



# Obituary Dick Bruna

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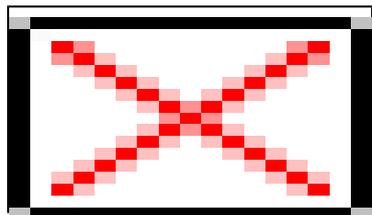
[223](#) [2]

Article Category:

Obituaries

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**Nicholas Tucker** remembers the creator of **Miffy**



Dick Bruna, who died aged 89, wrote and illustrated over two hundred picture books in addition to devising many book covers and posters. The adventures of his most famous character Miffy, a small female rabbit dressed in human clothes, were translated into forty languages with total book sales exceeding 85 million copies.

Bruna started drawing from an early age, designing covers for his school newspaper. Having kept rabbits as a boy, he had a soft spot for these animals that had also provided his family with much needed food during the war. In 1955, he told his oldest son Sierk a series of stories about the white rabbit. Drawing the same rabbit as well, Bruna decided to fuse story and illustration into a picture book called *Nijntje*. This childish mispronunciation in Dutch of the phrase 'little rabbit' was translated in 1970 by Olive Stone into the name Miffy.

Always outlined with a thick black line, staring straight at the reader and accompanied on each opposite page by four lines of text, Miffy did not prove an instant success. Parents found the little books with their abundant use of white space and no sense of perspective too simple. The six different primary colours Bruna limited himself to also seemed over-bright. But infants thought differently. With each mini-adventure conveyed in only twelve pages and covering ordinary events such as visits to grandparents, making a snowman or going to school, here were stories easy to recognise from real life. Miffy's static presence and narrow range of expressions, limited by a face that consisted only of a diagonal cross for a mouth and two dots for eyes, meant that infants 'freed from other distracting detail' quickly came to understand what she was feeling. The books themselves, measuring only 16x16cm, were also easy for young hands to grasp.

Not everyone was enchanted. Dutch librarians declined to recommend his twelve picture versions of **Hop o?-My-Thumb** and **Cinderella** on the grounds that these complex, rich stories should never be simplified down to such a basic level of illustration and text. But Miffy herself proved unstoppable, both in books and later as a brand, where she featured on over 10,000 products, although Bruna vetoed suggestions that she should also appear on toy guns and racing cars. Later Miffy stories also partially answered criticisms of previous sentimentality by taking on tougher themes to do with race and disability.

Taking an average of three months over each title, Bruna would produce hundreds of sketches until he was satisfied. Years were also spent finding just the right shades of the reds, blues, greens and yellows that make up the bulk of his effects. Those he finally settled on are now known as Bruna colours. First painting his character in outline with a specially trimmed paintbrush, he would then cut out coloured paper shapes to make up their clothes and supply backgrounds. There was then the long process of trial and error until he was convinced that he had got every expression

right for its part in the story. If Miffy is sad, she may be allowed one tear, but in general the skill in getting over her emotions using the minimum of detail is one that Bruna managed to perfection.

Knighted by Queen Beatrix in 1993, he lived to see a statue to Miffy erected in Utrecht. This was joined in 2006 by the Dick Bruna Huis, a permanent exhibition of the artist's best work housed opposite the town's Centraal Museum. Cycling seven days a week from the house he had lived in for forty years to his studio in Utrecht every morning until he was over eighty, he remained a universally popular local figure. Modest, unfailingly hospitable to his fans, he combined being one of Holland's principal exports with an unassuming charm of manner that stayed with him to the last.

**Nicholas Tucker** is honorary senior lecturer in Cultural and Community Studies at **Sussex University**.

Page Number:

13

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