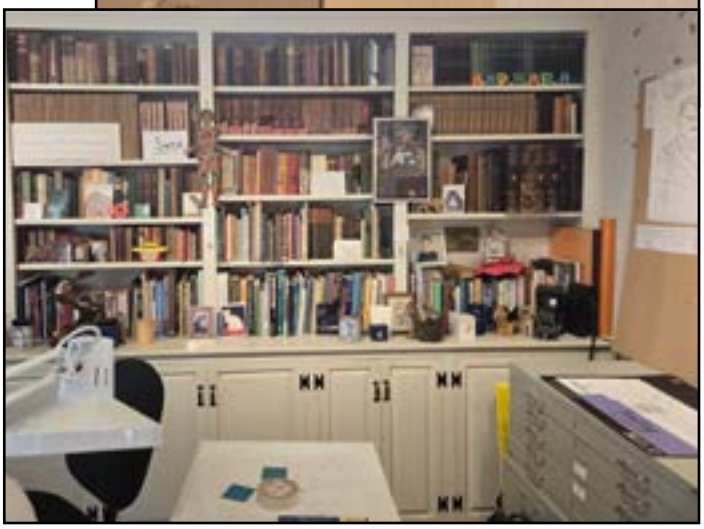


Walking into Barbara McClintock's studio, I was struck by the organized chaos that unfolded before my eyes. Barbara works out of her home in a cozy room that has been turned into an art studio. There are cork boards on two of the walls with sketches and work in progress tacked up in a collage of an illustrator's mind. Her bookshelves are full of books that she uses for research. For example, she mentions that there are books on sewing that she uses to understand why a particular piece of clothing drapes the way it does.

As I sat down in a comfortable chair in her studio I asked her how she got into illustration. What, pardon the pun, drew her to it, "I've always loved to draw. From the time I was a little girl, I drew comics, actually. I loved it, it was my favorite thing to do. My first memory actually is of drawing lying on the kitchen floor on my stomach with a crayon in each hand drawing big circles and things. My mom kept a lot of my drawings from when I was little. The first thing that I really wanted to be when I grew up was a cat, but that didn't work out." As she recalls the fond memories of her childhood she continues "So art was my backup plan. So that's kind of how that happened."

The first part of my growing up was in New Jersey and then in North Dakota, I went to college in North Dakota which didn't have much of an art program and they certainly didn't have anything about, you know, illustration or children's literature. I read an article about Maurice Sendak that came out in Time Magazine, I read that he lived in Ridgefield, Connecticut and I thought, geez, maybe I'll call Maurice Sendak and he'll encourage me and tell me what to do, you know, how to get started in this field." For those who don't know, Maurice Sendak was an American author and illustrator of children's books. One of the books that he illustrated I remember from my own childhood, "*Where The Wild Things Are.*" Barbara continued "So I called Ridgefield information and his number was listed a long time ago. I just dialed his number and I thought, how wrong can this go? He'll either be really nice and he'll tell me what I want to know or he'll hang up." When I asked her how it was to talk to him she said "So he was great. He talked to me for 20 minutes. He told me how to put together a dummy book and assemble a portfolio. He encouraged me to move to New York City. I said, "Great, should I go to art school?" He said, **"Absolutely not. They'll put so much garbage in your head. It will take you ten years to get rid of it."** So I thought okay, okay, I won't go to art school." So what did she do instead? Barbara said "I went to public libraries and checked out books of artwork or picture books or whatever. I brought them home. I studied them, I copied the artwork to kind of train myself to draw a certain way, then I returned the books and

took out more books. So my education really came through the public library system." Her saying this made me think about how important our public libraries are in terms of how much knowledge one can get from studying how others are doing the practice that you want to do. She moved to New York and started getting work "It was a long time ago, so it was much easier to break into the profession than it is now. But I was really lucky and you know, I started illustrating. The first book I illustrated was a year and half after I moved to New York. So I was maybe twenty when I did my first book. Then it just kind of went on from there." I asked her how long she was in New York and she had this to say "I lived in New York City for eleven years. Then I moved to Cold Spring, New York, Santa Fe, New Mexico, finally arriving in Connecticut. So I've been all over the place." I asked her if there was anyone else who inspired her? " I also discovered the work of a lot of other people like Ronald Cyril and Sempé, a French illustrator who did very loose line drawings and very joyful, cartoony-like characters." "I always loved Hanna-Barbera cartoons when I was growing up, and I would do comic books based on cartoon characters, things that I watched on Saturday mornings. But Sendak was absolutely a mentor to me. I never met him, interestingly enough, after I moved to New York City. I only just talked to him on the phone. I heard he could be very scary and picky. So I lost my nerve and I thought, "Oh, I better not meet him. What if he doesn't like me?"

photo by: Shana Sureck

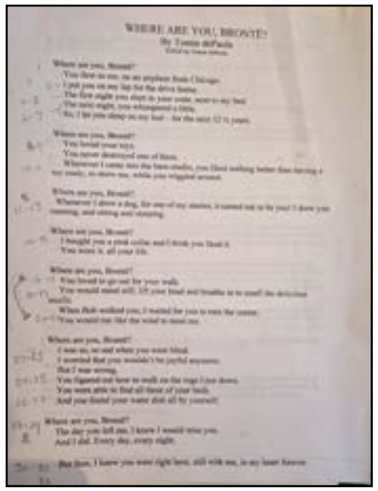


photo by: Caitlin Fabish

I asked if it's exciting, intimidating or both when working on a new manuscript?"Oh, it's both." She then told me about how her agent will send her a manuscript "Editors go through her first and then I get the manuscript from her and I see if it's something that resonates with me or not. If it doesn't, then I say no, no thank you. If it does then I'll start." She showed me an example of how she breaks down a manuscript and how she organizes the rough sketches that she does in the beginning while she's figuring out how she wants the story to flow with the pictures. "What I usually do is I get a typewritten manuscript, and I print it out and then in the margins of the manuscript I do little doodles. So I kind of break it up into thirty-two or forty-eight page sequences. It's always exciting and challenging." Barbara went to get an example of what she does, specifically for a book called "*Where are you Bronte?*" She illustrated Tomie dePaolo's last complete manuscript about his dog, Bronte, who passed away and how he coped with the death of his dog.

"So as I started reading the manuscript," she explains, "I started breaking it down, kind of like what action or activity relates to the next one. If there are clusters of activities that work together, then I try to think of that as being a double-page spread."

Pacing, for Barbara, is the invisible thread of the visual story. While some illustrators might start somewhere in the middle of the narrative and work outward, Babara prefers a more organic process. "I like starting out with the idea and then just letting it grow and progress." She feels like "That's how a hell of a lot of art goes. It just kind of comes from a little idea and then it just grows into something bigger."

The approach of letting the story shape the visual language carried into her work on *Where Are You Bronte?*, "What is interesting about this manuscript is that it's almost like a song, where you have a repetitive refrain, where are you Bronte? You start out with the idea of how Bronte entered Tomie's life. He was shipped from Chicago, probably from a dog breeder, and Tomie picked Bronte up in a crate at an airport, drove him home where eventually Bronte slept in Tomie's bed. So you have the initial, beginning of Bronte.

Dummy sketches photo by: Caitlin Fabish

She begins by doing dummy sketches to get a feel for the pacing and layout before even thinking about character details. "So my idea is I just want to know the pacing and the page layout, because that then leads me to think about doing the pictures for the books. I do these little dummies to go with it. Those can change and kind of morph into one thing or another. The characters are pretty loose. I do character development once I feel comfortable knowing the page layout and what the spreads are going to be. That dictates what the scenery is going to be."

Bronte arrives

In one early scene, Bronte is shown arriving at an airport in a crate, a small but intentional detail. "He lived in New Hampshire, so I wanted to have an airport that was close by to where he would have lived and show airplanes, a terminal and a control tower so you knew that it was not just a bus station or something, it's definitely an airport."

For Barbara, when illustrating *Where Are You, Bronte?* She focused on creating a sense of closeness between Tomie and his beloved dog. "I wanted there to be the intimacy of seeing Bronte on Tomie's lap," she explains. "There is also the scenery to show they're on a road, so you would see cars out of the window and trees. You knew it was a more rural, northeastern setting." That sense of place and emotional connection, she says, begins with layout long before the fine details emerge. One poignant line from the book "The first night you slept in your crate next to my bed." made her want the viewer to be down at eye level with the dog in the crate, looking up toward Tomie sleeping above him.

"Tomie loved antiques and folk art." she adds, "so I decided to go with an unusual very Americana patterned bedspread. That would be the bright focal point because Tomie loved color. I wanted to bring that into the Illustration."

Cover for The Mitten

From there she says that illustrations begin to "blend and move out," shaped by the pacing and structure of the book. When working on biographies, she's often looking at photographs of people to build a visual authenticity.

This attention to detail and research isn't limited to biographies. Barbara recalls her work on *The Mitten*, a book that I remember from my own childhood "I illustrated *The Mitten* a long time ago, and I borrowed taxidermied animals from a friend who collected them, so i had a really accurate representation of a rabbit, fox and a squirrel." She laughs as she shares a quirky fact: "The interesting thing about the mice is that taxidermied mice tend to be just freeze-dried." I remarked that I didn't know that and she told me that "You learn all kinds of things along the way when you're starting to work on stuff." No two projects are the same, and Barbara welcomes that unpredictability. "Every book is a little different. It's its own set of questions, its own puzzle, so it's really kind of like finding the approach and getting the tone of the manuscript, because illustration is like translating, it's translating the text and the intention of the author."

That means that not every idea makes it through. "You might have an idea that seems interesting but doesn't really serve the text well, so you have to push that aside. There's a lot of coming and going of visual ideas until you get the right thing."

While she handles the illustrations, typography is left in the hands of the art director who is vital part of the team behind any picture book. "I don't really do that," Barbara says about choosing typefaces. "The art director does. That is the beauty of doing a book. A picture book is really a unique art form in the way that it blends text and illustration. The text doesn't over talk the drawing, and the drawing doesn't over talk the illustration, it goes back and forth. It's a team effort."

She sees the art director's role as similar to her own in one key way. "The art director is deeply involved in determining the type font. So it's again, that idea of being a translator. The art director's job is to look at the drawings and the drawing style, but also get a riff on the text. Is the text talking about something that happened in the late 1800s or is it something that's yesterday or tomorrow? That drives their decision about selecting the type font."

The process is collaborative, but Barbara defers to their expertise. "Usually what happens is the designer will select a couple of type fonts and send them to me and say 'I think this one works really nicely with this book because this kind of reflects that or there's an energy to it or there's a calmness in the manuscript that the text is picking up' and they're far more versed and trained to select type fonts that will express those things than I am."

When it comes to illustrating emotional content, like the grief and love woven into *Where Are You Bronte?* Barbara turns to shape, gesture, and compositon. "There's a subtlety of gesture." she says, pulling a copy of the book from a nearby shelf. "There's so much that goes into it. I'm basically a cartoonist at heart, I love drawing, gesture drawings and expression of character and mood in the sketches that I do. I'm more like Randoplh Caldecott in that way." Shape, she believes, dictates an emotion on a subconscious level. "Every shape dictates an emotion. Round shapes express something that is complete. Anything with sharp angles, like rectangles are interesting because they can express something that is solid and complete." She gestures to her bulletin board, pointing to an in-progress piece featuring a cat and mouse. "So up there I'm working on a book where I have two characters who are unified and their spheres are connected so it creates a triangular shape that shows stability. This whole book is about war and the whole thing is built up to this point where they're unified and they change the old order of things. So shape is so important to expressing an emotion and I love it because it's subliminal. Also then you build on that, the characterization, the facial expression, the gestural expression of things."

The page where he's alone

At a certain point in *Where are you Bronte?* Barbara's voice softens. "There's a point in this book where you see Bronte getting older and beginning to fail. Then there's the day when Bronte dies and the page shows Tomie standing alone, just looking down at the dog bed." As she describes it, I find the page in my copy of the book, the one where Tomie is depicted in solitude. Barbara

nods "I think I wanted to catch the nuance of isolation that we all feel when we lose a pet. I certainly want someone to look sad, but I don't want it to be cartoony or maudlin. I want there to always be a sense of hope and a little charm or whimsy." There's a quiet moment as we sit with this. I remark that the book shifts beautifully from Bronte being physically present to something more spiritual, a lingering presence that stays with Tomie and by extension the reader.

Barbara agrees "Yeah, this book makes everyone cry. That's where it happens and people who don't know what it's about they're like oh, it's about a dog. Then they open it up to the page where he's alone and looking down at the dog bed. I cry still, it's that sense that he's important to talk about and share because it happens to everybody."

At this point, I start tearing up. I tell her I've experienced pet loss many times, but the one I lost during the pandemic still weighs on me. I miss them every single day. Barbara nods with empathy. "When I read the manuscript and was working on the illustration, oh I burst into tears every time I worked on that particular scene. When I read the book aloud to people, I will start crying. I hold the book up in front of my face while I'm reading it so people don't see me cry." She smiles softly, "That's the power of the story and it's the power of the drawings."

Barbara pauses before continuing, "We serve our readers. We take care of people. There's a generosity in illustration and in writing stories. It's so direct and clean and that's why I think it's so powerful to have that and emotive. So to try and draw that in a way when you're dealing with something that is so sensitive like that."

thumbnail sketches for works in progress

As the conversation shifts, Barbara stands and points to a bookshelf in the studio. "I'm working on two other books right now and this is all the research for those two books." She points to a cutoff on the first shelf "Up to about here is a graphic novel I'm illustrating. It's about a French curator in Paris during World War II and how she catalogued artwork that the Nazis were stealing. So this is all the novels about that time period. There are graphic novels illustrated by people whose work I very much respect and I want to sort of get ideas from." Then she moves to another shelf. "Then over here are books that are supporting a book I'm illustrating about war, the one I was talking about earlier." She pauses. "These books deal with very, very strong emotions."

Unlike her more playful work, these projects call for a different tone. "So that book, the graphic novel, and this one. It's sort of an outlier for me because most of the work I do is light-hearted and it's for very young children and there's some wit. Like the gingerbread man, he gets eaten in the end, but it's not so much a sad thing as it's an 'oh yeah, he had this coming.' "Whereas these books are really showing in one-hundred-sixty-eight pages someone witnessing the horror of war and what the Nazis were doing and continuing it through a graphic novel is paced differently than a picture book. It's so cinematographic and zooming in and seeing a face and expression and zooming out and you want to present surprises as you go along. You see the Nazis burning paintings that they considered degenerate, Picasso's, Cezanne, Brock. People, who were doing artwork, that to them wasn't Renaissance style. To build up to that point and then have a double page spread where they're torching and throwing paintings into a fire and the violence of it and everything."

cover and first page of Tomfoolery!

For me, this part of the interview stands out. It reminds me how important it is to have books about the horrible parts of history because when we remember, we resist forgetting. Barbara then pivots to something lighter, a manuscript she just finished writing. "I just sent a manuscript to my agent that I wrote about two cats, Pip and Emma. It's very much for a preschool reader, Emma eats Pip's food. Pip gets mad and doesn't want to play or do anything which builds up and there's a sweetness and a lyricism to it that's very gentle."

Then she says something that I think sounded like a note to anyone that wants to get into illustration needs to hear "I think the job of the illustrator too, is to find all these aspects and their personality. It's like acting, really. You're acting on paper and you have to find something that's authentic to you in order to make it believable to the reader who sees the book."

When it comes to style and palette, Barbara says it often depends on the book. Handing me a copy of *Tomfoolery!*, her biography of Randolph Caldecott, she explains "This is my natural style. I've loved Randolph Caldecott's drawings since college. I love the cartoony aspect and the wit, and my drawing style just naturally falls into something that relates to what he does."

With *Where Are You, Bronte?*, though, she wanted something a little different. "I wanted to blend my style with Tomie dePaolo's style to honor him." she says "But generally, I think I try to stay pretty close to the same style in what I do."

Enormous Numbers

Still, some books call for a more conceptual approach. She tells me about a book she illustrated about a mathematician called *Nothing Stopped Sophie: The Story of Unshakable Mathematician Sophie Germain.* "The text was pretty perfunctory" she explains, "I thought what if I made the numbers enormous? I looked at Robert Indiana's sculptures and got the idea to make the numbers into characters." She shows me a hallway where a framed and hanging print of the enormous numbers in question has a place on her wall as artifacts of that experiment in visual storytelling. Barbara's core process is still hands on "I draw by hand, usually with a light box and tracing paper," she says. "I build up the characters, then place watercolor paper over the sketch and redraw it. Then I ink, either with a dip pen or fine tip waterproof pens." Recently, she's been experimenting with Procreate, the digital art app for iPad. "I do sketches there, it's really easy to do and I can do them a lot faster because I can circle something and make it larger or smaller." She's still learning the ins and outs. "I don't work in layers, I just make a duplicate and keep working on that. I'm not there yet. I can't do this for a professional book yet, but I'm having fun and learning by doing."

As we begin to wrap up, Barbara tells me a surprising fact: most authors and illustrators never actually meet. "So they want the illustrator to just get a printed manuscript. The authors have their own interpretation of how to do it. The illustrators do send sketches and stuff to the author so that the author's not freaked out, but it's usually loose guidelines." The relationship is more fluid than people expect. "It's more of a 'here it is, do you like it, do you not?' People know what to expect from my work, so they're hiring me to do what I do with it." Sometimes Barbara is given details like whether the story takes place in a city, what the time period is, or whether the character lives in 18th century Paris. But in the end "They actually look to me to do something that's going to surprise them."

Barbara went on to explain that her partner, David Johnson, who is also an illustrator, primarily works in editorial illustration, which tends to be much more specific in terms of client demands. "Advertising and editorial illustration is very different from book illustration," she said. "You get a lot more latitude with books. You bring your vision to the manuscript. Whereas poor David, he's done advertising jobs where he'll go back and forth with the art director over twenty emails just to make a map look more like this or that. It's more granular, kind of intense. So, there's a lot more freedom in doing books than in those other forms of illustration." When asked if she felt if that kind of creative freedom could be a blessing and a curse, she agreed, but pointed out how David's experience shaped his approach. "It's interesting thinking about how David works. He's so used to everything being so specific, with really short deadlines. Like, he'll be doing the cover for the New York Times Book Review or something, and we'll be sitting down for dinner on a Friday night, and he gets a call saying 'okay, this job just came in, we need you to have sketches by Monday morning and the finished art by Tuesday.' So if we had dinner plans with friends or anything, we just have to cancel them, and he'll end up working all night."

David Johnson

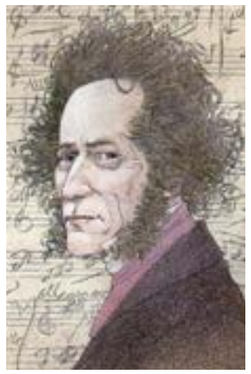


Illustration of Mendelssohn by David Johnson

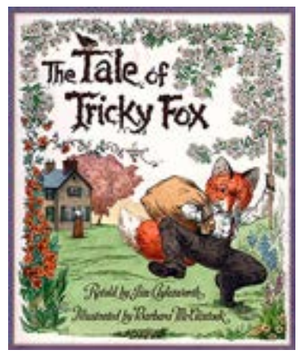
Sand Island Storm by David Johnson

Barbara went on to describe how art directors can be very particular when it comes to editorial work "The art director might say 'I don't know, the nose looks a little long' or comment on a specific element in a piece that needs to change." She sighed, adding "For David, if you give him a thirty-two page book with a year deadline, he's just at sea. He doesn't know how to respond to that. It's like how cats have quick-twitch muscles instead of long, endurance-running ones."

The conversation circles back to her work. Are there any common misconceptions about children's book illustrators as in "They only do silly books, or simple books that don't take much time to do." Barbara replied "I think that there's an assumption with children's books as a whole by most people who don't understand all the work that goes into it, that it's the bottom rung of the ladder. I think it has changed a lot, but people don't necessarily respect it. They think 'oh yeah, a picture book.' this artwork is very simple and it's just taking this person ten minutes and is something that anyone could do. Where in fact, I do so much research," she points to the bookshelves beside us again "This whole bottom bookcase is all research for the books that I'm illustrating and something that is deceptively simple." She continues "I have a lot of books about sewing so that I can understand why an article of clothing drapes the way that it does, or the sense of patterning. It takes most people six months to a year to do finished artwork for a picture book. It's hard work and it requires alot of back and forth with the art director and the editor. So it's a complicated thing to do. It's not easy. People like to think it's easy and they are so wrong about that."

I asked if people think that children's books don't have any sort of emotional depth to them. That they're just full of simple life lessons and sharing is important. Barbara recalled my reaction to the most emotional part of Bronte's story "The message is so powerful, adults respond very strongly to it. In fact, adults respond to that book much more strongly than children do. Kids are just like "oh yeah, Bronte died. But he's in Tomie's heart so it's okay. Let's get up and have snack time." On the other side of that she remarks that "If I read it to a group of families. It's the parents who are weeping at the end, tears streaming down people's cheeks and it's universal, old parents, grandparents, new parents. It's so very powerful and it is a terrible misconception to think that there is no emotional portent to what a picture book can offer." Barbara goes on to say that "The good ones all have that kind of power. It might be the power to make people laugh, or re-read it, or it touched a chord of some kind and it makes it important. Picture books are very important. So there's that whole component of literacy. You're teaching children to read, you're helping them understand, find something fascinating in a story.

Children and adults approach books very differently as Barbara explained "Children approach the picture first and then they want to learn what the words are that this picture is describing." This approach that children have to books is interesting in that it might open up the opportunity for a child to ask their parents questions about what they're reading in an attempt to try and understand why certain things are affecting their parents in a way that the child doesn't fully understand yet. Barbara remarks that even the funny ones get children to ask questions as she refers to another book that she illustrated called *"The Tale of Tricky Fox."* which is about a trickster fox. "He tricks people into giving him food. So he takes a bag and the first time he goes into a house, there is a rock in the bag and he says 'would you watch my bag there's something precious in it and I don't

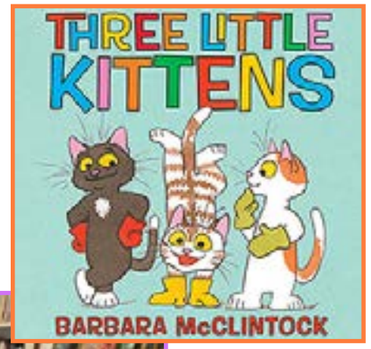


The Tale of Tricky Fox bookcover

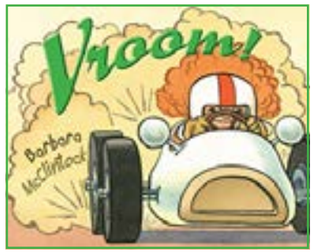
want anybody looking in it' and then he goes to sleep and of course the person who is hosting him can't resist looking in the bag. And they say 'oh, this is just a rock.' when the fox wakes up he looks in the bag and says 'where's my loaf of bread?' the person says 'you didn't have a loaf of,' oh, that's right I wasn't supposed to look in the bag. They say 'oh i'm so sorry. I'll give you a loaf of bread, and it goes on and on." She concludes by saying "That's the lesson, about how do you deal with someone like that? It's a little white lie, but for kids, it's fascinating because they're at that stage. But people are too. Grown-ups are too. It's all meaningful."

I commented on this by saying that this lesson is wrapped in the guise of 'it's just a silly little fox.' but once you stop and think about it there's a deeper meaning to it in that it's teaching children to not tell little white lies because they'll get back to you someday.

Lastly I asked her if she had any advice for someone who wants to get into Illustration "Go to your public library and check out ten picture books. Take them home, study them, look at them, decide what is similar, what is different, compare, contrast, try to figure out why the illustrator paced out the manuscript the way that they did. In two weeks, take all those books back to the library, check out ten more. Go back and do the same thing. Read as much as you possibly can. Expose yourself to as many picture books as you can. So just utilize your public library and go in and just read every book on the shelf if you possibly can and see what resonates with you.



Preliminary sketches for Three Little Kittens Cover (upper left)
Barbara's studio with space for furry assistant (bottom)
Three Little Kittens Book Cover (upper right)



These are just some of the books that Barbara has illustrated, or written and illustrated. Since she has had a hand in creating over forty books for children I included some of the ones that came up in my conversation with her as well as one that she has preliminary sketches for on her corkboards.