

Barbara Cooney, 83, Children's Book Creator

By Eden Ross Lipson

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Barbara Cooney, an author and illustrator of children's books whose first work was published in 1940 and whose 110th, "Basket Moon," appeared last fall, died on Friday at a hospital in Portland, Me. She was 83 and lived in Damariscotta, Me.

Miss Cooney honored the admonition she ascribed to her best-loved character, Miss Rumphius, who said, "You must do something to make the world more beautiful."

She won the Caldecott Medal for illustration twice, first in 1958 for a version of Chaucer's "Chanticleer and the Fox" in full color in the scratchboard technique she had been using for roughly 20 years. Her second Caldecott, in 1980, was for paintings for Donald Hall's "Ox-Cart Man" that were in a distinctive primitive folk art style.

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Each prize changed the artistic course of her career. After the first she began to paint, and after the second she began to write her own stories to illustrate, including what she retrospectively called a trilogy -- "Miss Rumphius" (1982), "Island Boy" (1988) and "Hattie and the Wild Waves" (1990). They made up what she said was "as close to any autobiography as I will ever get."

She was born in 1917 at the Hotel Bossert in Brooklyn Heights, which was built by her maternal grandfather. "Hattie and the Wild Waves" describes in detail her artist mother's childhood in a wealthy German-American family.

Miss Cooney grew up on Long Island and began summering in Maine at age 2. She graduated from Smith College in 1938 and studied lithography and etching at the Art Students League in New York.

She married Dr. Charles Talbot Porter and reared four children while he practiced medicine in Pepperell, Mass., later moving to a house overlooking the sea in Damariscotta.

The somewhat awed narrator of "Miss Rumphius" describes her great-aunt as "little and old" but adds, "she has not always been that way." Miss Rumphius is also known as the Lupine Lady because, after an adventurous life, she has returned to the Maine coast, where she harvests and scatters the seeds of her favorite plant. "Island Boy" tells the story of Matthais Tibbetts, who lived almost his entire life on a remote Maine island.

Maine, the much-loved scene of many of Miss Cooney's books, treasured the author in turn. In 1989 the Maine Library Association created the Lupine Award to honor outstanding children's books by state residents or authors of books about Maine, beginning with Miss Cooney, and in 1996 Gov. Angus King proclaimed her a Living Treasure of the State of Maine. In 1997 Miss Cooney announced a donation of \$550,000 to the library in Damariscotta, and later added \$300,000. Groundbreaking for a library costing \$2 million will be next month.

Miss Cooney received many honorary degrees and won numerous awards in addition to the Caldecotts, including the American Book Award for "Miss Rumphius" in 1983.

In addition to her husband and four children, she is survived by two brothers, three grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

Miss Cooney's work is much admired for its historical detail and accuracy, from the embroidery on Eleanor Roosevelt's baptismal gown ("Eleanor") to details of Finnish folklore ("Louhi, Witch of North Farm").

In her 1959 Caldecott acceptance speech she explained: "How many children will know that the magpie sitting in my pollarded willow in 'Chanticleer and the Fox' is an evil omen? How many children will realize that every flower and grass in the book grew in Chaucer's time in England? How many children will know or care? Maybe not a single one. Still I keep piling it on. Detail after detail. Whom am I pleasing -- besides myself? I don't know. Yet if I put enough in my pictures, there may be something for everyone. Not all will be understood, but some will be understood now and maybe more later."