



Photo by Jane Bown

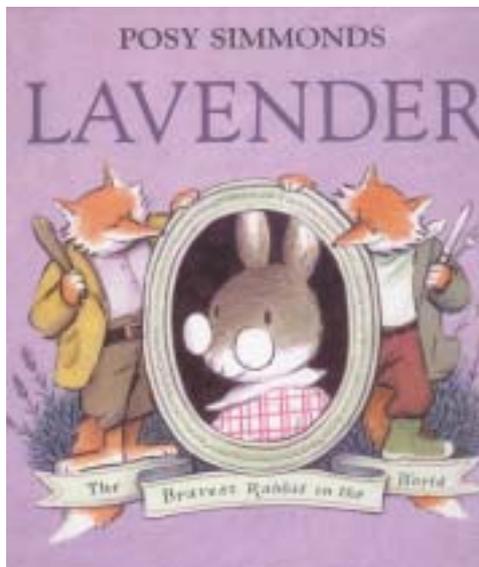
Truly Professional Posy Simmonds

Lavender is a gentle, bespectacled rabbit who becomes a heroine by accident (“which is how many of the bravest acts do come about,” Posy commented). She and her friends become entangled with a party of splendidly effete, pizza-eating town foxes (*‘Eat rabbits?!’* they exclaim with horror, *‘Eat chickens?! Yuk! eeyuk!!’*) and, subsequently, their country cousins, more conventional foxes who regard Lavender as food (*‘Hub is that it?’* – *‘One measly rabbit!’*). But potential danger is conclusively eliminated by Lavender’s

Quiet, contained, poised, Posy speaks, as she draws and writes, with all the directed precision of the true professional. Even when pointing out how efficiently her spectacles - when temporarily out of use as eyeglasses and dangling from a cord about her neck - double as a tray for catching biscuit crumbs, her innate dignity was unimpaired. Humour, as one would guess from her keen-eyed observation of the middle classes (*‘...PITY there isn’t a decent butcher...& you just CAN’T get coffee beans!’*), invariably hovers near, lending just that extra little lift, that crimping of the edges, to what she says.

“The *Guardian* offered me the space” – a weekly episode for a hundred weeks – “and they chose the shape, tall, like a giraffe. All I knew was that I would like to do something with a beginning and end.” Posy Simmonds was talking about origins, starting-points, spurs to creation. “Then, on holiday in Italy I saw a woman ... oh, she was so demanding, so bored ... and an Italian friend said, ‘She looks just like Madame Bovary’ ...” The result, of course, was her graphic novel extraordinaire, *Gemma Bovary* (with the substituted vowel). “I’d only ever written speech balloons before. The whole narrative took forever.”

The germ that prompted *Lavender* (subtitle: *The Bravest Rabbit in the World*), her new picture book for children, was implanted when “I followed a fox as it walked casually up the hill.” Her gesture indicated that this encounter took place close by (Posy and her husband live in a handsome house in a London square, not far from King’s Cross station). “I saw another sitting opposite the house, quite unperturbed. Urban foxes are slightly lighter in colour than country ones,” she added, as supplementary information ... “I thought, right, this is going to be a children’s book.”



involuntary aptitude for serendipity. “I’m afraid,” Posy admitted, “I may have been a little unfair to the country foxes. Eating chickens and rabbits ... After all, it’s what they do.” Nonetheless, she managed to sound relatively untroubled at this revelation.

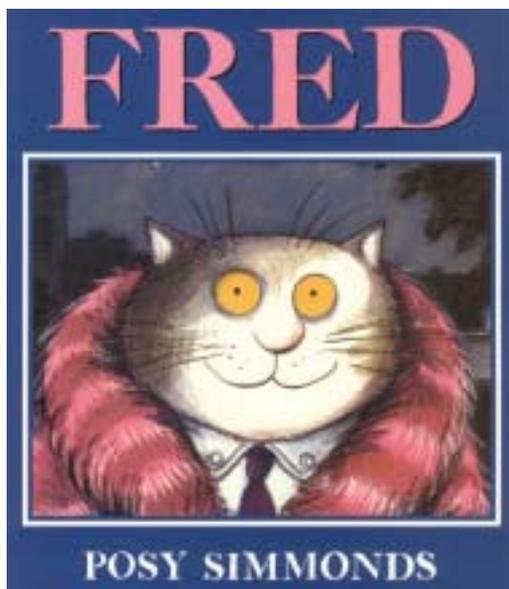
“I’ve always drawn,” she said. “I could draw, but I wasn’t good at anything else. When we [she, her sister and three brothers] used to be sent out to play, I would pray for rain. We lived in Cookham, and I was aware of Stanley Spencer ... There was a local lady who gave painting lessons to children. It was wonderful because we used proper cartridge paper. And she gave me a very good paintbrush for Christmas.”

As a child she poured over bound volumes of *Punch* dating from the 1900s up to 1938 (“Some of the jokes were awful, but the *drawings...*”), at the same time assimilating a pantheon of personal favourite illustrators, Giles, Searle, and Pont – “I particularly liked Pont”. Her absorption in the work of cartoonists influenced her own drawing to the extent that “my characters always had [speech] balloons coming out of their mouths.” On top of all this, “an American girl in the village asked me” – a swiftly assumed suitable accent – “Would you like to come to our house and read comics?” Brief pause.

“American comics ... Oh, the *smell* of American comics,” she intoned with the olfactory appreciation of the true connoisseur.

When she first attended art school (actually, the Sorbonne, for Art and French) she thought she was “going to do painting. But I knew I also wanted to write,” which prompted her move to the





“Tom Maschler asked me, ‘Why don’t you try a children’s book?’ I replied that I’d love to do one. Of course, doing a children’s picture book meant that I had to work in colour, and I wasn’t used to that. After all,” she added, “black-and-white and grey are essentially black-and-white and grey ... There are so many colours – so much choice – and I wanted to use all of them.” It was a ‘problem’ Posy quickly overcame, and the result was a masterpiece: **Fred**.

Famous Fred was joined in time by the Lulu books (**Lulu and the Chocolate Wedding**, **Lulu and the Flying Babies**) and **Bouncing Buffaloes**. In addition, Posy



spirits could just as well have been the result of Mediterranean warmth. Professionalism will out. And the black-and-white and grey had never looked better.

Chris Stephenson

Central School of Art and Design in London, where she studied graphic design, a mainly typographical course. But her self-confessed “cack-handedness” manifested itself when it came to setting type. “I prefer to draw type,” she declared, and, apart from the narrative chunks in *Gemma Boverly*, all her words have the appearance of drawn type.

“After art school I did what all art students do” - showing the portfolio. “I began to get some newspaper work, editorial drawings. The *Times* Women’s Page, I remember, phoned to ask me to do some space fillers – three column-breaks in an article about loft conversions - and could I come in and do it there? Before this, a drawing took me three weeks, now here I was, balancing on the edge of a desk, having to get it done by five o’clock. And there it was next morning with my name in tiny type. I was paid £5.”

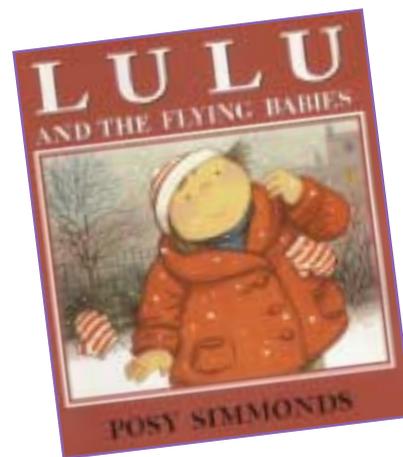
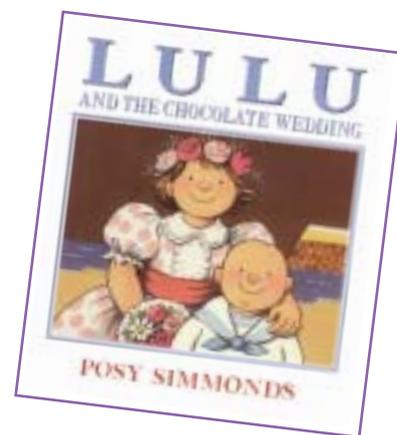
After a brief spell with “a new newspaper called the *Sun*”, Posy joined the *Guardian*. First as a “kind of dogsbody” on the features pages - “It was hair-raising, but wonderful training” – then as the writer and illustrator of a sharp-eyed, penetrating, detailed, witty and wicked comic strip.



injected new zip and bite into two classics with her illustrations for Daisy Ashford’s **The Young Visitors** and Hilaire Belloc’s **Matilda** (never have a pair of eyes conveyed so much delicious malignancy). And she is currently engaged on a new children’s book (“I’ve got to get it ready for Bologna,” she told herself). “I think,” she said, “children’s are more difficult to do than adults’. There’s more you have to leave out ...it’s a matter of judgement. And I always think you should include something *true*.”

As well as working on the new book, she is currently producing a weekly episode for the ongoing series **Literary Life**. It is a characteristically acute (and needless to say, funny) scrutiny of all aspects of the book world, from dyspeptic, hard-done-by authors to posh publishing soirées to lowly bookshops (“I wanted to include an independent bookshop because I think they’re doing something heroic”). Each episode is written and drawn the week immediately preceding its appearance in the Saturday Review section of the *Guardian*.

The week I met Posy (at the beginning of January) the weather had been cold and, as she said, “with perfect timing” her heating system had broken down. So the forthcoming instalment was composed in unfavourable conditions, to say the least. “It was *freezing*,” Posy affirmed. Consequently, I looked at Saturday’s (11.01.03) offering with increased interest. Would adverse meteorological conditions have taken their toll on the usual smooth flow of wit, blunted the unerring insight, and cramped the artistic style? Not a bit of it; the warm, affectionate humour and unalloyed good



(Q From *Mrs Weber’s Diary*)

Lavender Random House £10.99 ISBN: 0224047299

Fred Random House £5.99 ISBN: 0099264129

Lulu and the Flying Babies Random House £5.99 ISBN: 0099451158

Lulu and the Chocolate Wedding Random House £5.99 ISBN: 0099451165