The Artist Who Prefers Fur to Scales - Jan Brett

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by Lillian Heil

If you’ve seen Fritz and the Beautiful Horses (1981), Annie and the Wild Animals (1985) or Happy Birthday, Dear Duck (1988) by Jan Brett, you may have wondered where she gets her ideas. Brett says they come from memories of her student days at the Boston Museum. She spent many hours at the Museum of Fine Arts and finds that the images of sculptures, paintings, porcelains, and even the designs embroidered on kimonos surprise her by turning up in her illustrations for children’s books. Her ideas also come from the places she has lived and traveled. She was born in Hingham, Massachusetts (1949) and now lives in Norwell, Massachusetts, on Pleasant Street. One of her recent books, a poem by Edward Lear called "The Owl and the Pussycat," combined old and new memories. Brett chose the poem because it was a favorite when her mother read it to her (and later, of Brett’s own daughter, Lia), Because one line of the poem said, "They sailed away for a year and a day," Jan Brett and her husband went to a tropical island that was "far away" in the Caribbean Sea to get ideas for illustrating Lear’s poem. She found colorful boats that became the "pea green boat" in the poem, a strange tree that fit what she thought a bong tree might look like, flowers, exotic fish, and colorful island clothes. When you read the book, you’ll want to watch for the fish story that goes along with the romance of the owl and the pussy cat. One of Jan Brett’s trademarks is the borders she uses to enrich, forecast the next event, and sometimes tell a parallel story as shown in the illustrations reproduced from The Mitten, The Twelve Days of Christmas, and The Three Bears.
In *The Mitten* (1989), each new animal that squeezes into the mitten appears first in the borders, e.g., while the badger burrows into the mitten, the left border shows a handsome red fox’s head, and in the right one, he is bounding towards the overstuffed mitten. Notice, also, the rich texture of the fur or feathers on the animals, the embroidery, and the birch bark background on each border. And don’t miss the postscript picture at the end showing a puzzled Baba when she sees one normal sized and one greatly stretched out mitten.

The borders for *The Twelve Days of Christmas* give us Christmas greetings in eleven languages (four of which I couldn’t identify), a story of a family preparing for Christmas, and a different animal for every day. Each of the borders provides a rich setting for the gift of the day. One of my favorites is the amusing hedgehog, plum pudding border for the "three French hens," which are white chickens dressed like French ladies going to a ball, looking fat and self-satisfied in their bewigged pompadours, lace, feathers, and flowers.

Brett has outdone herself with *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* (1987). Her sumptuous bear’s home is complete with bear designs, beehives, and mice who look as if they are observer-narrators. Besides carved bears holding up tables, the furniture features sunflower seed motifs, stuffed salmon trophies, acorn rugs, strawberries and blackberry designs, and lots of honey bees and hives—all the things you would expect bears to treasure. Even the tunic-vests worn by the bears have bees, beehives, strawberries, mushrooms, and flowers hanging from them. The borders in this
handsomely textured in golden browns and the bears all have white noses. The huge, brown eyes glaring at Goldilocks are enough to get her moving rapidly out of the window.

Brett's borders add a multidimensional quality to her illustrations and to her stories. The variety of intricate details, rich texture—especially with hair and the fur of animals—make it wise to read Brett books slowly so as not to miss funny sidelines to the story. Brett admits she has a fondness for furry animals, especially bears. At an International Reading Association convention, someone asked if she would ever do a sequel to the romance between the two butterfly fish in The Owl and the Pussycat. Brett's reply was negative adding that she chose furry animals like bears, hedgehogs, and rabbits over fish. That clearly shows in the recent books she has written—Berlioz the Bear, (1991) and The Wild Xmas Reindeer, (1990), and the three I have just described—The Mitten, Goldilocks and the Three Bears, and The Twelve Days of Christmas.

If you want to read more details about the illustrations in The Wild Christmas Reindeer, The Owl and the Pussycat, or Berlioz the Bear, write to ask for her brochures which tell all about writing these books.

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These brochures are written and illustrated by Jan Brett and explain, to children, a lot about her personal approach to writing and illustrating. Maybe they will help inspire children you love to write and illustrate their own books.