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Children's Books: Virginia Lee Burton Turns 100

Mike Mulligan author gets big push

By Judith Rosen

Apr 06, 2009

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With so many major literary commemorations this year--the 200th anniversary of Edgar Allan Poe's birth and the 150th of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, to name just a few--Virginia Lee Burton's son, Aris Demetrios, says that he'll do whatever it takes to make his mother's centennial stand out, including donning a sandwich board and walking around the Boston Common.



Virginia Lee Burton at work in her studio in Cape Ann, Mass.

Fortunately, that shouldn't be necessary. Burton's longtime publisher, Houghton Mifflin, has embarked on an ambitious republishing program to introduce a new generation of readers to the creator of Mike Mulligan and his steam shovel, Mary Anne. And a group of Burton fans are bringing attention to her work by mounting an exhibit at the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art in Amherst, Mass., and working with public television stations to air a documentary film.

Not that the Massachusetts-born picture book author, illustrator and designer's sales seem to need much of a push. To date, combined sales of Burton's books have reached 4.5 million copies. Although the most popular of Burton's titles have never hit the sales level of, say, *Goodnight Moon*, they're up among the literary classics, says Heather Doss, children's merchandise manager at Bookazine. She characterizes Burton's sales as steady year-round, with a pop in January for *The Little House*, when booksellers mount Caldecott displays.



Demetrios, the eldest of Burton's two sons and a renowned sculptor, credits former Houghton v-p and publisher of children's books Anita Silvey with helping to make Burton an in-house favorite during her tenure (1995--2001). She introduced Demetrios and his brother Mike (yes, the Mike, to whom *Mike Mulligan* is dedicated; *Choo Choo* is dedicated to Aris) to the staff at Houghton headquarters in downtown Boston. Under her watch the press organized a memorable 60th-anniversary promotion for *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel* in 1999, which included a billboard at the site of the Big Dig. Now, in her forthcoming book *Everything I Need to Know I Learned from a Children's Book* (Roaring Brook, Oct.), Silvey calls Burton "the greatest American female picture book artist of the 20th century."

Burton is also one of the very few authors, notes Mary Wilcox, v-p and editorial director of franchise publishing, who picked up the cheerleading baton for Burton at Houghton, to have never had one of her books go out of print. That includes *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel*, which just turned 70. "How many authors can say that?" asks Wilcox rhetorically.

Full Steam Ahead

In addition, Houghton continues to tinker with Burton's legacy by introducing new editions of her books. Last month, the press released a slightly condensed board-book edition of *The Little House*, her 1942 Caldecott Medal winner about a country house that gets caught up in urban sprawl. This will be followed in September by a new paperback edition of *Katy and the Big Snow* (1943) with a glitter cover and snow stickers; a paperback-and-CD set will be available in October. The press plans to overprint the stickers and use them as giveaways at bookseller and library shows, starting this summer at BEA.



For the holidays Houghton will also publish a revised edition of Burton's final book, *Life Story* (1962), in both hardcover and paperback, which recounts the history of earth in five acts, and closes with an epilogue in which Burton

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<p>Best Books of 2010</p> <p>This year we took our annual slugfest to the pub underneath our new office and came up with a list of the year's top 100 books that could be our best ever. It wasn't any easier with a drink in hand to pick what we had to agree on were the best books of 2010, but once again, we've got a list we love.</p>	<p>Len Riggio: PW's Person of the Year</p> <p>By any standard, the past 15 months have been eventful for Barnes & Noble. In September 2009, the company completed its purchase of Barnes & Noble College Booksellers and two months later introduced the Nook, its entry into the e-reader wars. This spring, B&N appointed William Lynch as CEO and announced a \$140 million investment to upgrade its digital capabilities.</p>

BLOGS

Beyond Her Book
Barbara Vey Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators Conference

encourages her readers: "And now it is your Life Story, and it is you who play the leading role." Scientist Philip Morrison, the youngest physicist to work on the Manhattan Project, told Demetrios that he ranked *Life Story* with Charles and Ray Eames's *Powers of Ten* as the two best books for teaching cosmology.

Although Houghton is saving its publicity push for late summer, when Burton (1909--1968) was born, it has already sponsored several Burton celebrations. It helped fund the January premiere of Robert Bradshaw's symphony of *Katy and the Big Snow*, commissioned by the Cape Ann Symphony in Gloucester, Mass., site of the fictional town of Geopopolis, where the book is set.



An interior image from The Little House.

available [here](#).

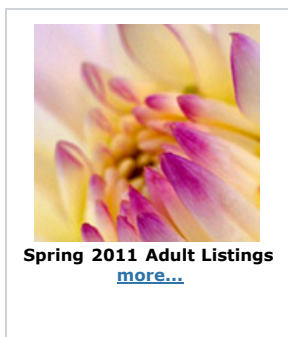
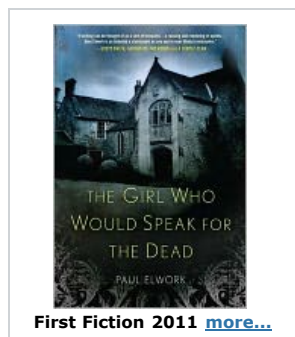
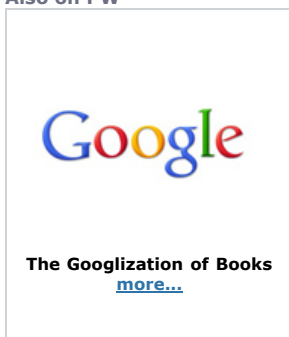
Demetrios and his brother are also doing their part to spread the word about Jinnee (as they called their mother), sans sandwich boards, by redesigning the [VirginiaLeeBurton.com](#) Web site. They've also just gotten rights back to *The Little House* from Disney, which released an animated short in 1952. They would like to do a new, updated movie of the book.

Demetrios, who designed a wooden steam shovel manufactured by Schylling a decade ago, says that he is open to extending Burton's legacy in other ways, including toys and other merchandise. "We're not going to do crass commercialization," he is quick to add. "She put so much into her work. She knew what she wanted, and she had perfect pitch about color. She was a perfectionist."

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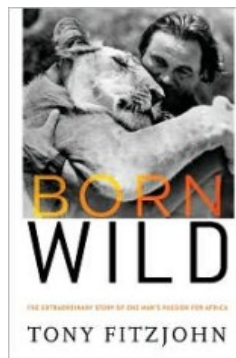
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TOP BESTSELLERS

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Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption	Hardcover Nonfiction
The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo	Mass Market Paper
True Girt	Trade Paper
The Lost Hero	Children's Fiction
Of Thee I Sing: A Letter to My Daughters	Children's Picture Book
House of Night	Children's Series & Tie-ins
The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo (unabr.)	Audio Fiction
Decision Points	Audio Nonfiction

PICK OF THE WEEK



[Born Wild](#) by Tony Fitzjohn

Fitzjohn worked with George Adamson for 17 years at his lion preserve in Kenya (made famous from the 1966 film Born Free) and recounts his unplotted, delightfully quirky, and frequently perilous journey from rogue Englishman to African wildlife conservationist. [more...](#)

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