

Brian Wildsmith's Magical World of Color

Judi Moreillon
Photos courtesy of Star Bright Books

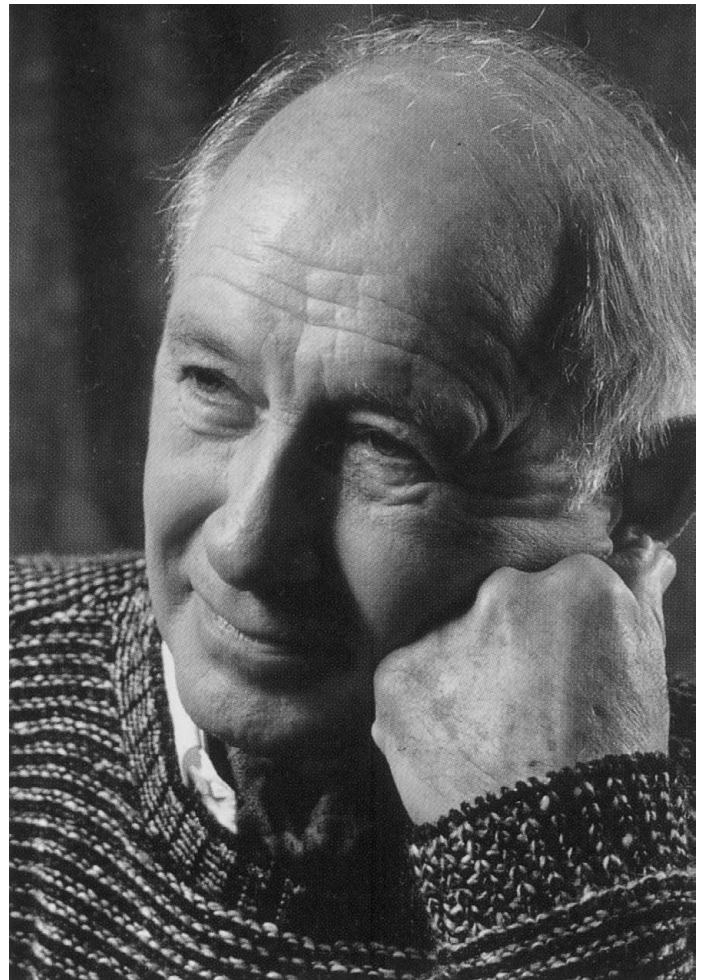
Picture lions, tigers, and bears in vibrant and sometimes unsettling colors, with lines that convey the texture of fur and expressions that compel readers to want to know these characters. Open his books, and you too can step into the magical, colorful world of British artist and bookmaker Brian Wildsmith.

Today, children's book illustration is considered a fine art form. Children's book art graces the walls of galleries, and whole museums have been dedicated to it. In many books, innovative and stunning artwork dominates the print, and visually oriented children have come to expect books to be feasts for their eyes. But that hasn't always been so. In fact, before Wildsmith came onto the children's book scene, the children's book illustrator's role was simply to support the author's story.

In 1962, Wildsmith authored and illustrated his first children's book, *ABC*, for which he was awarded the Kate Greenaway Medal, Britain's equivalent to the Caldecott Medal. This was an auspicious beginning for a young man at the start of his freelance art career, and many consider Wildsmith's entrance into children's book illustration as the beginning of a golden age.

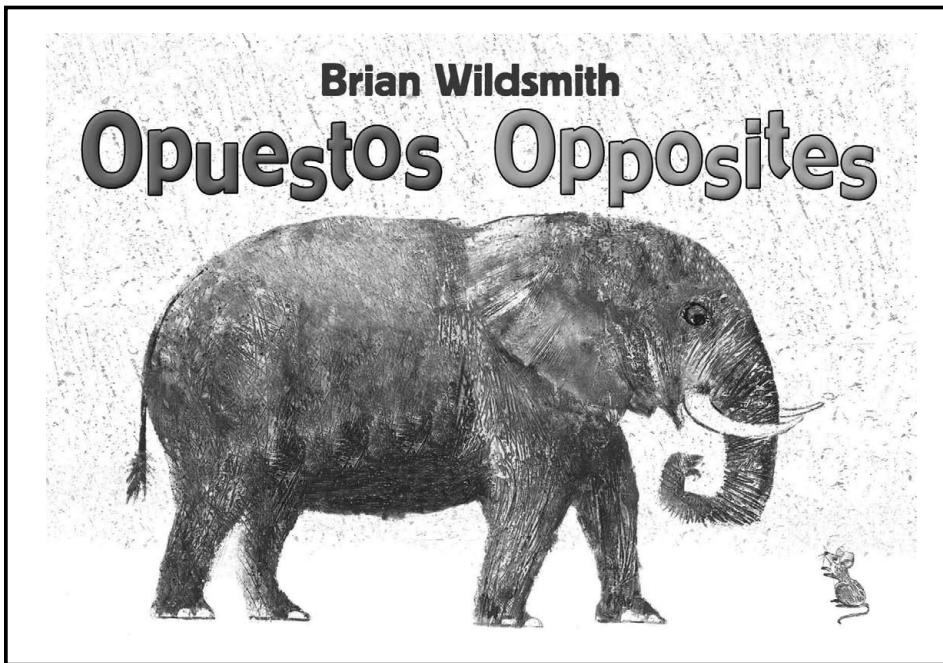
His artwork broke with tradition when he created images that could be described as "challenging" for children. His work was not realistic, and as such it may not have appealed to adults

who assumed that children's book illustration should simplify, rather than complicate, the story elements of setting, character, and plot.



Brian Wildsmith, © Brian Wildsmith

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Opuestos/Opposites, Star Bright Books, 1996

Fortunately, Mabel George, his editor at Oxford University Press, recognized Wildsmith's brilliant designs and succeeded in finding a printer who could reproduce the dynamic colors of his artwork with integrity. Both artist and editor were committed to creating children's books with mature, grown-up artwork. Wildsmith has said "I believe that beautiful picture books are vitally important in subconsciously forming a child's visual appreciation, which will bear fruit in later life."

In 1994, the Brian Wildsmith Art Museum was established in Izukogen, Japan. Eight hundred of his paintings are on loan to the museum. Almost one and a half million people, children and adults, visited a traveling exhibition of his work in 2005. Many have been touched by his talent and influenced by his exuberant vision.

Born and raised where everything was cold and gray in Yorkshire, England, Wildsmith became devoted to the sun early on in life. Today, he paints in a lovely sun-drenched studio in southern France, where the light is warm and clear. From his window, he sees luscious green countryside, and in the distance he glimpses the Mediterranean Sea.

Wildsmith remains an artist who applies his expansive talent to illustration. Through his books for children, he has dedicated nearly fifty years to developing children's appreciation for art.

Now in his seventies, he continues to create striking books for children with pieces of art that serve as illustrations and can stand on their own as well. This is his homage to his love for the light, his expression of the magical world of his imagination, and his gift to generations of children.

This interview with Brian Wildsmith, in his own words, took place in fall of 2007.

On Becoming an Artist

I was born in Yorkshire, England, and spent my childhood in a mining village. We had no books; children's books and illustrated children's books like I create today were nonexistent. All we had were comics, which I absolutely loved. Apart from that, I had no early introduction into children's stories.

When I was eleven, I won a scholarship to the high school. The art classes there were ridiculous. All we did was draw cubes and circles and rectangles. We had no introduction whatsoever into all the glories that have been produced in the art world, no introduction to sculpture or architecture. My friends told me I was the best artist in the class because we used to draw—apart from the cubes—airplanes dogfighting and ships shoving each other. Then World War II came, and

paper and paints were very difficult to get, so there was hardly any painting.

Even to this day, I can't grasp why I became an artist. As a child, I wanted to be a scientist. In the sixth [grade], I remember going to a physics class and I stopped on the way and a voice said to me, "Is this really what you want to do with the rest of your life?" And the answer was, "No. I want to be a creator."

I turned around and saw the headmaster and left the school. He was perplexed and bewildered. My parents were wonderful. They said, "Look, Brian, what are you going to do?" I said, "I want to go to Barnsley School of Art."

It was a very good art school, and from there I won a scholarship to the Slade School of Fine Arts, which is the art department of University College, London. For three years, I didn't do any illustration. All we did was draw the nude model, and I hardly ever painted them because I was so poor I couldn't afford paints and brushes.

I left Slade to do my national service and was sent to the Royal Military School of Music to teach mathematics. When I finished my service, I became an art teacher at what we call a grammar school; you would call it a high school.

During that time, I read an article that said that there were twenty-eight thousand book titles published every year. I thought to myself, "Oh my goodness, they would all need a book cover." So I taught myself how to do lettering and designed book covers. In those days, there was no full-color book cover production. It was all two-, three-, or four-color printing. You had to draw for every color on a separate piece of paper and then they all had to be combined. But it was a marvelous introduction into techniques and into producing works for books.

Then I got married. I used to drive into London on my little scooter after the high school art classes had finished and made appointments to see publishers. Eventually, I got book covers to do, and then I got more and more. After three years, my wife said, "Why don't you give up teaching, Brian, and do what it is you want to do?" And then when I came home and said, "I resigned." She said, "I'm pregnant!" She was marvelous about that. She knew that had I realized she was going to have a baby, I would have been too scared to go into books because you never quite know if you are going to earn any money or not.

On Becoming a Children's Book Author and Illustrator

After I had done book covers for a while, I went to see Oxford University Press. I saw there a wonderful lady, Mabel George, who was very shy. I took some semi-abstract paintings I had done in color, and she looked at them and she said, "Right, Mr. Wildsmith. We'll be in touch."

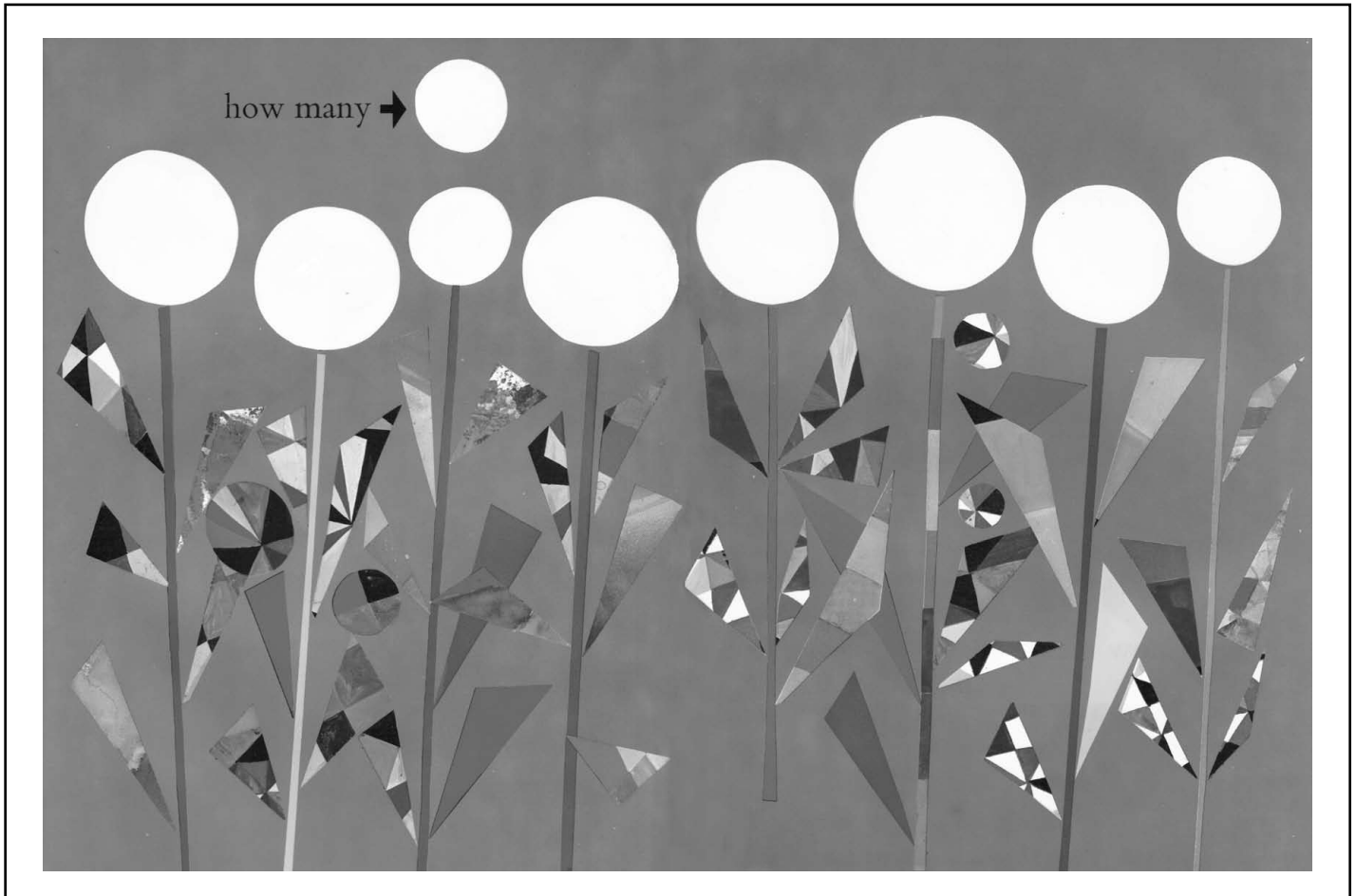
So I thought that means, "Don't call us, we'll call you." Two weeks later, she called me and said, "I have a book cover for you to do." So I did that and then more and more and more. After a couple of years, she said, "Right, Brian. It's time for you to do a book in color. The reason I gave you the books in black and white to do is that you knew nothing about books."

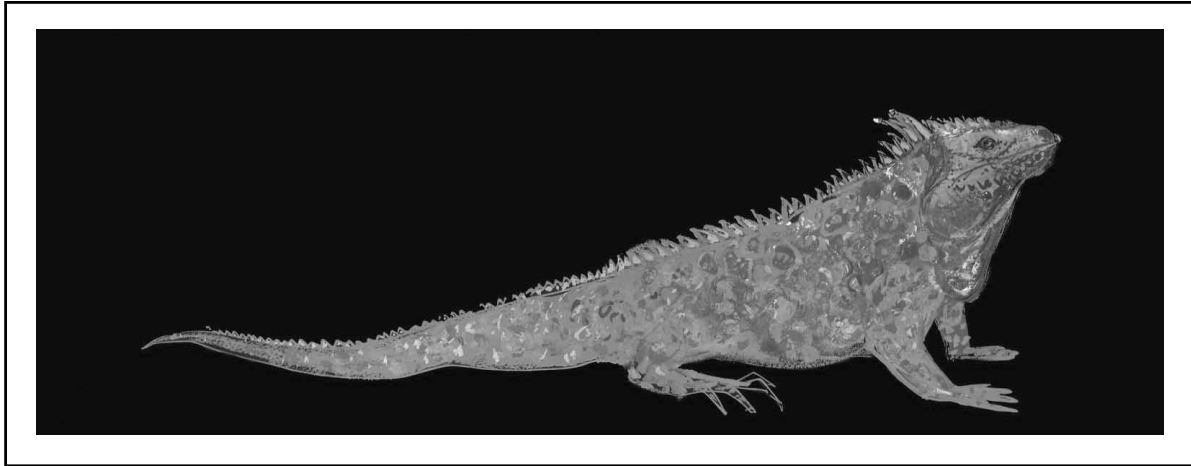
One day, Mabel asked me if I would produce twelve color illustrations for the *Arabian Nights*. Of course, I was delighted. The book was published, and in the *Times Literary Supplement*, the review said, "We now descend to the lowest depths, to Brian Wildsmith's vicious attack on the *Arabian Nights*. These aimless scribbles which do for drawings wander aimlessly and pointlessly about the page. It may be art, but it certainly isn't illustration."

I went in to see Mabel, and thinking this would be the end, she said "Brian, we're the Oxford University Press. We make up our own minds, and that review has convinced us we have something new."

By giving me an allocated space, in which I had to draw, say, three inches by four and a half, I had to learn to do a drawing that size. She said, "Now, you are ready. Have you thought about an A-B-C book?" To be quite honest, I hadn't. But immediately it flashed in my mind what it was I would like to do, and I explained it to her. She said, "Right, go and do it." The book was published to great acclaim. In fact, from all the articles I read after, it changed the course of English picture books in England.

Then after the *ABC*, I saw Mabel and she said, "Brian, what about doing your own stories?" So I said, "Mabel, my spelling is terrible. My punctuation is terrible, and my grammar is not all that wonderful."



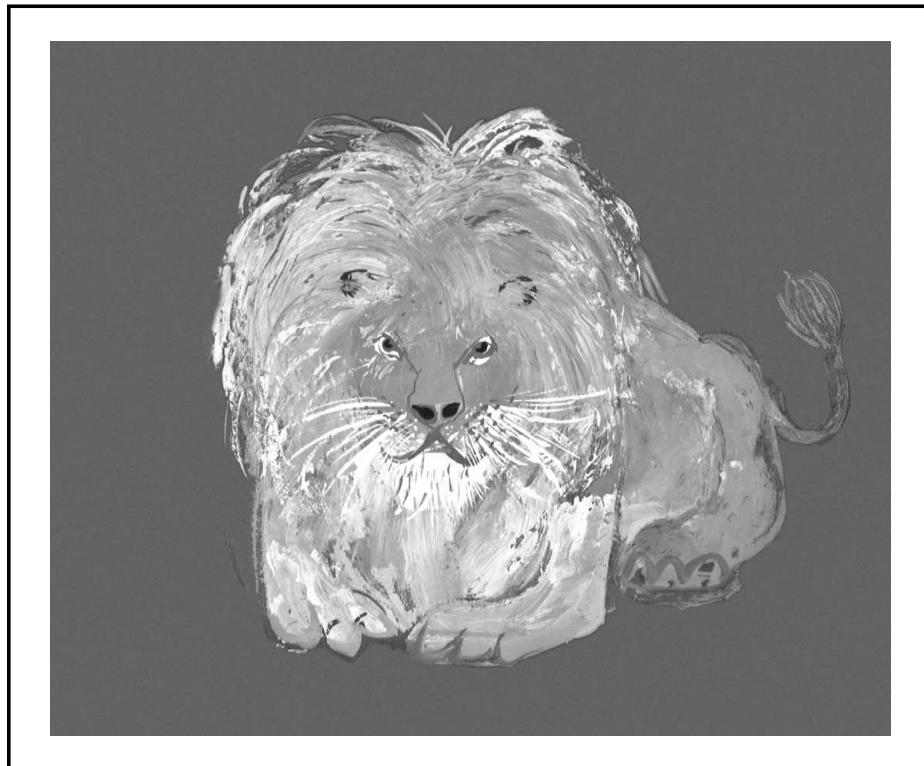


Iguana picture from Brian Wildsmith's *ABC*, Star Bright Books, 1996

She replied, "Brian, we have editors here with ink pots full of full stops, commas, exclamation marks, and etc. The core of the book, the main thing, the chief thing is the idea. The idea. Original ideas in the way the pictures are produced are very, very rare."

On Interpreting with Colors and Shapes

Before I start a painting, I must have a complete picture of what I'm going to do in my mind. I call it the "Mozartian Method." Mozart had the complete sounds in his head before he wrote them down. His process was like copying what was in his mind. It's like that for me. The subject and the intensity of what has to be expressed determine if I use a combination of reds and blues,



Lion picture from Brian Wildsmith's *ABC*, Star Bright Books, 1996

or if blue or yellow is prominent, and so on. It's something you can't describe. There's a certain intuitive way of doing it.

Every subject needs its own special interpretation to my point of view. Like a composer, although you always know it's his work, he doesn't produce music for a ballet or a sonata or prelude or symphony the same way. Each one has a different interpretation. And that's what I have felt I must do with my work. Many illustrators' work is the same for everything that they do. It's just different shapes and so on.

I want to have a different interpretation for everything. One of the best examples of that is my *123*, which is a counting book that has a section without numerals. Numbers are abstract until applied to something specific. So what I did was to take the three basic shapes—triangle, circle, and square—and I used these in a combination of forms, colors, and shapes within these shapes to produce my counting book.

I was very happy with it. As a point of fact, I remember Mabel George saying, "Brian, some of our mathematicians at the university, they don't understand your book. They were totally visually ignorant, but the children saw it straight-away."

On the Value to Children of Learning Life Lessons from Animals

Normally we say wisdom comes with age, but not always so; hence a child with an uncontaminated mind often sees a reality that the adult does not. Children respond to and love animals. They are intrigued and fascinated by them. I believe children need to know fables [with animal characters] because they are treasures of wisdom. I want to make a picture book that children take delight in, not a kind that merely

serves for education. I depict simple and realistic scenes powerfully, and by reading the stories and by looking at these pictures, children rediscover the world of wisdom.

For me, animals are wonderful to paint because the essence of painting them, as in all painting, is to get to the heart of what you are representing. Whether it's a kettle or a tree, there is an inner life to everything. All great painting has this. If it doesn't have it, it's not memorable art. And all the paintings I have ever seen that I have loved and enjoyed, they are all about inner meaning.

Once I was in Japan and a curator of a large museum and his friends took me to lunch. He said, "When I was an art student, the teacher said to draw an object and paint it." This he did. The teacher came back and said, "No, you haven't painted it." And then he tried again. And again the teacher said, "No, you haven't painted it." Then the teacher came back and put my *ABC* in front of him. "This is what painting is about—the inner life that which makes a thing what it is."



Wildsmith in his studio, © Brian Wildsmith

On Creating Books with Religious Themes

I decided I would like to do something about the fact that most children's books I've seen that are supposedly on religious themes give no real indication of what religion is about. When I decided to do a book on the passion of Christ, my wife said, "If you're going to do that, a book set in Israel, you have to go and case out the joint."

So we decided to visit Israel. Through a friend, the Israeli director of tourism got to know that we were coming to Jerusalem, and he decided to help us. He was absolutely wonderful. We were met at the airport by a chauffeur-driven Mercedes. He got us a double suite of rooms for the price of one at the King David Hotel. He engaged a brilliant scholar on the history of Israel, and she took us around to places we would not have otherwise seen or known about.

It was amazing how wonderful they were to us. I asked, "Why are you doing this?" The Israeli tourism director replied, "Jesus was a Jew, you know. And we're proud of him."

The eight religious books I have created were simply wonderful to do.

On Board Books for the Very Young

I am absolutely delighted with the board books offered by Star Bright Books. Publisher Deborah Shine assembles the books

with illustrations from various titles that I have created over the years. The books are very well printed and well thought out. I'm especially pleased that she is printing them in so many languages; they get to such a wide variety of children from different backgrounds. Star Bright Books has the best interest of children at heart.

On Art, Faith, and Passion

There are schools of art, but you cannot teach art. A good teacher advises and will recognize the individual qualities of that particular student and help him develop. Art is an intensely personal thing. The first thing for new artists, I think, is that drawing is crucial. Good drawing is an absolute necessity. So draw, draw, draw, draw.

Then, you have to look within your own soul as to what you want to do and how you want to do it. If you want to paint an elephant red, white, and blue, paint it red, white, and blue. If you want to paint a dinosaur not just gray but in colored spots and so on, then so be it.

You have to believe in yourself. It's not an easy job. But you have to have faith in yourself. You have to have the will and the courage to carry on, carry on, carry on. Without the faith in yourself, forget it, forget it!

Art is the expression of all that is wonderful, beautiful, and mysterious in our world and the essential nourishment for the soul, that which make us what we are. As I approach fifty years of producing books for children, my passion for children and their books has remained constant. &

To learn more about Brian Wildsmith, visit www.brianwildsmith.com.

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