49.95 or 39.95 (EA Mac 10 Pack)

Protection: None

PPC Native- No

Around the World in 80 Days

5 Joysticks

Classic Novel

If there is one thing I can say about multimedia storybooks, they sure come in a wide variety of tales. In this case, our tale has grown into the classic novel *Around the World in 80 Days* by Jules Verne. Unlike *Living Books* and *The Learning Company*, this story takes a very different slant on the concept of interactive stories. Besides promoting the storytelling process and reading comprehension, it also develops skills in critical thinking and geography as the reader visits 11 countries on their trek around the world.

Let's Help

Instead of just watching the tale unfold, children ages 5 to 8 actually interact with and help Phineas Fogg and his pet monkey Sidney solve problems as they try to beat their arch-rival Hogsbreath in their race around the world. To help you aid Phineas and Sidney out of one jam after another are the Paintbox Pals, a collection of special friends with very unique talents. Whenever you see Phineas with a puzzled look on his face, that's your cue to select one of the four Paintbox Pals to assist you in helping Phineas. These pals include Sally Sprayer, Jazz Painter, Winston Whoosh, and Nick Lead.

Non-Linear

Many a time you will find that there is more than one way to solve a given problem. At each of these crossroads, some of the Paintbox Pals will try to egg you on to use them while others will turn their back on you indicating that they cannot help you. At different point in Phineas' journey you will get the chance to choose which country he and Sidney should visit next. This skill building story has more than 30 animated screens with hundreds of interactive choices that allows the young reader to choose his or her own way through the story each time they read it.

[Hard to Find](#)

Sadly, this gem of a story somehow slipped between the cracks and is not widely known (or available) since its July 1994 release. Luckily, EA chose to include it in their Mac Top Ten Pack which this writer had the luck to review in the September 1995 issue of IMG. If you are looking for a way to introduce your kids to a classic novel then you may want to buy the ten pack. It lists at \$39.95, which is really the price of one program and you also get nine other fine EA products. Once your child has gone around the world a few times, you may want to look for EA Kids 1993's release of Peter Pan: A Story Painting Adventure.

Disney

Animated Storybook

500 S. Buena Vista Street

Burbank Ca 91521-8464

818-543-4372

800-228-0988

Street Price- 29.95 (Lion King) 39.95 (Winnie the Pooh)

Mac Requirements: Performa 550 or better, Quadra, Power PC, 256 Color Monitor or better, CD Reader, System 7.x, 4 Mb of RAM

Protection: None

PPC Native- Yes

The Lion King

3 Joysticks

[Up to Par?](#)

When I first heard that Disney was planning to adapt the Lion King to a multimedia storybook, I expected a masterpiece from the animation specialists and masters. Alas, I was somewhat disappointed by this adaptation of what is now considered a Disney classic. Where most of the other stories I looked at go beyond the text of the story, this one is very limited in scope of the story. It does an average job of telling the story but I found the animation to be limited and the sounds and special effects to be composed of sound bites.

Interaction

As with the other stories, The Lion King does have an interactive section where you can play within the pages of the story, but the number of “hot spots” are limited and not all pages are interactive. On some screen pages (three to be exact) Disney does offer what they consider to be three special games. The Pouncing Game is where you help Simba develop his pouncing skills by helping him sneak up and jump on Zazu. Connect the Star is basically connect the dots while the third game is called Bug Catching. We all know how Timon and Pumba are always hungry and how much they love a good creepy crawler sandwich. Well, it is your job to help Timon put together a delicious plate of grubs. This is done by clicking on insects as they scurry across the bottom of the screen.

Education Value?

Although these games may be fun for the very young, they have little educational value except in developing mouse movement skills. This is still an important skill since this is usually the first thing a child needs to learn if he/she is to master the Mac’s operating system. Over all I found Disney’s first release a bit disappointing and that sales of this storybook may have relied more on name than edutainment value.

Winnie the Pooh and the Honey Tree
4 Joysticks

Gets Better

It is always nice to see a company learn from its mistakes and it looks like Disney got the message with the release of their second animated storybook. Winnie the Pooh and the Honey Tree is a vast improvement over the Lion King. Although I still feel that more animation can be given to the telling of this classic Pooh story, other areas more than make up for the weaknesses I found in the Lion King. In this release, the story can be read in either English or Spanish making it a fine addition to any elementary ESL class.

Improvements

Through the use of 17 story screens, children will discover what makes Winnie the Pooh one of the more heartwarming stories in the Disney collection. In many ways it is just like reliving the original release of this story back in 1966 when I was a young one. While Lion King was sadly lacking in “hot spots” in the interactive mode, Winnie the Pooh offers hundreds of comical clickables. This makes one feel more at home with the story and increase the desire to explore and learn more about Pooh and his friends.

Education Tie-Ins

To aid in vocabulary skills, children can click on words in the narration portion of the screen and get contextual definitions like they got in the Lion King. Throughout the story are five skill building games dealing with identifying objects, colors and shapes, cleaning house and more. A brand new sing-along of five classic Pooh songs has also been added. Children are invited on a fun sing-along trek as they follow the easy read-along lyrics. In all, I found Winnie the Pooh and the Honey Tree a fine follow up to the Lion King. With all the bells and whistles Disney has added, this multimedia story can take its place with the other fine titles out. Their next storybook is going to be Pocahontas. If Winnie the Pooh is any example of

how Disney can grow and learn, then we should be in for a real treat when Pocahontas is released.

Davidson
Magic Tales
19840 Pioneer Ave
Torrance CA 90503
310-793-0601
List Price- 35.00, Lab Packs-149.95
Mac Requirements: LC 575 or better, Quadra, Power PC, 256 Color Monitor or better, CD Reader, System 7.x, 6 Mb of RAM (3 MB available memory)
Protection: None
PPC Native- Yes

[It's a Small World](#)

Our last entry in our search for fine storybooks ends with the release of a new series of titles called Magic Tales by Davidson. These tales originate from different parts of the world and teaches children about the different cultures that exist through these stories. In some ways we could call these stories a United Nations of Living Books except with some major differences. Each story is about 30 minutes of incredible cinematic-quality animation with beautifully rendered three-dimensional art. You have to see one of these stories to fully grasp the quality that went into creating and animating the graphics. To be honest, this is the kind of work I would have expected to see in the Disney storybooks.

[Keeps Attention](#)

The stories are also nicely scored with original music and songs. Each story has over 500 click and explore "hot spots" in the interactive mode. This is more "hot spots" than can be found in any other multimedia storybooks that I know of. This is sure to draw children into the magic of these stories and help build early reading skills and develop important moral lessons. The first two stories released by Davidson are called Baba Yaga and the Magic Geese and Imo and the King. Here is a short synopsis of each story.

Baba Yaga and the Magic Geese
4 Joysticks

[Baba Yaga Who?](#)

This Russian tale tells the story of how a young girl named Tasha learns the importance of being responsible and keeping promises. One day when Tasha's parents go to town, she is told to take care of her younger brother Niki. Soon after her parents leave, Tasha becomes so involved in playing with her doll that she does not see her brother kidnapped by Baba Yaga's Magic Geese. Now Tasha must search the woods to locate and defeat Baba Yaga as she rescues her brother. Children will be delighted with the humor and magic that goes on between the characters in this fun tale. The interaction that Tasha and Niki have with the magical elements of the forest (and not Gump) are sure to inspire children's imagination and make them want to return to this adventure again and again.

Imo and the King
4 Joysticks

[Heir to the Throne](#)

From Russia we now travel to Africa for an East African folk tale of a boy name Imo who had a desire to rise to royalty. It seemed that King Azizi had no heir to his throne and thus no one to rule the land when he would pass on to the great beyond. To solve this dilemma, King Azizi let it be known that he who could solve three tasks would be the next leader of the

kingdom.

[Do on to Others...](#)

Once word got to Imo, he decides to travel to the King's village to see if he could fulfill the royal challenge. On his way, Imo has three chance encounters that help to reveal his noble nature. Will Imo be able to pass the tasks the King set forth? The only way you will find out is by taking part in his journey as you read and enjoy Imo and the King. If you wish to continue your journey after reading these two tales then you may wish to travel to Japan and read *The Little Samurai*. Davidson plans to release this tale sometime in November and should be available by the time this article goes to press.

[Last Words](#)

This ends our tour of some of the finer multimedia stories. Although this list is not complete and other titles may be available by the time you read this, I hope I was able to help you in choosing a title that will educate and entertain those young ones out there. So without any further adieu, I want to wish everyone a Happy Hanukkah, Merry Christmas, and Happy New Year. Remember, it is not ignorance that is bliss, it is knowledge.