



Over the Hills and Far Away

A collection of nursery rhymes from around the world Collected by Elizabeth Hammill

What a treasure! A beautiful book of nursery rhymes from across the English-speaking world, lovingly collected by Elizabeth Hammill, co-founder of Seven Stories, the National Centre for Children's Books. She had nurtured the idea for many years but, although it seemed an impossible task, she decided to take the plunge and the result is this extraordinary collection accompanied by stunning illustrations from seventy-seven international artists. The book is also an outlet for her interest in the literary culture of other countries and in 'words on the move'.

Trying to make ourselves heard over the sounds of the busy Seven Stories' bookshop, I asked Elizabeth what impelled her to tackle this mammoth task. "Nursery rhymes," she said, "belong to all of us wherever we live. Our English Mother Goose rhymes have travelled the world – migrating with ease and begetting intriguing cultural variants as they go. New home grown rhymes emerged in the Americas, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere. More recently, indigenous verse as well as that of later migrants has been translated into English. Today, in this diverse world of ours, I wondered why there was no collection that reflects and celebrates this wonderful multiplicity of 'infant songs' and voices – no collection where each rhyme or set of verses in it is illustrated by artists from the relevant cultures."

Why not create such a collection herself – one that would also support Seven Stories and reflect its artistic aims? Elizabeth first put this idea to the noted African American artist and storyteller Ashley Bryan in Maine in 2000. An avid folklore collector himself, he was hugely enthusiastic and her research began in his extensive library. She explored (and collected) anthologies of infant songs here and abroad as well as collections by early twentieth century anthropologists of Native American, First Nation, Chinese, and African American verse – many now available online through Project Gutenberg. In South Africa, unable to find any nursery verse, she contacted the Special Collections Librarian at the University of Cape Town who came up with an intriguing

counting out rhyme. Australian academics informed her that Aborigine verse could only be anthologised if permission to use it was given by the family it belonged to. She and Australian illustrator Jan Ormerod attempted to do this, but sadly Jan passed away and completion wasn't possible.

Some beautiful verses that Elizabeth found initially in contemporary collections of indigenous American verse for children proved, on tracking them back to their original sources, to be inappropriate for the very young. "Context matters and so does translation," Elizabeth told me. "A Tsimshian 'Laughing song' from British Columbia – sung to a girl to



A copy of the book being presented to the Duchess of Cornwall by Elizabeth Hammill and Chief Executive, Kate Edwards, during a visit to Seven Stories in January 2015



From *Over the Hills and Far Away*:
top left, *Little Miss Muffet* (English) illustrated by Clara Vulliamy,
top right, *Little Miss Muffet* (Australian) illustrated by Bruce Whatley.



bottom left, *Little Miss Tuckett* (American) illustrated by Amy Schwartz,
bottom right, *Lickle Miss Julie* (Jamaican) illustrated by Jenny Bent.

keep her happy and strengthen her for the hard adult life awaiting her – existed in several versions – the laughing beat of the original slowly disappearing from increasingly anglicised translations.”

I asked how she ultimately chose which rhymes to use and then how to arrange them. “I looked for wonderful, sharp, sometimes surprising, sometimes funny, sometimes poignant but always memorable language, images, and storylines. I kept an eye out for changing versions of different rhymes; verses where fragments of other rhymes appeared in unexpected combinations; verses or rhymes that reflected different cultural views on a particular theme like ghosts and spirits or nature. My arrangement begins with an invitation to gather round and listen from a Tohono O’odham singer and loosely follows the course of a day as well as the ages of man, the seasons, wind and weather, kings and queens and so on to night time and lullabies again. Sometimes I put one rhyme on a double spread, sometimes a grouping of rhymes. The American ‘Yankee Doodle’ sits opposite the English ‘The Grand Old Duke of York’, while four counting out rhymes from England, South Africa, America and the Caribbean share a double spread as do four variants on ‘Little Miss Muffet’ in which she is frightened by a spider (English), a grasshopper (American) ‘Bredda Anancy (Jamaican) and a boxing wombat (Australian).”

How did you find seventy-seven illustrators? “It took almost two years,” Elizabeth told me, “and it proved to be an extraordinary adventure. I was keen to match verses and illustrators, culturally and temperamentally. Initially I wrote to artists I knew or had worked with or whose work I was familiar with: Shirley Hughes, John Lawrence, Robert Ingpen, Jerry Pinkney, Axel Scheffler, Emily Gravett... I invited them to illustrate a double spread of verses that I thought they would happily connect with.

As I wanted the book to be a first gallery of art too, I also looked for emerging artists like Yasmeen Ishmail, Mark

Hearld, Jon Klassen and Gus Gordon and unpublished artists, running an illustration competition for UK art students with my publishers Frances Lincoln and Seven Stories which was won by three young artists, Holly Sterling, Pippa Curnick and Sian Jenkins. The internet was invaluable for it was here that I discovered artists previously unknown to me: the Tohono O’odham watercolour artist Michael Chiago to illustrate the opening verse; the Tsimshian artist Bill Helin to illustrate the ‘Laughing Song’ which he remembered his grandmother and aunts singing to him, just as the African American painter Daniel Minter recalled his grandmother singing the spooky ‘Wen de big owl whoops’ and ‘Don’t talk, Go to sleep.’ Contacting an Inuit artist proved more problematic but, to my surprise, I found an Inuit museum in London whose director put me in touch with the Nunavut Arts and Crafts Association in north eastern Canada and hey presto – Andrew Qappik agreed to illustrate an Inuit finger rhyme.”

The brief for all the illustrators was simple. Each could interpret their rhyme or group of rhymes freely – looking for connections between rhymes if there was more than one on a double spread. Some artists experimented with style: South African artist Niki Daly with origami, Australian illustrator Ann James with gum tree leaves. Some chose to hand letter their texts, others to use a typeface that seemed appropriate for their interpretation. The pages were their own!

The ensuing collection is a wonderful treasury of finger rhymes, lullabies, counting rhymes and traditional rhymes. Dip in, find old favourites, make new discoveries. Take a trip around the world from Scotland to New Zealand and delight in this extraordinary collection.

Valerie Bierman

Over the Hills and Far Away All royalties are donated to Seven Stories.
Published by Frances Lincoln £14.99 ISBN: 978-1847804068