

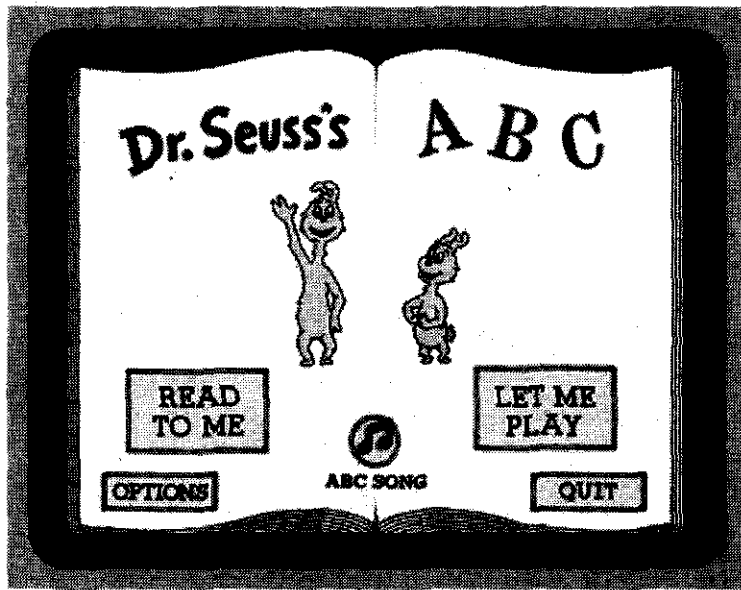
Bringing kids' books to life

Broderbund updates well-loved children's stories for the '90s / **Simson L. Garfinkel and Beth Rosenberg**

RECENTLY, WE'VE had the pleasure of introducing our toddler daughter to Broderbund Software's collection of "Living Books" CD-ROMs. Many parents have probably noticed the glut of children's software on the market, much of it of questionable quality. But Broderbund's "Living Books" have impressed us: They're entertaining, educational, and easy-to-use — at least most of them are.

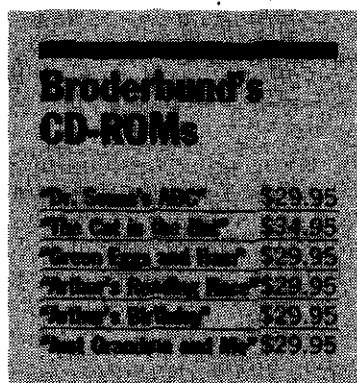
Broderbund has been developing original Mac and PC titles since the early 1980s. But the company also has been transposing well-loved children's stories into interactive software for nearly a decade, periodically revamping them to keep up with advances in multimedia technology. The company's current offerings for younger kids (ages 2 to 7) includes three Dr. Seuss books, two Arthur stories, and one title from Mercer Mayer's "Little Critter" series.

Every "Living Book" is introduced by the story's main characters. It then gives young users (or their parents) two options: "Read to Me" and "Let Me Play." If the child clicks on Read to Me, the program will read the story aloud, highlighting each printed word in the text as it is spoken. At the end of each numbered page, the program shows a few animated tricks. While the disc plays, Mommy and Daddy are



then free to do something else.

For youngsters sophisticated enough to master a mouse or a trackball, click Let Me Play. Children can jump from page to page, as if they were flipping through the printed book. Once on a page, virtually every object and every word on every page responds to a mouse click. Click on the word puppy, for instance, and the word changes to a picture of a puppy, the narrator says puppy, and the puppy yips and pants. There is a lot buried on each page: Often, when you hit the same object, you will get a different response each time. The interactive play easily stretches a 15-minute story to at least twice that length. Unfortunately, it was all too sophisticated



for our 18-month-old.

Our daughter is positive that no CD-ROM should come without a game, and Broderbund didn't let her down. "Arthur's Birthday" has "Pin the Tail on the Donkey" and a version of the game "Concentra-

tion." "Green Eggs and Ham" includes a paper activity book called "Beyond the Computer," for parents and children to use together. "Dr. Seuss's ABC," designed for the younger set, plays the musical numbers from the CD-ROM when you spin it on a conventional CD player.

Obviously, parents should be careful about these discs, as they don't all provide a well-balanced educational diet. "Green Eggs and Ham," with its bubble-gum colors and fast, discordant music, is too reminiscent of a conventional Saturday morning cartoon. "Just Grandma and Me" has jerky graphics and too little text to support it. We also found that the CD-ROM's animations were too violent for the intended age.

Broderbund has gone to great lengths to make the CD-ROMs faithful to the books on which they are based: The text and the illustrations displayed on the screen are identical to what appears in the paper versions. Unfortunately, merely replicating award-winning books wasn't enough for Broderbund's developers: They've gilded the lily by inserting additional dialogue into virtually every scene. The added dialogue is never as good as the original, and it's frequently out of character — as when the boy in "The Cat in the Hat" talks about being grounded and having his mother call the police.

Most of the "Living Books" software cost \$29.95. Each includes a CD-ROM that runs on the whole range of Windows (both 3.1 and 95) and Macintosh (both 68K and PowerMac) computers. The faster your computer, the better you'll find the animations. Most also come with a softcover copy of the original book, although "Arthur's Reading Race" didn't.

We found that the programs ran better on the Macintosh than

on the PC. Although we had to disable the virtual memory on our antique Quadra 605 to get the characters' mouths to synchronize with their speech, the programs ran smoothly. On a PC, we first had to run Broderbund's installer and create a special directory on our C drive. The animated figures and text looked a little jagged on a 200 Mhz Pentium with 32MB of RAM; the problem went away on our system with 64MB of memory. We were disappointed by the performance under Windows NT: Most of the CD-ROMs started well enough, but then crashed a couple of minutes into playtime.

Broderbund likes to believe its "Living Books" serve an important educational function. Each CD-ROM touts the skills children should learn. For example, in addition to "language acquisition" and "computer literacy," "The Cat in the Hat" tutors preschoolers in "spatial relations." "Just Grandma and Me" introduces children to foreign languages, by allowing them play options in French, German, and Spanish.

We think the educational claims hold up for "Dr. Seuss's ABC" and "Arthur's Reading Race," but for the most part these "Living Books" are more fun than educational. But that's not to say our daughter isn't learning anything. At 18 months, she's already starting to recognize some letters. Her ability to sit through longer, more complex stories has dramatically improved. Her short-term memory is better. And yes, she has learned the proper way to handle a CD-ROM — an indispensable skill for anyone these days.

Technology writer Simson L. Garfinkel is joined this week by his wife, Beth Rosenberg. He can be reached at plugged-in@simson.net.