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John Steptoe: An Artist Whose Style Grew with His Stories

by Lillian H. Heil

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In Steptoe's Stevie, the heavy black outlines and bold colors portray the energy and vigor of African-American culture. The fractured pictures, black outlines, and contrasts of light and dark in Daddy Is a Monster . . . Sometimes depict a child's view of parental sternness. The dramatic use of black and white makes the lively journey of Jumping Mouse larger than life. The realistic style and rich colors lend nobility to the people and lushness to the plants and animals in Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters. A person probably would not guess that all four books were written and illustrated by the same person, but they were. Steptoe is able to suit his style to his story. However, Steptoe’s life and his works indicate that he was pursuing his own identity through his evolving art style.

Steptoe was born in Brooklyn in 1950. His mother provided him with drawing materials when he was very young because she noticed that her shy son expressed himself through art. Steptoe later received formal training in art at the New York School of Art and Design in 1967, but he left school just three months before he was to graduate. He decided he wanted to create picture books for black children rather than work as a commercial artist. Stevie, published when Steptoe was only nineteen years old, contains black dialect and speech patterns. Steptoe’s nine-year-old brother, Charles, was the inspiration for the story. Life Magazine (Aug. 29, 1969, pp. 58-59) compared Steptoe’s style to that of the French expressionist Georges Rouault, whose work Steptoe had never seen. Steptoe did not realize he had done something new when he used black dialect for Robert, the narrator. In the book, Robert describes his troubles with Stevie: "And so Stevie moved in, with his old crybaby self. And he was greedy too. Everything he sees he wants, 'Could I have somma that? Gimme this.' Man!" Steptoe commented that he wanted to write a book that black children could relate to, and he "was amazed to find that no one had successfully written a book in the dialogue which black children speak" (Something About the Author, 1976, Gale Research, Vol. 8).

Steptoe notes that as an artist he went through "different stages in a process—perhaps several processes. . . . In my first books I was a colorist. When preparing the art for Daddy is a Monster . . . Sometimes, I turned away
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from being a colorist to explore the technical problems of light and dark" (Acceptance Speech in Horn Book Magazine, Jan/Feb, 1988 for the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award for illustration). Steptoe commented that learning how to use black and white helped him develop clarity of image and move towards realism.

With Mufaro’s Beautiful Daughters, he again used color, noting that he "added the old knowledge of coloration to his new discoveries of light and dark" (Acceptance Speech in Horn Book Magazine, Jan/Feb, 1988 for the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award for illustration). Steptoe felt that the Boston Globe-Horn Book award, which he received for Mufaro’s Beautiful Daughters, was a validation of his twenty years of work and growth as an artist. He had learned to value his African ancestors for their industry, love for family, and dignity. Steptoe also felt that Mufaro, in addition to making a statement about African pride, proclaimed the brotherhood of all. In the book, the visual images range from the almost blurred faces of black children to the sharper delineations of form and feature of the kindly people. Steptoe felt that each individual can find ways to value himself and to work with his fellowman.

Steptoe did not want to be considered an exceptionally talented member of his race; he observed that hundreds of thousands of young African-Americans “want to accomplish something important with their lives” (Acceptance Speech, Jan/Feb, 1988). He thought that perhaps his earning an award would encourage young African-Americans to love themselves enough to accomplish their dreams.

Steptoe died in 1989 at the age of thirty-nine. I hope that you will review his books and notice how his work changed as he discovered his own heritage and humanity. Notice the drama created by the black-and-white drawing of Jumping Mouse’s confrontation with a wolf; the strongest contrast available to an artist is that between black and white. See how the black around the wolf’s pupil draws attention to the wolf’s intent look at Jumping Mouse. This also makes us notice the small creature, whose white form stands out because of the wolf’s black shadow.

As you read through CBR, notice how the mouse can still be seen by the wolf because of the black grass behind him. Steptoe later shows Jumping Mouse turned into a powerful eagle, silhouetted against an almost white sky. Review Steptoe’s other books. Each of these four books he wrote and illustrated has received awards for excellence. Steptoe’s work and vision can help us all to keep our dreams alive.