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Ruth Heller: Visualizer of Colors, Shapes and Compositions

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When Ruth Heller reads, she visualizes in technicolor. Find one of her picture books and see how brilliant colors, interesting textures and curving lines all combine into a stimulating visual composition which is enhanced by Heller's concise rhyming text. Heller did not start out as a creator of picture books. Born in Winnipeg, Canada, she attended school in California; she did some work as a medical secretary and was a free-lance designer and illustrator from 1967-81. She began her career "designing wrapping paper, cocktail napkins, kites, mugs, greeting cards, posters and coloring books" (Something About the Author, vol. 66, p. 124). While researching for a coloring book on tropical fish, Heller saw an egg sac of a dogfish shark and it "led me to read about other egg-laying (oviparous) animals. My reading stimulated visions of colors, shapes, and compositions" (Something About the Author, vol 66, p. 124). And from this beginning came Chickens Aren’t the Only Ones. In one of the illustrations from this delightful book, one sees a variety of shapes—graceful swan, curving snail shell, horny sea horse with the curved tail, fat fish with circular design—all combined to make a pleasing composition. What can’t be seen in a black and white reproduction are the brilliant colors—the orange snail, tropical bird, purple and gold fish—and this illustration is actually more subdued than her typical use of color! Heller’s effortless rhyme makes the text concise and pleasant to hear aloud. In addition, the rhyme aids the readers memory in learning new facts and vocabulary.

Heller seems to focus all her imagination on one topic, explore every avenue, and produce several clever creations for that topic. Only then does she turn her attention to a new area. After the book on oviparous animals, she produced another on mammals entitled Animals Born Alive and Well. One can see the texture of the striped zebra in the center of the illustration and how the curving lemur tail points the eye back to the center of the picture in the illustration from later in this issue. Thus, once again we see Heller’s focus on shapes and good composition continue to inspire her illustrations.

Heller wrote and illustrated seven books on plant reproduction and camouflage before moving to parts of speech. Those who think such a subject is dull need to take a look at A Cache of Jewels (collective nouns), Kites Sail High (verbs), Many Luscious Lollipops (adjectives), Merry-Go-Round (nouns), and Up Up and Away (adverbs), and Behind the Mask (prepositions). Heller’s colors tend toward the brilliant (as in a fleet of ships with purple sails and fuscia banners or the purple cow in the book on adverbs). She delights in swirling shapes (as seen in the exploding fireworks or the peacock feather pen in the verb book). Her compositions are sometimes funny juxtapositions of shapes and colors (such as the long legs and curving neck of brilliant pink flamingos next to black grand pianos in the book on nouns). But above all, the shapes fit together visually—as can be seen in the reproduced illustration from the noun book showing the heads of three geese against a white background.
CHICKENS aren't the only ones.
There's no more to discuss.
Everyone who lays an egg is
O • VIP • A • ROUS.

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Each exuberant example supports Heller's statement that "There is never a lack of ideas. As I am working on one project, ideas for others keep arising. Creativity begets creativity"— especially when the creator visualizes in technicolor as Ruth Heller does. Her books will spread the contagion of creative use of colors shapes and composition to children of all ages.
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