

Helen Oxenbury

A Life in Illustration



Helen Oxenbury is an icon of the children's book illustration world. Her bibliography reads like a roll call of honour within the industry and there can't be many schools and libraries that don't regularly use her books in classrooms and storytimes, nor many families without personal favourites. It was a great pleasure to interview Helen and talk about her life and work, portrayed beautifully in *Helen Oxenbury: A Life in Illustration*, an outstanding new book published by Walker Books. Written by renowned American children's book scholar Leonard S Marcus, it's filled with observations and insights spanning Helen's life, not only capturing her spirit and achievements but doing it with warmth and humour, making the reader feel they are participating in a conversation. The book opens with Marcus' interview with Helen and then explores her life and career through eight chronological chapters from 1938 to the 2000's, each beautifully illustrated with photographs and Helen's pictures.

An observation made in the book is that, "... she had a gift for crafting words and pictures that brought adult and child together – how did she know her readers so well?" Her response is she thinks it's because she's a reader herself. She read to her children when they were small, and now she reads to her grandchildren. She believes it's important to be honest with children and not to talk down to them. Her books are always slightly autobiographical,

reflecting some of her own experiences as a parent and grandparent. She knows how she felt in those situations and thinks other adults and children understand that and feel the same way. I think she's right and it's this that makes Helen have such a special place in readers' hearts.

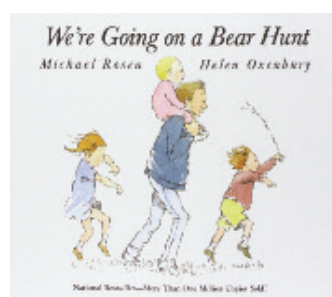
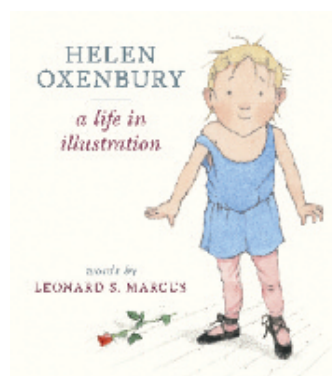
I picked up on a quote about Helen's childhood that "Nearly all the books in the Oxenbury household were on loan from the local library". Helen recalled it was her local library that always provided her with much needed books to read. She thinks the cuts to the arts are disastrous, believing that a world without literature, libraries, music and opera would be dreadful. She feels a much higher value should be placed on these by decision makers, because the arts offer learning experiences that will stay with a child throughout their life.

Even in these difficult financial times, Helen feels the UK publishing industry is still one of the most exciting in the world with first class authors and illustrators, and publishers who put consideration and care into achieving high standards of design and production. She feels passionately that children need to be given the best books and pictures that move them and reach beyond the page, into the soul of the reader.

Helen is a multi-award winner. She won the prestigious CILIP Kate Greenaway Award twice and was the first English author to receive the Eric Carle Award. She and John (Bunningham) were jointly awarded the Book Trust Lifetime Achievement Award in 2018. She's incredibly modest, reflecting that it was lovely to receive awards for doing something she loved so much, but it is the responses from children and families to her books that mean the most to her.

The book's postscripts include pieces from Trish Cooke, Mem Fox, Phyllis Root, Michael Rosen and Martin Waddell about their experiences of working with her and we talked about these collaborations. I told her I used to use the traditional rhyme 'We're Going on a Bear Hunt' with groups of children all the time when I was working as a children's librarian. When I first heard that she and Michael Rosen had adapted it for an illustrated picture book, I wasn't at all sure

how they could do it and keep the vibrancy of the action rhyme. When I saw the finished book, of course, they had formed a perfect partnership and produced a wonderful book that has become a classic family favourite. She laughed, when



she let me into the secret (admitted by Michael in the book), that he wasn't at all sure when he first saw the pictures either. When she is collaborating, she usually works through the publisher so that she isn't influenced by the authors, as she believes "they trust you to take their text and put your own interpretation on it, and it works better that way". She did this even with *There's Going to Be a Baby*, the only book where she collaborated with John.

Preparing for this interview, re-reading her books and looking through the bibliography at the end of the book, made me realise just how much her books resonate with me. Looking back, they perfectly capture moments on a memory journey through my career as a children's librarian and through my life as an aunt and great aunt. She said, "I've always loved illustrating books and fifty years later I still love it." Her respect for the children and adults reading her books, plus a tongue in cheek poke at the funny side of everyday situations, is one of the reasons she is such a firm favourite with families. Her books bring stories to life in different ways and help readers access the story through her delightful illustrations.

Of her illustrative techniques, she says "It depends on the story and the characters. When I read the text, I always get a feel for the medium it needs for the illustrations. *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* felt like such an English adventure so needed watercolour, whereas *So Much!* and *Big Mama Makes the World* needed acrylics. *Farmer Duck* was definitely watercolour and set in East Anglia where I grew up." She told me that for some books, one illustration can take up to a week to do, because she keeps re-doing it, thinking she can get it better, but for others, they just flow and she's happy with them. She's also very particular about the colours she uses. She's currently working on a project for Penguin Random House, illustrating "a little known and darkly delicious" retelling of *Red Riding Hood* by Beatrix Potter. She says she's "carrying the story on a little further and having a great deal of fun doing it". The illustrations are stunning and I can't wait to have a finished copy in my hands.

I asked her who the illustrators are that she admires most. Her first response was "my husband, John, I admire him greatly, as well as Raymond Briggs, whose work was groundbreaking, Maurice Sendak and Edward Ardizzone for their originality, and E H Shepard because his illustrations always move me." We talked further about John and she said that if it wasn't for him, she wouldn't have become an illustrator and carved out the career that she has. He was the person who encouraged her and helped make it happen. As we spoke, her love for him and their family shone through and it was with the utmost sadness that I heard the news of John's death on the 4th January 2019. It is hard to find the words to describe the impact of his death because they all sound too small for the huge talent of John Burningham. The world of children's books has lost a giant. Millions of children and adults will not have the pleasure of enjoying new titles, and for this we all mourn. Helen, however



Red Riding Hood.
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has lost her best friend and the love of her life. I am sure that everyone joins me in sending her our deepest sympathy and our heartfelt gratitude for what both Helen and John have given to the world of children's books, individually and collectively.

Annie Everall



Helen with John Burningham.

Selected Bibliography:

Published by Walker Books

Helen Oxenbury: A Life in Illustration written by Leonard S Marcus £30.00
ISBN: 978-1406357943

We're Going on a Bear Hunt written by Michael Rosen £6.99
ISBN: 978-0744523232

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland written by Lewis Carroll £8.99
ISBN: 978-1406360431

There's Going to be a Baby written by John Burningham £7.99
ISBN: 978-1406331080