

# This story drives her quackers

By Esther Baird

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BEVERLY, MASS. - I know it's an institution. I know that as a parent living in the greater Boston area I ought to ooze with affection for it. But this is one bit of local culture I could happily do without.

I refer to — in case it's not abundantly clear — the set-in-Boston children's story, "Make Way for Ducklings."

Here are the facts: It's horrendously long. The illustrations have the color scheme of dishwater and my daughter asks me to read it to her *ad nauseum*. Jack, Pack, Lack, Mack — enough already!

Perhaps there was a point in the far-flung past when I found Mrs. Mallard's extra swing in her waddle charming or thought Michael was a sympathetic character instead of a dim cop who could stand to lay off the peanuts. Not so any longer. At least when we read an equally long Dr. Seuss book I am amused with the tongue twisters and find the illustrations endlessly fascinating. *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish* can easily take a week to get through. I'm O.K. with that. But I can't endure those ducks.

I mean let's be honest; the entire plot makes no sense. The mallards leave the Public Garden because with all those fast bikes it's no place to raise children. Then, the entire second half of the story revolves around their long, tedious walk through Boston where everyone has to [sigh] make way for the ducklings. But where are they headed? Right back to the bike-filled Public Gardens — apparently now an imminently perfect place to raise young ducks!

Ridiculous.

But oh, how my daughter loves it.

So, in an attempt to bring a fresh perspective to this wee bit of literary dullness, our family took a Saturday outing down to the Public Gardens to see where all the magic happened. It was the dead of winter — as it's been since about August — but we weren't snowed in and that qualified as great weather.

Bundled up, we emerged from the parking garage and, using our copy of the book as a map, we set off down towards the pond. There were, of course, no Swan boats to be seen. In fact, it seemed that there were also no ducks. Our eldest daughter peered across the frozen pond to the little island where they supposedly slept at night. "Where are Mr. and Mrs. Mallard?"

Well it was one thing for me to find the book personally coma-inducing. But it was another for my daughter to have such an interest in a story, to delight in the characters, and to have it fizzle.

So my husband and I began inventing interesting stories about how Mr. and Mrs. Mallard and their eight little ducklings were off on a sunny vacation or perhaps visiting the museum for the day — anything to make the lack of ducks palatable when suddenly, we heard them. There huddled beneath the bridge in the one patch of unfrozen water was a large family of mallards.

My daughter was thrilled. There they were! Mr. and Mrs. Mallard and their now-grown-up children! We found the page that had the bridge on it and were able to point to the exact spot in the illustration where we were standing. I have to say, you just can't do that with a Dr. Seuss book.

Later we wandered up to the northeast corner of the Garden to see the bronze statues commemorating Mrs. Mallard and her eight little ducks as they entered the park. Our daughter named each of the ducklings and gave Mrs. Mallard a kiss. You couldn't help but be charmed.

I still can't understand why the Mallard family left the Public Garden only to come back. I still long for anything resembling color in the illustrations. And I certainly still cringe whenever I have to list out all eight ducklings. But now when I read the story, and I finally get past their tedious traffic-inducing walk to the entrance of the park, I can see my daughter leaning over to give them a kiss. And as I turn that last, blessed page I can see our family standing just beyond the island under the bridge.

With daughter number two on her way to the favorite-book-age, let's hope those new images will give me the energy to read it at least a 100 more times.

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