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## Barbara Cooney

**Date:** 2002

**From:** Major Authors and Illustrators for Children and Young Adults

**Publisher:** Gale

**Document Type:** Biography

**Length:** 3,583 words

**Lexile Measure:** 1600L

About this Person

**Born:** August 06, 1917 in Brooklyn, New York, United States

**Died:** March 10, 2000 in Portland, Maine, United States

**Nationality:** American

Updated: Jan. 1, 2002

Barbara Cooney proved herself to be not only a prolific but also a versatile writer and illustrator in a career that spanned over sixty years. Two-time winner of the Caldecott Medal, once for a book she wrote and once for a book she illustrated, Cooney began drawing when she was still a young girl. In an interview, Cooney once explained: "I've been drawing pictures for as long as I can remember. It's in the blood. . . . My favorite days were when I had a cold and could stay home from school and draw all day long." Cooney's mother was an artist and so paints, brushes, and other supplies were always available. "I became an artist," Cooney related in *Horn Book*, "because I had access to materials and pictures, a minimum of instruction, and a stubborn nature."

After graduating from Smith College and taking classes at the Art Students League in New York, Cooney made the rounds of New York art directors looking for work. She once commented, "Book illustration, I thought, might be a way to use what little talent I judged I had." With the outbreak of World War II, Cooney joined the Women's Army Corps. Marriage and her first pregnancy pushed her into leaving the military and turning to more domestic matters.

While raising her family, Cooney began illustrating and writing children's books. To make her illustrations as realistic as possible, she often visits the actual places in the story. "I often go to great lengths to get authentic backgrounds for my illustrations," she once explained in *Horn Book*. "I climbed Mount Olympus to see how things up there looked to Zeus. I went down into the cave where Hermes was born. I slept in Sleeping Beauty's castle."

Cooney often based her stories on historical events, and she took great care to get the historical details right. "When creating period costumes and environments," a contributor for *Juvenile Miscellany* reported, "Cooney is very exacting. She travels to the location of the book setting to conduct extensive research." To do her illustrations for *The Year of the Perfect Christmas Tree*, written by Gloria M. Houston, Cooney "went down to Appalachia and met the author's family," she told *Publishers Weekly*. "They were a great help in telling me how it was back then when the story takes place (post-World War I) and about the spirit of the place--I couldn't have gotten that without going there."

For her Caldecott-winning book *Chanticleer and the Fox*, Cooney retold and illustrated a story by Geoffrey Chaucer. Her inspiration, she told *Horn Book*, "is a little embarrassing because the answer is so simple. I just happened to want to draw chickens. . . . For years I have admired the work of Chinese and Japanese artists, in particular, their landscapes and their birds. But I think the actual day that *Chanticleer* was conceived was . . . one autumn day. I had been out in the woods picking witch hazel and was on my way to cook supper. As I came out of the woods I passed a little barn that I had often passed before. But never at that time of day nor when the barn door was wide open. At that hour the sun was getting low and it shone right into the doorway. The inside of the barn was like a golden stage set. At that time of year the loft was full of hay, gold hay. And pecking around the floor of the barn was a most gorgeous and impractical flock of fancy chickens, rust-colored chickens, black ones, white ones, speckled ones and laced ones, some with crests on their heads, some with feathered legs, others with iridescent tails, and all with vermilion-colored wattles and combs."

For her book *Miss Rumphius*, Cooney was inspired by a real-life woman who had traveled the world over planting flower seeds. In Cooney's story, Miss Rumphius is a world traveler who returns to her hometown when she is very old because she wants to create something of beauty before she dies. The surprising way she does this is the core of the story. "Of all the books I have done," Cooney once said, "*Miss Rumphius* has been, perhaps, the closest to my heart. There are, of course, many dissimilarities between me and Alice Rumphius, but, as I worked, she gradually seemed to become my alter ego. Perhaps she had been that right from the

start." *Miss Rumphius* won the American Book Award and was selected as a *New York Times* Best Book of the Year.

Although Cooney wrote and illustrated her own books, she also illustrated over one hundred books by other writers. She told *Publishers Weekly*: "I love doing my own books, but my ideas are slow in germinating. I can't put out a book a year. I like to keep my hand in, so I find new things to work on, and interpreting other people's texts is one of them." Ideas for her own books came slowly to her and they took time to develop. The idea for the *Island Boy* grew from her love of the Maine coastline. When she found an old history of Maine which told of a man who lived on a nearby island his whole life, Cooney knew she had found her story. "I've had a love affair with the area since I was born," she told *Publishers Weekly*. "I wanted to do it justice. I expect I feel it is heaven on earth."

Cooney's Caldecott-winning book *Ox-Cart Man* tells of a New Hampshire farmer of the nineteenth century who, each year, loads the goods and food his family had produced during the year into an ox-drawn cart and takes them to market. There he sells all the goods and the ox and walks back across New Hampshire to his home. Written by Donald Hall, *Ox-Cart Man* takes place very near to where Cooney lived. Cooney explained to *Horn Book* that although the story took place near her house, she needed to do extensive research for the proper historical details. "First of all," she related, "I had to establish *exactly* when the story could have happened. 'When' is very important to an illustrator because the sets (the landscape and architecture) must be accurate; so must the costumes, the props, the hairdos, everything." Cooney's research even extended to determining which buildings would have been standing in Portsmouth, New Hampshire in 1832--a difficult question because of the frequent fires the town suffered. But the natural landscape remained the same. "When you get into country up our way, it still looks pretty much like the New England that the Ox-Cart Man knew," Cooney stated.

In the 1970s, Cooney had a new house constructed along the Maine coastline to use as a studio. Her younger son built it over a three-year period. As Constance Reed McClellan related in *Horn Book*, Cooney "conceived the idea, chose the site, designed and planned the house, watched over and participated in its construction. . . . But the house is now her own--her retreat, her fortress, her castle." Containing Cooney's art studio as well as a photography studio, the new house eventually stood within a few feet of the Atlantic Ocean.

Cooney continued creating her own books and illustrating the work of others almost up to the time of her death in the year 2000. Into her fifth decade of writing and illustrating, Cooney was still creative. Her 1990 title, *Hattie and the Wild Waves: A Story from Brooklyn*, is a picture book about her mother's childhood in New York City at the turn of the twentieth century. While describing Hattie's comfortable life in a Manhattan mansion, a summerhouse on Rockaway Beach, a Long Island estate, and a Brooklyn hotel, Cooney focuses on her character's decision to become an artist. "Cooney is at her best here," maintained Zena Sutherland in *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*. Similarly, Ilene Cooper of *Booklist* commented, "Cooney sets out to capture an era, and at this she succeeds, but the heart of the story is a girl's determination to follow her dream." With *The Story of Christmas*, an informational book for primary graders, Cooney traces the origins of a variety of global facts, legends, and customs that helped to define the celebration; the book is a revised edition of the author's earlier *Christmas* (1967). Although some reviewers questioned the reduction of Christian references in the revision, a reviewer in *Publishers Weekly* asserted that Cooney did "a commendable job" of bringing together biblical stories, legends of pagan festivals, and modern customs. *Eleanor* is a picture biography of Eleanor Roosevelt that describes Roosevelt's life from her unhappy childhood through her graduation from an English boarding school at the age of eighteen (an experience that she said "opened the world" for her). According to Maria B. Salvadore in *Horn Book*, Cooney includes illustrations in *Eleanor* that "use a palette of reds and deep pinks to reflect Eleanor's growth in self-confidence." As well, Barbara Kiefer of *School Library Journal* stated, "Cooney once again brings her unique vision to biography," while Leslie Bennetts of the *New York Times Book Review* commented that "Ms. Cooney's tale is affecting; any child will find it easy to relate to this classic account of an ugly duckling." In an interview with Julie Yates Walton in *Publishers Weekly*, Cooney said: "I've done a lot of books based on history, but they were not totally factual. I loved writing this book because somehow I felt that I had done what I had never been able to do before: to write exact truth. Every word is researched and true, every sentence I tried to whittle down to its true meaning. I think that *Eleanor* is the nicest thing I've ever written."

Cooney's final publication, the illustrations for Mary Lyn Ray's *Basket Moon*, appeared in 1998. In this homage to the time-honored craft of basket weaving, Cooney created with "her deft brush," scenes "as pristine as the narrative," according to a reviewer for *Publishers Weekly*. "Cooney's quiet, beautiful paintings in oil pastel and acrylic express the essence of the story," noted *Booklist's* Hazel Rochman. Finally, *Horn Book's* Margaret A. Bush commented that Cooney, in her eighties at the time she illustrated the book, offers "both a fine sweep and nice details of the landscape" and also "deftly conveys the time and place."

At her death in March of 2000, Cooney was one of the best-known and best-loved children's illustrators, something of a Grand Dame of children's books. A lover of books as well as a creator of them, Cooney donated \$850,000 in her last years to her hometown of Damariscotta, Maine, for the building of a new library complex.

#### PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Born August 6, 1917, in Brooklyn, NY; died March 10, 2000, in Portland, ME; daughter of Russell Schenck (a stockbroker) and Mae Evelyn (an artist; maiden name, Bossert) Cooney; married Guy Murchie (a war correspondent and author), December, 1944 (divorced, March, 1947); married Charles Talbot Porter (a physician), July 16, 1949; children: (first marriage) Gretel Goldsmith, Barnaby; (second marriage) Charles Talbot, Jr., Phoebe. **Education:** Smith College, B.A., 1938; also attended Art Students League, 1940. **Politics:** Independent.

#### CAREER:

Freelance author and illustrator, 1938--. **Military service:** Women's Army Corps, World War II, 1942-43; became second lieutenant.

## WORKS:

Writings FOR CHILDREN; SELF-ILLUSTRATED, EXCEPT AS NOTED

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- *The Kellyhorns*, Farrar & Rinehart (New York, NY), 1942.
- *Captain Pottle's House*, Farrar (New York, NY), 1943.
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- *The Little Juggler: Adapted from an Old French Legend*, Hastings House (New York, NY), 1961, new edition, 1982.
- (Adapter) *The Courtship, Merry Marriage, and Feast of Cock Robin and Jenny Wren: To Which Is Added the Doleful Death of Cock Robin*, Scribner (New York, NY), 1965.
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- *Christmas*, Crowell (New York, NY), 1967.
- (Editor) *A Little Prayer*, Hastings House (New York, NY), 1967.
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- *Miss Rumphius*, Viking (New York, NY), 1982.
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- *Island Boy*, Viking (New York, NY), 1988.
- *Hattie and the Wild Waves*, Viking (New York, NY), 1990.
- *The Story of Christmas*, illustrated by Loretta Krupinski, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 1995.
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- Frances M. Frost, *Uncle Snowball*, Farrar & Rinehart (New York, NY), 1940.
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- Anne Molloy, *Shooting Star Farm*, Houghton (Boston, MA), 1946.
- Phyllis Crawford, *The Blot: Little City Cat*, Holt (New York, NY), 1946.
- Nancy Hartwell, *Shoestring Theater*, Holt (New York, NY), 1947.
- L. L. Bein, *Just Plain Maggie*, Harcourt (New York, NY), 1948.
- Lee Kingman, *The Rocky Summer*, Houghton (Boston, MA), 1948.
- Ruth Crawford Seeger, *American Folk Songs for Children in Home, School and Nursery School: A Book for Children, Parents and Teachers*, Doubleday (New York, NY), 1948, reprinted, Linnet, 1993.
- Child Study Association of America, *Read Me Another Story*, Crowell (New York, NY), 1949.
- Rutherford George Montgomery, *Kildee House*, Doubleday (New York, NY), 1949, reprinted, Walker (New York, NY), 1994.
- Lee Kingman, *The Best Christmas*, Doubleday (New York, NY), 1949, reprinted, Peter Smith, 1985.
- Phyllis Krasilovsky, *The Man Who Didn't Wash His Dishes*, Doubleday (New York, NY), 1950.
- Ruth Crawford Seeger, *Animal Folk Songs for Children: Traditional American Songs*, Doubleday (New York, NY), 1950.
- Nellie M. Leonard, *Graymouse Family*, Crowell (New York, NY), 1950.

- Child Study Association of America, *Read Me More Stories*, Crowell (New York, NY), 1951.
- Rutherford George Montgomery, *Hill Ranch*, Doubleday (New York, NY), 1951.
- Elisabeth C. Lansing, *The Pony That Ran Away*, Crowell (New York, NY), 1951.
- Lee Kingman, *Quarry Adventure*, Doubleday (New York, NY), 1951, published as *Lauri's Surprising Summer*, Constable (London, England), 1957.
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- Mary M. Aldrich, *Too Many Pets*, Macmillan (New York, NY), 1952.
- Margaret Wise Brown, *Where Have You Been?*, Crowell (New York, NY), 1952.
- Barbara Reynolds, *Pepper*, Scribner (New York, NY), 1952.
- Miriam E. Mason, *Yours with Love, Kate*, Houghton (Boston, MA), 1952.
- Margaret Wise Brown, *Christmas in the Barn*, Crowell (New York, NY), 1952.
- Catherine Marshall, *Let's Keep Christmas*, Whittlesey House, (New York, NY), 1953.
- Ruth Crawford Seeger, *American Folk Songs for Christmas*, Doubleday (New York, NY), 1953.
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- Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women; or, Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy*, Crowell (New York, NY), 1955.
- Louise A. Kent, *The Brookline Trunk*, Houghton (Boston, MA), 1955.
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- Margaret G. Otto, *Three Little Dachshunds*, Holt (New York, NY), 1963.
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- Hugh Latham, translator, *Mother Goose in French*, Crowell (New York, NY), 1964.
- Anne Molloy, *Shaun and the Boat: An Irish Story*, Hastings House (New York, NY), 1965.
- Jane Goodsell, *Katie's Magic Glasses*, Houghton (Boston, MA), 1965.
- Samuel Morse, *All in a Suitcase*, Little, Brown (Boston, MA), 1966.
- Aldous Huxley, *Crowns of Pearblossom*, Random House (New York, NY), 1967.
- Alastair Reid and Anthony Kerrigan, *Mother Goose in Spanish*, Crowell (New York, NY), 1968.
- Edward Lear, *The Owl and the Pussy-Cat*, Little, Brown (Boston, MA), 1969.
- Natalia M. Belting, *Christmas Folk*, Holt (New York, NY), 1969.
- William Wise, *The Lazy Young Duke of Dundee*, Rand McNally (New York, NY), 1970.
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- Robyn Supraner, *Would You Rather Be a Tiger?*, Houghton (Boston, MA), 1973.
- Dorothy Joan Harris, *The House Mouse*, Warne, 1973.
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- Norma Farber, *How the Hibernators Came to Bethlehem*, Walker (New York, NY), 1980.
- Wendy Ann Kesselman, *Emma*, Doubleday (New York, NY), 1980.
- Margot C. Griego and others, selectors and translators, *Tortillitas para Mama, and Other Nursery Rhymes: Spanish and English*, Holt (New York, NY), 1982.
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- Sergei Prokofiev, *Peter and the Wolf: A Mechanical Book*, Viking (New York, NY), 1985.
- Toni de Gerez, reteller, *Louhi, Witch of North Farm*, Viking (New York, NY), 1986.
- Gloria Houston, *The Year of the Perfect Christmas Tree: An Appalachian Tale*, Dial (New York, NY), 1988.
- Alice McLerran, *Roxaboxen*, Lothrop (New York, NY), 1991.
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- Jane Yolen, *Letting Swift River Go*, Little, Brown (Boston, MA), 1992.
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- Contributor of illustrations to periodicals.

#### Adaptations

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  - *Juvenile Miscellany*, winter, 1986.
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## Source Citation (MLA 8th Edition)

"Barbara Cooney." *Major Authors and Illustrators for Children and Young Adults*, Gale, 2002. *Gale In Context: Biography*, [link.gale.com/apps/doc/K1617001160/GPS?u=brun84057&sid=GPS&xid=217ac89d](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/K1617001160/GPS?u=brun84057&sid=GPS&xid=217ac89d). Accessed 2 May 2021.

**Gale Document Number:** GALE|K1617001160