

William Steig

William Steig writes: “I was born into a family of artists. My parents, my brothers, my children, my wives, my brother’s wives, and their children are all artists.”

Given his background, it is not surprising that Steig had used his artistic talent as a successful cartoonist for New Yorker magazine since 1930. As an observant caricaturist, his drawings have made us laugh at our own shortcomings.

What is unique about William Steig is that in 1968, in his seventh decade of life, he began a new career as a children’s author and illustrator. Since that time he has won critical acclaim and numerous awards.

Steig notes that he probably writes for himself as a child. As a boy he read Robin Hood, Robinson Crusoe, Pinocchio, and the King Arthur series. His own books reflect this early exposure to adventure stories.

Children from age four through the middle grades appreciate Steig’s humor, sense of adventure, and magic as conveyed through his pen and ink and watercolor illustrations. Dr. DeSoto is a prime example of how he meshes humor with his illustrations. The story and illustrations are inseparable.

In the modern folk tale tradition, Steig conveys considerable emotion through his talking animals. A fox often portrays a tricky advocate trying to undo the hero or heroine. In The Amazing Bone the reader has no doubt as to the fox’s intentions. Of course, he plans to eat poor distraught Pearl.

Fanciful happenings are common to many of Steig’s books. In Caleb and Kate, a witch transforms Caleb into a dog. A witch disguised as a chicken, sends Tiffky on an adventure into another dimension Tiffky Doofky. There is a magic red pebble in Sylvester and the Magic Pebble, and a magic liquid in Gorky Rises. Incantations and spells are also found in many stories.

Friendships take on a special importance in almost all of Steig’s books. In Farmer Palmer’s Wagon Ride, Farmer Palmer and his friend and a hired hand, Ebenezer, endure many trails together. Perhaps Amos and Boris best represents Steig’s value of friendship. An unlikely combination, Boris the whale and Amos the mouse cultivate a strong bond. Though they come from completely alien environments, one from sea and the other from land, they learn to love and appreciate the uniqueness of each other.

The loving family bond is another trait Steig incorporates in his books. Steig often sends his main character on a quest or adventure where he endures the pitfalls of life. He always returns the unlucky fellow to his family and there is a joyful, ecstatic reunion. The message seems to be that love within the family is integral to happiness.

Steig is not just an illustrator of picture books. In 1983, Dr. DeSoto was chosen as a Newbery Honor book, in recognition of its literary quality. In 1977, Abel’s Island received the same honor. He is clearly an author for the middle grades as well. Even his picture books contain descriptive, flowing narrative, which is readily adaptable to language arts lessons for older children. Younger children enjoy the flow and dazzle of his words, which often become an art of their own vocabulary.

Adults, as well as children, enjoy the work of this versatile author and illustrator. Steig has a way of allowing us to laugh at ourselves. Through his craft he helps us to visualize life’s absurdities—especially in situations where we take ourselves too seriously.

¹Kingman, Lee. Illustrators of Children’s Books

²Lacher, Francis Carol. Contemporary Authors

³Ibid

⁴Commire, Ann. Something About the Author
Louise Stearns

Resource Bibliography

Bader, Barbara. American Picture Books From Noah's Ark to the Best Within. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1976, pp. 563-564

Commie, Ann. Something About the Author. Detroit, Michigan: 1979, V. 18, pp. 275-276

Kingman, Lee. Illustrators of Children's Books, 1967 – 1976. Boston: Horn Book, 1978, pp. 19 and 161.

Latcher, Francis Carol. Contemporary Authors. Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1962 V. 77-80 pp. 523-524.

Bibliography of Books by William Steig

For Young people; all fiction except as noted:

CDB! (word games), Windmill Books, 1968

The Minstrel Pig, Windmill Books, 1968

Sylvester and the Magic Pebble, Windmill Books, 1969. Caldecott Medal, 1970.

The Bad Island, Windmill Books, 1969.

An Eye for Elephants, (limericks), Windmill Books, 1970.

The Bad Speller, (anecdotes), Windmill Books, 1970

Amos and Boris, Farrar, Straus, 1971. New York Times choice of Best Illustrated Books of the Year, Runner-up for National Book Award, 1972.

Dominic, Farrar, Straus, 1972. Christopher Award (Children's book category), Allen White Children's Book Award, 1975.

The Real Thief, Farrar, Straus, 1973

Farmer Palmer's Wagon Ride, Farrar, Straus, 1974

The Amazing Bone, Farrar, Straus, 1976. Runner-up for Caldecott Medal, 1977.

Abel's Island, Farrar, Straus, 1976. Newbery Honor Book, 1977.

Caleb and Kate, Farrar, Straus, 1977

Gorky Rises, Farrar, Straus, 1980

Dr. DeSoto, Farrar, Straus, 1982. Newbery Honor Book, 1983.

Writings – Cartoons; all self-illustrated: See Contemporary Authors (bibliography) for a complete listing.