



RUSSELL HOBAN

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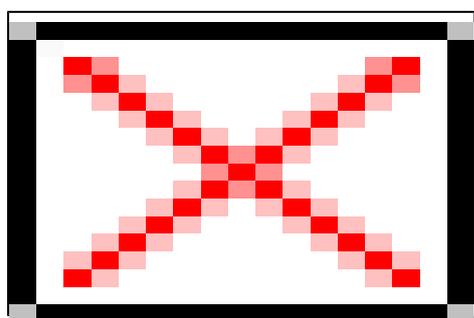
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Article Category:

Obituaries

Byline:

Russell Hoban, known both for his picture books and his novels, has died aged 86. Brian Alderson assesses the career of this prolific and original writer.



Over some thirty years following his birth on 4 February 1925 Russell Hoban's life took on the pattern of a bright talent drawn to the exercise of his powers both as artist and writer along the margins of commercial art: designer, copy-writer, illustrator for the magazine trade. In 1944 however, during a brief spell in the US army, he had married Lillian Aberman who had been a fellow student during his time at art school, and it was with her that he built a new reputation as picture-book storyteller. His first two books in 1959 and 1960 had been illustrated by himself and were his take on factual matters that interested him, like dump-trucks and atomic submarines, but in the latter year, accompanied by that fine illustrator Garth Williams, he introduced the world to Frances, the little girl badger (invented as such by Williams), demonstrating a childlike reluctance over going to sleep.

I don't know what the artist thought when the affairs of this instantly attractive young miss and her ever-patient parents passed into the hands of Lillian for their further portrayal, but for the next twelve years and through **seven** titles (including a little volume of ?songs?, Frances became the constant element in a succession of more than twenty collaborations between husband and wife. Like the

Frances books the stories often turned on a childish dilemma, whose resolution was played out with varying success (a plonking moral in *Tom and the Two Handles* [1965], a neatly rounded one in *Charlie the Tramp* [1967]), but there is no gainsaying the elegance with which Lillian's drawing complemented the words on the pages. That some of the most successful stories eschewed the use of colour throughout may stand as a salutary lesson in the use of line for most of today's chromo-merchants.

A decisive change occurred in 1967 when *The Mouse and his Child* was published in New York. Though seemingly a children's novel, illustrated (brilliantly) by Lillian, its text took readers into a countryside unknown to residents among such conventional Neverlands as Narnia or Prydain and into themes of an inexhaustible resonance. It looks to have been all too much for Hoban's American audience and the enthusiastic response of British critics when the book was published here in 1969 was one of the main reasons for Hoban to quit his native land for good, in favour of London, and for Lillian to quit the partnership for good, returning to the United States with their four children

Although Hoban's ?English years? saw him win wider fame as a novelist, he by no means ceased to write books for children, clocking up thirty or so of widely varying lengths and subjects. Pre-eminent, of course, was *How Tom Beat Captain Najork and his Hired Sportsmen*

(1974) and its successor *A Near Thing for Captain Najork* (1975), whose superlative illustrations by Quentin Blake should not be allowed to deflect attention from the gift of such illustrable texts. Indeed Hoban's characteristic voice as a storyteller, his easy vernacular, his sharing with his readers of an amused astonishment at what is passing before their eyes, does not desert him (except in the muddled and almost wordless *Flat Cat* of 1980) and although the plotting of some of the fantastic tales stands in need of the editorial care that the great Ursula Nordstrom gave to his 'American period', the response of a raft of devoted illustrators gives a piquancy to almost everything that he published. (See, for instance, Jan Piekowsky's reworking of the imagery of Burton's *The Little House* for the apocalyptic *M.O.L.E.* [1993] or Patrick Benson's strip treatment of *The Court of the Winged Serpent* [1994].

Something of a sage, who liked to give the impression that his probing thoughts were not as serious as they actually were, Hoban was a man of constantly affable humour. Following his divorce from Lillian he married Gundura Ahl and the house they kept near the aptly-named Eel Brook Common in Fulham and where they brought up their three sons was the ground for many an hospitable Symposium. Mine host, who died on 13 December last, at the age of 86, will be much missed by friends and readers alike.

Brian Alderson is founder of the Children's Books History Society and a former Children's Book Editor for **The Times**.

Russell Hoban photo by Richard Mewton

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