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Margo Zemach: The Artist Who Saw the World as a Stage Full of Humorous Events

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As a beginning artist Margo Zemach worried because no matter how serious she was trying to be, everything she drew looked funny. As a child she played backstage while both parents were in the theater. Both humor and the magic of the theater became trademarks of her unique visual style. When reading her picture books, readers will chuckle at her unique ability to portray the humor in every character and situation and to project the excitement, drama, and movement she learned from the theater.

Zemach (born in 1931 in Hollywood) grew up during the depression years, and she had mental images of roads "spilling out in front of the car" as the family traveled across America looking for work (Self Portrait: Margo Zemach. Addison-Wesley, 1978, p. 6). She spent several of her early years with grandparents in Oklahoma City, and when she was five, went to live in New York City with her mother and stepfather Benjamin. She loved the lights of the city and the magic of the theater where both her parents worked. She spent many hours alone, and at first, drew as she waited for something else to happen. Soon she drew to entertain herself with stories and jokes. Zemach comments with typical humor: "If there are only cornflakes and mustard in the kitchen, it's a great thing to be able to paint chocolate pudding" (Self Portrait: Margo Zemach, p. 13). In her autobiography, Zemach describes how the theater helped her conceive her stories.

I can create my own theater and be in charge of everything. When there is a story I want to tell in pictures, I find my actors, build the sets, design the costumes and light the stage. I know that when I am done all I will ever have is black lines on paper but if I can get it all together and moving, it will come to life. . . . When the book closes, the curtain comes down. (Self-Portrait: Margo Zemach, p. 180)

But Zemach stumbled from one job to another before she became an artist. "After failing as an usherette, typist, salesperson, messenger and file clerk, I decided to go to art school" (Self-Portrait: Margo Zemach, p. 14)

In art school Zemach began to worry when everything she drew looked humorous because she wanted to be a serious artist whose work hung in museums.
Perhaps she began to realize the uniqueness of her talent when she went to Vienna to study art (1955-56) on a Fulbright scholarship and met Harve Fisch trom. They spent the year talking about life and walking around Vienna instead of going to school. Returning to America one was on the East coast and the other on the West. The time spent writing to each other convinced them to get married. Their first children's book was about a boy in Vienna—Harve wrote the story and Zemach illustrated it. (Harve used the pen name "Harve Zemach"). The partnership continued as they created books and children, and traveled in Europe, spending a year in Denmark and five years in London. Harve's death in 1974 forced Zemach to say goodbye to her "best friend" and to their "being parents together." (Self-Portrait: Margo Zemach, p.28) Zemach returned to California to live in Berkeley where she was a mother and a creator of children's books. In 1989 (at age 58) Zemach died of Lou Gehrig's disease, leaving us with a heritage of more than forty books.

Zemach illustrated her favorite fairy tales as a young girl; therefore, it was only natural that she would illustrate many books based on folktales. Working almost exclusively in colored inks or pen and ink, her drawings reflect the love she had for the movement and drama of the stage. One of my favorite illustrations in Duffy and the Devil, her Caldecott award-winning book of 1974, is a two-page spread of irate witches, brooms in hand, chasing Squire Lovel home. The angry witches are pitching headlong down the hill with a frantic squire and his hounds literally not touching the ground as they escape. Additionally, Zemach's proclivity for portraying the funny side of every situation adds to her distinctive style. She realized that "Humor is the most important thing to me—it's what I'm thinking about. If I can make it beautiful, too—so much the better!" (Something About the Author, Vol. 21, p. 212). When the devil begins jeering at Duffy because he promises to take her away in three years (unless she can guess his name), Zemach doesn't position the characters in ordinary standing or sitting positions. Instead Duffy is lying on a very plump stomach as she gets down to eye level with the gleeful devil. The undignified position intensifies the humor and focuses all attention on the fiendish little man. Use of line, as well as lumpy shape and position, make the illustration funny—the sketchy lines, big noses, tiny eyes, and comic expressions let the reader feel the lighthearted Zemach approach.

Another story filled with rambunctious action is Jake and Honeybunch, the story of a contrary mule (Honeybunch) who gets Jake killed and then succeeds in getting them both into heaven. Zemach's humor succeeds in making ornery characters lovable. Probably her best known folktale is The Fisherman and His Wife—the story of the wife who doesn't know when to quit wishing for more power and wealth. She is the perfect character for Zemach's sense of fun and her awareness that material wealth is not lasting. The picture shows the wife
on the morning after her second wish, in a castle, now wishing to be the king. The wife is theatrically gesturing as she announces her next wish to her long-suffering husband. The fat wife, the expressions, the silly cupids on the head and foot of the bed, and the tiny details of the four burned-down candles on the bed posts, all make the reader laugh at this silly, greedy, little woman. And yet, we can tell that Zemach likes her characters, no matter how ridiculous they are. Her stories seem to explode with humor, energy, and exuberance.

In 1983 Zemach illustrated the story about the value of hard work in The Little Red Hen. All through the book, she characterizes a fancy goose; dandified cat; and top hat, waist-coat-clad pig who are unwilling to work. She knew children were fascinated by detail, so her stage contains old-fashioned stoves, thatched cottages, bonnets, butter dishes, jam, and a huge loaf of bread. In the final scene (reprinted later in the issue), the little red hen and her four chicks enjoy the fruits of their labors—without the goose, cat, or pig.

Speaking to A. L. Lloyd in Hornbook magazine Zemach said, "Children need detail, color excellence—the best a person can do" (Aug. 1974, p. 358-362). And that is what Zemach gave to the world of children's books, as she vigorously portrayed humorous action and characters for all of us to enjoy.