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Douglas Florian: The Poet-Artist Who Views Life with Delight

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In 1980, Douglas Florian’s illustrations for Mirra Ginsburg’s *The Night it Rained Pancakes* received a starred review in the *School Library Journal*. Ginsberg’s retelling of a Russian folktale about two brothers—Ivan and Stepan—who try to conceal a pot of gold from their lord provides an amusing stage for the vivacity of Florian’s artistry. Florian’s simple, expressive illustrations immediately convey the clever, cunning of Ivan and the simpleness of good-hearted Stepan. Playing with the portrayal of the two brothers’ eyes, Florian captures the essence of their characters. Ivan’s brows are pursed, and his eyes meet the world in a very straightforward manner; Stepan’s eyes usually gaze heavenward, giving him the look of one who doesn’t quite know what is really going on. Florian’s attention to small but significant details is telling of his skill. Additionally, his illustrations focus on the feeling of what is portrayed in the writing. He is an artist who views life with delight.

Florian grew up in New York City, the son of an artist-father and a chef-mother. He attended Queens College in New York City in 1973 and also the School of Visual Arts (New York City) in 1976. Florian decided to be an artist when he was ten, influenced, he says, by his father’s paintings (mostly landscapes), which covered the walls of the house. Florian published work in several magazines, but soon tired of the rush of meeting deadlines. After the success of his illustrations for *The Night it Rained Pancakes*, he decided to write as well as illustrate.

Florian wrote and illustrated a series on nature which shows his ability to evoke a mood through watercolor illustrations. *A Summer Day* shows all the joys of a family’s day in the country—the lovely countryside, swimming, fishing, a peaceful sunset, catching fireflies, and the ride back to town. *A Winter Day* starts with eating a big breakfast, sledding, making snowmen, bringing in wood for the fireplace, and ends with warming toes. *Nature Walk* takes the reader on a walk, providing plant and animal identification along the way. *Vegetable Garden* starts with soil preparation and goes through all the steps of gardening, from planting to harvesting, illustrated with mouth-watering watercolors of fruits and vegetables. Each book is a complete experience, leaving the reader satisfied and content. The ideas are peaceful, but the use of colors is always lively. This is not an artist who wants to lull his viewers with shades of only one color. Instead, he wants his readers to wake up and enjoy the beauty of nature. The same is true of his books on work. *The Auto Mechanic* details a day in the life of a mechanic and highlights the mechanic by contrasting the blue of the mechanic’s overalls with the yellow and orange shades of the cars. Florian visually tells his readers that no matter what one is doing, life is not dull.

In 1995 Florian began to attract much more attention and acclaim with his poetry. His *Beast Feast* won both the National Parenting Publication Award Gold Medal for poetry and the 1995 Lee Bennett Hopkins Award for poetry. Florian’s poetry illustrations not only give attention to color, rhythm, and balance, but they also add the unexpected turn of events that are so much a part of the poetic view of life. In *Beast Feast*, Florian wittily captures the oddities in the natural world with his rhyme and paintbrush. The walrus with its rusty-red coloring is “Walrusty,” the barracuda is ravenous-looking, the chameleon is nonchalant, and the ants spell out “Ant City”
with their tunnels. The caterpillar poem states that a caterpillar is not a cat, while the illustration shows a caterpillar busily chewing a cat shape out of a large green leaf. Florian admits to spending a great deal of time on this breezy book. He actually had thirty poems and fifty watercolors from which he and his editor chose the twenty-one best poems and illustrations.

In the Swim, an equally entertaining view of the water world, features the unexpected twists characteristic of Florian’s work. His “Sea Horse” poem lists all the reasons why these water creatures should not be called horses. Yet the illustration here shows their strong resemblance to horses, complete with miniature saddles and reins.

In “The Sharks” poem, Florian says that “Sharks can park wherever they wish,” as emphasized by an illustration of a shark crunching down on a parking meter.

Finally, a favorite illustration accompanies “The Starfish,” who, although he may have little else going for him, is after all a “star.” The illustration shows a happy starfish sporting the dark glasses of movie stars trying to look as if they do not notice being noticed.

In School Library Journal (June 1993), Lauralyn Persson notes that “Florian’s seemingly simple watercolors grow more intriguing with each new book.” Perhaps this is because he has the poet’s talent for highlighting the unexpected. Indeed, Douglas Florian is an artist with a poetic vision who views life with delight.