



# Brian Wildsmith: A retrospective

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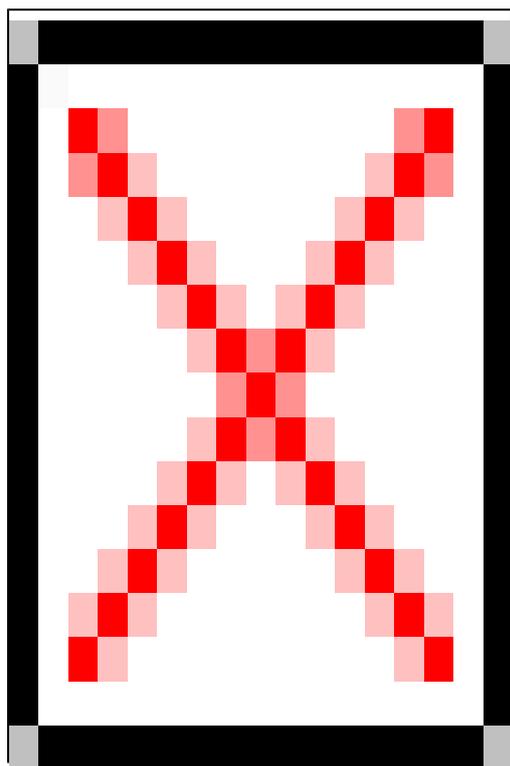
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**Joanna Carey** assesses his unique contribution.

In addition to Beatles, Mini-Minors, mini skirts and moon landings, the fabled 1960s also witnessed a revolution in the world of picture books. Developments in colour printing opened up limitless possibilities and, along with artists such as Charles Keeping and John Burningham, Brian Wildsmith was quick to recognize the implications of the new technology. Wildsmith is now 80 and **BfK** invited **Joanna Carey** to assess his unique contribution to children's illustration.



When **Brian Wildsmith's ABC** won the Kate Greenaway Medal in 1963, it was startlingly original. Now, nearly 50 years on, the images are still bold and surprising, often cropped in unexpected ways with no mimsy borders, or unnecessary detail. The brush strokes have an impetuous tactile quality, the paint looks thick and fresh, and even now you feel that if you closed the book, the pages would stick together.

The colours shout, sing and whisper, according to the mood. The red and yellow apple is juicily painted, fat, round and comfortable with itself, while the unicorn is a nervy creature, an ephemeral vision on a misty blue ground. There's an impressionistic butterfly, hastily painted, and a violin, whose darkly varnished, perfectly proportioned presence strikes a note of authority.

But it's the kettle that sings the loudest, with a scumbled base of cadmium orange emanating a palpable sense of heat. This alphabet was clearly the work of a painter?

## Formative years

Brian Wildsmith was born in Yorkshire in 1930, the son of a miner. His talents pointed to a career either in music or science, but at the crucial moment of decision, an inner 'voice' told him to study art, and after two years at Barnsley art school he won a scholarship to the Slade in London to study painting. He didn't fit in with the 'public school types' there and even a shared interest in cricket failed to break the ice. Canvases and paints were expensive so initially he concentrated on drawing, and spent a lot of time in the print rooms of the British Museum and the National Gallery, familiarizing himself with the works of the old masters.

'Illustration courses' didn't really exist in those days, and anyway, as a Fine Art student, he didn't expect to become an illustrator. But, looking back, he says 'it does seem very odd that in all my years at art school, nobody ever mentioned the subject of how I would ever earn a living!' He solved this problem (after his National Service) by getting a teaching job which he combined with freelance work for various publishers, doing cover illustrations and honing his graphic skills on the black and white line drawings that were at that time (though sadly no longer) such an important element in children's fiction.

His big break came when his work was spotted by Mabel George, an imaginative editor at OUP. She was about to try out a new Austrian fine art printer. As an experiment she commissioned Wildsmith to do 12 colour plates for the Arabian Nights. The publisher was pleased, but the luminosity of his paintings and his loose graphic style failed to impress the reviewer in the **TLS** who dismissed them as 'pointless scribbles'. Wildsmith was dismayed, but Mabel George wasn't bothered. 'I knew we had something interesting on our hands' she said, 'and that review has convinced me.' She thereupon commissioned him to create his **ABC**.

It caused quite a stir and Wildsmith, still a painter at heart, found in himself a growing passion for children's books. 'Art is food for the soul,' he likes to say 'and a picture book represents a child's very first encounter with art, so I felt this was a way I could make a contribution to the world. A drop in the ocean maybe, but this work offered a chance to communicate to children the importance of such things as kindness, compassion, friendship, beauty.'

## Imaginative freedom

Because he was new to making picture books, Wildsmith knew nothing about the process, and if the result was unusual, it wasn't because he was trying to be different; he was, quite simply, 'unaware of the constraints' 'I wasn't bound by convention, I just went my own, admittedly somewhat arrogant way. This was the 1960s remember! Liberation! The age of freedom and self expression!'

That freedom and self expression has led to 82 books that range from Mother Goose nursery rhymes, fables and fairy tales, to explorations of the natural world and stories from the bible 'as a 'cradle catholic' he says, 'I was brought up on those stories and they're some of the best in the world.'

He also turned his attention to poetry. It was customary in the early sixties for poetry to be accompanied by well behaved line drawings that knew their place, but Wildsmith's illustrations for **The Oxford Book of Poetry for Children** have an airy, almost unruly sense of imaginative freedom. And there's a show stopping moment in the drawing for William Blake's 'The Tyger' which with its soulful intensity, and its inescapable eye contact, is the first of the many tigers that prowl through Wildsmith's work.

Animals have always played a vital role and with the three non-fiction books, **Wild Animals**, **Fishes**, and **Birds** (all separately published in the '60s, but now gathered together in one volume, **Animal Gallery**) he was in his element and could allow his painterly instincts a free rein. This resulted in some stunningly beautiful images, rich in colour, texture and pattern, that explore the natural world. Bringing the art of illustration a little closer to the art of painting, these books are as rewarding as they are inspirational. I know from many years as an art teacher that these pictures offer children a valuable chance to see paint handled with freedom and spontaneity in a way that relates to their own efforts, but is importantly free of condescension, or false naivety. The use of colour and texture is magical in its variety 'the wrinkled

skin of the elephant is thickly painted, then blotted and scraped, while the rhinoceros is delicately depicted in line and wash; then there are the fishes ? rainbow fish flaunting their jewel colours, on a splashy spattered background, and the subtly stippled trout, hovering in the underwater stained glass luminosity of it all. Most memorable of all are the owls whose hypnotic stare fixes you and defies you to turn the page.

With the Fables of la Fontaine, Wildsmith turned wordsmith, retelling the stories with an economy which, particularly in the case of the Hare and the Tortoise, is in marked contrast to the extravagance of the flower-powered backgrounds where pinks and purples jostle with shimmering blobs of viridian green, cerulean blue and vermilion ? all the colliding colours of the sixties.

Animals aren't subject to fashion, but in almost all picture books the characters inevitably get to look a little dated as time goes by. Wildsmith avoids this by dressing them in non-specific, highly coloured archaic costumes ? such as those in **The Miller, the Boy and the Donkey**. This is a fable about a donkey that must be carried on a palanquin, to keep its feet clean. It's very funny but because Wildsmith's humour never involves resorting to anthropomorphic winks and nudges, and because the donkey is so beautifully, naturalistically drawn and so intricately textured, the gentle humour is exquisitely subtle.

**The Circus** (1970) is another sensitive piece. The elegant plumed horses are drawn with a controlled rhythmic grace, as is their rider, and the brightly coloured geometric designs that decorate the circus ring work in counterpoint to the drawing of the animals' natural markings. But circuses have changed over the years, and with its caged lions, performing seals and bicycling bears, this is a thought provoking period piece, and although there is a gentle humour here, with cheerful dogs leaping merrily through hoops, the tiger poised to perform in all his forlorn symmetry is a heartbreaking reminder of the way things were.

**The Little Wood Duck** (1972), although a rather slight story, is one of Wildsmith's most beautiful books. While the psychedelic butterflies, wilful colours and splodgy brushwork of the flowers and foliage, place this firmly in the '70s, the drawing of the fox and the duck and the delicate handling of the fur and feathers have a tenderness and attention to detail that you often find hidden away in early Italian paintings, and, in addition to that, there's an oriental feel to Wildsmith's exquisite watercolour technique which perfectly captures the thistledown texture of the duckling, so much so, that you almost feel it, soft and insubstantial in your hands.

In 1974 Wildsmith received a telegram out of the blue from the American film director, George Cukor, inviting him to design sets and costumes for a film of Maeterlinck's **The Bluebird**. It was irresistible; he met the stars including Jane Fonda, Elizabeth Taylor and an eight-year-old Patsy Kensit. It was filmed in Leningrad but although it provided Wildsmith with some unique anecdotes ? he's an engaging storyteller in real life, as well as on paper ? the film was not a success. However, the book that rose from its ashes has a gentle magic of its own.

But the Bluebird fiasco was a rare exception; most of Wildsmith's ideas are his own. ?The thing about my ideas,? he once told me, ?is that they arrive in my head fully developed ? it was like that for Mozart too apparently ? but the trouble is, in my case, weeks can pass before I realize that it's a bloody awful idea. So I have to be absolutely certain it's right before I start work on it, because once I start, I'm stuck with it for seven or eight months. So I don't even begin work until I've really fallen in love with the idea.?

Wildsmith is now 80. In 1971 he moved to the south of France with his wife and children ? a long way from London, a long way from Yorkshire. He loves the sun and I'm reminded of his glorious retelling of la Fontaine's fable, ?The North Wind and the Sun?, with the elemental vigour of the illustrations evoking the ultimate redemptive powers of warmth and gentleness. He's done 82 books which have sold worldwide in their millions and the house is full of his huge abstract paintings.

But he is puzzled by what he perceives in the UK to be a gulf between fine art and illustration ? ?It's a cultural thing? he says. ?Illustration is undervalued in the UK. But it's different elsewhere.? He's done lecture tours in Canada, the US, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand. And in Japan, where he has a huge following, there's a whole museum devoted

to his work.

But things are changing here, and exhibitions of his work are due to open in London and Newcastle in the next few months.

**Joanna Carey** is a writer and illustrator.

### **Master of Colour: Brian Wildsmith at 80**

Exhibitions celebrating his work open at The Illustration Cupboard (22 Bury Street, London SW1Y 6AL) 24 March ? 24 April 2010 and at Seven Stories (30 Lime Street, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 2PQ) 2 April ? 18 July 2010.

Brian Wildsmith?s books are published by Oxford University Press.

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