

PLAY TODAY

Building the Young Brain
through Creative Expression

Ann Barbour, PhD



PLAY TODAY

**Building the Young Brain
through Creative Expression**

Ann Barbour, PhD

PLAY TODAY

Building the Young Brain through Creative Expression

Ann Barbour, PhD



©2016 Ann Barbour
Published by Gryphon House, Inc.
P. O. Box 10, Lewisville, NC 27023
800.638.0928; 877.638.7576 (fax)
Visit us on the web at www.gryphonhouse.com.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or technical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior written permission of the publisher. Printed in the United States. Every effort has been made to locate copyright and permission information.

Cover and interior photographs courtesy of Shutterstock.com ©2016.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Barbour, Ann, author.

Title: Play today : building the young brain through creative expression / by
Ann Barbour, PhD.

Description: Lewisville, NC : Gryphon House, Inc., 2016. | Includes
bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015036470 | ISBN 9780876596616

Subjects: LCSH: Play. | Creative ability in children. | Early childhood
education.

Classification: LCC LB1140.35.P55 B37 2016 | DDC 372.21--dc23 LC record available
at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015036470>

Bulk Purchase

Gryphon House books are available for special premiums and sales promotions as well as for fund-raising use. Special editions or book excerpts also can be created to specifications. For details, call 800.638.0928.

Disclaimer

Gryphon House, Inc., cannot be held responsible for damage, mishap, or injury incurred during the use of or because of activities in this book. Appropriate and reasonable caution and adult supervision of children involved in activities and corresponding to the age and capability of each child involved are recommended at all times. Do not leave children unattended at any time. Observe safety and caution at all times.

PREFACE

My fascination with dramatic play began as I witnessed my own sons' rich fantasy play. I realized no amount of forethought or planning on my part could have engaged them more. What interested and concerned them as young children, and how they were making sense of their experiences, was visible through the scenarios they enacted. Over the years, I also observed hundreds of young children in my classroom eagerly initiating and joining in pretend play and other forms of creative expression. I learned more about each of them in the process. I saw their social competence, language, and cognition blossom through these self-initiated and self-structured activities. I recognized their needs and challenges more fully. I also realized the extent to which dramatic play and creative activities integrate learning and can be central to curriculum.

My graduate studies and subsequent twenty-some years of teaching undergraduate and graduate courses in play helped me further grasp its fundamental role in children's healthy development and learning. I hold in high esteem all those whose research and practice contributes to the professional knowledge base and helps me continue to deepen my understanding. Just like children, we in early childhood are accustomed to learning from each other! I hope this book will aid your own understanding and will help you nurture children's dramatic play and creativity.

To that end, this book is dedicated to all early childhood educators whose passion for encouraging children's optimal development and learning translates into hundreds of daily decisions and interactions. It is also for my sons, Evan and Nathan, whose innovative enterprises continue to amaze me, and for Alan, whose curiosity, intellectual integrity, and constant support sustain me.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Dramatic Play and Creative Expression

in Children's Lives	1
Play Today	4
Dramatic Play and Creative Expression	6
Dramatic Play at Different Stages	10
Individual Differences in Dramatic Play	13
Dramatic Play and Innovation	14

Chapter 2: Learning through Dramatic Play

and Other Creative Activities	19
Brain Development	20
Cognitive Development	22
Social and Emotional Development	24
Language and Literacy Development.	26
Physical Development	29
Dramatic Play and "Academics"	31

Chapter 3: Supporting Dramatic Play

and Creative Expression	35
Setting the Stage for Purposeful Play.	35
Creating Dramatic-Play Centers	37
Creating Art Centers.	50
Creating Music Centers	60
Managing Time	65
Using Technology Appropriately.	68
Planning Play and Creative Activities	72
Facilitating Creative Play.	78

Making Play Visible	89
Involving Families	92

Chapter 4: Ideas for Dramatic-Play Activities. 97

Airplane	101
Bakery	105
Bank	108
Bath Time	112
Bedtime	115
Camping.	118
Celebrations	121
Construction Site	123
Fishing.	127
Grocery Store	130
Hair Salon/Barber Shop	134
Hospital	138
Library.	142
Movie Theater	145
Optical Shop.	148
Post Office	151
Restaurant	154
Shoe Store	158
Veterinarian Clinic.	161
Wash Day	164

Chapter 5: Ideas for Art Experiences 169

Stimulating Creative Expression through Art	171
Activities and Materials	174
Drawing	174
Painting	177

Printmaking	182
Rubbings.	185
Modeling	186
Collages and Mosaics	188
Assemblages and Sculptures	192
Outdoor Art Explorations	196
Technology-Based Artwork	198

Chapter 6: Ideas for Music and Movement Experiences 203

Stimulating Creative Expression through Music and Movement	204
Activities and Materials	212
Whole-Group Activities	212
Music and Movement Activities	215
Individual and Small-Group Activities	217
Projects	220
Technology in Music and Movement	225

Chapter 7: Family Connections and Spreading the Word . . . 227

Appendix A: Recommended Children's Books 231

Appendix B: Recipes for Art Materials. 237

Appendix C: Online Resources 243

Appendix D: Wish Lists for Families 247

References 251

Index 253

CHAPTER

1

Dramatic Play and Creative Expression in Children's Lives

More and more, people recognize what experts in child development and innovators in early education have known all along: play is foundational to children's development and learning. In fact, the first preschool and kindergarten programs were based on learning through play—activities children choose and carry out by themselves. Friedrich Froebel, the father of the kindergarten; Maria Montessori, whose educational methods are used throughout the world; Jean Piaget, the great developmental psychologist; and Loris Malaguzzi, founder of the Reggio Emilia approach, emphasized the importance of providing environments that motivate children to actively engage in their own endeavors, ones in which they are not directly told what to do or how to do it. The work of these pioneers in early learning has inspired countless child-centered programs. Perhaps they have influenced the approaches you use in your own work.

**Play is
foundational
to children's
development
and learning.**

In recent years, there has been considerable interest in the importance of play. Early childhood professional organizations advocate for it. Journalists

write about it in the popular press. Research abounds on how play shapes children's brains and optimizes learning. A 2007 article by researcher Kenneth Ginsburg, "The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds," links free and unstructured play with healthy development. Corporations such as IBM promote its application to innovation and future success. Commercial enterprises provide play spaces and play-based programs for children. Local governments invest public funds to build community playgrounds. A proliferation of Internet blogs, websites, and videos describe how play—particularly imaginative or pretend play—facilitates learning and development.

So what is this activity that is as natural for young children as sleeping and eating? Why has play inspired such renewed interest? Child development and early education experts struggle to define play concisely; yet, there is general agreement on its characteristics.

- Play is freely chosen, actively engaging, intrinsically motivating, and fun.
- Play is process oriented, that is, carried on for its own sake rather than to accomplish some specific goal.
- Play is nonliteral. In play, children distort reality in some fashion. We call the nonliteral nature of play fantasy, pretend, make-believe, or dramatic. Children create their own realities by letting an object or action symbolize something that in reality it is not. They use blocks as phones, build castles out of sand, strum imaginary

guitars, and put on capes to rescue playmates from the bad guys.

Unlike adults, children don't struggle to define play. They will show you or tell you that play is what they want to do rather than what they have to do. They have an innate need to explore and act on their environment as they attempt to make sense of it. It is through their own endeavors that children learn about the world, how it functions, what their place is in it, and what effect their own actions have on it. Trying to understand these basic things is common to people of all ages. It's just that adults usually go about figuring things out through other avenues. On the whole, adults are less curious, less flexible in their thinking, less imaginative, and less willing to take risks than young children are. Children's need to know is evident in the hundreds of questions they ask every day. Less obvious to us are the internal processes through which they create meaning. They continually synthesize information from new experiences by making connections to what they already know, thus constructing their own understandings and hypotheses of the world in which they live. When they have a problem or are puzzled by something—say, reaching the bananas on the counter or wondering why there are ants in the kitchen—they rely on these connections. They might use an available item to make a stool, an ingenious solution. Or they might imagine the cat chased the ants inside, an improbable cause. Their actions and speculations demonstrate flexible thinking and, often, indifference to other peoples' opinions.

Perhaps these descriptions remind you of children you know or memories of your own childhood. I remember watching a three-year-old from my kitchen window after a summer downpour. Across the street a big mud puddle had formed near the sidewalk, something novel in our neighborhood. He tapped

his foot into the puddle several times, feeling its consistency. He carefully stepped into the muck and stood very quietly for a moment. And then he began to jump and splash with great excitement. The flying mud delighted him. Bending over, he squeezed it in his fists. Next, he sat down, kicked his feet back and forth and then lay on his back to try to make the equivalent of snow angels in the mud. He was obviously enthralled by this new experience, by how the mud looked, felt, and responded to his actions. I don't think his parents shared my amused reaction and probably not my approval when he came in the back door. But I hoped they accepted and perhaps even understood why he was compelled to play in the mud and what he gained from that experience (besides a need for a bath). Not only was this child investigating the properties of mud and seeing what he could do with and in it, he was reveling in expressing himself.

PLAY TODAY

A generation or two ago, children were more often engaged in spontaneously playful activities of this kind. More young children were cared for in their own homes, and there were times during the day when most children were left to their own devices. Parents, particularly mothers, were busy with household tasks or caring for younger children and were happy to have older children occupy themselves. Regardless of the family's economic circumstances or cultural background, most homes had a few toys and a good variety of everyday items or "loose parts." Children used the materials on hand to create worlds from their imaginations. They lined up chairs to make cars they could drive. They dressed in articles of clothing and stepped into the roles these clothes represented. They clomped around in their parents' shoes as they prepared for work or a trip to the store. They cooked imaginary birthday cakes and blew out the candles, and they

created shoe-box homes for their dolls. There were usually other children around to introduce novelty. They planned what they would do by telling other children, “Let’s pretend . . .,” and then decided who would be and do what. They organized games in their neighborhoods. Even though parents were busy, they were usually available to watch, to answer questions, or to settle conflicts that arose. What occurred happened naturally. It was taken for granted as part of the fabric of family life. Parents were grateful that children could entertain themselves, but they were less conscious of all the things children were learning in the process.

For the great majority of children today, these times are gone. Children are playing less. Their everyday experiences are influenced by changes in family structures and roles, economic circumstances, neighborhood environments, educational policies and standards, commercial interests, and the infusion of technology into every aspect of our lives. The proliferation of screen technology and the amount of time children spend watching television and videos and using mobile devices has increased dramatically in recent years. According to a recent research summary by the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, estimates for the time preschool children spend with screen media range from 2.2 to 4.6 hours a day. While many questions remain about the effects of screen technology on children’s minds and bodies, there are growing concerns about what children are not experiencing and doing in this era of digital childhood.

Many schools have reduced recess or have eliminated it altogether in an effort to provide more time for “on task” work and to increase the school’s academic ranking. Parents schedule structured activities for their children with the understandable goals of promoting their achievement, cultivating their talents, keeping them safe, and occupying them in constructive activities. Many children are fortunate to have these kinds of opportunities. Nonetheless, over-

scheduling diminishes opportunities for hands-on creative play. The combined effects of these social changes means that the contexts in which children grow up today are very different than they were in their parents' and certainly their grandparents' generations. Their opportunities for play—self-chosen and self-structured activities—have diminished.

Even though the circumstances influencing childhood are rapidly changing, the underlying processes through which children develop and learn have not changed. They still literally and figuratively crawl before they walk and walk before they run. They still learn to communicate through trial and error and the responses and examples of those who care for them. They still construct their understandings of the world around them and their place in it through firsthand experiences interacting with objects and people. And there are still important life skills that children need to build to be successful in school and beyond. Play in general helps build many of these fundamental skills. Dramatic play in particular is closely associated with children's learning.

DRAMATIC PLAY AND CREATIVE EXPRESSION

In addition to exploratory play like that of the child splashing in the mud, children's "sense-making" hinges on how they actively process and reprocess their firsthand experiences to understand them better. The main way young children do this is through dramatic play. They are adept at re-creating the life experiences that are most meaningful to them. Dramatic play enables them to control the scale and complexity of these experiences to better grasp their meaning. Unlike exploration or imitation, in dramatic play children create something new and different from external reality. Toddlers and two-year-olds may begin by imitating others as they practice simple actions, but they transi-



tion quickly from this kind of practice play. Preschoolers are not merely imitating the behaviors of a parent when they play house, although their parents' actions inform their play. Instead, dramatic play enables them to determine what it means to be a parent in relation to what they already know. It's common to see children reconstruct some aspects of their experiences over and over again with different variations. This is because as their understandings grow, their play changes and becomes more complex.

Dramatic play is also a form of self-expression. When children pretend, they are representing what they know about things that interest and concern them, however incomplete their knowledge may appear to adults. This form of self-expression aids understanding in the same way that many adults find that talking or writing clarifies their thinking. Young children are able to express through dramatic play what they do not yet have the verbal skills to communicate. Pretending provides a safe and nonjudgmental context for exercising a variety of intellectual skills.



Other ways that children make sense of their experiences and express their understandings are through what teachers who are inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach to early education think of as children's natural "languages." These modes of expression include drawing, painting, sculpture, collage, music, and movement. They too involve symbolic thinking, just as conventional language and dramatic play do. After all, a word such as *car*, whether spoken or written, is a symbol; it stands for the actual thing. The gestures and objects children use to pretend to drive a car symbolize what they know about cars and how to operate them. Likewise,

drawing a picture of a car or of their parents, siblings, and themselves depicts their knowledge of cars and their family. These kinds of symbolic representations help children cement their understandings.

Dramatic play and creativity go hand in hand. Both rely on children's symbolic thinking. Both involve drawing on experiences to make connections, imagine possibilities, and deal with ambiguity or, in other words, to hold contradictory

or opposing ideas. For example, children realize that a good idea that solves one problem can simultaneously create other problems, and that realization helps them develop reasoning skills and deal with conflict. In dramatic play and other creative activities, children use both *divergent* and *convergent thinking*. Initially, they imagine many ways to play out a particular scenario or express themselves creatively. This is called divergent thinking. After weighing possibilities, they switch to convergent thinking to carry out the one way they have settled on. They shift back and forth between these two forms of thinking at appropriate times in the creative process.

You may recall similar examples of children's symbolic representations from observing your own children or the children you teach. I am reminded of a three-year-old who danced around the playground pretending she was a fairy godmother with a magic wand who could transform other children and playground equipment into characters of her own imagination. I also remember the group of four-year-old "kittens" who minded their five-year-old "mother cat" friend whose pet cat had just had a litter, and the six-year-olds who built a fort out of packing crates and newly trimmed branches from which they made forays to capture prisoners. I also think of the three-year-old who painted an entire sheet of easel paper yellow after a trip to the fire station because "everything there was yellow," and my own son who sculpted hairy mango pits to resemble the features of each person in our family.

What do all these activities have in common? Why are children compelled to play out scenarios and invent environments and objects from their own imaginings? It is unlikely adults would plan these particular activities for children. Yet, given unstructured time, space, and materials, children spontaneously experiment, envision, plan, and carry out situations and create objects of their own design—

ones that are most meaningful to them at the time. In the process, they build foundational skills and concepts, and they delight in self-expression. They feel a sense of accomplishment and joy because they are in control of their actions.

DRAMATIC PLAY AT DIFFERENT STAGES

The early stages of play involve exploration and practice. Infants crawl to investigate the measuring cups in a bottom kitchen drawer. Toddlers and two-year-olds repeatedly nest or stack those cups, but they may also pretend to drink out of them. This emergence of symbolic play in the second year of life (between twelve and twenty-four months) is an indication of children's developing cognitive abilities to make objects, gestures, actions, and, eventually, words stand for or represent something or someone else. As children grow, the gestures, actions, and language that accompany their representations and creative expressions become more complex. Pretend play that is initially centered on themselves starts to involve others. Toddlers who pretended to drink from a cup soon give their stuffed animals a drink. Three-year-olds depend less on realistic objects such as a real cup to prompt dramatic play. They may substitute another object, such as a clam shell, for a cup. Later, they are able to rely on just the mental image of a cup. Simple actions are organized into sequences and pretend scenarios, such as making tea and having a tea party. This progression in children's ability to represent their experiences parallels the development of language and literacy from concrete to more abstract.

The preschool years have been called the golden age of symbolic play. Whereas younger children's play is mainly solitary or parallel (when they play next to another child), the play of preschool and kindergarten children becomes increasingly social. Aptly termed *socio-dramatic play*, it is the primary form of play for four- to six-year-olds. It is person oriented rather than object oriented, and be-



cause of that, it is considered to be a higher level of symbolic play behavior. In addition to transforming objects and actions symbolically, socio-dramatic play entails role-play, where children transform themselves, pretending to be someone or something they are not. The gestures, actions, language, and objects they use must be consistent with the roles they assume. They also must coordinate their roles with those of other children. Doing so requires communicating outside the play to negotiate roles, plan actions, and solve conflicts: “I am the mommy and you are the baby, and I’m going to fix you something to eat.” Then it requires ongoing communication within the play itself: “Here’s some nice warm soup.” As their play evolves, children move back and forth between reality—“Let’s pretend I have to get ready for work,”—and fantasy—“Bye-bye, honey. I’ll be home soon.” This transition in and out of the play frame helps children communicate and understand social cues. They learn to interpret the behaviors of other children and respond appropriately. This process also helps them understand that other people’s thoughts and feelings can be different from their own.



Pretend play with others provides multidimensional opportunities for learning and practicing skills in all areas of development as children create complex scenarios together. Play usually lasts for at least ten minutes, but it can be much longer as play partners coordinate roles, communicate, and interact to enact pretend episodes.

Preschool and kindergarten children also create the physical frameworks for their play. Sometimes their efforts focus mainly on constructing things together such as roads and tunnels in the sand. At other times, their creations become stages for dramatic play. They might assemble everyday materials to set up a hospital or shoe store, and then take the roles of doctors and patients, shoe sellers and customers. In either case, the structures or settings they create represent what they understand about such things. Simultaneously, the process of creating these frameworks themselves enables children to acquire and refine fundamental skills.

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN DRAMATIC PLAY

Many factors influence children's dramatic play. You may have noticed differences in the amount, themes, roles, degree of realism, use of language, and level of activity in their pretend play. As described earlier, age is a primary factor. Toddlers and two- and three-year-olds often engage in solitary dramatic play, and their play is usually object oriented. They may pretend to drive a car or put a stuffed animal to bed. They also can be directors, making their toys act out particular sequences of actions, as can older children who are playing alone. In group situations, three- to six-year olds usually join together in person-oriented fantasy play. The roles they choose can be more or less realistic. In general, younger children in this age range tend to act out realistic themes based on everyday experiences—say, pretending to be a mommy or brother—and they are more reliant on realistic props to stimulate their play. As children's experiences in the world increase and their symbolic abilities develop, they are more likely to enact roles that are less family centered, less realistic, and less dependent on realistic props.

Gender can also influence themes and roles. Girls more often adopt domestic and person-based themes and roles; whereas, boys tend to gravitate toward adventure and object-based themes and roles. It's quite common to see a girl pretending to be a mother or a particular storybook character and to see a boy driving a car or becoming a superhero. As in other areas, boys tend to be more physically active and less verbal in their fantasy play. Boys also tend to have more gender-typed interests than girls do. For example, they might be less inclined to play house than girls would be to put out a pretend fire. Since play is based on daily experiences, exposure to screen media also influences the content of children's play. More exposure results in less realistic themes and roles.

Socioeconomic status may also be a variable in the amount and depth of children's socio-dramatic play. It should be noted, however, that research finds varying effects of class and economics. Any actual differences might be attributed to access to play materials and environments that support play as well as experiences that inspire it. Culture, parenting styles, and family expectations may also affect children's dramatic play.

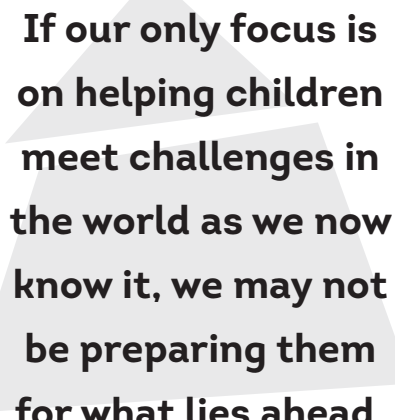
It is important to remember that these are tendencies, meaning that on average more or fewer children of a particular age, gender, or background will display these differences. Tendencies should not be interpreted as expectations for how individual children will or should play. Nonetheless, knowing there may be differences in dramatic play can help you plan accordingly and maximize the opportunities children have.

DRAMATIC PLAY AND INNOVATION

More than two thousand years ago, the Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, "Change is the only constant." We could argue that change has sped up considerably since his time. None of us can know what children's lives will be like in five years, let alone in twenty years. Babies born today may live to see the twenty-second century. We can only guess what political, social, economic, or technological developments will transform their daily lives. Adapting to and thriving in rapidly changing times requires more than basic academic skills. It demands resourcefulness, flexibility, teamwork, a creative frame of mind, and an internal sense of responsibility and self-discipline. It also requires a willingness to take risks—to generate and test new ideas without fear of failing or being discouraged by the preconceptions or evaluations of others.



In the current intense focus on common standards to ensure children measure up on standardized tests, opportunities for learning these kinds of skills and attitudes are often lost. In his 2006 *TED Talk*, “Do Schools Kill Creativity?” noted innovation and creativity expert Sir Ken Robinson said, “We don’t grow into creativity. We grow out of it. Or rather, we get educated out of it.” A 2010 *Newsweek* article by Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman, “The Creativity Crisis,” quotes faculty of a major Chinese university on the topic of America’s focus on standardized curriculum, “You’re racing toward our old model. But we’re racing toward your model, as fast as we can.” That same year, 1,500 IBM executives from around the world who were surveyed selected creativity as the most important factor for future success. If our only focus is on helping children meet challenges in the world as we now know it, we may not be preparing them for what lies ahead.



If our only focus is on helping children meet challenges in the world as we now know it, we may not be preparing them for what lies ahead.

Creativity is not solely connected to the arts. It involves using previous experiences to create new connections to solve problems. Every field emphasizes thinking outside the box. In elementary and high school classrooms, an emphasis on project-based learning has been shown to increase students' problem-solving abilities and creativity. And indeed, projects conducted with younger children that enable them to

investigate and display answers to their own questions provide many opportunities to develop these intellectual dispositions and skills. Be that as it may, dramatic play, the primary form of play for preschool and kindergarten children, is associated with high levels of creativity.

Dramatic play provides a risk-free arena where children can explore and experiment with ideas, test and evaluate their skills, and add to and change the environment in their own ways. In role-play, children act as if they are someone else, imagining and weighing possibilities. This helps them analyze situations from different perspectives. Pretending to be someone else, with all the gestures, actions, and language that entails, also gives children practice thinking divergently as they consider different things they can pretend to do. After they have decided what and how to play, their attention shifts to staging the play they have planned. Their thinking becomes more convergent. Creativity and innovation rely heavily on divergent thinking, but to accomplish goals, convergent thinking is also necessary. It's no wonder that research shows that young children who spend a good deal of time role-playing have high scores on measures of creativity.

If you are like most teachers, you hope the children you teach will be lifelong learners. Even though that term is somewhat cliché, its connection to personal growth and social progress cannot be overstated. Lifelong learning requires a desire to figure things out, to actively make sense by making personal connections, to look at things from different perspectives and imagine possibilities, and to be unafraid of making mistakes. Do these attitudes and skills remind you of the things young children do in creative play?

PLAYTIME *is* Learning TIME!

Play—particularly imaginative or pretend play—is not just fun; it is foundational to children's learning. Play boosts brain development in many ways: from memory and flexible-thinking skills to communication, social-emotional, mathematics, science, and literacy understanding.

In **Play Today**, Ann Barbour, PhD, shows you how to get the most out of children's playtime with thoughtful preparation, then stepping back and letting the creativity and learning begin. Dr. Barbour offers dozens of easy-to-do play scenarios that will spark imaginations. With some simple props and donated items, you can transform your centers into rich and rewarding learning spaces for the children in your classroom.



Ann Barbour, PhD, is a professor emerita of early childhood education at California State University, Los Angeles. She has been an educator for more than 30 years. She is also a content advisor for *A Place of Our Own/Los Niños en Su Casa*, a television series for parents and caregivers of children from birth to five, broadcast daily on public television stations throughout California.


Gryphon House
www.gryphonhouse.com

GH 10059

U.S. \$14.95

