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a child's story  
for grownups



E. W. TEDLOCK, JR.

## *The Little Engine That Went Backward*

[for David, who saw it]

ONCE UPON A TIME, REALLY NOT SO LONG AGO BUT A LONG WAY OFF, THERE WAS A BOY WHO SAW A STRANGE LITTLE ENGINE GOING ALONG UNDER HIGH HILLS.

This boy had seen engines before, and heard them too. He lived out in the vast, open land of New Mexico. And there he had seen the big, streamlined, yellow and red engines of the western railroads, shooting straight across the land beside the roads. And he had heard them too, throbbing and humming their powerful Diesel-electric motors. And he had heard their voices, big bull-frog voices warning the people that they were coming very fast. They sounded like grown-up people in a great hurry.

Now, far away from these giants, the boy saw and heard this strange engine, the little engine that went backward.

He was riding in the car with his father and mother, and his sister and brother. For a long time they had been winding and turning through the blue hills of Tennessee. Then they entered a valley, and there was a shiny railroad track going along straight among the trees.

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*E. W. Tedlock, Jr., authority on D. H. Lawrence whose latest Lawrentian venture has been a visit to the British Isles to follow the kicked-over traces of this author, teaches contemporary fiction at UNM. The drawing of the little engine which accompanies this story is the work of his son Dennis.*

Then they saw a cloud of smoke coming down the track, and his father said: "Do you know what?"

What his father said was part of a game they played.

The boy answered: "No, what?" And his father said, in a surprised sort of way: "Here comes a STEAM engine."

The boy looked and looked and listened and listened, and the smoke got bigger and bigger and he began to hear a panting HUFFING sound, and a round, black engine rumbled up and by, not as fast and smooth as the big, gleaming western engines, but with much more HUFFING and CHUFFING and breathless PUFFING of white steam from its sides.

This engine was not, of course, the little engine that went backward.

No. They had to drive a long way through the valley before they saw this engine. In fact, they had nearly forgotten about engines, when suddenly, on the other side, they saw a railroad track again. Even the track was strange. It looked tinier and not so straight, and at first it seemed to be moving instead of lying there nice and quiet on its bed. Then suddenly there was a soft huffing and puffing and rolling sound, and the little engine glided toward them through the trees, GOING BACKWARD, pulling a train of tiny cars by its nose.

But all they really noticed was the strange little engine, and the wink of its headlight, like an eye, and a soft panting voice that said: "Did you think I would be a big, noisy engine? Did you think I would be going forward like all the other engines?"

The father looked at the boy, and the boy looked at his father, and they began the game again.

"Do you know what?" said the father.

"No, what?" answered the boy, though he knew what.

And his father said in a surprised sort of way: "That engine was not only a steam engine. It was going backward."

He stopped the car, and they all turned their heads and looked backward to where the little engine had gone. And there it was, just a little way down the track, stopped, with its headlight softly winking at them.

They looked at each other. And the father said: "Do you know what?" And they all said: "No, what?" And he said: "I want to talk to that engine."

The boy answered: "So do I." And his mother and his sister and his brother all exclaimed: "So do I." So they turned the car around and went back to where the little engine was waiting, chuffing and huffing

and puffing, and winking at them with the eye of its headlight. They all got out and dodged across the road full of forward racing cars to where the little engine waited among yellow flowers growing in the cinders.

"Hello," said the boy. "We want to talk to you."

The little engine gently raced its wheels and answered in a low, whistling voice: "I want to talk to you, too. What do you want to know?"

"Well," said the boy. "Of course we want to know why you go backward."

"No reason why I shouldn't," said the little engine.

"But," the boy said, "all the other engines go forward."

The little engine raced its wheels rapidly, backward, and whistled rather sharply: "Anybody can do that, and anybody does. I'm not anybody, and I hope you're not anybody. At least you stopped to talk to me, and you had to go backward to do it."

"Well, as for that," said the father, "we turned around. We didn't go backward. We came back."

"Same thing, nearly," the engine said, racing its wheels a little, backward, showing how it was done. "You came back, even though you were coming back frontward. Now, look at those people out there," and the little engine winked toward the road, where the cars were racing by, all going forward. "See all those anybodys, doing what anybody can do?" It raced its wheels contemptuously.

The boy liked the little engine. He looked at the cars on the highway, all going forward, and he thought of all the other engines he had seen, all going forward. "You're right," he said. "You're wherer than everyone goes, and backward is better than anyone knows."

The little engine winked at him, and blew a little ring of white steam gently up, and raced its wheels very gently but very fast. "Thank you," it said. "You can come to see me do it any time you like. Do you want to see me do it now?"

"Yes," said the boy. "Oh, yes."

The little engine chuffed once, and huffed once, and began to puff and roll away, winking its headlight at the boy all the time. It gathered speed, and went away backward down the track. And after a while, all they could see was its wink, and then even that was gone.

The boy and his father and mother and his sister and brother dodged across the road and got slowly into the car. It seemed that the only thing they could do was go forward.

"I'd like to go backward," said the boy.

"So would I," answered his father. And his mother and his sister and brother all said: "So would I."

So, for a while, his father backed the car down the road. But it was getting late, and they were a long way from home. Besides, all the other cars were going forward, and that made it hard for them to go backward. So after a while his father sighed, and they all sighed, and his father turned the car around, and they went forward, just like anybody's.

### ADVICE TO SCHOLARS

*A shuttered room is best for taking notes:  
Lust of the eyes can ruin the sternest mind  
If one so much as glance outside. What gloss  
Of furry diction, of whatever close-bred  
Rarity, can break the mongrel hold  
Of any season loose within the year?  
Green world, white, or brown—a peek through a broken  
Slat is fatal. All earth's citations prove  
No systematic thumbing of the leaves  
Can match a maple's index.*

*I tried it once. Objectively I sat  
Correlating incunabula  
Beside a window giving on the moon.  
Stolidly I studied vellum texts,  
Emending Gothic vowels with flat precision,  
Until that subtle satellite had spun  
Deep into the casement's orifice,  
Keats-like. I erred: I looked—the garden's ghost  
Impaled my brain upon a moon-spiked sky,  
Crippling my cry for shutters.*

—LARRY RUBIN