1997

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Katya Arnold: The Artist Whose Pictures Explode with Energy

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When I first caught a glimpse of Katya Arnold’s wild bird on the cover of Eric Kimmel’s retelling of *The Valiant Red Rooster*, I thought, “She is an illustrator to write about.” But, because I was leaving Utah and CBPR for an extended time, I didn’t purchase the book. Upon my return to Utah I stumbled upon *Onions and Garlic* (also retold by Eric Kimmel), and was drawn to the book because of my father’s infamous love for onions. The cover showed a wild young man trying to hold onto an active-looking sack of onions. Glancing at the name of the illustrator—Katya Arnold—didn’t ring any bells, but the energetic style did. The jagged lines reminded me of that wild red rooster, and I realized that these two lively images were by the same artist.

Katya Arnold was born in Russia. Her father is a math professor, her mother an art historian, and her husband an artist. She studied art at the Moscow Polygraph Institute, taught at Moscow University, lived in Jerusalem, and finally settled in New Jersey. Coming from her Russian background “where as soon as children learn to walk they are taken mushrooming with their families,” Arnold is also an avid mushroom lover. She has hunted mushrooms all over the world. At age three, her mushroom-hunting started about the same time she discovered the beauty in art. Her creation of pictures started at age twelve when she decided to become an artist. She now teaches in Brooklyn, New York, and shares with the children she teaches her love of painting and the books she illustrates.

Arnold’s illustrations seem to explode with energy for several reasons: the mixture of jagged (Arnold’s eleven-year-old relative called them “squiggly”), diagonal and strongly curved lines; packing the pages with lots of objects, people or animals; and very strong colors. For example, in *The Valiant Red Rooster*, when our hero takes aim at his adversary, the jagged lines and his rooster red color make the rooster bristle with anger. The diagonal direction of the bird’s body and the feathers flying off in curves make him look as if he has been propelled from a cannon. The peaceful villages and river in the background make the rooster’s energy even more dramatic.

In *Onions and Garlic*, the onions in the field surrounding the onion-loving king’s castle seem to grow before one’s eyes. The reasons—there are so many onions, and their curved lines contrast with the vertical green tops. The onions in the foreground have more and longer leaves than the ones near the castle, giving a feeling of movement as the eye sweeps from front to back.
When the brothers of our kind-hearted protagonist, Getzel, see for themselves the beaches covered with diamonds as big as goose eggs, Arnold’s energetic style paints the boys exploding with joy. Again, her jagged lines convey energy, and the boys’ leaping, bouncing movements (with Arnold’s use of diagonal shapes) remind one of athletes who have just made the winning point in the last seconds of a game.

The two brothers purchased enough garlic to fill a small ship. Then they set sail for Getzel’s island. They arrived after a long voyage.

Gedalyah and Hananyah looked around with astonishment. Everything Getzel had told them was true. They walked along the beach, picking up diamonds as big as goose eggs.

“Our fortune is made!” Gedalyah said.

He and Hananyah set out for the royal palace. They found it standing in the middle of a vast field of onions.

Katya’s Book of Mushrooms proclaims the illustrator to be a true mushroom lover and an expert at finding the edible kind. Her explosive strokes make the mushrooms seem like active characters in a story. The squiggly and diagonal lines, crowded pages, and strong, bold colors make her book about mushrooms an adventure rather than a peaceful mushroom-hunting walk through the woods. For example, her illustration of a grabby seagull accompanies her stories of animal mushroom lovers and showcases her exciting diagonal lines and bold, complementary reds, oranges, purples, and blues.

Katya Arnold’s exciting illustrations bring out the adventure of even the most mellow of stories, and her color and lines explode off the page into the reader’s heart.