

Barbara Cooney

BY BARBARA BADER

Barbara Bader's American Picturebooks from Noah's Ark to the Beast Within is a classic text in children's literature criticism—the definitive history of the picture book in this country. She is now at work on a revised and expanded edition, The World in 32 Pages: One Hundred Years of American Picturebooks, to be published by Winslow Press in 2001. The following article is excerpted from Bader's new book, where it will be fully illustrated.

Barbara Cooney came late to center stage, after decades as an illustrator admired for her graphic arts skills. But that particular accolade carried an implication, justified or not, of limitation. To succeed in a changing market, to satisfy her own ambitions, Cooney had to transform herself into a different kind of artist—a colorist and painter.

For Cooney, it was the work of a lifetime that began auspiciously in Brooklyn in 1917. Father was a stockbroker with New England roots. Mother was an amateur painter from a prominent German-American family of art and music patrons; she was proudest, however, of the forebear who painted oils-by-the-yard and cigar store Indians. Summers Cooney spent with her paternal grandmother on the Maine coast, the start of another lifelong allegiance. In due course she went to boarding school, then to Smith College. Though she had always drawn, it didn't occur to her to go to art school—a matter sometimes of regret, sometimes of pride—but apparently she never considered being anything but a children's book illustrator. "The answer is that I love stories."

Between 1940 and 1943 she illustrated three books, to some small effect, and wrote three of her own, to less effect. Then, after a brief wartime stint in the Women's Army Corps (WACs), she entered upon a progression common to women of her generation: twenty busy years of "getting married and having children" (two marriages, four children), of "staying home and taking care of my family"—and, in Cooney's case, "decorating books."

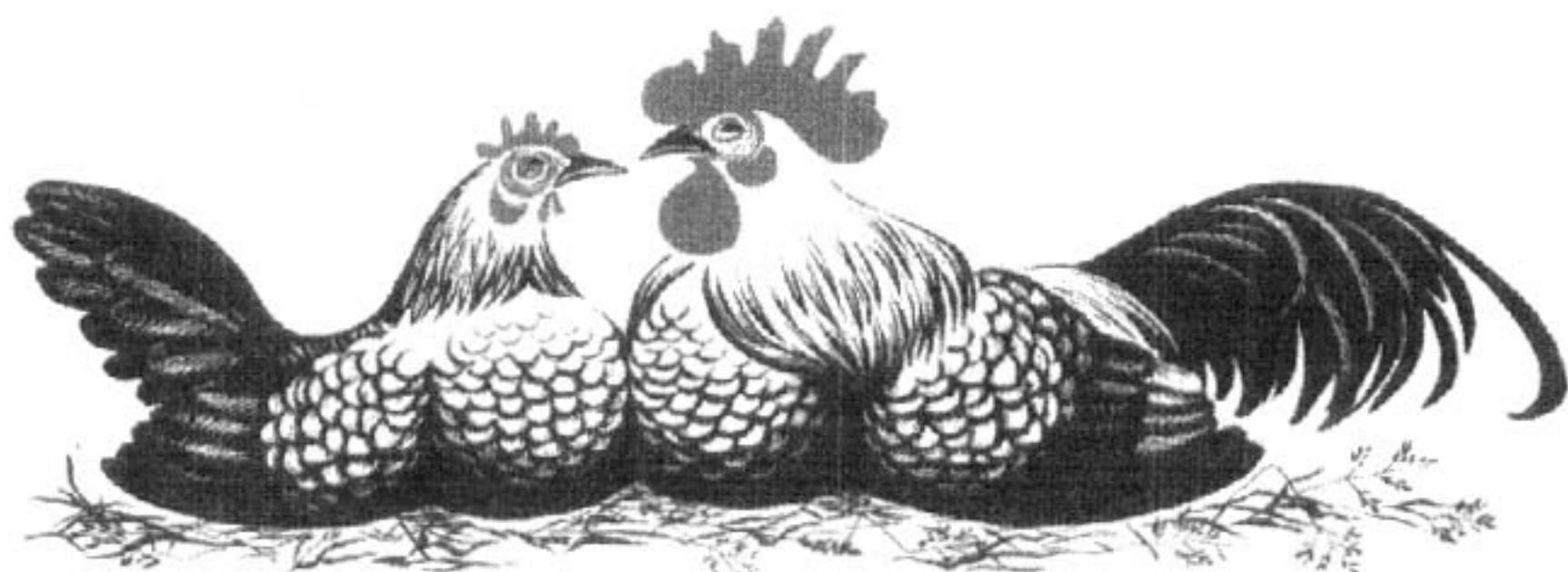
From the mid-1940s through the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, there were very few years when she didn't illustrate at least two or three

books; in 1952 her name was on six. Many she did for money, not for love: all those younglings to educate. But the 1952 batch included two by Margaret Wise Brown, *Where Have You Been?* and *Christmas in the Barn* (both Crowell)—and led to another warmly regarded Brown/Cooney Christmas book, *The Little Fir Tree* (Crowell, 1954). In Cooney's mind, children and animals were always with her, in person and on paper; and she was plagued by the thought that the number of her commissions depended on "the quality of the fur she drew." To outsiders, she was a Little Master. Just as her gentle, grave, very plain illustrations give conviction to Brown's rural New England Nativity—or rather, turn Brown's all-inclusive narrative into a New England Nativity—her crisp, animated embellishments are the making of Ruth Crawford Seeger's *American Folk Songs for Children* (Doubleday, 1948) and its successors.

In the 1950s and 1960s the Cooney name was synonymous with scratchboard, and, in the United States at least, she was the prime exponent of the medium most closely associated with book illustrations. This made sense: she had come into children's books as a black-and-white artist in order to illustrate, decorate, do a job—not, like a painter or designer or cartoonist, to create independently. For the 1960s *Horn Book* series "The Artist at Work," she wrote a description of scratchboard illustration, a model of its kind, that says a good deal about Cooney herself.

Each illustrating medium has a character of its own. Like wood engraving, which it resembles in appearance, scratchboard has an affinity for the printed page. The crisp, forthright technique makes a happy marriage with the clean letters of type. The flat black-and-white surface of the drawing preserves the flat surface of the page and the unity of text and illustration. For the artist, the medium is a good disciplinarian. It allows no subterfuge, no sketchy representations, no incomplete statements. Weaknesses cannot be hidden. The results may be delicate or brutal, but they are never indecisive. In short, the artist must know how to draw and he must draw with precision, for there is a finality too in drawing on scratchboard. . . .

FOR COONEY, SCRATCHBOARD was a source of pride and vexation. She liked the demands it made, the results she achieved; she didn't like her work to be valued, by anyone, for "the quality of the fur." She knew it was essentially a black-and-white medium; she didn't like being told, when she asked for full, camera-separated color, that she had "no color sense." To do scratchboard illustrations in two, three, or four colors was laborious—you made the black key plate on scratchboard, then scraped or scratched the



design for each additional color into a transparent overlay—but in the world of children's books, where color cost money, each additional color added to the artist's standing. For the first picture book of her own, an adaptation of "The Nun's Priest's Tale" from Chaucer, Cooney was granted five colors, at least for half the pages. Some double spreads would be in five colors, some in two colors, and some would be split—ideally, in such a way that the discrepancy would be unnoticed and the picture might actually benefit; such is the case with the barnyard scene, described below, which is the most reproduced illustration in the book. *Chanticleer and the Fox*, a work of craftsmanship and intelligence, won the Caldecott.

The farmyard scene that sets the stage is a Late Medieval idyll, poor as the widow and her daughters are said to be. We are charmed by the sight of the winsome little girl snuggling up to the stout, flower-wreathed old sheep that has eyes only for the flowering tip of the mullein, one of nature's least graceful creations. We take delight in the sows feeding in their thatched and planked and split-log surrounds, a vignette remindful of Thomas Bewick, the father of wood engraving. These goodies are but prelude to the fable of the vain rooster Chanticleer; the worshipful little hen, Demoiselle Partlet, too doting to believe her dream of imminent danger; and the sly fox whose appeal to Chanticleer's vanity almost succeeds as a consequence. From the tip of his comb to his taloned toes, from his proud, puffed-up breast to his sweeping tail feathers, Chanticleer is an image fit for an English inn sign. But the story only gets up off the page when Cooney is stalking the fox, or stirring up the chickens, in two colors. The multicolor pictures are too decorative and diffuse, perhaps, to be effective as dramatic vehicles.

With the success of *Chanticleer*, the constraints on Cooney eased. She took her family to France for the summer, the start of a twenty-year, mid-career period of foreign travel and engagement with

things French, then things Spanish, things Greek. She worked at her art and, without abandoning scratchboard, tried other media. Early in the French days she did *The Little Juggler* (Hastings House, 1961), adapted from the legend of the juggler of Notre Dame, and illustrated it with scratchboard drawings, in one and four colors, that attest to her burgeoning sense of place. Though the color is still conventionalized, the drawing is much freer; and to Cooney's gratification the people are much more "a part of the place." She illustrated French versions of nonsense verse by Edward Lear and Eugene Field—in a new, light-and-dark technique—and she was asked to do *Mother Goose in French* (Crowell, 1964) in full color. It was not a good idea, for Barbara Cooney or Mother Goose: the pretty, picturesque illustrations could pass as French travel ads of the time. Cooney was not yet a painter or a colorist.

More happily met, from those restless, ambitious years, is a book of modest intention; a story that, like "Old Mother Hubbard," has tempted artists known and unknown since the first nursery books were printed: "Cock Robin." Or, in the complete form in which Cooney did it, *The Courtship, Merry Marriage, and Feast of Cock Robin and Jenny Wren, to which is added the Doleful Death of Cock Robin*. She had settled on *Chanticleer*, Cooney used to say, because she wanted to draw chickens. Songbirds are birds of another feather, true, but Cock Robin cuts a fine figure, Jenny Wren is enchanting as a blushing bride, the proceedings tap a vein of merry spoofery in Cooney, and she draws and colors with a lightness of touch she seldom exhibited elsewhere.

Mere excellence was not enough, though. To end her apprenticeship, as she put it—to come into her own, we might say—Cooney needed a major achievement in full color. The opportunity, when it came, could have been tailor-made. To illustrate Donald Hall's homespun prose-poem *Ox-Cart Man*, she did a set of folk art-ish paintings that gained her a second Caldecott and freed her forever from unwanted commissions and pre-separation. With the kudos also came the confidence to think of telling stories of her own. She was sixty-two.

Hall's methodical, cadenced account of a nineteenth-century New England farmer and his family through the seasons—a steady round of growth and work and going to market—draws



upon Cooney's long-standing affinity for vintage Americana and her later-come ability to integrate people and places. The artwork is the new thing. Did she realize that her natural inclination toward silhouetted forms, flat planes, precise detail, and needle-point verdure gives an appearance of folk painting? That, with *Ox-Cart Man*, she might be in her element: a sophisticated artist working in a naïve style? So we have, on oh-so-formal display, the family members, the family sheep, and the goods each family member has made from the sheep, ready for the farmer to take to market . . . where he will purchase new tools and equipment, and "two pounds of wintergreen peppermint candy," that all hands will enjoy together in a glowing fireside scene.



Many years ago I went on record as finding the landscape too immaculate, the town scenes too tidy, the whole effect more quaint and tranquil than Hall's plain words dictate. Indeed, *Ox-Cart Man* is the New England myth of industry, equanimity, and stability incarnate, and people love it for just that reason.

After *Ox-Cart Man*, Cooney might have coasted along as the newest New England icon. But that wasn't enough, either. She continued to accept commissions, selectively, and especially welcomed the chance to go to new places and learn new things. To illustrate John Bierhorst's *Spirit Child*, a Mexican story of the Nativity (Morrow, 1984), she went to Mexico; for *Louhi, Witch of North Farm*, a Finnish tale retold by Toni de Gerez (Viking, 1986), she was off to Finland. But mainly she wrote and illustrated *Miss Rumphius* and the two other highly personal books, *Island Boy* and *Hattie and the Wild Waves*, that she referred to collectively as "my trilogy."

The wonder is that it took this born storyteller and fine writer—see her Caldecott acceptance papers, the scratchboard piece—forty years of illustrating other people's stories before she was ready to put words to paper again. She lacked confidence, she said. But it may also have helped that she was back in the Maine of her childhood at a time in life when looking backward comes naturally. It was a time in American life, too, when the urge toward personal retrospection was strong; *Ox-Cart Man* had its source in family legend. There is also the woman factor: the two dominant books in

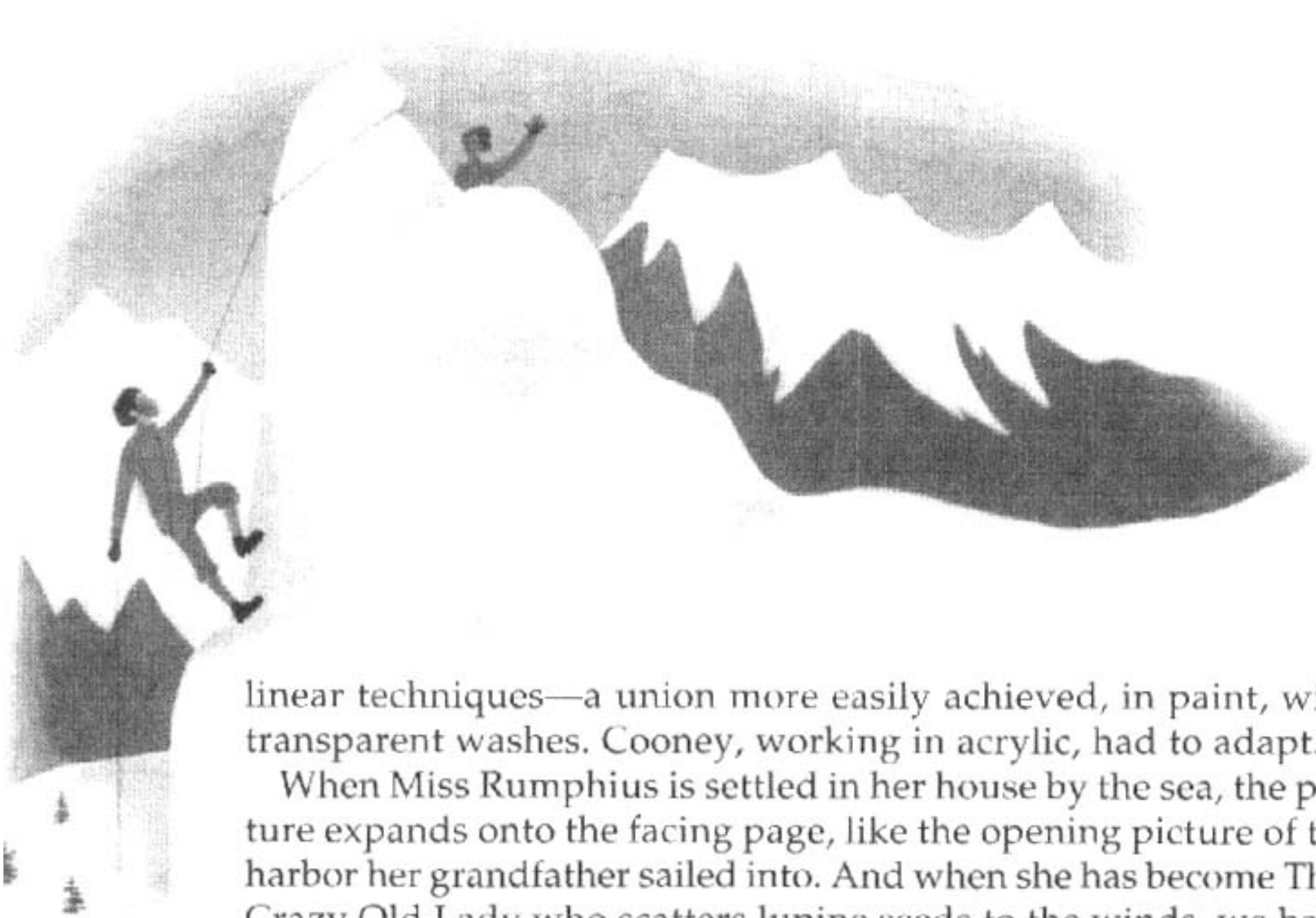
the trilogy are both about determined, creative women, like Cooney herself.

Potentially, *Miss Rumphius* is a snooze and a sermon—the long, undramatic life of a spinster librarian who, in her last years, makes the world beautiful by scattering lupine seeds. As Cooney pictures her—in words and in pictures—she’s Katharine Hepburn without attitude. The words are as good as the pictures. Little Alice Rumphius (who has a corolla of red hair) sits on the knee of her beloved painter grandfather in her sailor suit; when she grows up, she tells him, she too will go to faraway places and live by the sea. She must do a third thing, he says, she must make the world more beautiful; and she agrees, not knowing what that might be. “In the meantime Alice got up and washed her face and ate porridge for breakfast. She went to school and came home and did her homework.” New paragraph: “And pretty soon she was grown up.”

The narrator is a child, elderly Miss Rumphius’s great-niece, telling the story—partly as her great-aunt has told it to her, partly in her own droll way—to other children. The text is pithy, exquisitely paced, and consistently interesting. In composition and execution, the pictures are a leap and a bound beyond their counterparts in *Ox-Cart Man*. We are not looking at a scene, we are on the scene; Cooney has raised the sightline and let the forms bleed off the page. She has learned to draw architecture, like the Old Masters, to create multiple settings and points of interest. Her silhouetted forms have substance; her interior has light and air. She has achieved complexity without losing focus. The fashionable lady in the lower stacks, the two children on the heavenly second level, the tot in the nook beyond—all these claim interest, along with the newspaper reader, the trim young miss and her pug, the revolving bookstand, the stuffed animals . . . while only reinforcing the centrality of Miss Rumphius, in the picture and the library.

Her exotic, far-flung travel is complete in two magic Movieland scenes, with accompanying vignettes, that are at once spare and suggestive. There’s wit, too, in Miss Rumphius atop the mountain encouraging her male companion below—and then, on the opposite page, hurting her back getting off a camel. It’s time, maybe, to find her place by the sea.

The pages flow. The clean, spacious design—a collaboration between Cooney and Viking art director Barbara Hennessy—allows each small figure its gesture, then carries the eye onward. In full color, artist and designer have achieved the happy union with paper that was once the preserve of scratchboard and other



linear techniques—a union more easily achieved, in paint, with transparent washes. Cooney, working in acrylic, had to adapt.

When Miss Rumphius is settled in her house by the sea, the picture expands onto the facing page, like the opening picture of the harbor her grandfather sailed into. And when she has become That Crazy Old Lady who scatters lupine seeds to the winds, we have a double-page spread—in the breezy spirit of a bygone *New Yorker* cover—that positions the reader along a lupine-lined lane to watch her approach.

Island Boy (Viking, 1988), the second book in Cooney's trilogy, tells of a Maine family resolved to remain on their island, generation after generation, and hold off summer "rusticators." It's a slight, predictable work borne along by sincerity. *Hattie and the Wild Waves* (Viking, 1990), based on the childhood of Cooney's mother, has a great deal of substance: it's set firmly in the turn-of-the-century household of a prosperous, refined German-American family where Hattie and her brother and sister have a full life upstairs and downstairs at holiday celebrations and during summers at the seashore. It's at the shore that Hattie, the family picture-maker, is inspired to become a painter; she persists through the society marriage of her sister, the business success of her brother, winters at the downtown Brooklyn hotel he builds (the historic Bossert), evenings of going to the opera with Mama and Papa—until, hearing a young performer "[sing] her heart out," she takes the plunge and enters art school. The pictures are some of Cooney's loosest and freshest: the scene of the children playing cards with the servants below-stairs has the rugged expressiveness of a genre painting; the scene aboard Papa's "beautiful boat" gives a new, dramatic thrust to Cooney's penchant for parallels. But *Hattie and the Wild Waves* remains family history pointed up, and social history by the by, where *Miss Rumphius* is legend.

Together the two books launched a new subgenre of pictorial life-portraits suited to "different" women and other out-of-the-way figures. Cooney herself wrote and illustrated a biography of

Eleanor Roosevelt, *Eleanor* (Viking, 1996) and illustrated a book about Emily Dickinson conceived in a Cooney-esque way, Michael Bedard's *Emily* (Doubleday, 1992). The last book she illustrated, Mary Lyn Ray's true-to-life story of a family of basket-weaving backcountry outcasts, *Basket Moon* (Little, Brown, 1999), is a departure for Cooney in subject and treatment—a somber tale with a violent, transforming climax.

Barbara Cooney died in March 2000, working away as if she would indeed, as she once said, live to be a hundred.

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BARBARA COONEY WAS almost uniquely a librarians' illustrator. For the greater part of her career she illustrated quietly disarming books—like Lee Kingman's *The Best Christmas* and *Peter's Long Walk*—that lived full, rich lives in school and public libraries; and for the most part it was librarians (along with fellow artists) who admired and appreciated her work. Consciously or not, she gave back their love—our love—with *Miss Rumphius*. The child who grows up enterprising, adventurous, and romantic becomes a world-traveling librarian. Then, retired to her seaside cottage, she watches as the local children gather up lupines, her wild lupines, by the armful. To a children's librarian, that's a job description.

