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ARTS AND LETTERS

FREEING THE ELEPHANTS

What Babar brought.

BY ADAM GOPNIK

A chain of elephants, trunks and tails linked, wanders, with a mixture of upbeat energy and complacent pride, along the endpapers of a children's book. So begins one of the stories that most please the imagination of the modern child and his distant relation the modern adult—Jean de Brunhoff's "The Story of Babar," published in 1931. The Babar books are among those half-dozen picture books that seem to fix not just a character but a whole way of being, even a civilization. An elephant, lost in the city, does not trumpet with rage but rides a department-store elevator up and down, until gently discouraged by the elevator boy. A Haussmann-style city rises in the middle of the barbarian jungle. Once seen, Babar the Frenchified elephant is not forgotten. With Bemelmans's "Madeline" and Sendak's "Where the Wild Things Are," the Babar books have become part of the common language of childhood, the library of the early mind. There are few parents who haven't tried them and few small children who don't like them. They also remain one of the few enterprises begun by a father and continued by his son in more or less the same style. Laurent de Brunhoff, who was twelve when his father died, at the age of just thirty-seven, picked up the elephant brush after the Second World War and has gone on producing Babar books, with the same panache, almost to this day. (Audubon's sons' continuation of their father's "Quadrupeds" is another instance, but in that case the father was alive when the sons began to carry on the work.)

Babar comes to us now in a show, at the Morgan Library & Museum, of the early drafts and watercolor drawings for the first books by both de Brunhoff *père* and de Brunhoff *fils*. Jean had produced the very first Babar book at the demand of his wife and two children, who had fallen in love with an elephant-centered bedtime story that she had been telling the children family of artists perched on the ledge—a broad one in the France of his time—between fine-arts painting and book and fashion illustration. (De Brunhoff's father had worked with the academic Impressionist James Tissot, and his brother was the editor of French *Vogue*.)

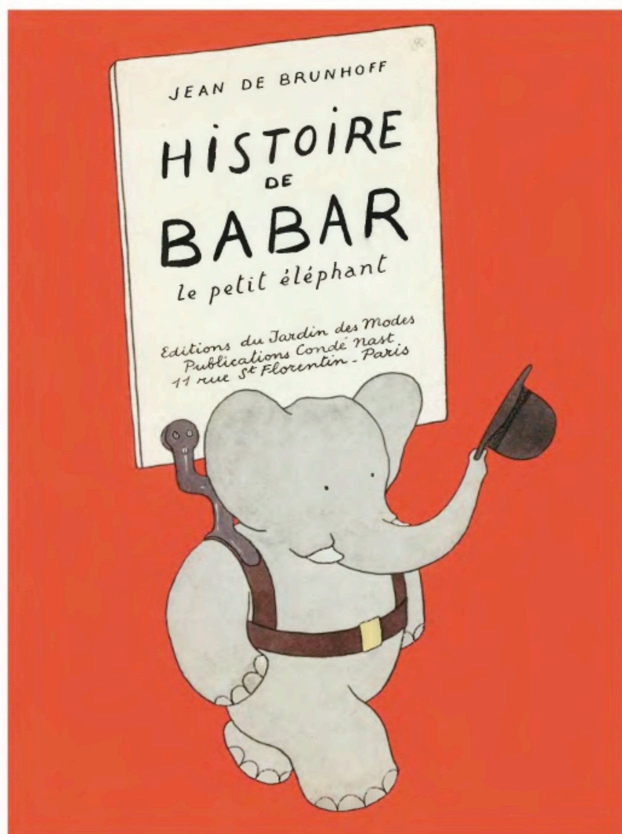
Jean de Brunhoff was trained as a painter, and what strikes one first about his preliminary drawings for "Babar" is how much more conventionally masterly—the work of an obviously accomplished draftsman—they look than the final drawings do. The sketches are sinuous and authoritative as de Brunhoff searches out form and dramatic manner. (He made oil paintings for adult collectors, and those which survive are likewise quite conservative and finished.) The completed Babar drawings, by contrast, are beautiful small masterpieces of the faux-naïf: the elephant faces reduced to a language of points and angles, each figure cozily encased in its black-ink outline, a friezelike arrangement of figures against a background of pure color. De Brunhoff's style is an illustrator's version of Matisse, Dufy, and Derain, which by the nineteen-thirties had already been filtered and defanged and made part of the system of French design.

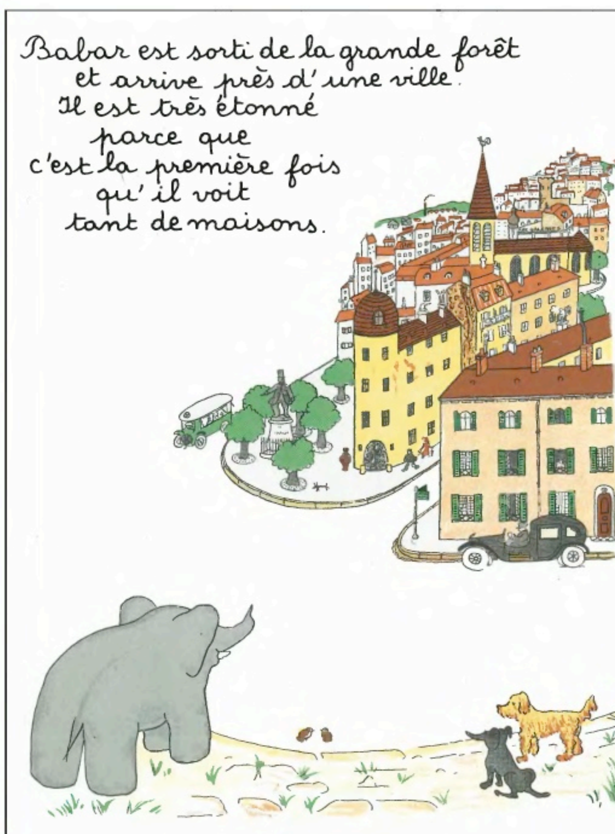
But the Babar books are more than the sum of their lines. By now, of course, a controversial literature is possible about *anything*, and yet to discover that there is a controversial literature about Babar is a little shocking—*faut-il brûler Babar*? ("Must we burn Babar?"), as one inquisitor puts it, in a famous French locution. And the controversial literature isn't trivial: it touches on questions that are real and enduring. In the past few decades, a series of critics on the left, most notably the Chilean writer Ariel Dorfman, have indicted Babar in the course of a surprisingly resilient and hydra-headed argument about the uses of imagery and the subtleties of imperialist propaganda.

in the summer of 1930. He came from a

Babar, such interpreters have insisted, is

an allegory of French colonization, as seen by the complacent colonizers: the naked African natives, represented by the "good" elephants, are brought to the imperial capital, acculturated, and then sent back to their homeland on a civilizing mission. The elephants that have assimilated to the ways of the metropolis dominate those which have not. The true condition of the animals—to be naked, on all fours, in the jungle—is made shameful to them, while to become an imitation human, dressed and upright, is to be given the right to rule. The animals that resist—the rhinoceroses—are defeated. The Europeanized elephants are, as in the colonial mechanism of indirect rule, then made trustees of the system, consuls for the colonial power. To be made French is to be made human and to be made superior. The straight lines and boulevards of Celesteville, the argument goes, are the





Some left-wing critics have read in the Babar story an implicit endorsement of the civilizing effects of French colonialism.

MUSEUM; RIGHT: LIBRAIRIE HACHETTE 1939/HACHETTE LIVRE 2006

to be thought through before being introduced to young readers, while, to take an extreme example, a book from nineteen-thirties Germany about the extermination of long-nosed rats by obviously Aryan cats would go on anyone's excluded list, however beautifully drawn.

Yet those who would burn "Babar" miss the true subject of the books. The de Brunhoffs' saga is not an unconscious expression of the French colonial imagination; it is a self-conscious comedy *about* the French colonial imagination and its close relation to the French domestic imagination. The gist of the classic early books of the nineteen-thirties—"The Story of Babar" and "Babar the King," particularly—is explicit and intelligent: the lure of the city, of civilization, of style and order and bourgeois living is real, for elephants as for humans. The costs of those things are real, too, in the perpetual

phant is dangerous, wild, and painful. It is therefore a safer thing to be an elephant in a house near a park.

Every children's story that works at all begins with a simple opposition of good and evil, of straightforward innocence and envious corruption. While the good hero or heroine has to be particularized, with flaws and idiosyncrasies, the evil force is, oddly, the more powerful the less distinct it is; because villainy is itself so interesting, there's no great need to particularize the villain. In few works of children's literature is the creation of dull and faceless evil as effective as it is in the Babar saga. "Page 2 of 'Babar' " is a code word among certain parents for the entire issue of what it is right to expose our children to. (It's actually the sixth numbered page in the book, and the fourth page in the story, but it seems to register as page

sign of enslavement. Through such subtle imprinting, the premises of imperialism come to be treated as natural. The case cannot be dismissed out of hand: it's easy to see that, say, "Little Black Sambo," for all his pancake-eating charms, needs

care, the sobriety of effort, they demand. The happy effect that Babar has on us, and our imaginations, comes from this knowledge—from the child's strong sense that, while it is a very good thing to be an elephant, still, the life of an ele-

2, being the second element after the introduction of the elephant nursery idyll.) It is there that Babar's mother, with her little elephant on her back, is murdered, with casual brutality, by a squat white hunter. The pro-page-twoers think that

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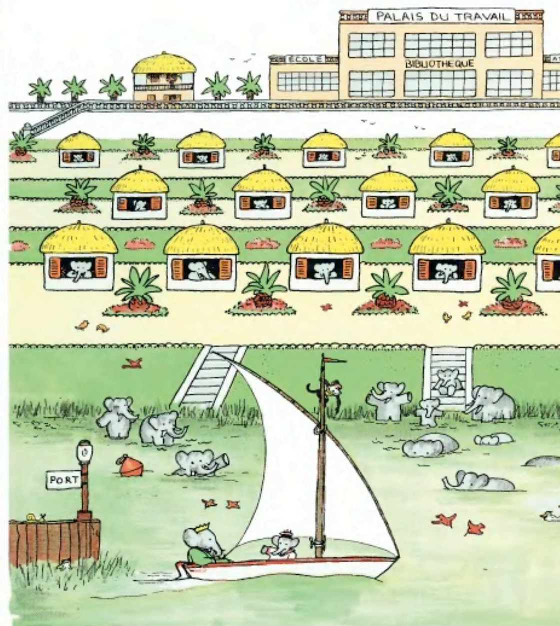


without the incident the story is robbed of motive and pathos; the anti-page-twoers think that it's just too hard, too early, and too brutal, so they turn the story into one of a little elephant who merely wanders into Paris—not such a bad premise. (Maurice Sendak, in a lovely appraisal of Babar, recalls thinking that the act of violence that sets Babar off is not sufficiently analyzed—that the trauma is left unhealed and even untreated—while Nicholas Fox Weber, in his good book about the art of the elephant saga, suggests that Babar's "apparent indifference to his mother's shooting is a by-product of the essential drive to see beauty and continue living no matter how tragic the past.")

Whether the motive is amnesiac or therapeutic, the moment when the lost and motherless elephant enters the French city—Paris, surely, though also standing in for French colonial capitals from Saigon to Casablanca—is a magical moment. The arrival is subdued and simple, creating a tension between the savanna and the city that is continually renewed, and around which the whole series will be

powerful form in Rousseau's matchless "Sleeping Gypsy," as in de Brunhoff's unforgettable nocturne of Babar and his bride, connects the two.

But there is a deeper connection between this kind of French made-at-home exoticism and the domestic charm of Babar—between, if you like, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Henri Rousseau, between the idea of the native genius of children and a romantic vision of Africa. France during the nineteen-thirties was in transition from an old, unashamedly predatory model of imperialism to one that insisted on the *mission civilisatrice*—the vauntedly benevolent gathering of different races into one French commonwealth—and, simultaneously, from a model of work and labor as their own reward to one in which the reward of irksome labor was French family leisure.

This double "primitivism" of the hearth and the heathen, the foyer and the faraway, is apparent in the books' visual style, even more than in the obvious and much argued-over story line. High Fauve style, from the beginning, and in the

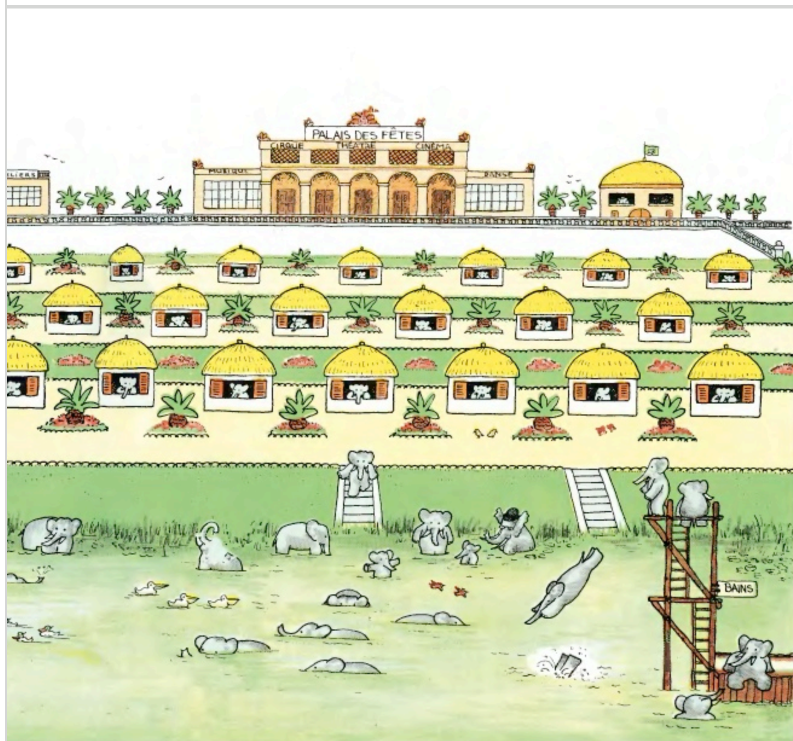
piece as sophisticated as Matisse's "Piano Lesson," of 1916, where the play between the oppressive weight of French teaching and the gasping attempt at pleasure weighs on the boy. And the traffic between the exotic elephant and the French nursery is already implied, in a more complex form, in Matisse's "The Moroccans," of the same year, in which the remote decorative style of French-colonized Africa is rephrased in terms of the metropolitan faux-naïf. (Although "tribal" art is in no way childlike, French artists, wrongly but fruitfully, saw it that way.) The tightrope between the exotic and the domestic that the Babar books walk is central to the French imagination of the first half of the twentieth century: the great desert opens onto the great city; the beautiful patterning of the carpet gives life to the gray light of the Île de France; we dream of the elephants, and the elephant dreams of a green suit and a motorcar. (The children's dining room of the French ocean liner Normandie was, tellingly, decorated with de Brunhoff's elephants, animal totems of French yearning.)

R AND RIGHT: LIBRAIRIE HACHETTE 1939

and around which the whole series will be structured. The exoticism of the Babar story is obviously a Fifth Arrondissement exoticism, like that of the turn-of-the-century Douanier Henri Rousseau, whose harmless but rapacious paintings of wild animals, inspired by visits to the zoo, have much of the same sober charm as Jean de Brunhoff's. And the dream of the desert as an enchanted place, which takes such style, from the beginning, and in the hands of Matisse in particular, was connected to children's art and the idea of childhood. Picasso saw this keenly, speaking often (if with a hint of condescension) of how crucially the drawings of Matisse's children had affected their father's art, and for the better, supplying a kind of domestic primitivism, an African art of the nursery. That is visible even in a master- of French voyaging.)

All of which complicates one's sense of the politics of "Babar," too. One can forget, reading the critics, that the books are, first and last, meant to be *funny*, and that Babar is an elephant who talks and walks: the story is happening to creatures that children know do not ride elevators, wear suits, or build buildings. Part of the joke is in the way the obvious animalness of the

LEFT: MORGAN LIBRARY & MUSEUM; CENTE



protagonist makes evident the absurdity of the human behavior depicted. An animal that attempts to become an astronaut or conduct an orchestra is inherently ridiculous and makes the ambition ridiculous as he pursues it. That's why Daffy Duck in "Duck Dodgers" is daffy.

As an elephant who takes on the role of the bourgeois patriarch (and monarch), Babar reveals that role's touching absurdity. In "Babar the King" (1933)—the central book in the Babar saga—the rhinos and the elephants have been at war, but the point isn't that the rhinos are evil. It is that war between nations is as absurd in reality as war between animals looks on the page. Becoming French, the elephants reveal the absurd and contrived elements of the French national character. Celesteville is a parody of the French corporatist dream, beautifully expressed, in "Babar the King," in the drawing of

There are no bankers or stockbrokers in Celesteville. Capitalism is elided, as are unnecessary "middlemen," in this perfect Comtian economy, in which each does his job and receives his goods. There is to be no ambition, either, no upwardly mobile individual elephant. (That is an American elephant's notion.) The reward for this serene corporatism is apparent on the next page: after working in the morning, the elephants take the afternoon off. And this society provides continuity with the classical traditions—the elephants, bewigged and formal, attend a production of the Comédie-Française.

Surely the happy effect this has on the reader, and the elephants, is not the result of our (or their) having been propagandized to accept colonial hegemony. This isn't a portrait at a distance of an imaginary colonial city. It is, instead, an affectionate, closeup caricature of an

and order and their proper relation, beginning in order and ending there, but with disorder given its due. In our century, different ideas of order have been represented in children's literature by a city or a country. The Mary Poppins stories, "Peter Pan," "The Wind in the Willows," and, in a slightly different way, "The Hobbit" all use an idea of England and, often, of London. Here order is internal, found at home, part of the natural world of the nursery and the riverbank; disorder lies beyond, at times threatening but more often beckoning as a source of joy and Dionysian possibility—as in the beautiful chapter entitled "The Piper at the Gates of Dawn," in "The Wind in the Willows," or the celestial circus in "Mary Poppins." Order, in the English vision, is comforting but plain; disorder is perilous but romantically alluring. We escape the nursery for the disorder of the park.

the elephants at their various occupations, as Cartesian and logical as a poster from the pedagogical-instruments house Deyrolle:

> If Barbacol wants a statue for his mantelpiece, he asks Podular to carve one for him, and when Podular's coat is worn out Barbacol makes a new one to order for him. . . . Hatchibombotar cleans the streets, Olur repairs the automobiles, and, when they are all tired, Doulamor plays his cello to entertain them. . . . As for Coco, he keeps them all laughing and gay.

idealized French society. The fragility of this society—and its inability to resist the rhinoceroses—only intensifies the pathos and affection it inspires.

So "a certain idea of France," in de Gaulle's phrase, is at the heart of the appeal of the Babar books. What is that idea, and how does it differ from our idea of England or America? All children's books take as their subject disorder

The idea of Paris that one finds in the Babar books—or in the Madeline books—has another shape. Disorder is imagined as internal, psychological; the natural world is accepted as inherently *coquin*, "mean," or potentially violent. Order needs to be created by constant infusions of education and city planning; it is a source of Apollonian pleasure. Paris is the place where you go up and down in the elevator. Madeline's wish is to walk along

Jean de Brunhoff, a trained painter, worked hard to make his Babar illustrations as simple as possible. He ended up creating a kind of domestic primitivism, a faux-naïf style that affectionately parodied the ordered rhythms of French bourgeois existence.

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the parapet, while Miss Clavel wakes every night to sense that something is not right, and the girls walk in two straight lines to hold disorder at bay. When disorder arrives—Madeline and Pepito's time with the Gypsies, Babar and Celeste's imprisonment in the circus—it takes the form of a new routine. Disorder is the normal mess of life, what rhinos like. Order is what elephants (that is, Frenchmen) achieve at a cost and with effort. To stray from built order is to confront the man with a gun.

In the children's classics of New York—"From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler," "The House on East 88th Street," "Stuart Little," "The Pushcart War," "Harriet the Spy"—neither order nor disorder is taken to be natural. The world of the books oscillates unpredictably between them, producing battles and freaks. The best we can find are small secret islands of order. Everything turns on the individual child and her ability to create a safe miniworld of her own within the big chaotic city.

In London, in children's books, life is too orderly and one longs for the vitality of the wild; in Paris, order is an achievement, hard won against the natural chaos and cruelty of adult life; in New York, we begin most stories in an indifferent city and the child has to create a kind of order within it. Each scheme reflects a history: the English vision being a natural consequence of a peaceful nation with a reformist history and in search of adventure; the French of a troubled nation with a violent history in search of peace; and the American of an individualistic and sporadically violent country with a strong ethos of

the moral of a point. The child does not dutifully take in the lesson that salvation lies in civilization, but, in good Freudian fashion, takes in the lesson that the pleasures of civilization come with discontent at its constraints: you ride the elevator, dress up in the green suit, and go to live in Celesteville, but an animal you remain—the dangerous humans and rhinoceroses are there to remind you of that—and you delight in being so. There is allure in escaping from the constraints that button you up and hold you; there is also allure in the constraints and the buttons. We would all love to be free, untrammelled elephants, but we long, too, for a green suit.

Far more than an allegory of colonialism, the Babar books are a fable of the difficulties of a bourgeois life. "Truly it is not easy to bring up a family," Babar sighs at one point, and it is true. The city lives on the edge of a desert, and animals wander in and out at will, and then wander out again to make cities of their own. The civilizing principle is energetic but essentially comical, solid-looking on the outside but fragile in its foundations, reducible to rubble by rhinoceroses. Even the elephants, for all their learning and sailor suits, can be turned into slaves through a bad twist of fate. The unruliness of natural life is countered by the beautiful symmetries of classical style and the absurd orderliness of domestic life—but we are kidding ourselves if we imagine that we are ever really safe. Death is a rifle shot and a poisoned mushroom away. The only security, the de Brunhoff books propose, lies in our commitment to those graceful winged elephants that, in Babar's dream, at the end

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family isolation and improvised rules. We go to the imaginary Paris for sudden glimpses of evil (the death of Babar's mother) set off by satisfying visions of aesthetic bliss (the Celesteville Bureau of Industry, situated near the Amusement Hall), just as we go to the imaginary London to satisfy our longing for adventure and the undefined elsewhere, which returns us safely in the end to Cherry Tree Lane. And we go to the imaginary New York for the pleasure of the self-made: to see two children actually hide and live in a museum; to see an alligator, or a mouse, absorbed uncontroversially into a normal life.

Fables for children work not by pointing to a moral but by complicating of "Babar the King," chase away misfortune. Love and Happiness, who are at the heart of the American vision, are, in Babar's dream, mere tiny camp followers. The larger winged elephants, which are at the forefront of this French vision of civilized life, are instead Intelligence, Patience, Learning, and Courage. "Let's work hard and cheerfully and we'll continue to be happy," the Old Lady tells the elephants, and, though we know that the hunter is still in the woods, it is hard to know what more to add. ♦

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An audio interview with Adam Gopnik, and more art by Jean de Brunhoff.