



RapsCALLION Laureate

Article Author:

[Brian Alderson](#) [1]

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Brian Alderson offers a preliminary assessment of **James Marshall**.

James Marshall, the American author and illustrator, died on 13th October 1992. A preliminary attempt to assess the distinction... and distinctiveness... of his work is offered here by **Brian Alderson**.

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Among the myriad happy purchasers of the new edition of Iona and Peter Opie's **I Saw Esau** I wonder how many paused at the dedication pages. And among those who paused, I wonder how many nodded in sage agreement to Maurice Sendak's acknowledgement of James Marshall. 'Who he?' tends to be the response I get when I wax lyrical about his books - and not just from averagely-interested adults. Today's emphasis on 'front-list' publishing means that plenty of professionals in the houses that publish him don't know who he is either.

This seems to be a pity. For although Maurice Sendak writes of him as friend, he also writes of him as colleague, and that dedication was as much as anything a mark of high respect. Nobody, I suppose, when confronted by **Wings**, or by **MacGoose's Grocery**, will gasp and lift their countenances heavenward as they do for **Where the Wild Things Are** or **Little Bear**, but there is in James Marshall's writing and illustrating a continuous warm-hearted hilarity which may be unassuming, but which places him among the few great creators of children's books in the last twenty years.

Part of the reason for our failure to recognise his stature probably stems from the fact that the wild things who inhabit so many of his books are not gob-smackingly metaphysical or semiotic idols, but are 'merely' figures of fun. What's more, they very often seem to be the same figures of fun drifting from one book to the next. If you look at the residents sitting round Mama Jo's boarding house table in **RapsCALLION Jones**, you may get a sense of *deja vu*. 'Can this man draw nothing,' you may ask, 'except overweening foxes, self-satisfied pigs, lugubrious bears, devious striped cats and dopey dogs?' And Ma Jo herself, a toothy Marshall bulldog, looks even more Churchillian than usual on account of the large cigar with which she fumigates house and boarders alike.

These animals, joined by assorted crocodiles, parrots, rats and roosters, turn up in one guise or another through a couple of dozen of James Marshall's books: in full colour picture books, like **Wings**; in simple 'readers' like the Fox stories which Messrs Red Fox are, appropriately, now republishing); and in longer books illustrated in monochrome-wash like the collection **Rats on the Roof**, the pseudo detective story **Summer in the South**, and the miniature travelogue **Taking Care of Carruthers**. They are joined by the series of picture books that feature those two amiable hippopotamuses George and Martha. (These nice people got their names from the lead characters in **Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf?**, which Marshall's mother was watching on television when he was working on the books. At the time of publication the author was given as Edward Marshall - a Bunbury-style relative - but he had to be abandoned when demands for his attendance at conferences became too importunate.)

Alongside the Marshall menagerie there exists another one, peopled by people, where only a little more diversity is to be

found. There's not much difference between the characters in those books (only published in America) about Miss Nelson - alias Miss Viola Swamp - and her class of unruly children, and those books about the 'cut-ups', who might well have stepped out of Miss Nelson's school. But there is also the entirely novel Stupid family, through whom Marshall achieved one of his earliest successes.

[The four books about the Stupids are ostensibly by Harry Allard, who, unlike Edward Marshall, does exist. But his texts are so completely in the Marshall grain that, for my money, he is simply a front-man. Indeed, such a protective buffer may well be necessary, since the stories of the Stupids may these days be seen as a satire on the intellectually-challenged. Should we really make fun of people who put pictures of fish on the wall and label them 'Dog', or who think that they have died when the electricity fails and all the lights go out?]

To accuse these books of 'sameness' however, is to miss a very individual wit that bubbles through each of them - and, at this level of excellence, who cares if they are all the same anyway? The chief characteristic of this wit is Marshall's irrepressible delight in the very short story. His single-story picture books usually make play with one simple idea: Portly McSwine, for instance, consumed with worry over his National Snout Day party; but Marshall also likes condensing several stories within one pair of covers. Sometimes he works with what are little more than one-liners, as in, say, the forty-eight unencumbered pages of **George and Martha Encore** into which he fits five separate stories (eg. George asks Martha what "Give me a kiss?" is in French; Martha tells him; so George gives her a kiss.) Sometimes he ingeniously sets these anecdotal quips into a larger frame, as in **Three by the Sea**, where stories told by the three kids are not only neatly interconnected but also turn out to be a defence of Story itself against the brainlessness of reading schemes. His accretive method also goes into the construction of the longer books. **Taking Care of Carruthers** is nothing more than a set of dovetailed episodes which are themselves told as a story by Eugene the turtle to keep Carruthers the bear content while Emily pig looks on.

The briskness of Marshall's plotting in these little tales gains vital energy from his equivalent command of language and picture, working the two together in close harness. Look for instance at the opening three pages of **Wings: a tale of two chickens**:

'Harriet and Winnie were as different as two chickens could possibly be.

Harriet was enormously fond of reading.

"Frankly, I'd rather swat flies," said Winnie.

Many interesting hobbies kept Harriet busy all day. "I'm so bored, I could just die," said Winnie.'

The taut phrasing sets the scene for a story in which Winnie's Puddle-Duck-like foolishness is redeemed by Harriet's sensible foresight, but the full impact of the sentences comes from the counterpointing pictures which are at once ludicrous and satirical. Winnie, at the tea-table, or standing on two books to swat flies, or yawning on a garden seat, may be seen in every township of the nation.

Marshall makes his illustrative points with an almost child-like simplicity of line and colour, which conceals a highly practised skill. (He has the same gift as Quentin Blake for making two eye-dots reflect a multitude of expressions.) Look at the Cut-ups, fired into Lamar J Spurgle's zinnias in Mary Frances's rocket-ship, which is activated by a single coiled spring. It's totally daft, but it carries complete conviction through its wide-eyed acceptance of its own simplified date, to say nothing of the confident portrayal of Mary Frances herself in tracksuit and matching dark-green glasses.

Or look at Carruthers, who is persuaded to act in a play about Goldilocks where he is assigned the part of Baby Bear. The picture of him in a gigantic nappy, looming over a bewigged duck asleep in a tiny wooden bed, is one of the funniest drawings that you could ever wish to see.

In the last five years of his life, Marshall had also been playing about with picture-book versions of nursery stories - belated successors to his entertaining Mother Goose of 1979. Several of these were published in Britain by Collins and

they exemplify his ability to set word against picture at its best. Assuredly **Hansel and Gretel** was a mistake; the story is too long and too varied in its demands to suit the jocose Marshall manner, but with tales like **Red Riding Hood** and **Goldilocks** (again) he brought pantomime into picture books. The stories were made for his sharp prose, his ear for repartee. ('Once there was a little girl called Goldilocks. "What a sweet child," said someone new in town. "That's what you think," said a neighbour') and the pictures add a dimension of comedy (Goldilocks is seen flying through the air from a garden swing, bound for a tub of water, while three fat Marshall cats doze contentedly, unaware of what is heading in their direction).

Book after book is characterised by this apparently casual, but very skilled, very beady-eyed, combination of verbal and visual effects. Marshall has none of the vulgar explosiveness of artists in the current scratch-and-scribble school, who enforce the notion that children desire at all times to be supplied with the frenetic. And he has none of the painterly overkill of those illustrators who promote the idea that picture books should be High Art. His way is the classic way of brevity and understatement, words and lines accumulating into experiences that are the more hilarious for not appearing to be so. We are not so rich that we can afford to lose the masters of this art, nor that we can wilfully neglect them.

James Marshall titles currently in print:

Rats on the Roof and Other Stories, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 13315 7, £8.50

Taking Care of Carruthers, Young Lions, 0 00 672341 1, £2.99 pbk.

The following titles are available in hardback from Bodley Head and in paperback from Red Fox:

Fox All Week, 0 370 30834 4, £5.99; 0 09 997240 9, £2.99 pbk

Fox at Work, 0 370 31482 4, £5.99; 0 09 914931 1, £2.99 pbk

Fox Be Nimble, 0 370 31483 2, £5.50; 0 09 918261 0, £2.99 pbk

Fox, and His Friends, 0 370 30935 9, £5.99; 0 09 995640 3, £2.99 pbk

Fox at School, 0 370 30814 X, £5.50; 0 09 995650 0, £2.99 pbk

Fox in Love, 0 370 30959 6, £5.99; 0 09 997280 8, £2.99 pbk

Fox on Wheels, 0 370 31548 0, £5.99; 0 09 914921 4, £2.99 pbk

Four on the Shore, 0 09 988760 6, £2.99 pbk

Three by the Sea, 0 09 993900 2, £2.99 pbk

Three up a Tree, 0 09 988770 3, £2.99 pbk

A fairly complete list of Marshall's work is given in **Twentieth Century Children's Writers**, edited by Tracey Chevalier and D L Kirkpatrick (St James Press, 1989).

Brian Alderson is a children's book reviewer for **The Times** and in September last year Gollancz published his version of **Arabian Nights** with illustrations by Michael Foreman, 0 575 04251 6, price £14.99. There is also a splendid limited edition of the book available (only 200 copies, signed and numbered) at a price of £75.00.

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