

HELEN OXENBURY

a life in illustration



words by

LEONARD S. MARCUS

WALKER BOOKS
AND SUBSIDIARIES
LONDON • BOSTON • SYDNEY • AUCKLAND

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FOR MY GRANDCHILDREN

♠

H.O.

FOR DAVID BRION DAVIS
INSPIRED TEACHER

♣

"To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment."

Emerson

L.S.M.





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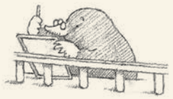
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"It is impossible to be too much on the side of the child."

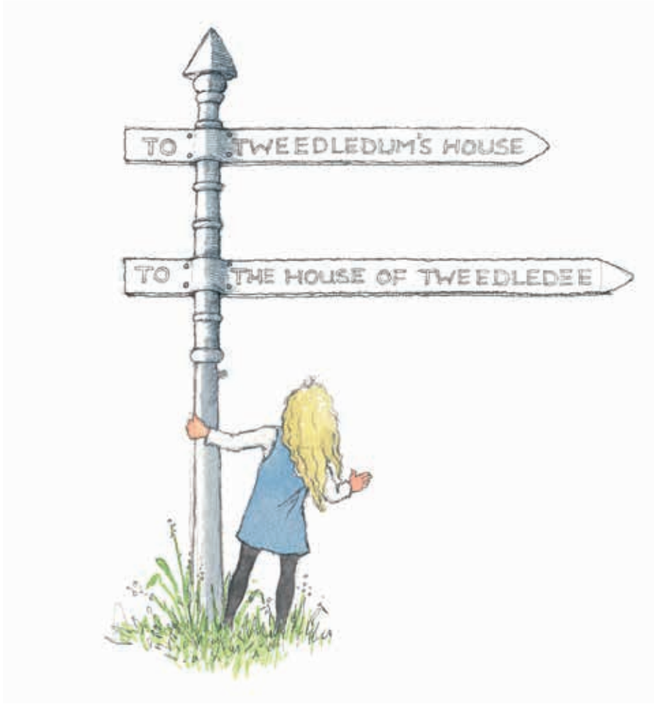
Helen Oxenbury

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HELEN OXENBURY

the interview

LEONARD S. MARCUS



I FIRST met Helen Oxenbury in 1989, on a grey November morning in New York. She had arrived from London the previous afternoon, and our 10 a.m. interview was to be her first appointment on a crowded eight-city American promotional tour. I wrote for a magazine read by parents like the ones who bought her wise and superbly drawn picture books. Parents chose the books for their toddlers and preschool children and were often surprised to find how much they enjoyed the books, too. Helen Oxenbury, it seemed, knew young children and their parents equally well: she understood how hard it was to be a new mum or dad and how impossibly hard it must be, at times, to be a baby – a brand-new person in the world. What was more, she had a gift for crafting words and pictures that brought adult and child closer together. How did she know her readers so well? As I waited in the featureless white room that her publisher had set aside for our interview, I wondered what this well-loved artist with not just one but five new books on offer that autumn would have to say.

I had been writing about children's books by then for a good fifteen years – both as a journalist and as a biographer and historian – and had come to regard Helen Oxenbury as one of the genre's indispensable figures. She had published an extraordinary body of work, a long shelf of knowing, smart and deeply affectionate illustrated books that gave young children a true-to-life picture of their world. I knew from my historical travels that books as deceptively simple

Facing and next page: Alice Through the Looking Glass, *Walker, 2005*

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as Helen Oxenbury's were apt to be underappreciated by some. I also knew that real simplicity in art was almost never easily come by and that wholly satisfying baby and toddler books like hers were exceedingly rare.

At 10 a.m. the conference room door swung open and in walked a Macmillan publicist followed by Helen Oxenbury, looking relaxed, I thought, after her long flight. She smiled the warm smile I recognized from her official photo.

"You must be tired," I said.

"Just a bit," she replied, taking the measure of her words as we sat down opposite from each other, a recorder between us.

"Oh, but don't worry about that," she said, her voice brightening into a burst of friendly reassurance.

I pressed the on button, and for the next two hours we spoke about many things.

We talked about Helen's earliest memories of books and about the experience of growing up in wartime Britain. ("I thoroughly enjoyed the war," she declared with mischief in her voice. "You see, I didn't really know what was going on.") She described the jolt and rush of leaving the east of England for London as a twenty-year-old art student. (No, it had not been all glamour and glory: "London seemed like another country and I was very, very lonely for the first year.") We discussed her uncompromising commitment to her art; her marriage to author and artist John Burningham; the challenges of being a working mother and the path by which her experiences in that hugely important area of her life had come round to serve her well as material. We talked about the five new books whose release she had come to the US to celebrate.

Four of those five books represented the American launch of the Tom and Pippo series: large-format first storybooks about a doughty toddler, Tom, and the cloth monkey who is his trusted companion, comic foil and springboard to imagining himself as the bigger, wiser, more responsible half in a parent-child relationship.

Helen's fifth new autumn book, a collaboration with the writer Michael Rosen, was called We're Going on a Bear Hunt *and marked a notable departure for her on a number of counts. For one thing, it was a book of unusually large format by both her own and industry standards. For another, it was as much about landscape as it was about people. There was also something strikingly original about the book's overall look and design. From the moment I had opened a review copy earlier that autumn, I had known the book was special. For once, the oxymoronic marketing catchphrase "instant classic" seemed no more or less than the fact of the matter.*

That morning I had packed a copy of Beatrix Potter's The Tale of Peter Rabbit, *curious to know what Helen Oxenbury might have to say about it. Her eyes lit up as I placed the little book before her and, scanning its pages,*





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she paused over the illustration of Peter about to lose his blue jacket as he slips under the fence into Mr McGregor's garden. I asked her what made the book so memorable.

"Things happen," she said, "that involve all the emotions. It starts off with a safe family. Then Peter does the very thing he's been told not to do. There's a slight tension and fear, the feeling that something is looming. He's seen by Mr McGregor the gardener, and then there is the great chase, and… It's a very good adventure story."

"Beatrix Potter metes out justice in the end," I pointed out, "making Peter pay with a bellyache for his wild adventure, but it is not this or any lesson that readers are left with."

"That's right," said Helen, closing the book. "It's just good natural naughtiness." – a clear-eyed glimpse, as in her own stories and illustrations, not of things as they should be but rather of things as they are.

Then it was time for the next event in Helen's American book tour – a telephone interview with a reporter from Salt Lake City. Not all children's book people, I had long since discovered, were quite as loveable as their creations. But as we said our goodbyes, it struck me that the artist I had just met was very much the person I had already encountered in the pages of her books: the wry and perceptive observer of people, places and things; the consummate professional; the champion of children; and – considering the timing of our morning get-together – the generous good sport.

Later, as I played back the tape, I picked up on a paradox that I thought had presented itself in our conversation: Helen's books had the mark of perfection about them. Yet their theme, so often, was our human need to accept each other in all our imperfection, parent and child alike. As an artist, Helen had said, she herself found it hard to feel satisfied with her work, especially once it was published. Yet, as though to balance out this self-critical impulse, she took great pride in the fact that her art was constantly evolving.

*"I've changed quite a lot," she said. "*We're Going on a Bear Hunt *is quite a bit different from the work I was doing even three years ago."*

When I asked Helen what might be next, she replied, "I have a feeling that I want my drawings to be much freer now."

As she said this, she paused to consider just how that might feel.



From We're Going on a Bear Hunt, *Walker, 1989*

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At Home in London

Sometimes, when she is at home in London, Helen Oxenbury begins her working day at a favourite neighbourhood coffee house. The work she does there does not look much like work.

She starts by selecting a small table and ordering a large coffee. No papers or pencils come out onto the table. Next, Myles, her commanding Jack Russell, takes his place on the chair next to hers. He knows the routine and is already on the alert when a passerby, or customer across the room, suddenly catches the artist's attention. It is then that the day's work really begins.

"I start to wonder," Helen has said of what happens next, "what this person does for a living. What's the relationship between those two? Is that her husband or lover? Is that his wife or girlfriend? It's a kind of comedy, totally based on appearance and filed away for characters to come."

An old friend who has watched Helen watching people in this way over the years has observed the exact moment when she knows she has seen enough. A change, he suggests, will sweep across her face as, for just an instant, both her eyes close – click! – like an old-fashioned camera shutter. "Done and done," as another old friend of Helen's, with a fondness for an antique



From Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, *Walker, 1999*

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turn of phrase, would say. Time perhaps for Helen to head to her studio.

The Territory of Childhood

In the art of Helen Oxenbury, seeing is a way of knowing, and drawing a form of felt experience. In the great variety of books she has illustrated over nearly fifty years, Helen has mapped out the territory of childhood in drawings that combine the intimacy of a family snapshot with the formal mastery of a searching and rigorous art. A perfectionist with a restless dislike of repeating herself, she has been a pioneer in children's literature, creating books of compelling interest to babies, toddlers and (wisely) their parents; and, in Britain, in opening the once all-white world of the picture book to children of colour. She has given readers fresh reinterpretations of time-honoured classics and added classic picture books of her own to the canon that build freely on the dynamic tradition set by Randolph Caldecott, Beatrix Potter and Edward Ardizzone. It is remarkable to realize that all this has gone on, for decades, in the same household where another of the world's most original picture book artists, Helen's husband, John Burningham, has also been hard at work.



Helen and her brother, John, in Felixstowe, c.1940

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The Ardent Youngster

Helen, it seems, was always going to be some sort of artist. Born in 1938 in Ipswich, in the east of England, she suffered from asthma as a young child, a condition that periodically left her bedridden. Drawing became a favourite distraction and a lifeline. No great reader as a child, she made do with whatever books she had at hand. The first picture book she recalls with pleasure was a very brash photo album of the American film sensation Shirley Temple. It made no difference that she had not seen any of the charismatic child star's sun-splashed films. For a time, Helen dreamed of becoming a tap dancer but had to settle for ballet lessons. Enid Blyton's Famous Five novels became firm favourites, while other stories were read aloud by Helen's mother, Muriel, whose special feeling for Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books left an impression with lasting consequences. It hardly mattered that books in general were in short supply. When the ardent youngster reached the end of a particularly absorbing Blyton novel, she simply turned back to page one and read it again.

Children's books with full-colour art were in short supply in Britain generally. Publishers treated colour as hoarded treasure, to be dispensed at rare intervals between long expanses of type and black-line drawings or silhouettes. Helen came to love the dramatic reveal of the occasional full-colour plate in the Blackie's Children's Annuals her mother passed on to her, and to appreciate the impact of colour when used sparingly. Books, she learned early on, were not in any case objects to feel precious about. Nearly all the children's books in the Oxenbury household were on loan from the local library.

The Look of Things

Helen's father, Bernard Oxenbury, was an architect who had carved out a professional niche as an author of government-sponsored regional land use plans. The look of things and visual awareness mattered deeply to him. In the 1950s he was among the first to judge the best kept village competition, aimed at beautifying communities and bolstering civic pride via a proliferation of flower boxes and well-trimmed lawns. At home he collected oil paintings and dabbled in marquetry and painting in watercolours, once producing for Helen and her brother a beguiling drawing of a "community of elves living in the roots of a tree which overhung a river", and at other times entertaining them by painting pictures of their toys. Had he dreamed of becoming an illustrator? His daughter

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would later wonder about this. In any event, he encouraged her first artistic efforts, and sent her drawings off to competitions in which Helen sometimes took the prize.

By the age of six, Helen had found that she enjoyed drawing people, best of all. She would wait for a family member to become absorbed in some activity – her grandfather sitting by the radio for hours listening to a cricket match suited her needs perfectly – then she would take out her paintbox and settle down to work.



Ipswich's deep-water harbour and railway goods yards made the town a target for German aerial bombardment throughout the war. The Oxenburys had built an underground bomb shelter in their garden into which they climbed whenever the warning siren sounded. Neighbours would sometimes join them to await the all-clear over a cup of tea. The shelter was fitted with bunk beds but young Helen resisted sleep, not so much out of fear

Above: A Sad Mishap! *– a drawing by Helen's father Bernard, taken from his autograph book*
Facing page: Helen's childhood drawing of her Grandpa, c.1946



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as from the sheer drama of being there. The war was apt to seem more unreal than not to a well-cared-for young child living outside London. One incident finally brought home the war's horrific nature for a child's comprehension: the crash-landing of a German bomber, more or less intact, on an Ipswich bridge. Found dead in the cockpit beside the dead pilot was the pilot's dog.

Wartime rationing took an emotional toll, especially on Muriel, "queuing up for a tiny bit of fish, which she'd give to us children, and half a pound of butter for the week". Winters were already cold and harsh, and for Helen the image of her mother rising early each morning to lay a new fire in the open hearth packed the force of a haunting cautionary tale. Years later she would wonder aloud what sort of career Muriel, an outgoing woman who loved to entertain, meet people and dance, might have pursued had she only been given the chance. Helen resolved to find some way not to share that same fate. Long before she left Suffolk she would decide that art might be the answer.

A Spirited Girl

Around the time Helen turned eight, the Oxenburys, seeking relief for their daughter's chronic asthma, moved twelve miles south-east



Helen (left), her brother John (right) and their Grandpa (middle), seen here with his pipe as captured in Helen's own childhood drawing on page 31, c.1948

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from Ipswich to the seaside resort of Felixstowe. The plan worked so well that Helen soon discovered a whole new side to herself. She became a competitive tennis player who enjoyed sport and taking off with friends on ambitious bike rides past the ghostly stone fortifications built along the shore during Napoleonic times, and disappearing on messy walks through the nearby mudflats.

During the long damp Suffolk winters, holidaymakers migrated elsewhere, the shops that catered to them were closed, and young people like Helen had little to do besides dream of the world that lay beyond Suffolk. After school, there were the radio serials about Special Agent Dick Barton to distract her, and film matinees at weekends. A single ticket entitled the cinema goer to watch unlimited showings of a double feature repeated throughout the day; Helen's favourites were always Hollywood musicals such as *An American in Paris* and *Singin' in the Rain*.



Helen playing tennis as a teenager, c.1954

Glamorous Images

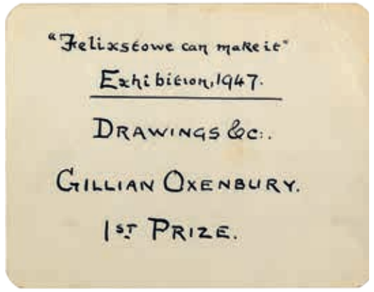
To a romantic teenager with glamorous images of far-off America in her head, Bentwaters, the local air base that the RAF had handed over to the American 81st Fighter Wing after the war, became a focus of endless speculation. At the age of fourteen or fifteen, Helen and her friends dressed up like the American airmen's wives in white ankle socks and men's white shirts worn untucked. Completing the spectacle, they put up their hair in curlers wrapped in a colourful scarf. The object was to get invited to a base dance. The Americans seemed, however, to be under strict orders not to mix with the local population. In any case, the friends' elaborate machinations got them nowhere, and, as Helen attended to her school studies, she also considered her prospects for a life beyond Felixstowe.

"Drawing," she later recalled, "was one of the few things I had always been good at in school." With her father's blessing, Helen enrolled in the Ipswich School of Art, where she received a rigorous introduction to sculpting, architecture, still life and life drawing that she thoroughly enjoyed. One favourite instructor made a lasting impression through the bracing sarcasm of his tough-minded critiques, an uncompromising approach that fuelled Helen's own

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perfectionism. "You jolly well sat down and you drew the human body and if it wasn't right then you'd just start again."

Suffolk folk referred with pride to John Constable, the great Romantic landscape painter, as one of their own, and recalled that film actor John Mills had spent part of his boyhood in Suffolk, and that Eric Arthur Blair had taken his pen name – George Orwell – from the River Orwell, which flowed through Suffolk near his parents' home. More often, however, people spoke disparagingly of a portion of England that "wasn't on the way through to anywhere", as Helen herself would later observe. She would retain a lifelong love of the region and return to it often for days or weeks at a time. But it was hardly the place for a young artist who was ready to hone her craft to a high professional polish.


"Felixstowe can make it"
Exhibition, 1947.
DRAWINGS &c:.
GILLIAN OXENBURY.
1ST PRIZE.

The wide-ranging Ipswich curriculum was designed to prepare the way for more advanced training elsewhere. To Helen, there was "only one place to specialize in anything" – London.



Above: The certificate from the "Felixstowe can make it" Exhibition where Helen – then known by her middle name, Gillian – won first prize, aged 9

Facing page: Helen at art college, c.1958

Next page: From Alice's Adventure's in Wonderland, *Walker, 1999*

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