An interview with Barbara Reid

Susan Gaitskell

Résumé: *Nous avons interviewé Barbara Reid, dont les illustrations en plasticine lui ont valu des éloges ici et à l'étranger. On se rappellera avec plaisir* The new baby calf *et* Have you seen birds? *Barbara Reid parle ici de ses choix comme auteur et de l'évolution de son oeuvre.*

At 2:00 on November 10, 1988, I arrived at the Toronto apartment of Barbara Reid, recipient of the 1988 Ezra Jack Keats Award for Illustration. Tape recorder and question list in hand, I was prepared for this interview. Barbara Reid greeted me and showed me into her living room. We sat down – she on a chair, I on a couch, the tape recorder poised discreetly on a coffee table between us. We began. The tape recorder did not. We began again. The tape recorder showed tentative signs of life. Barbara suggested we move to the floor to accommodate it. The tape recorder was beside itself with joy.

I have enormous admiration for Barbara Reid. She is very spry. Though expecting to give birth in three weeks to her first child, she was a model of cross-legged graciousness. Now and then, in an effort to preserve my dwindling dignity, she would politely inquire after my creaking bones. "Fine," I'd say, "Just fine." Though I remember these exchanges fondly, I have edited them from the transcription that follows.

Gaitskell: When did you first get interested in art?
Reid: I've always been interested in it.
Gaitskell: And in books?
Reid: I was always a big reader. Mom and Dad encouraged it. We didn't have a lot of books at home, but we went to the library all the time.
Gaitskell: Any special favourites?
Reid: The Narnia books. I still read them. I also went through a phase where I read every animal book on the shelf – *The call of the wild, Meph the pet skunk, Rascal,* and Gerald Durrell's stuff.
Gaitskell: Did you ever draw the characters in the books you read?
Reid: Yes. When I finished stories I'd often draw the characters the way I thought they should look, or sometimes I'd copy illustrations.
Gaitskell: Did you have any favourite pictures when you were a kid?
Reid: I liked realistic pictures. A lot of textbooks at the time were illustrated

in a deliberately childish style. I thought, I can do that. I was more impressed by things that I couldn't do.

Gaitskell: Was there a time when you became interested in illustration as opposed to fine art?

Reid: Yes. I started to realize there *was* such a thing in high school. Around that time there was a revival of interest in the classic children's book illustrators. Books by people like Arthur Rackham were showing up everywhere.

Gaitskell: Was Rackham a particular favourite?

Reid: Yes. I went through a real Rackham phase. I also liked Dulac, Tenniel, N.C. Wyeth, and Maxfield Parrish too for a while, but that was in art college.

Gaitskell: You went to the Ontario College of Art?

Reid: Yes. It was really a last minute decision. I wanted to be a writer. I thought that would be a job and I didn't think art had any jobs. At the last minute I decided to go to OCA because I started hearing that there was commercial stuff.

Gaitskell: Was it tough to get in?

Reid: Well, you had to show a portfolio and it was really scary. Three people interviewed you. I'd done a bunch of sketches of my pet rat, and my interviewers thought I'd copied them from a book. I said, "No, this is my pet." "Oh, well, if you're sketching from life," they said, "that's different."

Gaitskell: Did you enjoy OCA?

Reid: Yes, it was great. There was a real wave of people who wanted to be children's book illustrators. Everyone just laughed at us and said, "Forget it. You can do it for fun if you marry someone rich." I said, "Fine. I still want to be an illustrator." I learned a lot at OCA.

Gaitskell: Did you marry someone rich?

Reid: Rich enough. My husband, Ian, is a freelance photographer.

Gaitskell: Do you only illustrate for children, or do you illustrate for adults as well?

Reid: I do everything.

Gaitskell: Which do you prefer?

Reid: I like it all. Kid's stuff has taken over, but I'd like to do some more adult stuff now. It makes you use your brain, dealing with a different audience. You start getting boring when you do the same thing all the time.

Gaitskell: Could you describe the process that you go through once you get a manuscript to illustrate?

Reid: I read it – a bunch – and then I start doing roughs. Usually with a book I know how long it is and whether it's in colour or black and white. Then I do a dummy – a grid pattern that lays out all the pages – to give it a pace. I like to think of the book as a whole before I work through it from beginning to end.

Gaitskell: Why?

Reid: It lets me plan where there are going to be big pictures and keeps me from getting repetitive. I make little notes, then go back and do the roughs in

order, tighten them up, use reference if it's necessary. The roughs get shown to the art director. If there are any changes, they happen then. After that I do the finished art.

Gaitskell: Do the roughs take a lot of time?

Reid: With some pages I know from the beginning exactly what I want to do. With other pages I can walk around for days accomplishing nothing. It's really frustrating. I clean the house, I shop, I reorganize cupboards. I do all kinds of stuff just to avoid dealing with it. Then an idea comes somehow.

Gaitskell: Where does it come from?

Reid: It's surprising how much comes from your own experience. The plants or buildings or people I represent often turn out to be the ones I'm familiar with. I've noticed when I make buildings they're brick buildings, and Toronto's brick. I've noticed the same thing with other illustrators; for example, Rackham's trees all look the same. Then you go to England and, wow, the trees all look like that!

Gaitskell: What about the ideas that are outside your direct experience? How do they evolve?

Reid: When I have a project to do, I surround myself with stimuli. I look at different history books to get time periods and colours. I get all kinds of remaindered art books and flip through them to get a mood or a feeling or a colour. I look through alphabet books, costume books. I go to the picture library. I set up the studio and I sit there waiting. It's important to set up all these little tokens so that, when the idea god comes by, I'll look ready.

Gaitskell: Who discovered Plasticine, you or the idea god?

Reid: Me. I played with it all the time when I was little.

Gaitskell: You liked it better than Play-Doh?

Reid: I hated Play-Doh. I didn't like the smell. It got hard and it tasted bad. But Plasticine was great stuff. Some Saturdays, I'd be in the mood to make something, so I'd spend all day modelling a whole village out of Plasticine. If I was home sick from school, I used to spend hours in front of the TV doing Plasticine. Life hasn't really changed for me.

Gaitskell: When did you decide that Plasticine was something you could use in your art?

Reid: I did it as a project at OCA. We were encouraged to do things with unusual media. It was a lot of fun and it seemed to get a really good reaction.

Gaitskell: Was it a problem convincing art directors to use Plasticine for picture book illustration?

Reid: I originally didn't think of it for kid's stuff. I thought of it for caricature, because that's what I liked to do. It did take a while for art directors to be open to the idea that it had to be photographed. But when I started doing textbook illustration a lot of 3-dimensional work was coming out. Paper sculpture and collage were really popular so the textbook people were open to it. Then I had some samples to show the other people.

Gaitskell: Your husband takes the photographs?

Reid: Yes, and it's great to have someone who knows how to shoot the stuff. It's not just like copying flat work. The lighting is very tricky.
Gaitskell: What do you like about Plasticine?
Reid: It's flexible. I can change my mind and play with it, keep moulding it and working on it. It's really nice for detail. With watercolour, you've got to be right the first time or you've got to redo it; if you're putting in a lot of detail, it gets really boring because you've got to work it up from the beginning. With Plasticine, it starts out very plain: you do the base layers and build on them. Then it gets more and more exciting as you add the little details.
Gaitskell: You add a lot of detail, don't you?
Reid: Yes. I think, especially for kid's stuff, that's the exciting part. By the time I did *Mother Goose* I'd started using paint to get shine and tiny pearls and beads. You can go farther and farther and start putting in real cloth and building real things, but I don't want to go too far. I think it's part of the fun that the things are made with Plasticine. It's a silly medium. People are friendly to it and it makes them laugh. But I get tired of it. I'd like to do other stuff.
Gaitskell: Have you any other wildly experimental plans, using ostrich feathers or something for your medium?
Reid: I don't think so. I do things I know how to do and come up with ideas as I need them. Plasticine was easy because I knew how to play with it. I'd like to do some traditional stuff – watercolour and line illustration – maybe to prove that I *can* do it, that I'm not just getting by on this weird medium.
Gaitskell: Are there any particular books you would like to illustrate?
Reid: No. I like to do new stuff, contemporary stuff by people who are writing today. Frankly, I'd like someone to tell me what to do. I miss that. I'm finding it hard these days because I'm in a really lucky position. I can pick and choose projects, but it's a big responsibility. I feel I don't just want to do any old book. I want to do something really good and I don't know how to find it. I get manuscripts, but I'm not confident enough of my judgment: is it a really good story or not, I don't know.
Gaitskell: Have you ever thought of writing a story of your own?
Reid: I'd like to, but I'm not ready yet. I don't have anything to say. People always tell me, "Oh, write your own." That's like telling a writer, "Oh, illustrate your own." Writing the Plasticine book was easy because that was explaining what I do, but coming up with a story? All the great stories have already been written. And to stop working and just think up something out of the blue? No, I need the discipline of a manuscript, the size of a page, then I can fight it, work with it.
Gaitskell: Did you like doing the *Playing with plasticine* book?
Reid: Yes, it was fun.
Gaitskell: Whose idea was it?
Reid: Well, Kids Can Press started bugging me right after *The new baby calf* to do a How-To. I kept saying no. Anyone can pick up Plasticine and figure it

out. But there are some things that take a lot of practice and learning, and I didn't want to tell people the shortcuts. I felt uncomfortable, I couldn't picture the format. I didn't see how it could work without being really crippling for kids. I didn't want to tell them how to do something exactly. I never liked that as a kid. Then Kids Can started saying, "If you don't, someone else is going to." They got me that way. At the same time, I'd been working on *How to make pop-ups* by Joan Irvine. Four of us – Joan, the designer, the editor, and I – really hammered it out and I started to understand how that kind of instruction can work. It seemed the team was already in place, and I really liked the format. Finally everything was right.

Gaitskell: Was the book a challenge for you in any way?

Reid: Yes. The hardest part was trying to leave it open-ended so that it's a creative book. That's why I wanted black and white, partly so that people could afford it but also, if you make ducks orange and kids only have purple, some don't care and will work with purple, but other kids are real rule followers and I was trying to leave it open for them. If you show glossy photographs of wonderful finished stuff, it's depressing for kids to not be able to do it. It's nice just to give them some ideas.

Gaitskell: How do kids respond to Plasticine?

Reid: It loosens them up. When they see illustrations, they think, oh I can't draw and everyone (except for the three talented kids in the class) gets discouraged. But with Plasticine, everyone tucks in because it's silly and they don't have to worry about it being good – for them, that means photographically real. Modelling's easier than drawing too. The kids don't have to transform anything into two dimensions. They can just stick on an arm instead of having to figure out what angle to draw it from.

Gaitskell: How important is research in your work?

Reid: It varies. *Have you seen birds?* needed really tight research. It took a lot of readings, but it finally became clear what kinds of birds the author was talking about on each page. Sometimes she'd cover seven or eight different birds and often I had to pick one to illustrate. The bird had to be fairly generic so that a kid – maybe a European kid – would have a chance of seeing it. I made lists, narrowed things down, crossed things off. I used a bunch of bird guides and library books.

Gaitskell: Why did you chose Plasticine as the medium for that book?

Reid: Initially Scholastic didn't want *Birds* in Plasticine. They felt that Plasticine was fine for things like cows and earth but for birds it was too heavy, and I agreed. I worked for a couple of weeks with different kinds of watercolour and it was getting to look like Audubon – too real – and I was getting very tight and it wasn't any fun. Then I made a couple of Plasticine birds. I realized that because Plasticine's more crude and cartoony and humorous, it takes away that textbook, bird book feeling that I couldn't stop getting in watercolour without making it really cartoony. Now they're quite accurate, but they're not Batemans.

Gaitskell: What kind of research went into *Sing a song of Mother Goose?*
Reid: I looked at a lot of Mother Goose books and I tried to get a feel for the Edwardian period, with those hats. I've never had a chance to illustrate costumes before. Birds and calves are dressed as they're dressed and you can't play around with it. With Mother Goose, I worked in all kinds of colours. It's so much more exciting to do faces than beaks.
Gaitskell: The farmer's face in *The new baby calf* is fascinating. Is he a particular person?
Reid: No. I got about 20 pictures of grisly old guys and hung them up around me to get in the mood and see how their faces work.
Gaitskell: I thought it might have been your grandpa.
Reid: No. Mother Goose started out being my grandmother, but it's not really her. It's sort of one of my aunts. There's an imperial old-lady style that's my other grandmother. She was English and very proper and very ladylike. She was in my head when I was doing those characters, but they don't necessarily look like her.
Gaitskell: When a text doesn't mention something, do you feel free to add your own ideas? For example, in *Birds* the text never mentions a cat, yet the book opens and closes with one.
Reid: Yeah, I think it's your duty to push the words, to add to the words, as long as you're not changing them. With *Birds* we decided that there shouldn't be people in the book; that would be too distracting. But it would be nice to have a beginning and end because there's really no story. So I thought, okay if we're going to have a bird watcher and there's no people, a cat seems to work. The idea's so obvious once it comes.
Gaitskell: Whose idea was it to make the birds jump out of their frames on the page?
Reid: Mine. I designed the grid of the whole book and arranged the pages. I do very basic design. I tend to centre things, divide them up neatly, but what a real designer can do with type is incredible and that's something else I'd like to do – get hooked up with some really hot designers, people who could take my work and make it look even better.
Gaitskell: Do you have particular designers in mind?
Reid: Well, there's a few. I like working with Michael Solomon at Kids Can Press.
Gaitskell: You use a lot of aerial views. Why?
Reid: I did it in *The new baby calf* because there's no story. Nothing happens page after page. It's just this farm and this calf, so I tried to make it interesting by using different points of view. You want the kids to respond, ask questions, say "what's that and look at that." That's what picture books are about. I always try to work with angles, to imagine what if I were this character or that. It's like acting.
Gaitskell: The tiny subplots you put into your work – the duck family and the pig family in *The new baby calf*, for example – do you see this as a form of

storytelling?

Reid: They're little jokes. That's how I've always drawn. There's the main subject of the picture, but then there's always someone doing something in the background. It's like making fun in the back of the classroom. I always did that too.

Gaitskell: In *Sing a song of Mother Goose*, how did you decide whether characters were going to be male or female, human or animal?

Reid: Those are some of the hardest decisions and nobody understands. You go out for a beer after work and someone says, "I had a really rough day," and you say," I did too, I couldn't figure out what to do with Tweedle-dum and Tweedle-dee," and they say, "Oh really, give me a break."

Gaitskell: Why are Tweedle-dum and Tweedle-dee turtles?

Reid: I had a problem. I really liked John Tenniel's *Alice in Wonderland* illustrations – the two little round guys with the striped shirts – but I didn't want to copy them. I wanted to take that verse away from Alice and I couldn't figure out how. I kept coming up with characters and they all looked like Tenniel's. Then I tried to think of animals and it suddenly clicked. Turtles would be good because Tweedle-dum and Tweedle-dee are battling. Turtles are armoured, and when they're afraid you can show it by putting them inside their shells. I was really happy with that one.

Gaitskell: And why is the mouse running down the Hickory, Dickory, Dock clock a girl in a pink frilly dress?

Reid: That's my textbook training. Textbook people are really uptight about sexual stereotyping. I've been drilled: make sure there's an even split of girls and boys, make sure the girls aren't doing anything too feminine, the boys aren't doing anything too masculine, try, whenever possible, to flip the illustration to make it non-sexist. I've learned through textbooks when in doubt, draw an animal, because animals can do sexist things. If a little girl were dressed like that, I'd expect to get flack, but with a mouse I can get away with it for another year, maybe.

Gaitskell: The dish that ran away with the spoon is a bit of a vamp, no?

Reid: Yeah, I switched that one. In most nursery rhyme books the dish is the male, but I thought dishes look more female, and I thought I'd make her kind of tarty. She should be taking charge, taking the guy by surprise and running away with him.

Gaitskell: There's a lot of formal dress in this illustration.

Reid: I thought it must be a party, a fancy-dress ball or maybe it's a pantomime with the cow on stage, but they're just dressed up and carrying on. That seemed to be the mood for that piece.

Gaitskell: Why did you make the speaker in "Where are You Going, My Pretty Maid?" an artist?

Reid: Because that's a fairly sexist poem. I thought if there's an artist ogling this chick going by, maybe it's just for beauty's sake. I thought I'd make him one of those painters out there trying to be an Impressionist. I wanted to make

him less leering, more innocent – he's a soldier in most Mother Goose books. I enjoy some of the old stereotyping stuff, but I don't like to show it, and maybe for kids it's a little much.

Gaitskell: The maid's postures are very strong.

Reid: Yes, she's aggressive. I didn't want to make her a shrinking-violet type or have her look crushed that the painter doesn't want to marry her.

Gaitskell: He's the one who looks crushed.

Reid: Yes, his paintbrush shows it. You should be able to cover up the words and know what's happening in that scene from the way the characters are acting. I think that's important in illustration, telling the story without words.

Gaitskell: Did you have problems depicting death and illness in "Solomon Grundy"?

Reid: It's such a morbid little poem. I was thinking of how to do it nicely when I decided, no: he's sick, he's dead, there's no way around it. Actually, as a little kid, nothing ever really shocked me in a book. I think we get more sensitive as we get older, but I know little kids read about horrible dismemberment in fairy tales, and I always liked that part.

Gaitskell: Is there anything you notice about children's senses of humour that you cater to in your work, or is it your own sense of humour that guides you?

Reid: I think it's my own, it's childish probably. Some kids like it and some kids don't. My type of humour is generally making fun of any type of pompous behaviour. I really like to poke fun at people who take themselves too seriously or to make fun of anything bad. That's my way of dealing with things, so that's the kind of humour that comes out.

Gaitskell: What do you like best about your job?

Reid: It's really rewarding – like cooking. You get this story and you turn it into your own; then you take it and show it to someone and they like it. It's the need to please instantly satisfied, like when you were a little kid and you made a picture and showed it off to someone. I've never really gotten over that.

That seemed like a good ending for the interview, so I creaked to my feet, waited for normal sensation to return to my legs, and left. A month has passed and there have been some changes. I have a new tape recorder. Barbara Reid has a new baby girl. The latter's name is Zöe Jan Crysler.

Children's Books Illustrated by Barbara Reid

It's tough to be a kid. Mary Blakeslee. Richmond Hill: Scholastic-TAB, 1983.
Mustard. Betty Waterton. Richmond Hill: Scholastic TAB, 1983.
The new baby calf. Edith Newlin Chase. Richmond Hill: Scholastic-TAB, 1984.
Jenny Greenteeth. Mary Alice Downie. Toronto: Kids Can Press, 1984.
Have you seen birds? Joanne Oppenheimer. Richmond Hill: North Winds Press,1986.

How to make pop-ups. Joan Irvine. Toronto: Kids Can Press, 1987.
Sing a song of Mother Goose. Richmond Hill: North Winds Press, 1987.
Playing with Plasticine. Toronto: Kids Can Press, 1988.

Awards Won by Barbara Reid

Canada Council Children's Literature Prize for Illustration, 1986
IODE Book Award (Toronto Chapter), 1986
Ruth Schwartz Children's Book Award, 1987
Ezra Jack Keats Award for Illustration, 1988

Susan Gaitskell *is a writer and editor who lives in Toronto. Her new book for children,* A Story of Jean, *is scheduled for publication by Oxford University Press in the fall of 1989.*