

CREATOR OF 'DUCKLINGS' DIES ROBERT MCCLOSKEY WAS 88 ROBERT MCCLOSKEY, 88; CREATED 'MAKE WAY FOR DUCKLINGS'

Bailey, Michael J . Boston Globe ; Boston, Mass. [Boston, Mass]01 July 2003: A.1.

[ProQuest document link](#)

ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

His second book was first in fame. In "Make Way for Ducklings," Mr. [ROBERT MCCLOSKEY] told the tale of Mr. and Mrs. Mallard and their quest to find a safe place to raise their eight hatchlings. In doing so, Mr. McCloskey gave readers a duck's-eye view of Boston: of flying over the State House and Louisburg Square, of swimming in the Charles River and Public Garden pond, of waddling along Mount Vernon Street.

Mr. McCloskey would use the island and the surrounding Penobscot Bay as the setting for most of the rest of his work. His friends and neighbors became the friends and neighbors in the books. In doing so, he captured a slice of New England life and its people for his stories in much the manner that Norman Rockwell infused his canvas with the people and places of Western Massachusetts. Mr. McCloskey, however, displayed on occasion a sense of the mischievous - dropping one of his pals, Burt Dow, into the belly of a whale, for instance.

In "Time of Wonder," Mr. McCloskey's first book in color, the landscapes and seascapes of the islands in Penobscot Bay are as animate and unpredictable as the children who "belly-whop," frolic, or, sometimes, hunker down in fear there. With lyrical language and splashes of color, Mr. McCloskey recreates a world where the tides continually fashion new scenes, the forests whisper their vitality in the fog, and the rains march across the islands, the bay, and, finally, you.

FULL TEXT

Globe staff reporter Michael Rosenwald contributed to this obituary.

His books introduced millions of boys and girls to the pleasures and perils of blueberry picking and to the wonders of where the waves meet the land. His renderings of the webbed wanderings of eight tiny ducks also introduced the children to a place of crooked paths and straight-as-an-arrow decency, a place called Boston.

Robert McCloskey, whose storytelling and drawing talents made him a cherished guest at bedtime stories for generations of families, died yesterday at his home in Deer Isle, Maine. He was 88.

His second book was first in fame. In "Make Way for Ducklings," Mr. McCloskey told the tale of Mr. and Mrs. Mallard and their quest to find a safe place to raise their eight hatchlings. In doing so, Mr. McCloskey gave readers a duck's-eye view of Boston: of flying over the State House and Louisburg Square, of swimming in the Charles River and Public Garden pond, of waddling along Mount Vernon Street.

The book captures not just the cobblestones of Boston, but a bit of its character as well. When the ducks run into

that bane of all Bostonians - traffic - their way is made clear by a big-hearted Officer Michael and his pals.

When "Make Way for Ducklings" was published in 1941, The New York Times called it "one of the merriest picture-books ever." The book was awarded the Caldecott Medal in 1942, given annually to the most distinguished picture-book. "Make Way for Ducklings" has been translated into nine languages and has sold about 2 million copies.

To Boston, the book is more than an often-read, often-honored children's tale. It has become a celebrated part of the city's heritage. In 1987, sculptor Nancy Schon - working from an idea by Suzanne de Monchaux - created a bronzed Mrs. Mallard and eight ducklings suitable for climbing by toddlers near the Mallards' eventual home, the pond in the Public Garden.

"I was struck with how this very simple work contained so many messages of caring, messages about the relationship of mothers to children, and so on," de Monchaux said last night of "Make Way for Ducklings."

"And because the book made Boston a familiar city to so many children, I thought he should be remembered."

The Public Garden is also the site of the annual "Make Way for Ducklings" parade on Mother's Day, featuring hundreds of children dressed in the costumes of their favorite characters.

To this day, tourists and new residents alike tell of how their first impressions of Boston came not from a history textbook or the setting of a TV sitcom, but from a 1,150-word story by a young man who had failed in his attempts to make a living as a painter and who, to his final days, considered himself barely an adequate story-teller.

Born in Hamilton, Ohio, Mr. McCloskey said his first loves were neither drawing nor writing.

"From the time my fingers were long enough to play the scale I took piano lessons," he wrote in an autobiographical sketch for "The Junior Book of Authors" in 1951. "I started next to play the harmonica, the drums, and then the oboe. The musician's life was the life for me, that is, until I became interested in things electrical and things mechanical.

"I collected old electric motors and bits of wire. . . . I built trains and cranes with remote control, my family's Christmas trees revolved, lights flashed, and buzzers buzzed, fuses blew, and sparks flew! The inventor's life was the life for me, that is, until I started making drawings."

The illustrator's life, it turned out, was the life for him. He won a scholarship to the Vesper George Art School in Boston in 1932 and served as an apprentice for a muralist.

Living on Myrtle Street on Beacon Hill, he would walk each morning to his art classes on St. Botolph Street. The trip took him across one of his favorite parts of the city, the Public Garden.

When he returned to Boston several years later, he spotted a family of ducks amid snarling traffic near Charles Street. That image, he later recounted in interviews, was filed away.

Mr. McCloskey received further training in New York City and spent a few summers on Cape Cod, intent on making a living as a painter.

While in Manhattan, Mr. McCloskey showed his portfolio of paintings - mainly landscapes and images from

medieval mythology - to a children's book editor. To his surprise, the editor suggested he write, as well as illustrate, a children's book. But instead of dragons and mysterious forests, the editor said, Mr. McCloskey should consider other subjects.

Mr. McCloskey returned to his roots in Ohio. He decided to use in his books the sights and sounds, the images and ideas, and the people and places of his life.

It was an idea Mr. McCloskey embraced the rest of his career.

His first book, "Lentil," told the story of a vocally-challenged Midwestern lad who found his calling in the harmonica and, in the process, saved his town's homecoming celebration.

For his next book, Mr. McCloskey returned to that scene near Boston's Public Garden.

According to an interview with The New York Times in the early 1990s, the author finished a story of Mr. and Mrs. Mallard and their brood of ducklings, with such names as Tom, Dick, and Harry. And Genevieve.

Mr. McCloskey didn't think it was much of a story, but he showed it to his editors at Viking Press. They told him the story was fine and he should go ahead with the illustrations. But, they said, he needed to rename those ducklings - the names he had chosen were too adult.

In creating the illustrations, Mr. McCloskey took a page from naturalist John Audubon, but in a most peculiar setting. He bought four mallards and for weeks let them run free in his apartment in New York. He would crawl next to them, at their level, to see how they waddled; he would plop them in the bathtub to see how they swam. After running out of patience - and Kleenex, according to Mr. McCloskey - he freed the ducks and finished his illustrations.

Annoyed at the suggestion to change the ducklings' names, Mr. McCloskey used in his final manuscript alphabetical nonsense names, from Jack and Kack to Pack and Quack.

To the post-war generation of baby boomers, these names would become as much a part of their childhood lore as Paul Bunyan and Oliver Twist were to generations before them.

Yet, even after the book was greeted with critical and financial success, Mr. McCloskey did not consider himself an author.

"I am primarily an artist, incidentally a writer," he said to a reviewer at the time.

During World War II, he married Peggy Durand, the daughter of noted children's author Ruth Sawyer Durand. The couple eventually had two daughters and settled in New York and summered on Scott Island off the coast of Maine.

Mr. McCloskey would use the island and the surrounding Penobscot Bay as the setting for most of the rest of his work. His friends and neighbors became the friends and neighbors in the books. In doing so, he captured a slice of New England life and its people for his stories in much the manner that Norman Rockwell infused his canvas with the people and places of Western Massachusetts. Mr. McCloskey, however, displayed on occasion a sense of the mischievous - dropping one of his pals, Burt Dow, into the belly of a whale, for instance.

Although Mr. McCloskey's other books did not attain the popularity of "Make Way," they succeed in evoking in the reader a similar sense of place and, more importantly, an attachment to a child's perspective of those places and the rituals and rhythms of their lives.

In "Time of Wonder," Mr. McCloskey's first book in color, the landscapes and seascapes of the islands in Penobscot Bay are as animate and unpredictable as the children who "belly-whop," frolic, or, sometimes, hunker down in fear there. With lyrical language and splashes of color, Mr. McCloskey recreates a world where the tides continually fashion new scenes, the forests whisper their vitality in the fog, and the rains march across the islands, the bay, and, finally, you.

The book won the 1958 Caldecott Medal, making Mr. McCloskey the first author to receive this award twice.

His "Blueberries for Sal" and "One Morning in Maine" won honorable mention from Caldecott. Both were inspired by real-life events of his young daughters, Sarah ("Sal") and Jane. One collaboration with his mother-in-law, "Journey Cake, Ho," earned Mr. McCloskey another honorable mention from Caldecott.

Among his many honors, Mr. McCloskey was named a Living Legend by the Library of Congress in 2000. Earlier this year, the Massachusetts Legislature named "Make Way for Ducklings" the official state children's book.

Illustration

Caption: 1. The ducklings as they first appeared in 1941 and (below) the author/illustrator. / COPYRIGHT ROBERT McCLOSKEY 2. Robert McCloskey used the sights, people, and places of his life to provide the settings and the subjects of his books. / 1991 GLOBE FILE PHOTO / STEPHEN CASTAGNETTO

DETAILS

Subject:	Deaths – McCloskey, Robert
People:	McCloskey, Robert
Publication title:	Boston Globe; Boston, Mass.
Pages:	A.1
Number of pages:	0
Publication year:	2003
Publication date:	Jul 1, 2003
Section:	Obituary
Publisher:	Boston Globe Media Partners, LLC
Place of publication:	Boston, Mass.

Country of publication:	United States, Boston, Mass.
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals--United States
ISSN:	07431791
Source type:	Newspapers
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	Obituary
ProQuest document ID:	405535724
Document URL:	http://libraries.maine.edu/mainedatabases/authmaine.asp?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/405535724?accountid=17222
Copyright:	Copyright New York Times Company Jul 1, 2003
Last updated:	2017-11-10
Database:	Global Newsstream

LINKS

[Linking Service](#)

Database copyright © 2020 ProQuest LLC. All rights reserved.

[Terms and Conditions](#) [Contact ProQuest](#)