

### Everyday tasks and rising waters: Picture book portrayals of Mrs. Noah

Several studies of picture books have considered the role of Noah, the central character in the most famous flood story in Western culture. With unquestioning obedience, Noah follows God's instructions to build an ark, gather animals, and ride out the storm. But what about the other seven humans who survive, especially Noah's wife? To be sure, the majority of picture books don't include her at all or merely portray her in the background, collecting food or welcoming animals as they board. When she does have a major role, the book is often structured around a stereotypical female activity such as cleaning (*Washday on Noah's Ark*), gardening (*Mrs. Noah's Vegetable Ark*), sewing (*Mrs. Noah's Patchwork Quilt*), or soothing frightened creatures (*Naamah and the Ark at Night*). In a few cases she challenges Noah, not because she objects to God's plans for worldwide annihilation but because of petty concerns such as her fear of spiders (*Noah's Notebook*) or her sheer stubbornness (*Noah and the Devil*). In several retellings, however, Noah's wife acts as an equal partner in the enterprise. In *Noah and His Ark*, C. J. Applebee includes as much detail about pre-flood preparations of clothing and food by Mrs. Noah and her daughters-in-law as he does about the ark building by Noah and his sons. In both *How the Animals Saved the Ark and Put Two and Two Together* and *Noah's and Namah's Ark*, Noah's wife takes charge of the situation and keeps the action moving, often with tongue-in-cheek humor. In fact, the practical concerns and humorous comments and situations related to Noah's wife in picture books harken back to an unlikely literary precedent, Noah's shrewish wife in medieval mystery plays. Although she rarely appears as intransigent in these picture books, her practical concerns and actions resonate with a young audience who may not grasp the implications of a worldwide deluge but definitely understand the need for food, clothing, and a place to sleep whatever disasters threaten. (This presentation will be accompanied by images from the picture books discussed.)