



Authorgraph No.112: Nicola Bayley

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Nicola Bayley interviewed by **Joanna Carey**.

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Nicola Bayley's career took off like a rocket with her very first book. Her degree show at the Royal College of Art (just a few small, distinctive paintings) had caught the eye of publisher Tom Maschler and **Nicola Bayley's Book of Nursery Rhymes** was published by Cape in 1975. Given that illustrated nursery rhymes represent a vitally important first encounter with art and literature for the very young, was it not quite a responsibility for a beginner?

'I didn't think of it like that' she says, nor did she delve into the arcane origins of the rhymes. 'I simply took the Opies' nursery rhyme book and chose my favourites. The imagery was all there in my head.' Illustrated with unusual charm and finesse and an almost enamelled luminosity that was to become her hallmark, the book was a huge success and Nicola, tall and strikingly beautiful, in ankle length Indian print skirts and glossy curtains of long dark hair was the talk of the town.

Now in her forties she has an elegant, enigmatic composure that sits engagingly with a robust sense of humour and an emphatic, Woosterish turn of phrase ...

'Yes I got heaps of attention. Looking back, I realize I was spoilt to bits but at the time I wasn't really aware of what a lucky cove I was' or of how the pace would gradually slow down.' But did early success affect her development as an artist? Did it restrict her to doing more of the same?

'Cripes no! my style was already well defined' 'I knew exactly how I intended to work.' The illustrator Fritz Wegner who taught her at St Martin's (where she went after leaving her convent school) agrees? 'Nicola always knew just what she wanted to do, but was very secretive' always had screens round her desk? teachers had to request an audience with her?? and it was the same at the Royal College of Art where Quentin Blake was head of the illustration department. 'Yes, it was rather odd the way she rigged up curtains round herself' but if she wanted to be alone, that was fine by me? certainly better than not coming at all.'

This somewhat eccentric isolation (due in part, she says, to depression following an accident that had befallen a friend) had an interesting effect. 'Although I'd previously done large flamboyant paintings (and she had at one point considered studying stage design) I found I was forever challenging myself to work on a smaller and smaller scale' she says. And Blake recalls, with some amusement, that her final folio 'was scarcely bigger than a note-book' she could have kept it in a handbag.' And some of her illustrations were so small they had to be enlarged for printing.

Nicola lives in South London with her husband, and son Felix. She is no longer curtained off, but the house does have a certain fairy-tale air of seclusion ... an atmosphere, perhaps of Cocteau's film **La Belle et la Bête**, with a melancholy statue in the hall and a cluster of 'commedia dell'arte' masks peering sightlessly from above ... As in Nicola's illustrations, every inch of the glorious interior is richly textured and packed with absorbing details? curios, antiquities,

shelves groaning with elderly dolls, clowns, cats and crocodiles; marble busts, theatrical costumes, feathery folderols and a bewildering diversity of pictures. It is a hot day and Nicola has been trying to work outside. 'But some huge insect has crapped on my drawing?' she says, dabbing at it vigorously with a cloth.

Her studio is downstairs – a cool, dark, booklined room. There is a Cecil Beaton print, a poster for Abel Gance's Napoleon and round her desk an army of antiquated (mostly cat related) tin toys, lead figures, puppets and tiny curiosities – a bit cobwebby, some of them – 'but now and again I do a little dusting with a paintbrush' – and the intricate array of pens, pots, quills, nibs and brushes makes it hard to tell which are collectors' items and which are the tools of her trade.

Nicola works in watercolour on thick 'Fabriano' paper that does not buckle and so does not need stretching. Still preferring to work on a small scale – 'any larger, and I just lose it?' – she uses a lightbox to transfer her drawing from the rough, then builds up the painting with a meticulous pointillist technique. Like coals glowing in a furnace, the tiny dots of colour jostle one another to create an intense energy, or meld together in gentle diffusion. Form is defined by infinite textural and tonal variety and with the subtle handling of light, each richly patterned composition, however small, has the depth and complexity of a miniature peepshow or theatre. (It is fascinating to enter the very fabric of some of these paintings through a magnifying glass – and easy to see why one critic was inspired to call Nicola 'the sitting room Seurat?...')

Paintings take three weeks to complete so she is understandably put out when people assume she takes short cuts with an air brush ... And she can be severely critical of her own work – or just plain rude – 'look at this page design?' she says of an early book 'what a frightful hotch-potch of fried egg shapes – and look at that LEADEN cow jumping over the moon! One wonders how it ever left the ground!'

She has worked with an impressive list of authors: Russell Hoban – William Mayne – Christopher Logue – Richard Adams wrote **The Tyger Voyage** specially for her – how exactly does she so successfully anthropomorphize noble creatures like tigers without robbing them of their natural dignity? 'I'd certainly never ridicule an animal – I start by drawing them – without reference – sailing, drinking tea or whatever, just to get the effect I want ... Then I study the animal's anatomy, its movement – see just what would be possible – then I can let the information merge with my imagination.'

The Patchwork Cat is Nicola's favourite book, probably because the model was her own cat Bella (1974-1992). With her affectionate, intimate observation and subtly heightened naturalism, these illustrations explore every inch of the story. And in Hoban's **La Corona and the Tin Frog**, there is an unusually powerful interplay between words and pictures – so to what extent does she actually confer with her authors?

'Very little?' she says, though at Walker Books, her roughs for the **The Mousehole Cat** did lead to discussions with author Antonia Barber who – at first – felt strongly that the fisherman's cat should be a Tabby, not black and white.' But this manuscript really made my spine tingle – and in my mind the Great Storm Cat *had* to be a Tabby – whose wavy markings would be echoed in the waves of the sea, and the sound waves of the storm ... *that* was my way into the story.' She did a lot of local research and drawing in Cornwall and the operatic scale of the story, and the shifting balance between fantasy and reality is perfectly matched both by the wide, imaginative sweep of her seascapes and the reassuring warmth of her domestic interiors. But as I admire her magical use of light ... the lanterns ... the moonshine ... Nicola gazes ruefully at the bearded, silver-haired fisherman on the cover – 'WHY, Oh WHY did I give him that stupid hat? He looks just like that bloody Captain Birdseye...'

While there is always a gentle element of wit in her illustrations, she admits to feeling uneasy about **Fun with Mrs Thumb** – about a doll trapped in her own home by a predatory cat.' Initially, I was totally beguiled by this, with all the glorious possibilities of the dolls' house interiors ... and the cat, seen so huge through the little windows – but ultimately it was so bleak! The doll had no chance ... there was no element of hope and really, that's just not on??

Cats find their way into almost all her work but her latest book, **The Necessary Cat**, is, like its author, entirely devoted

to them. A celebratory catalogue of feline facts, fiction, fantasy and folk-lore, its easy-going layout, she says, gave her a chance to 'loosen up?', and in addition to her customary miniature paintings, she offers spirited black and white line drawings, silhouettes, delicate plant studies, witty pastiches, tiny vignettes and, alongside a Wordsworth poem there is a freely drawn pencil sketch of a kitten, which, she says, at 14 inches across is 'COLOSSAL by my standards?'. And the variety of styles allows her to pay homage to some of her own heroes ... among them Quentin Blake 'even as a child I used to snip his drawings out of **Punch**'? Pauline Baynes whose line drawings for the Narnia Chronicles so entranced her ... and Rex Whistler whose decorative wit and Arcadian vision is clearly so close in spirit to her own. And, of course, Kathleen Hale, the creator of Orlando the Marmalade Cat.

At this point Nicola's own cat enters the room and yawns rather pointedly before settling down. It is clearly time to go. Nicola relishes the solitary nature of her occupation; she listens to the radio while she works 'or I did until they messed up the Radio 4 schedule' now I mostly listen to James Brown on tape.' Unfailingly modest, she talks with an entertainingly deceptive nonchalance about her work 'It's a bit like knitting really' once the drawing's done, there's absolutely nothing I like better than to settle down with a huge area of fur to fill in.' And she does not stint herself 'you just have to look at **The Necessary Cat** to see what a very good time she has been having.

Details of books mentioned

The Patchwork Cat by William Mayne, Red Fox, 0 09 998320 6, £4.50 pbk

The Mousehole Cat by Antonia Barber, Walker, 0 7445 0703 0, £9.99 hbk, 0 7445 2353 2, £4.99 pbk

Fun with Mrs Thumb by Jan Mark, Walker, 0 7445 2534 9, £8.99 hbk

The Necessary Cat by Nicola Bayley, Walker, 0 7445 1924 1, £10.99 hbk

Nicola Bayley's **Book of Nursery Rhymes**, **The Tyger Voyage** by Richard Adams, and **La Corona and the Tin Frog** by Russell Hoban, all published by Cape, are now out of print.

Joanna Carey is an author and illustrator and the former Children's Books Editor of the *The Guardian*.

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