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BARBARA ESBENSEN

M. JEAN GREENLAW

At the annual convention in November 1994, Barbara Juster Esbensen becomes the 10th recipient of the NCTE Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children. This award was established in 1977 and is presented to a poet for his or her aggregate body of work. It was the first award in the United States to honor children's poetry.

Barbara Esbensen was born in Madison, Wisconsin, in 1925, and she spent the first 20 years of her life there. She graduated from the University of Wisconsin with a major in art education. For many years she taught art in grades K-12, but a move to Eureka, California, resulted in her becoming a classroom teacher. She has also taught art and creative writing to children and college education students.

Esbensen's first book of poetry, *Suing around the Sun*, was published in 1965. There was then a hiatus as she raised six children. She is married to Thorwald Esbensen, a writer and former educator. Their family has included six children, innumerable cats, and an ever-growing collection of grandchildren. This interview was conducted early in January, 1994.

MJG: What were your reactions to learning that you were to be the recipient of the NCTE Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children?

BE: I was astounded because it is very nice to know that people are actually reading your poetry and thinking about it. My experience has been that poetry is a little bit of a stepchild in the world of literature, and it is nice to know that somebody is reading it and considering it valuable. I think the award validates all the time that I have spent adoring words and putting them together and having a marvelous time looking at what is going on the page. You don't really hear a lot about yourself as a poet; you don't get many reviews or much feedback from teachers when you go to the schools, either. It seems to me that it is a rare teacher who already is enthusiastic about poetry. After I come to a school and tell them what kinds of things I am trying to do with the words, teachers then really become excited about what words can do. Many times teachers are focusing on only stories and informational books, so this is wonderful: It makes me feel like a star!

MJG: Could you talk about your early years as a poet? Is there a writer who influenced you? What made you keep on going even though poetry is a stepchild?

BE: In my family I was known as Barbara, "our little artist," and I did major in art at the University of Wisconsin. I was an art teacher for a long time, and I had a friend one time who said to me that when she hears me talk about painting, I'm talking about painting as if I'm a writer. So I know that words have always been something very, very vital to me, and I know I've always compared one thing with another in my head. When I was 13 years old, in the fall of 1939, I was

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in 10th grade, and I wrote a poem because Russia invaded Finland. I heard about it on the morning news, on the radio before I went to school. I was fuming. I went to school, took a look at a map, and saw how big Russia was and how little Finland was.

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(students) with wild enthusiasm
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and say, "Get it, get it!"*

That was the extent of my political and geographical knowledge, but I was so mad at Russia for invading Finland that I wrote a poem. I composed it in my head on the city bus, going home on a rainy November day. By the time I got to my home on Sherman Avenue in Madison, Wisconsin, I had composed this poem in my head, and I remember standing in our front hall, dripping and grabbing paper out of my notebook and writing it down. The next day I put it on the desk of my teacher, Eulalie Beffel. She called me up to her desk and said, "Barbara, do you write—have you written other poems?" I said yes. She said, "This is excellent. Barbara, you are a writer!" That did it: I believed her. She introduced us to Amy Lowell, Sara Teasdale, and Stephen Vincent Benet—the poets who weren't rhyming. I think all my previous experiences with poetry were exposures to "Flower in the Cranny Wall" and "The Highwayman." "Flower in the Cranny Wall"—I hate to tell you I know that poem because it is so dumb. I never really cared about that flower in the cranny wall. But when Miss Beffel gave me some poems by Amy Lowell and Emily Dickinson to read, I felt as though I were going to faint. It was so exciting to know that I was allowed to think these thoughts that were kind of bizarre and to know I didn't have to rhyme.

MJG: Are you still in contact with Eulalie Beffel?

BE: Oh, yes. In our family we call her Bess. She was my mentor then, and though she is 85, she has seen every sentence, every phrase, every paragraph, every poem I have ever written. I write her and say to her, "Bess, just write in the margin with red ink if it needs work." That is what she used to say at school. "Barbara!" she'd say. "This needs work!" But she changed my life. I've dedicated my new book that

will be out in the fall to her. In the dedication it will say, "To Eulalie Beffel, my only teacher. You changed my life." She truly changed my life. I've always been a teacher. Sometimes you feel you aren't making a difference, but you still know you really are. I know I have made a difference to kids. It is astounding to know that kids are sitting in your classroom and that you are not making a difference. My philosophy is to present them with wild enthusiasm and kind of knock their blocks off. Crack their heads together and say, "Get it, get it!"

*MJG: Poets whose work wasn't rhymed had quite an impact on you; yet your first book of poetry, *Swing around the Sun*, published in 1965, is a book of rhymed poetry.*

BE: Yes, actually I was always writing other poetry that didn't rhyme and sending it out to *Saturday Review* and other magazines like that because I didn't know what else to do with it. In the early 1960s, a publisher who didn't publish children's books told me that he didn't think I would get anywhere with poems that didn't rhyme and suggested I write a book of poetry that rhymed. So I wrote *Swing around the Sun*, and, you know, the poems in there are good. I never take that book with me when I'm talking to children, however, because I don't want them to horse around with rhyme; it is too confining, and they get too tinkly tanky. But the images that I've used in *Swing around the Sun* are good, so the rhyme doesn't take away from them. I have a book coming out called *Dance with Me*, in which I have written about every single thing I could possibly think of that dances: dust motes, a mother who is doing a little dance with her hoe in her garden, and that stuff that's on the highway that causes a mirage of water when we drive in the summer. The poems rhyme, and I'm a little nervous about that book coming out and taking it out to show children. But I've hidden the rhymes in the middle of lines so it doesn't seem like everything is an end rhyme.

MJG: But rhyme can be enjoyable.

BE: Yes, it's all right. Except that kids keep rushing toward the end of the line, and they are going *June, moon, spoon, baboon, spittoon*. There is a section in my introduction to *A Celebration of Bees: Helping Children Write Poetry*, where I give examples of work that was written in my third-grade class in Eureka, California. My students did a lot of poetry writing. I had a girl named Elvira Marin who just wrote

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wonderful stuff, and then later when she was in fifth and sixth grade she wrote things like "007 has gone to heaven" just terrible stuff. She wrote me a letter and said, "I know this isn't any good, but our teacher says all poems have to rhyme," and she also included a little squib that she had been thinking about that was just marvelous. So, writing poetry that rhymes is a real danger because I'm worried the teachers will pick up on it and say, "Now boys and girls, you heard Mrs. Esbensen's poems, so let's all sit down and write poems." And they are all going to be rotten!

MJG: Your next book of poetry after Swing around the Sun is titled Cold Stars and Fireflies, and it was published in 1984. That is almost a 20-year time difference. Why the long time between books of poetry?

BE: In the midst of all that I had five children, and I wrote *A Celebration of Bees*, which took me several years. Although I wrote it in 1971, it wasn't published until 1975. It often takes several years from the time I write my book to the time it is published. Some of that period is the time it takes for my illustrator to complete the art.

MJG: I find it fascinating that you also write award-winning informational books. To most people poetry and nonfiction seem to be very opposite in style. When you sit down to write an informational book, what do you do that is different from writing your poetry?

BE: For one thing, I want to be sure that everything is absolutely accurate. Still, I'm writing about things I'm really in love with, such as loons, owls, and otters. I have just written a new book about sponges that is out from HarperCollins—I wasn't really in love with sponges to start with, but they are very interesting. I also want to do a book on wolves. So in addition to all the information that I want to be absolutely accurate, I'm trying to get my impressions—my almost physical impressions—of these animals I adore onto the page. Therefore I'm trying to choose words the way I would in poetry to get these impressions across. I think strong verbs and images are what make the animal come alive, and that is what I'm trying to do. Its got to be more than Sergeant Friday on "Dragnet"—"just the facts, ma'am." We want more than the facts. We have to make animals come alive. When I'm talking about how the owl sails and glides, I choose words that give us the feeling of that quiet, silent glide.

MJG: What kept coming up over and over again when the Committee discussed your work was the images you present. What moved us is the clarity of your images, the differentness of your images. We just kept coming back to reading your poems aloud. Do you think that your beginning as an artist has to do with your focus? You know some poets focus on rhyme, some on word play, and some on puns. But you seem to focus on image.

BE: I'm sure that I'm looking all the time. I'm sure of that because I am an artist, and that's what I have really been doing all my life. I'm a looker! And I'm an exaggerator.

As I tell kids, you can't just think. It doesn't do any good just to think. You must see it on the paper . . .

My former husband and I went for a walk one day when we noticed the robins had come in from Canada. There were robins all over someone's lawn, and I said, "Oh my gosh, there are a million robins on that lawn." He said, "A million robins? There are probably 22." I said, "David, there is no way on this earth that I care that there are 22 robins on that lawn. You *count* the robins, and I'm telling you that the impression is of robins neck-to-neck, wall-to-wall." I tell children you are allowed to say things that are absolutely off-the-wall in poetry.

MJG: What is your writing process like when you are working with poetry?

BE: When I'm working with poetry, I sit and stare. I work with the computer, which certainly does free you up, I must say. I give myself a subject. In the book *Dance with Me*, I wrote a list of all the things I could think of that danced. That list helped me get going. I'll give you an example of something else. I've written a book on the Aurora Borealis. What I did there was write down every single word I could possibly think of that, to me, described the Northern Lights. I filled two pages with all kinds of verbs, colors, and images like *sifting* and *powdered*—unusual combinations. As I tell kids, you can't just think. It doesn't do any good just to think. You must see it, on the paper, which is why I wrote "Pencil." I tell students the poem is in the pencil. The words are all in there, and as soon as you start letting a

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few of them out on the paper, you're surprised; they are all holding hands, and they are all yanking each other along. In other words, they are going to come out on that page. You are going to be astounded when you stop writing and you put your pencil down. What's on the paper is astonishing.

MJG: It is interesting that every time we talk about a topic, you immediately go back to children and teaching.

BE: True. This is the way I want to talk to students about my own work. I tell them that poetry is something we all can do if we are permitted to do it.

MJG: Each of your books works around a theme. Do you start with a theme first and then write your poetry for the theme, or do you write poems and suddenly see that they fit a theme?

BE: I deliberately wrote about the seasons because I love them. Both *Swing around the Sun* and *Cold Stars and Fireflies* are about the seasons. Now, in writing *Words with Wrinkled Knees*, I had the feeling that some words are so perfect for what they are that it is almost as if they had invented themselves. I thought that I was just going to write a book about words—maybe animal words, maybe musical instrument words, maybe some weather words—who knows? When I called Barbara Fenton and told her my idea, I had three poems written. I had a poem about an elephant and one about a hippopotamus. Then I had a poem about a xylophone because I could picture this long word "xylophone," with an arm at each end tapping out its own name. I read those poems to Barbara, and she started to laugh. She said, "I'm going to take this book, but forget about the music words. Just concentrate on the animals." So that's how that book happened.

MJG: You have several books coming out that are waiting to be illustrated. What are the themes of those?

BE: I am delighted about a book that Helen Davie, who illustrated *The Star Maiden* and *Ladder to the Sky*, and I are collaborating on. Our editor called me one day and asked what I would love to write if Helen could illustrate it. I told her I love to think about patterns in nature. I'm just astounded at how there are patterns everywhere you look, and I don't think children know about this. She started to laugh, and she said, "Helen

told me the same thing." Helen then sent me a folder full of information that she had been gathering for years on patterns in nature, and I had been doing the same thing myself. Isn't that amazing? So I wrote a book called *Echoes for the Eye*.

MJG: You also have written some folklore. How do you seek out the sources for your folklore? What moves you to say, "This is a story I want to tell?"

BE: For *The Star Maiden*, I read the story in the collection called *Book House*. The tale I retold was called "Legend of the Water Lily." When I decided to retell "Legend of the Water Lily," I sent it to Little, Brown. I called them up and said I had a story I would like for them to look at. They said fine, send it. In two minutes they called me back and said they loved it. It seems little children apparently also loved *The Star Maiden* because it has been one of their best-selling books for a number of years. Little, Brown wanted to know the source for the story; *Book House* said it was an Ojibwa tale and gave no source beyond that. So I turned to my other great love, librarians. I called the public library, and Lois Renquist found the original story for me in a book published in 1860 by an Ojibwa chief. I wrote that source on the copyright page. In that source there was also the story that I call *Ladder to the Sky*; it was a description by the chief of some things that he had learned while he was preparing to become a medicine man in his Ojibwa nation. So that was a wonderful extra plus for me because I thought that was a very exciting story.

MJG: I would just like to end by asking what advice you have for teachers who are afraid to use poetry in school, to free them up to be willing to take a chance with poetry.

BE: Teachers should get into some kind of poetry workshop, which could be very scary for them if they don't feel they are writers. They need to join a friendly poetry workshop and see what it is like to write poetry before they try to get kids to do it. They *really* need to do it themselves. I also think that teachers who are going to read a poem to children should take a long hard look at the poem itself and, in a very flat little summary, write down what the poem is about. Then, they can point out what the writer does that makes this "about" come alive. Too many school children are worried about being right, about not being wrong, and about not saying something stupid. They don't want to be laughed at. If you have an accepting, adventurous atmosphere in a classroom, you may find some poets.

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