



Angela Barrett:

Exquisite Skills in Drawing and Painting

It is rare today to find an illustrator who, through their skills of visual storytelling, can captivate and create so much atmosphere, drama and sense of place in their images. Angela readily transports the reader into different worlds, different moods and different times, in each of her twenty-seven illustrated books created over the last twenty-five years. Her colour illustrations in particular are beautifully crafted and, at the same time, kick open new perspectives on the accompanying text. In her most recent book, *Sylvie and the Songman*, written by Tim Binding, she proves that stories with pictures are not just for the younger child but also inspirational for the older reader, whilst giving a lesson in how mono colour illustrations can illuminate text.

Angela's illustrations merit multiple readings over time, with close examination of all the details within the carefully considered structure of the overall composition. No matter their size, scale or format each image meticulously encapsulates the essence of the story, often providing a subsidiary text to thoughtfully provoke a fresh reading and understanding of the narrative. She says, "I read and read again and try to express exactly how I feel about that particular situation. It's finding the important point in a picture: the very moment in the text that needs illustrating. For me that is always quite clear."

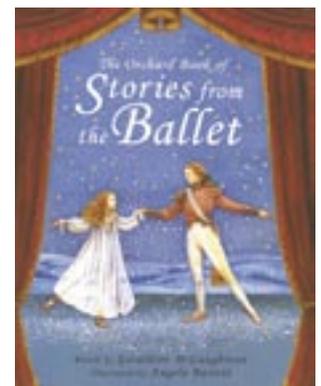
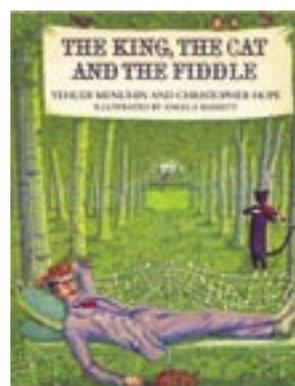
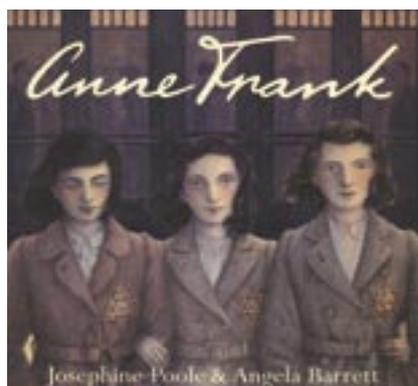
As we approached her apartment in London, the play of light on the trees reminded us of her unique awareness and use of light in her work. This was reinforced by a sunbeam highlighting her decoratively carved front door and the sunlight flooding her room and studio, reflecting on the rich range of surface colours and textures which surround her as she works. A huge desk dominates the middle of the room and a mirror throws back the expression of the illustrator/actor when Angela is trying to capture a pose or movement for a character in her illustrations. She quietly divulged that it was in this way that she posed for herself, in 1998, as Joan of Arc for the book



of the same title. The attention to detail and eye to beauty is never more immediate than in her choice of content and rendering for the carefully considered vignette illustrations for *The Orchard Book of Stories from the Ballet* in 1994. Each image stands as a striking and colourful visual souvenir highlighting an aspect of the story of the dance.

Angela was born and raised in Essex and childhood memories are very important to her in helping to create

composite images. This is especially true for her coastal pictures which appeared in *The Snow Goose* in 2007 and, a year later, *Sylvie and the Songman*. Her eight years training began at Maidstone College of Art, continued at the Royal College where she studied under Quentin Blake and concluded with the award of an MA. She wanted to become a narrative painter like the Pre-Raphaelites, making paintings based on literature and poetry. Someone had to tell her that actually she was an illustrator, but hadn't realised it herself! As a child she'd felt that "I wanted to be a painter. I didn't know about illustrators. I knew about pictures in books obviously, but I hadn't made the connection even though I drew pictures in series. I would invent sets of characters, drawing one or two to begin with, then go on obsessively until I wore out that subject." Another aspect of her work, which also began in childhood, is her preference for darker themes and subjects. She confessed, "When I think of all the things I was allowed to get my hands on as a child ... I wasn't restricted in any way, but I've always liked the dark and murky stuff." When young she felt put out by anomalies in an illustration; now though, as an adult, she enjoys the freedom and fun of adding things that aren't recorded in the text – but she is always careful not to contradict what is written down.





Detail from *Beauty and the Beast*

Angela has gained great recognition and respect for her work. She was runner-up in the Mother Goose Award with her very first book, *The King, The Cat and The Fiddle*, at the beginning of her career in 1984. She was a Nestlé Smarties Book Prize category winner in 1988 with her *Can It Be True?* and won the 1991 W. H. Smith Illustration Award for *The Hidden House*. She has also been shortlisted – three times – for the Kurt Maschler Award and once for the Kate Greenaway Medal in 1993 for *Beware, Beware*. Angela's method of working has changed little since, although her skills have been honed over time. It has always been a long process of building up an image from a drawing. "I always draw out in a fairly formal, finished way. I sometimes say I draw myself a colouring book and then I fill it in. I build it up in layers with lots of washes using water-colours, gouache and crayons on a Fabriano paper." Angela's very special ability for storytelling is inextricably linked to her careful construction of the illustrated page. A good example of this is the first colour spread in *Anne Frank* where she subtly hints at the suppression to come in the young girl's life by the claustrophobic nature of the room. The restrictive mesh surrounding the cot reinforces this feeling, as does the little teddy bear suspended on the side. This is contrasted by hope, shown in the reflected light on the baby's face, pierced by the expressive eyes looking outwards, alongside the symbolic freedom of the open window.

A further compositional device she uses regularly is derived from her interest in split screen effects from the world of cinema and film noir. For example, in at least two spreads of *Snow White*, she uses a panoramic spread showing an interior setting alongside a landscape which is divided by a vertical. It has the effect of being able to look at two key stages of the story from a single vantage point in much the same way as being able to see what is happening in the different rooms of a doll's house when you take off the front.

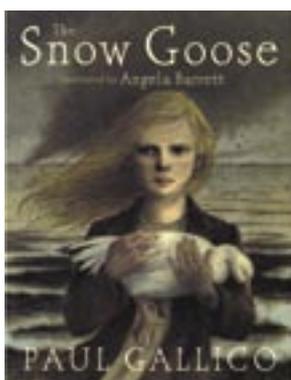
Another clever method common to Angela's designs is how the illustrations border the edge of the pages. Perhaps the most striking and typical would be pages 188 – 189 in *Sylvie and the Songman*. Here, at least sixteen fragments of illustration run to the edge of the page to reflect the comments in the text of scampering figures; 'animals were running everywhere'. She told us that she finds it exciting to see something pictorial extending right to the edge of the page. For these pages she'd tried another of her early ideas – to have some figures disappearing into the gutter of the book. She had thought that some might burrow down as fast as they could to escape, but it hadn't worked on this occasion. The parts that do appear certainly give the impression of movement and action to highlight the drama and intensity of the story.



Detail from *Snow White*

For the last few moments of our meeting with Angela, we felt very privileged to share the exquisite jewels that are the artwork for her new commission – *Night Fairy*. Stunning! As we were saying our farewells the sunlight settled on two small models; a fox and a large bird hiding behind a drawing board. Both have appeared in recent books. Confirmation – if it was needed – that Angela puts nothing down which is unqualified; all her work is thought through to ensure our edification and enchantment.

Mike and Theresa Simkin



Snow White Retold by Josephine Poole
Hutchinson Children's Books £5.99 ISBN: 978-2099185611
Anne Frank Written by Josephine Poole
Hutchinson Children's Books £5.99 ISBN: 978-0099409762
Beauty and the Beast Retold by Max Eilenberg
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Orchard £8.99 ISBN: 978-1843622987
Sylvie and the Songman Written by Tim Binding
David Fickling Books £12.99 ISBN: 978-0385611213