Bethanne Andersen: Portrait of One Brave Artist

Martha Talman

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"We don’t have to do an interview to have fun," proclaimed Bethanne Andersen. The emphasis is definitely on “fun” with Bethanne who, fresh from the new faculty seminar at Brigham Young University, was ready to discuss design, publishing, children’s books, everything, in fact, except Bethanne Andersen.

Bethanne’s career as a children’s book illustrator is off to a flying start. Her picture book, Seven Brave Women, written by Betsy Hearne, was recognized with a Boston Globe Horn Book Honorable Mention in 1998. Commenting on the book, Bethanne says, “Oh, I just rode Betsy’s coattails on that one. I always wanted to do children’s books.” When pressed for specifics, she admitted that while doing a “drop off” at Greenwillow Books in New York she met two editors and had the manuscript in her hands five minutes later. “We trust you,” the editors said. The faith of the New York editors does not correspond to a large ego. Unassuming and humble, Bethanne speaks openly of divine influence and guidance in her life.

After receiving the text, Bethanne returned home to Idaho and thought about the “wonderful story.” Although her personal family history is different than the one in the book, she felt that the stories depicted women who “were” her family. She tried to illustrate how she believed each woman “would have wanted to be remembered.” The amount of thoughtful meditation spent on each picture is exemplified by her idea that an illustration of a woman becomes an icon, a symbol of that woman’s life. It is obviously not by accident that her illustrations seem well-married to the text.

The art of Seven Brave Women embodies the qualities that the women exemplify. Their characters are strong individuals who show that each person’s experience is significant. Bethanne’s art shows that the ordinary is beautiful. The soft palette, flowing lines, and peaceful expressions juxtapose the movement and decisiveness of the brushstrokes. These are stories displayed on a background full of depth and texture. Of the artistic elements, it is the use of line that stands out as extraordinary in Bethanne’s work.

The road Bethanne Andersen has traveled from Brigham Young University student to
children's book illustrator is as fascinating as the tales told in *Seven Brave Women*. Bethanne began her artistic career as an artist after graduating from Brigham Young University with a Master of Fine Arts (MFA) and has now returned to teach illustration, drawing, and computer animation.

“Although I always knew I wanted to be an artist, I came to BYU an aesthetic virgin with no high school art. Then I was taught.” The years since graduation have provided her with a wealth of experiences including working as an independent artist, doing magazine illustration with its attendant deadlines, mothering two sons, and studying at the School of Visual Arts in New York City. But her first and true artistic love is illustrating children's books.

Bethanne explains that at five and six years old, she didn’t just draw, she didn’t just make up stories, she made little books – written and illustrated. When praised for the quality of her illustrations, her response is, “I want to be much better. I’ll be better after about 30 books and with tons of work.” When complemented on the fluidity of her style, Bethanne answers, “Oh, I’m too tight, I’m working on looseness.” She credits the support of her family, especially her husband, attorney Steven, but adds that her sons are “better critics than collectors.” “I wish I had a penny,” for every person who says they want to illustrate or write children's books, says Bethanne. “You have to be incredibly driven,” she adds, “and have help. I wish it were easier, but each book is a miracle. It’s harder than I imagined.”

The illustrations in her latest book, *Ten Queens*, written by Milton Meltzer and published by Dutton Children's Books, exemplify the strength and individuality of the women who ruled. Each brushstroke is decisive, bold, and energetic. Even bejeweled and surrounded by flowers, it is clear that these are truly “Portraits of Women of Power.” There’s nothing frail here – even lace on Catherine the Great’s dress is painted with broad strokes. Choices of stronger colors, more defined lines, and higher contrast show these women in their glorious determination. The backgrounds of these illustrations are boldly textured and decorated with techniques such as impasto, spattering, and drybrushing. In Bethanne's 1979 *Project Report* for her MFA, she wrote, “By working with materials, lifting, erasing, smudging, and building up a surface, an effect was created which made drawing seem more alive.” The backgrounds are boldly decorated with diverse techniques such as spattering, drybrushing, and impasto. In her portraits, Bethanne has captured the passion and power of the women.

Involved with her next project, *Kindle Me a Riddle*, written by Roberta Karim, forthcoming in the fall of 1999 from Greenwillow Books, Bethanne is knee-deep in dummy boards and ideas. “In making a book,” Bethanne says, “you get to be the director and you get to play all the parts. I use techniques like background and character development.” Like each new project, this story of a pioneer girl and her father set in 1850s Utah written by Roberta Karim, presents new challenges. Bethanne used costumes and the authentic setting of the “This is the Place”
Historic Monument in Salt Lake City to create a real frontier feeling.

Of the three days each week she teaches, Bethanne says, "I like teaching the college students. They’re funny and I enjoy the youth and energy." In her second year of teaching at BYU, she sees her role as bridging the gap between painters and illustrators, between illustrators and artists. Teaching is helping those students who already possess creativity to "draw better, to see, to focus," and by using assignments, giving those who are already good draftsmen the opportunity to expand their creativity.

Bethanne promises that she will ask her mother for those little books she made as a child. "There are probably some great ideas in them," she says with her irrepressible wit. She rushes off to meet her next deadline. Bethanne Andersen has work to do. As she stated in her Project Report, "I long for more visual experiences which cause the mind to be intrigued after one leaves the painting’s presence."

Bibliography


