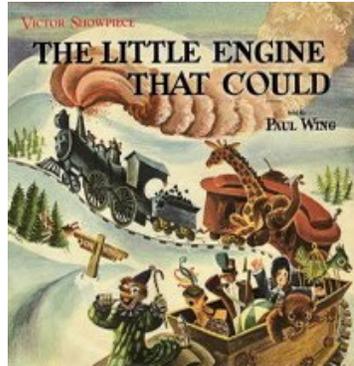


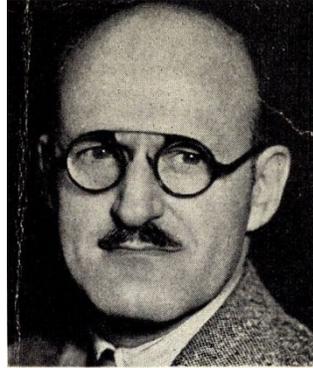
“The Little Engine That Could”--Paul Wing (1948)

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Essay by Roy E. Plotnick (guest post)*



Original release



Paul Wing

The tale of the plucky little engine that succeeds when others have not even tried has been part of American tradition for over a century. First told in recognizable form as sermon in 1906, it was widespread by 1920 under various titles, including “The Pony Engine” (1910) and “The Little Engine that Could” (1920). By far the most familiar and best-selling version was published in 1930 by Platt & Munk under the title “The Little Engine that Could.” It was “retold by Watty Piper” from the “Pony Engine” by Mabel C. Bragg. Watty Piper was a pseudonym for Arnold Munk of Platt & Munk; Mabel Bragg’s version of the story appeared in 1916. This version of the story is still in press and remains a best-selling children’s book. There have also been numerous recorded versions of the tale, dating back to 1929. A best-selling version in late 1940’s and early 1950’s was “The Little Engine that Could,” narrated by Paul Wing, and released by RCA Victor. In it, the Toyland Special runs into trouble carrying toys from the town of “Hither” to “Yon.”

Paul Wing was born in Peoria, Illinois, on March 5, 1892. His family moved several times before they settled in Chicago. Growing up, he made frequent visits to his family’s ancestral home on Cape Cod, to the extent that in later years he gave his birthplace as Sandwich, Massachusetts. After graduating high school in Chicago, he attended the University of Wisconsin, but left in 1912 to become a reporter for the “Chicago Tribune.” This was soon followed by a short career in both vaudeville and summer stock theater, marrying while on tour, and then finding work in an advertising agency in New Jersey. Wing’s career in radio began in 1929, when he wrote and produced the first of many original stories for children, including “Dorothy Wants a Dog” (1934). He would later be billed as “Paul Wing: The Story Man” and become director of children’s programs for NBC. Wing then settled in Connecticut.

Wing’s big break came circa 1937, when he became the host of “Paul Wing’s Spelling Bee,” which was eventually broadcast nationally on the NBC Blue network (the precursor to today’s

ABC). This show was notable for the set-up of the competitive teams, including boys versus girls, fathers versus mothers, opposing postmen or firemen from different towns, or students from different colleges. Winners of the game received \$25, with \$15 going to the runner-up. One of the most publicized encounters (January 30, 1938) was a co-production with the BBC and pitted Harvard and Radcliffe against Oxford (the American team won). In 1938, the show was popular enough that Milton Bradley released the "Paul Wing's Spelling Bee" board game. That same year, he published the young adult book "Take it Away, Sam!," part of the Dodd, Mead and Company series of "Career Books." This novel was a fictionalized account of his own career in radio; the book jacket described Wing as a "well-known radio personality." "Kirkus Reviews" pronounced it as "as good a vocational story for boys as I have found."

The radio version of "Paul Wing's Spelling Bee" was canceled in 1939, but on November 5 of that year until early 1940 it was broadcast on W2XBS in New York, an experimental television station run by RCA, making it one of the very earliest television quiz shows ever on the air. Wing went on to briefly host the radio show "Youth Versus Age," which again featured a competition between two supposedly antagonistic groups. This show would mark the end of his career in broadcasting.

After the Second World War, Wing surfaces again, head of the children's department of RCA Victor, the recording arm of NBC's parent company. Writing in the "New York Herald Tribune" on July 28, 1946, Jack Sher and John Keating described the following scene:

The engineer in the sound booth dropped his arm, pointed at a dignified square built man with a Monty Woolley beard. The beard parted and Paul Wing began to recite the story of "The Little Engine That Could" into the wax ear of a recording machine. Wing, who entered the field of children's entertainment by telling bedtime stories to his own moppets, is now a luminary in a postwar boom industry--the making of children's records. He not only spins yarns himself, but also hires the great names of stage and screen to put the classic stories of childhood on wax.

As pointed out by Sher and Keating, Wing and RCA Victor were tapping into the post-war demand for children's records, with sales increasing by an order of magnitude from pre-war levels; some 27 million children's records were pressed in 1946.

"The Little Engine that Could," with Paul Wing narrating, along with sound effects, was released on two 10" 78 rpm discs as part of the RCA Victor Youth Series (Y341) in 1948. The story was credited to Mabel C. Bragg, a small notice on the back cover indicates by special arrangement with Platt and Munk. Inside are a series of monochrome illustrations with some text. The total recording length was 13:44. These records were also released as 7" 45 rpm records in yellow vinyl as WY341 and in a version with a 24-page read-along story book as WY384 in October 1949. This was part of the RCA Victor Little Nipper Series; the barking of "Little Nipper" was a signal to the child to turn the page. The musical background was by Norman Leyden, Frank

Milano was the voice of Nipper, the orchestra was conducted by Henri René. These recordings were on the “Billboard” list of best-selling children’s albums from 1948 to 1954. When LP’s became standard, the story was repackaged in 1958 as one side of RCA Victor LBY-1008 (later RCA Camden Cal-1008). It was accompanied by four Winnie the Pooh stories told by the actor James Stewart.

In addition to “The Little Engine that Could,” Wing recorded many other children’s stories for RCA Victor. These included “Uncle Wiggily,” “Little Black Sambo,” “Little Black Sambo’s Jungle Band,” and “The Wedding of the Princess.” In 1948, he narrated the Max Fleischer cartoon short of “Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer.” He also wrote a children’s book, “The Unsuccessful Elf,” published in 1947, that the “New York Times” called “funny and charming.” Wing died of prostate cancer in Boothbay Harbor, Maine, in February of 1957.

(I would like to strongly thank Neal Simpson of Frenchtown, NJ, for generously sharing his files on Paul Wing; this greatly aided my research. For more on the history of the little engine story and a list of other recorded versions, see: [In Search of Watty Piper: A Brief History of the "Little Engine" Story](#))

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* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.