

## THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

# Famed children's author crafted fables

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The census in 1940 found Munro Leaf living at Smoke Tree Ranch in Palm Springs with his wife and one-year-old son. By then, Leaf was an internationally famous author and his small book that published in 1936 had been lauded by Mahatma Gandhi and Eleanor Roosevelt; and condemned to fiery censure by Adolf Hitler and Francisco Franco. But that year, Leaf and his family were pleasantly and quietly living on the desert while the world commented on his little book.

Leaf had a master's degree in English Literature from Harvard University and had already written a few children's books when, to help his friend Robert Lawson, he sat down on a rainy Sunday in October 1935 and in the span of 25 minutes scribbled the text of "The Story of Ferdinand" on a yellow pad for Lawson to illustrate.

Lawson could ably draw all sorts of animals, but cats, dogs, bunnies, mice and horses were pedestrian and populated any number of picture books. As Michael Patrick Hearn noted for The Washington Post on the 50th anniversary of the book, "Leaf wanted something novel. He finally settled on the story of a bull. Although he had never been there and had never seen a bullfight himself, Leaf set his fable in far-off Spain. He called his hero Ferdinand, from Ferdinand and Isabella, the only Spanish names the writer knew. And the story had to be funny, so Leaf made his bull a gentle beast who prefers to sit in the shade of a cork tree and smell the flowers."

Leaf's publisher hadn't been particularly enthusiastic about the thin book but agreed to buy it. Civil war had just broken out in Spain, so they contemplated holding the book's release and devoted their advertising budget for the year to another children's book, now long forgotten.

The reviews of "The Story of Ferdinand" when it first appeared were also forgettable, but "then something re-



**Ted Slocum and Walt Disney circa 1940. Both men knew Palm Springs and "Ferdinand" author Munro Leaf.**

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markable happened...the sales of Ferdinand suddenly jumped to 100 copies one week, 200 the next, and then climbed steadily, so that by 1938 it was selling 3,000 copies a week. Adults had discovered Ferdinand. Not only were they purchasing the children's book themselves, they were also passing this simple fable of a peaceable Spanish bull on to their friends. By December, Ferdinand knocked 'Gone with the Wind' off the top of the best-seller lists."

Bruce Handy in The New Yorker magazine mused about notoriety, "the bull ambled down Broadway as a balloon in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade and enjoyed the flowers on a float in the Rose Parade, in Pasadena...and Life magazine proclaimed the book 'the greatest juvenile classic since "Winnie the Pooh," while asserting that three out of four copies were bought by 'grownups . . . largely for their own pleasure and amusement.'"

History does not record exactly how Walt Disney was introduced to the book, but perhaps Palm Springs played a part. Disney was clearly enamored of the story and produced a charming, eight-minute cartoon adaptation, "Ferdinand the Bull," that won the Academy Award for short film in 1938. Disney himself voiced the character of Ferdinand's mother. After the film, Ferdinand was even more

fabulously famous.

Ted Slocum, close friend of Walt Disney, had a home on the desert at Smoke Tree Ranch (as would Disney a few years later). A presentation copy of the first edition of "The Story of Ferdinand" was inscribed by Leaf on March 7, 1940 and read, "To Ted Slocum with all the best from Ferdinand and Munro Leaf." The Smoke Tree Ranch brand, a snuggled-up S, T and R, was drawn on the page below the inscription by Leaf and he explained further, "This is one of 5000 of the first of the little bull--they grow more and more like the snows of yesteryear. M. L."

Indeed, the first edition, just a few years from its publication was already exceedingly rare, and Leaf knew it (a quick internet search today will find that a fine copy of that first printing will sell for as much as \$10,000. Since then, the classic book with its now iconic illustrations has been translated into some 60 languages and has never gone out of print).

In Palm Springs, the newspaper noted his lecture at the high school auditorium, to which the town was invited, and his appearance at the bookstore to sign copies for admiring readers.

Two years later, in 1942, the entire world, not just Spain, was at war, and Leaf was in the Army. His story of the gentle bull who refused to fight became

the subject of a larger discussion of culture. Denounced as a pacifist work and "democratic propaganda" by the authoritarian regimes of the Axis powers, the book was banned and burned by Hitler. Debated by elite intellectuals as satire of sit-down strikes, or fascist manifesto, adult opinions of the book ran the gamut. Following the 1945 defeat of the Nazis, 30,000 copies of the book were distributed to the children of Germany by the U.S. military in an effort to endorse peace.

Leaf and Lawson's second collaboration, "Wee Gillis," about a boy living in Scotland halfway between his father's family in the Highlands and his mother's in the Lowlands, was cited as a 1939 Caldecott Honor Book. He wrote "Noodle," a story of a very elongated dachshund, illustrated by Ludwig Bemelmans, beloved author of the Madeleine series of books, who after long consideration is satisfied with his own unusual shape.

Leaf wrote a regular feature for The American Magazine, humorously condensing important works of literature. He produced a cartoon series called "Watchbirds" which was published in Ladies' Home Journal and later collected into several books, observing the essence of human behavior and translating those observations into guidance for good living, helping parents pass along important wisdom to youngsters.

After the war, he collaborated with Theodor Geisel, known for his own remarkable Dr. Seuss children's books. Together they created a pamphlet for the military about preventing the spread of malaria. Leaf wrote another 25 books after his service in World War II — two published posthumously.

Leaf's books help raise generations of children, instilling critical concepts for civilized society. Many adults these days could benefit by reading "Manners Can Be Fun," "How to Speak Politely and Why," "Fair Play," and "Let's Do Better."

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