



# Faith's Farewell

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**Chris Powling** talks to Faith Jaques about her Grand Finale.

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`Any illustrator would relish tackling a collection of nursery-rhymes,' says Faith Jaques. `It's such an obvious and lovable thing to do. After all, the main reason for specialising in children's books at all is the range of subject-matter they provide - fantasy, illusion and imagination well beyond what most adult books allow. Not only that, but every rhyme offers something different. You're not shackled to a repetitive likeness for page after page. I don't think people realise how *boring* this can be ...' Her latest book, then - **The Orchard Book of Nursery Rhymes** - is rather special. `It's one of the few wholly enjoyable jobs I've undertaken because I was given all the time I needed. Without a deadline to worry about I could concentrate on making it *good* rather than quick.' Also, it's special for another reason. She insists it's the last book she'll ever illustrate.

## Why?

`Because I've been drawing since I was three,' she says. `That's more than sixty years of hard grind - watching the light (only three reliable working-hours a day during the winter) one eye always on the calendar so I keep to my schedule, four different pairs of glasses on the go all the time so I can get the close work right, looking after a damaged thumb that's troubled me for ages ... I've had enough of *doing*. From now on I'm concentrating on *being* - with friends, with books, with just rambling about instead of leading the life of a recluse!'

It's hard to disagree, of course. After all, the Jaques career began more than forty years ago with **Alice in Wonderland**, **Cinderella**, **Goldilocks** and **Little Women** - not to mention **The Football Association Book for Boys** and **The Young Cricketer**. And that was just in 1950. Since then she's illustrated more than a 120 books including texts by Roald Dahl, Philippa Pearce, Leon Garfield, Gillian Avery, John Cunliffe, Nina Bawden, Arthur Ransome, Barbara Willard, Gwen Grant, Alison Uttley, Allan Ahlberg and Helen Cresswell. The excellence of her `doing' has never been in doubt. Douglas Martin, in **The Telling Line** (Julia MacRae 1989), described her best books as `already being sought out as the true heirs of Greenaway, Rackham and Ardizzone... increasingly apparent to a new generation of collectors'.

So a great deal rests on this final performance of hers. She's quick to point out that the back-up has been splendid in every respect. `Judith Elliott at Orchard really *listens!* She gave me all the time I needed with no pressure on me at all. I was able to take two-and-a-half to three years over the project as a whole - three months just for the pencil dummy. Not only that but I was able to *design* the book, to make the layout crystal clear with a careful distribution of pages and plenty of white space on quality paper. You see, I wanted this to be an entirely individual-looking book. Rita Ireland, Orchard's production manager, was marvellous. At Orchard you can have your say with anybody. It's one of the advantages of a small publisher.'

## No alibis, then.

And no shirking the preparatory work. Many of the rhymes, chosen here by Zena Sutherland, have their origins in the Middle Ages or even earlier, but it was towards the end of the eighteenth century that they first came to be published. That's why Faith chose to set them in the Georgian period. This presented no problem since her private archive is legendary. 'I never have to go to a museum or gallery - I have filing cabinets crammed full of evidence about what people wore, or made, or where they lived.' Even the colour she strove to get just right. 'It needed to be soft and very muted - Georgian colours always went through grey.' Such historical details being important to her, she was determined that as many as possible would be correct. Hence, where a specific background was called for - as with the 'Doctor Fell' or 'Doctor Foster' verses - that's what she gave it. She steeped herself, too, in the Opie's invaluable **Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes** and at the end of the book offers five pages of notes discussing her interpretations. She points out, for instance, that 'Polly Flinders'

*.. is an example of how frequently people seemed to whip their children. There are several old engravings showing mothers or fathers wielding a bundle of birch twigs over a child. The twigs were often hung up on the kitchen wall ready to use.'*

Is this, then, a nursery-rhyme collection for the drily academic?

## On the contrary!

Child-friendly throughout and ravishingly pretty from one set of end-papers to the other, it's full of a wonderful quality that's easy to specify and hard to deliver: sheer *charm*. Certainly Faith Jaques brings to her work the traditional virtues of painstaking research and meticulous draughtsmanship, yet she also draws on a lifetime's experience in making sure her skills are unobtrusive. After all, why should children know, or even care, that the shoe in 'There was an old woman' is 'made of embroidered brocade and typical of the decorative shoes of the period' or that in 'Gregory Griggs' we really do encounter twenty-seven wigs covering the changing fashions between 1730 and 1800? For young readers the fantasy, illusion and imagination on offer in these pages will be attraction enough? at first, anyway. Later, who knows? With a labour of love like this, anything is possible.

Can this really be the Jaques swansong, then? If so, it's a wonderful farewell. But my guess is that thousands of children, and many discriminating adults, will be hoping otherwise.

**The Orchard Book of Nursery Rhymes** by Faith Jaques, rhymes chosen by Zena Sutherland, is published by Orchard Books, 185213 056 3, £9.95.

Other books mentioned:

**The Telling Line: Essays on Fifteen Contemporary Book Illustrators**, Douglas Martin, Julia MacRae, 0 86203 333 0, £35.00. An article by Douglas Martin appeared in **BfK 62** (May 1990).

**The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes**, Iona and Peter Opie, Oxford, 0 19 8691114, £15.95

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