

Colouring the road to Oz

Barbara Reid

Résumé: *Barbara Reid évoque la maison familiale et les moments précieux en compagnie des livres, puis son travail d'illustratrice, qui l'a conduite à lire les textes écrits à sa manière propre.*

For me, the subject "My own story: plain and coloured" brings to mind the movie "The Wizard of Oz". Just as Dorothy's home in Kansas appears in black and white with full colour being reserved for the dreamland of Oz, as a child my own life seemed rather plain in comparison to the colourful worlds to be found in books. (It also seemed a very hard task to express my own thoughts with words instead of someone else's with pictures.)

Books have always been important to me. As a small child I was an early riser. House rules kept me in my room until 8.00 a.m. As a result I spent about two hours every morning playing with my books. I knew them all by heart but their entertainment value could be stretched by making up new stories to match the pictures, or by inventing a story that made sense when I went through the book backwards. I carried on imaginary conversations between the characters. I even chewed on the metallic spines of certain books for the tingling sensation they gave my teeth. It can be said I really *devoured* my first books!

Another wonderful introduction to the book world was being read to. My mother and I would lie on her bed for a quiet time each day and she would read aloud, such books as *The Moffats*, *The secret garden*, Edith Nesbit books, and anything by Gerald Durrell or with animals in it. I could stare into space and visualize the characters and their surroundings. I don't often get the luxury of being read to now, but I still enjoy good radio for the same reasons. The story can flood into my mind, but part of the brain is free to imagine, interpret and "colour" it.

Once I could read for myself there was no stopping me from escaping to other worlds whenever I got the chance. I became very good at reading late into the night under the covers using the illuminated dial of my electric clock to see by. Reading Rumer Godden made me think with an English accent for weeks. I became Elsa the Lion (*Born free, Living free* etc., etc.) for a whole summer. My favourite books were C.S. Lewis's Narnia series. I was constantly wishing myself into that exciting world to perform noble deeds, instead of sit-

ting trapped in a pastel classroom looking at the clock and reproductions of the "Lone pine" for what seemed like one hundred years.

A great outlet for this frustration was drawing. I could draw my favourite characters, or myself as I would like to appear in a story. It was possible to prolong a book after it ended by drawing what happened next.

Being very shy, I spent a lot of time observing people and their behaviour, another endless source of drawing material. Drawing is also a super way for a shy person to communicate--a caricature of a teacher or a cartoon of class big shots is a sure ticket to popularity without having to talk much!

It would be nice to think a career in illustration occurred to me back then. When I see some biographical information neatly typed in chronological order it even appears to have been a direct course of action. However, when I honestly look at my story it's really a case of doing what I liked and avoiding the rest, with no clear goal in sight. If you keep doing what you like, you get good at it. If you get good enough you don't have to do the other things any more.

I liked to read and draw. Good reading ability and quiet behaviour in class often convince teachers a student is "bright". I shamelessly exploited this attitude and constantly volunteered for special projects: clearing up the art room, making posters for concerts and fun fairs, producing plays and backdrops improved my artistic skills and neatly sprung me from the monotony of the classroom and some math lessons.

This kind of behaviour worked in high school as well. Dazzling science models and diagrams helped obscure the fact that I wasn't taking much in. High marks in English, history and art helped to establish a studious reputation. On the final math exam I had answered all I could in the first ten minutes. The rest of the paper I filled with an illustrated essay on the John Donne poem that contains the lines "Ask not for whom the bell tolls. . ."--which seemed appropriate. The kind teacher passed me with a 50% on the condition that I never, *ever*, take a math class again. A promise I have kept!

By this time I assumed I would become a writer. I loved what writers did and wanted to be one. It should have occurred to me that as much as I admired writers and their craft, I never wrote myself--except an assignment. (Like this!) Whenever I had ideas to express (which was often) it came out in drawings. While I admired artists and illustrators, my favourites were all dead and it never seemed a realistic career choice.

As usual, it was a case of doing what I like that steered me at the last minute to choose the Ontario College of Art over journalism at Ryerson. On the day each of the colleges and universities displayed their attractions at our high school, I was drawn (no pun intended) into the O.C.A. room for two reasons: there were only three others in the audience and, the two graduate students doing the presentation were extremely handsome, colourful and Bohemian--complete with ponytails. This was a rare thing to see in my very normal North

Toronto neighbourhood. After half an hour I was convinced my career was in art.

At least half the first year students at O.C.A. in 1976 naïvely said, "I'd like to illustrate children's books." It was very trendy at the time; reproductions of many classic illustrators' work were appearing on greeting cards, wrapping paper and expensive coffee-table books.

Four years of O.C.A. tore our minds apart and reassembled them. My career plans swung from art direction to typography to storyboard rendering. Illustration won in the end, but like all my fellow grads I knew that *no-one* becomes a children's book illustrator now-a-days and, that all forms of children's illustration were for struggling newcomers only. It was the bottom rung of the illustrator's ladder in terms of respect and especially with regard to money. The word "starvation" was associated with children's illustration.

Starting out as a freelance illustrator (a real job with enforced hours never occurred to me) I had a portfolio with a bit of everything in it. I did lots of jobs in many media, including plasticine. Just as in school, it was very rewarding to do a good job--to please someone with artwork. Being a beginner, I did much of my work for school textbooks. To my surprise I enjoyed the challenge of making fun, exciting pictures within the strict restrictions imposed by textbooks.

As usual, I put much more energy into assignments I liked and the other jobs began to fall by the wayside. People pictures, humorous work and children's things took over the portfolio and plasticine work took up the largest share. The children's book scene in Canada was going into a boom time just as I was steering myself into that market--a happy coincidence for me! While textbook, editorial and advertising work continue to pay the bills I am surprised and pleased to find I am primarily a children's book illustrator (and obviously not starving!).

I feel very fortunate, and a little guilty. I don't have to report to an office, I can be alone as much as I like and have found a socially acceptable way of spending most of my time in an imaginary world.

The first read-through of a manuscript opens the doors to the author's world and it's up to me to interpret it visually--a real honour and a thrill. I can surround myself with reference material and props to get in the mood of a book. I can act out the different parts and talk with silly accents in the privacy of my studio. And, most importantly, I can make the story my own in a small way by including very personal images and ideas that the author's words have stirred up.

My happiest moments come when I can solve a problem. For example, how to represent Tweedle-Dum and Tweedle-Dee (*Sing a song of Mother Goose*) without recalling Tennyson's classic version. After lots of pencil chewing the idea finally came. By turning them into turtles they are already dressed for battle and in combat greens. It's a simple spoof of wars in general and the

turtle shells become a perfect device to show their cowardice and retreat from the crow. Bird lore gained from research for "Have you seen birds?" made it obvious that the crow should make off with the shiny rattle to round out the story. Most observers won't get all that by looking at the picture, but I always hope that somewhere, someone thinks the same way and enjoys the jokes. At the least, it's personally very satisfying to come up with just the right image.

After all this self-searching, I have to conclude my story is quite a *selfish* one! In my attempts to escape to an Oz or a Narnia I've avoided the plain world as much as possible and done what I enjoy as much as possible--colouring.

Barbara Reid's *Have you seen birds?* won the prestigious *Ezra Jack Keats* award for innovative illustration. Her *Playing with plasticine* helps others have fun making their own pictures.



Stéphane Poulin, Barbara Reid and Suzanne Durançeau at their presentation.



Montreal illustrator Stéphane Poulin listens attentively as Toronto illustrator Barbara Reid answers a question about her work.