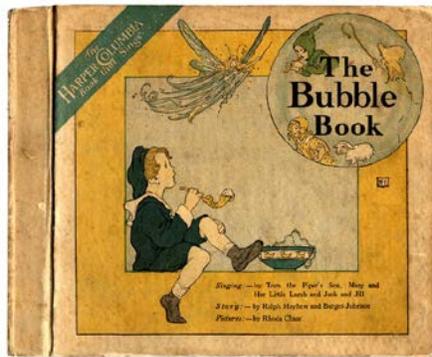


The First “Bubble Book” (1917)

Added to the National Registry: 2003

Essay by Cary O’Dell



Original cover



Original release label



An inside page/sleeve

Today, in this age of immediate digital down-loads, talking e-mail, a multi-million dollar audiobook industry and even cars that speak to their drivers, the charm of a so-called “talking book” seems rather quaint. That the “book” in question would “play” on a turntable of all things makes it seem even more antiquated.

But there was a time, especially to the ears of the toddler set, when such a phenomenon was more than charming—it was magical.

That magic came via the combined talents of authors Ralph Mayhew and Burges Johnson and the artistic pen of Rhoda Chase for their 1917 “Bubble Book.”

Billed as the “book that sings,” the “Bubble Book” was the creation of Harper Collins publishers and was the first product believed to combine the world of book publishing with the then emerging recording industry. The first “Bubble Book,” measuring a tiny 6” x 7” and was packaged just like a book: hard covered and title paged. Inside, spread across its 14 pages, was printed an original, short rhyming story and the complete texts of some very well-known nursery rhymes (“Tom the Piper’s Son,” etc.). Also enclosed were some delicate line drawings, by the aforementioned Rhoda Chase, each with a hint of an Art Nouveau influence. Three of the book’s pages doubled as record sleeves and each of these sleeves contained a miniaturized record (smaller than a 45rpm; today, the “Bubble Book” records look a bit like drink coasters). These records, when put on a player and spun at 78rpm, sang aloud the printed nursery rhymes. The voice is believed to have been Henry Burr, a then popular and prolific singer.

The “Bubble Book” series got its name from the cartoony “bubbles” that the first book’s unnamed lead, a little blue-clad boy, blows from a magical pipe he has been given. Soon after, the bubbles—like a TV precursor?—become the little boy’s entertaining window, a looking glass of sorts, a possessor of various characters who come suddenly alive to entertain him with rhymes and music.

A variety of factors came together to birth the “Bubble Books.” First was businessman Henry Waterson’s attempt to break up the three-pronged record business monopoly of Columbia, Edison and Victor that was then dominating the industry. His tract was to introduce smaller, shorter playing discs that could be sold for far less than the \$1.00 a disc (about \$20 today) that was then the industry norm. His company, suitably titled Wonder Records, brought to market discs that were not 7” to 10” inches in size like the discs of Edison, et.al., but just 5 ½”. Each of which could be sold for as little as \$.10 a piece.

Wonder’s new, smaller records were a revolution as some members of the public, once economically excluded from purchasing records, suddenly found they could obtain all sorts of

music for home playing. According to business documents from the time, between August of 1914 and June of 1916, over 20 million Wonder Records were sold. In order to keep up with the demand, Waterson eventually—surprisingly and secretly--contracted with Columbia to help handle some of the necessary manufacturing.

Ironically, such was often the plight of small recording labels. Believe it or not, a major hit could destroy them: they did not possess the manufacturing facilities to keep up with marketplace demand.

Eventually, in 1917, Columbia assumed full control of Wonder Records.

That same year, Columbia contracted with Harper Columbia publishers to produce the first integration of the written word with recorded sound. Hence, on August 17, 1917, Harper Columbia employee Ralph Mayhew patented (patent no. 1,236,333) the first “Bubble Book.”

Reporter and humorist Burges Johnson was then brought into the project, to co-author the text. Illustrator Rhoda Chase, the daughter of painter Henry S. Chase, provided the pictures.

The first “Bubble Book” contained recitations of “Tom the Piper’s Son,” “Mary and Her Little Lamb” and “Jack and Jill.” The book began:

A little boy sighed to himself one day:
“There isn’t anything left to play!
I’m tired of all of my old, old toys,
And I can’t go hunt for some other boys.
If ‘Cinderella’ was only true
I’d wish for a fairy godmother, too”
No sooner said, than a puff of smoke
Appear in the air—and a wee voice spoke...

The inaugural “Bubble Book” was a tremendous success thanks to their novelty, (relatively) low cost (about \$1.00 each) and a shrewd marketing campaign. Yes, the booklets with records were darling and cute but what helped sell this new “technology” was having it steeped in the oral tradition of storytelling and the fact that they trafficked in aged, familiar nursery rhymes. (The rhymes were originally chosen based simply upon their length—only about one to two minutes could be recorded on a side of a 5 ½” disc as compared to the 2-3 minutes that could be ingrained on a larger disc.)

Ads for the books also appealed to busy mothers, who could find a new, safe and productive way to keep their youngsters occupied. (One ad for “Bubble Books” promised moms “hours of peace and quiet.”) In an online essay, author Jacob Smith considered the phonograph’s new role within the home and its intrusion into parental roles:

[W]hile mothers were portrayed as the vehicle of a beloved tradition, ads imagined a future in which her role was replaced by the phonograph. Note how a 1918 ad in “Ladies’ Home Journal” presents “Tom the piper’s son,” who asked mothers, “Let me sing to your child...I’ve always wanted to tell those children of yours my story, and to sing them a song – and now at last I can do it.”

We find here the substitution of the phonograph for the mother’s voice and a tradition of oral nursery rhymes. Bubble Book ads were aimed at mothers as the “middle term” in the chain of family consumption, but implied that the phonograph could “cut out the middleman” between oral tradition and the child; the middleman being the mother, who was reminded of her parental responsibilities even as her role was threatened.

Surprisingly, in advertisements, little mention was made—to parent or child—about a possible “Bubble Book” byproduct: helping children learn to read. Since the nursery rhymes were always printed verbatim in the text, it would be easy for little fingers and eyes to follow along word for word. Later, such hybrids of sight and sound, conveyed via book and record (or

cassette or CD) would be adopted by a host of other elementary and pre-school teaching tools and it is certainly only a few degrees removed from what later educational TV series like “Sesame Street” would attempt.

After the successful debut of the initial “Bubble Book,” the “Bubble” authors and the artist would follow up with 13 sequels. The appropriately named “Second Bubble Book” emerged in 1918 and included treatments of “Simple Simon,” “Little Bo-Peep” and “Old King Cole.” It would be followed by 11 others, for a total of fourteen “Bubble Books” produced between 1917 and 1922. Later editions were given titles like “Pie Party,” “Happy-Go-Lucky,” and “Funny Froggy.”

Once each title hit the market, the “Bubble Books,” allegedly, sold over a million copies each thanks to sales made via the Montgomery Ward catalog and via highly modern-looking in-store display racks. Stores were even encouraged to hold “Bubble Book” Listening Hours (a precursor to the children’s “story times” once held at chain bookstores) or “Bubble Book” parties. Continuing with this juggernaut, later, companies began to produce specially-designed and decorated record players specifically for playing “Bubble Books” records.

For many youngsters, not that many years since the turn of the century, “The Bubble Book(s)” were possibly their first introduction, if not to books, then certainly to recorded music. Obviously, considering the exponential growth of the recording industry in the years and decades to come, it was the start of a fruitful, long-lasting love affair.

If audiences are still enthralled, then so too is the industry that spawned it. This particular “bubble” has yet to burst. Book/record (CD) packages are still a successful product and marketing device. Today, lots of texts, including how-to publications (from learning the guitar to cooking to DIY home repair), come with CDs inserted amongst their pages. For children, many a bedtime story today gets told via a book with a CD of sing-a-longs or sound effects attached.

And the origin of all these mixed media can be traced back--to a little boy dressed in blue and gifted with a magic pipe and some recorded music in the form of the first “Bubble Book.”

[For more information, an excellent website devoted to “The Bubble Books” and to Little Wonder records can be found at: <http://www.littlewonderrecords.com/bubble-book-history.html>]

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