



# Babette Cole Obituary

Article Author:

[Nicholas Tucker](#) [1]

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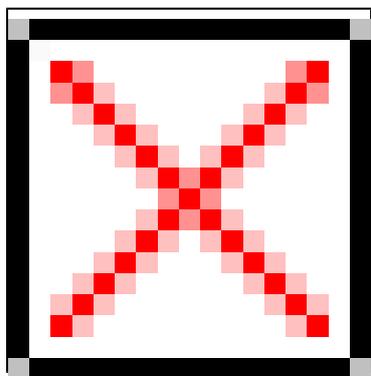
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**Nicholas Tucker** remembers the creator of **Princess Smartypants** and **Hair in Funny Places**

**Babette Cole September 1949 - January 2017**



Babette Cole, who has died aged 67, was for many years chief eccentric within the normally well-ordered world of British children's literature. Tiny and with elfin features, endlessly chatty, brightly dressed, totally uninhibited, full of laughter and purveyor of frequently outrageous gossip, she was the centre of attention at any publisher's party. Writing or illustrating over 150 picture books as well as producing dozens of greeting cards and book jackets, she brought energy and humour to everything she did. This included a range of topics sometimes still considered hardly suitable for young audiences.

Born in Jersey in comfortable circumstances, Babette spent much of her youth in the company of her pony. Wishing to become a professional show-horse owner, she decided to become an illustrator in order to raise the money required. A turbulent course in graphics and print-making at Canterbury College of Art followed, with her teachers unhappy at a growing taste for the grotesque that was to stay with her all her life. She brought out two picture books while still a student. These were followed in 1978 by **Nungu and the Hippopotamus**, arising from stories she heard after a spell in remote Africa in the company of an anthropologist.

Eventually relocating to Wales, she wrote and illustrated [The Trouble with Mum](#) [3], featuring a child worried with good reason that her parent was different from others, given that she was a witch. This was the start of a successful **The Trouble with** series later bringing in Dad, Gran and an uncle who doubles as a pirate and marries a mermaid. Drawn in pen and ink against concentrated water-colour or pastel backgrounds, her cartoon characters sported the long noses, bulging eyes, skinny arms and legs, big smiles and unruly hair that were to persist in the rest of her work.

Some television work followed but fame came with [Princess Smartypants](#) [4], a feminist, revisionist picture book about a young royal who wears dungarees and never wants to marry. This was one of the runners-up for the 1986 **Kate Greenaway** medal, an honour repeated next year with **Prince Cinders**. Here, a put-upon hero is bullied by three older brothers and only moderately helped out by a small, dirty fairy whose spells do not always work. Her most successful

work, [Mummy Laid an Egg; Or, Where Do Babies Come From?](#) [5] features her usual grotesque looking middle-aged couple trying to teach their children about sex through an increasingly muddled series of metaphors. In return their young then come up with some frank cartoon drawings of the real thing. Described by one critic as a godsend to parents, it sold nearly three million copies and was translated into 72 languages. Further shocks to some came in [Hair in Funny Places: A Book about Puberty](#) [6], an equally candid look at adolescent development.

During all this time Babette also owned and worked in a series of small farms breeding show ponies, hunters and cobs, just as she had always planned. An accomplished side-saddle rider, she was still competing well into her sixties. In 2015 she illustrated a 70th anniversary edition of Enid Blyton's **Five on a Treasure Island**, with grinning, cartoon young characters ruled over as ever by Aunt Fanny who looks not much older herself. But in the same year out on a walk she was almost trampled to death by a herd of Devon cows disturbed by her two dogs. Suffering a fractured shoulder, broken ribs and nearly losing an ear, she vowed to eat more steak from then on but never quite regained her health. She died from a collapsed lung, having married her 24-year-old partner and muse James Gutans, with whom she had lived for six years, two days before her death.

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