



As a former kindergarten teacher and lifelong book lover, Zora Charles knows a good story when she reads one. In the early 1980s, she began combing bookstores and fairs in pursuit of children's picture books, eventually working with dealer Peter Glassman who would later



Beatrix Potter, "Mother Rabbit puts Peter to bed," 1927, from *Tale of Peter Rabbit*, 1902. Watercolor on paper. The Charles Collection.

become her business partner in the Beverly Hills Books of Wonder. Twenty-four years later, Zora continues to speak with awe about illustrated children's books and her collection, the heart of which is being showcased in the current exhibition *Over Rainbows and Down Rabbit Holes*. A woman of compelling charm and turbocharged exuberance, Zora sat down with me and talked about her evolution as a

collector and how that journey transported her to the beguiling world of children's illustrated art.

**LM:** Zora, what set you on the path of collecting children's literature?

**ZC:** I started collecting picture books in the early 1980s when my husband, Les, and I used to go to antiquarian book fairs in New York City. I also started searching in bookstores and that's how I ended up in Books of Wonder in lower Manhattan [one of the largest and oldest sources of children's publications.]

**LM:** (By the way, that bookstore was the set for Meg Ryan's character in the movie *You've Got Mail* with Tom Hanks). From what I understand, your collection reflects considerable breadth and depth, which sort of belies the focus of first edition Caldecott winners that became your holy grail.

**ZC:** I started out buying first edition Caldecott and Newbury winners. The Caldecott Medal winning books – the medal was initially awarded in 1938 - stay in print, and have been read by generations. *Madeline*, first published in 1939, has never been out of print. Then in the 1990s I started veering away from that; now I just buy what I like, books I truly enjoy. I don't always agree with the winners and there are so many beautiful and interesting books out there. That's how I got Kay Nielsen ["Bluebeard," from *Red Magic*]...he never won a Caldecott for that, or Dulac [*The Rubyat*]...they never won awards in that genre, but they're important because of who they are as artists.

**LM:** Tell me about your relationship with your mentor, friend and eventual business partner, Peter Glassman.

**ZC:** I really have to give a lot of credit to Peter for shaping my collection those first few years – teaching me who was important to collect. He and I really are kindred souls; we're very much alike.

**LM:** Was he in part responsible for your crossing over from books to art?

**ZC:** When I met him, Peter and his partner had the bookstore in NYC that I mentioned earlier, Books of Wonder. Peter had some art; he happened to know quite a few of the artists, so he had

many of the original pieces. [Chuckling] It never even occurred to me that the art was separate from the text or how a book was made...you know, you just read a book! But I wasn't interested in art then. [Smiling].

**LM:** What happened to change that?

**ZC:** Well, Peter and I had been working together for a few years when he talked me into opening the Beverly Hills Books of Wonder. And above the bookstore, there was a gallery; for the first time we had space and Peter could display the pieces. We had a lot of artists in there...it was wonderful! [Squinting her eyes] And that's how I got really deep into collecting art – seeing the art – these pieces are fabulous! – and getting to speak with the artists. That's where my real excitement began to grow.

**LM:** How did you go about acquiring pieces and what was your first purchase?

**ZC:** Oh, I think the first was Gerald McDermott's *Arrow to the Sun*. It's very hard to find older pieces, like Beatrix Potter, and the Shepard (*The House at Pooh Corner*) ... when they come up it's usually at auctions and they're very expensive. What's charming about Beatrix Potter is that when she was creating nobody wanted to print her because she was a woman. The first printing of Peter Rabbit she did herself, a private printing, so those are very rare. Plus, hers were what were called 'the little books' and they were much loved because the children read them. They were made out of cardboard!

**LM:** Is the collector's market for children's books or the illustrations comparable to the market for art and books in general? Are prices exorbitant?

**ZC:** Depends on their reputation. Chris [Van Allsburg, *Jumanji*] is very expensive. Once anybody has won an award...it's just like the movies. A Caldecott or Newbury award makes your book. Everybody's going to buy it – schools, libraries. So the price goes up. And that's why artists today are able to decide whether they're going to keep their art, sell it, give it to an institution. My collection is going to the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art. I feel very strongly about this... that the art be available to a wider audience, not hidden away in some library.

**LM:** Do artists know the fate of the pieces you buy from them?

**ZC:** Oh, yes! I think that's one of the reasons they sell to me.

**LM:** What would you say has been your biggest coup?

**ZC:** [Sitting back, breathing deep]. Ohhhh, that would have to be... [definitively] Chris Van Allsburg. Actually, there are many coups – I finally got a Maurice Sendak.

**LM:** Was there a golden age for children's illustrated books?

**ZC:** Oh sure. In the early 1900s. At first, there were fairy tales before picture books. The older pieces, like the Dulac, and the Kay Nielsen...these are illustrations from compilations of fairy tales. They would do maybe one piece for five or six stories; they would not make a story out of the pictures. You could not separate the pictures from the text. But you could take the piece out of the stories and the painting would stand by itself. Then again around the 1980s, the picture book kind of exploded and the artists started being recognized so they were able to make a living at it. The artists own the illustrations unless they sell them to the publisher, the editor... so in the 1980s, you had the people who were buying, but you also had people like Maurice Sendak – who had been an artist and a really wonderful artist, you know, *Where the Wild Things Are*, who had decided not to sell his art. You can't get Maurice Sendak's work because he gives it to the

Rosenbach Museum in Philadelphia. And there are many other artists who do that. David Weisner...oh, [sighing, looking upward] I would love to have a David Weisner from his book *Tuesday*. But he decided to keep his artwork together. As did Paul Zelinsky...that was a coup when he started selling to me. Chris Van Allsburg was another.

**LM:** I take it these weren't your stereotypical 'starving artists.'

**ZC:** Well, Chris Van Allsburg used to sell his pieces because he needed the money, so he doesn't know where a lot of his early stuff is. In fact, I just found *The Wreck of the Zephyr*, which is in this show; that was from Peter Glassman. He was approached by this person in L.A. about a piece of art. It was a Chris Van Allsburg and the person knew it was but he wasn't particularly interested – and [leaning forward, squinting suspiciously] we're not even sure *why* he had it – but I was able to purchase it.

**LM:** Is illustrated art considered fine art and if not, is breaching that barrier the goal?

**ZC:** [Leaning forward, sighing with frustration] Illustrators always get a bum deal. There's always been this: Are you a fine artist or are you an illustrator? A lot of illustrators - especially when magazines took off – I mean, advertising - that's where a lot of artists got their work. But that came with a stigma. But no, being considered 'fine art' is not the goal. For the artist, it's about how to tell the story in the best possible way. Like the Dillons, when they did *Earth Mother*, and Zelinsky does this – if the story takes place in Egypt, the illustration will look Egyptian, or if it's in Greece, or whatever.

**LM:** So these artists have a particular cultural sensibility to their work.

**ZC:** Yes. They're just fascinating and that's what I love about them, that's part of the diversity that appeals to me.

**LM:** Most of your collection does have a multicultural slant. That's the draw for you?

**ZC:** Yes, the diversity of the human experience. And I think that's because I'm Mexican-American. When I was growing up, my parents were very clear not to teach in Spanish...I don't speak Spanish because it was such a stigma for them growing up in a Spanish-speaking family. Although they never had an accent, they felt - and I got this feeling growing up - that they felt that Mexicans born in America in the 1930s were being shipped back to Mexico because The White Guys wanted their property. So there's always been that sense of 'I have to be a little bit better.' So I always wanted to show my students that they have a culture that they can be so proud of, they can be proud of who they are...that you're not the color of your skin. But you can be proud of the color of you skin, who you are, your culture. The true beauty of this world is its diversity, not its sameness. And yet we're all in this together, we're all part of the human race. That what drew me, continues to draw me to those books, the connections we make within ourselves and with each other.

**LM:** Your collection has both old and new works; you have artists from that golden age of illustration – the Dulac, the Nielsen – as well as artists from the post-WWII period and of course the contemporary illustrators, the Dillons, Van Allsburg. Is it our ability to make those connections - tap into our own souls, relate to each other - that is the common theme?

**ZC:** Oh, that's interesting. [Sitting back, finger on lips] Well, I think first you do have that emotional response to a book. There is virtually an instant appreciation for a picturebook,

both the illustrations and the story. The classics, even in mythology, teach us how to live, how to find our path. There are certain things in life that will always be true and if an author comes out with a new way of presenting it, that makes it all the more exciting. Especially all the multicultural stuff; in the 1980s and '90s we started getting more of this, more of what the Dillons and McDermott and a lot of these artists were doing. And we saw that we all had the same stories! It might be Rumpelstiltskin - it might have a different name - but it's still the same moral dilemma: Would you sell your baby?

**LM:** Good books are effective vehicles for socialization, then, have an influence on how we grow up and the people we become?

**ZC:** Oh, yes. I think every kind of storytelling has an influence. This goes back in stories, fairy tales told around the fire: What do you want your child to learn? What do you want them to be aware of, be careful of in the world?

**LM:** Children's books have been used in therapy and apparently, some have been directly influenced by psychoanalysis. Well-known child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim talks about children's literature in *The Uses of Enchantment*. But he had been quite critical of *Where the Wild Things Are* – well, not just him, I guess it was generally controversial – not only because of the scary pictures but also because of the subject: a child's tantrum. Tricky territory?

**ZC:** You know, the thing I love about Maurice [Sendak] is he has such honor for children, for who they are, that they're not just nice, prim proper little people who sit in a corner and are well behaved. They're children! They learn from acting out. In the story, the child is acting out, but his mom still loves him. What a beautiful message. And it's done with humor; I think we've got to have a sense of humor about the human condition.

**LM:** Zora, what's with the preponderance of rude rollicking tales, stories in which oppressed kids triumph over tyrannical adults and underdogs always come out on top? Do kids just relate as underdogs because they're kids? And what about new age parents where kids are not underdogs at all, but are the central focus of family energy?

**ZC:** The thing that will never change is that the child is learning how to live in the world. And whether or not their parents make it easy for them, they're still going to come up against the same situations – the bully, the critic, whatever... you still have to build your character, build your own inner strength. Your parents are there to help you, but you're the one who wakes up all alone at night and...it's just you. I love children's books because they teach you how to cope. No matter how New Age your parents are - and they can be wonderful, supportive people - a child still has to find his own way. What we're trying to do as teachers, as mentors, is guide them with books and relationships. Wonderful stories offer a point of conversation.

**LM:** Clearly, it sounds like you related to the adults in your life through books.

**ZC:** Oh, yeah. I loved books growing up. Our parents never read to us; I was one of four, and my mom was busy raising children, my dad was busy working. But they read, they always had a book and I think that's important. At Christmas we always got a piece of clothing, a book, and a toy. So my parents started me out with the illustrated classics series; I had a *Little Women*, *The House at Pooh Corner*. But, my grandmother read to us. [Leaning forward with happy expression] When we'd go to her house, she would read to us with all this wonderful intonation, and voices...

**LM:** So you learned through the adults in your world to love books.

**ZC:** Yes. I was a country girl. My mom would take us into town and we'd skate down to the library and get a stack of books. Well, summertime to me was getting to read as much as I wanted!

**LM:** Ever harbor aspirations of becoming a writer or an artist?

**ZC:** [Throwing her head back, laughing]. Oh, no! Les is the artist in the family! He draws, he paints, and he's the writer, of course [long-running sitcom *Cheers*].

**LM:** But it's clear there's a creative aspect to collecting. I mean, you're projecting something about yourself, much like books on a shelf reflect the reader. The creativity is in what the collection says about you - your personality, your soul, much like a self-portrait. Any truth?

**ZC:** Oh yes. [Leaning forward thoughtfully] You see, I'm a good teacher; I come from a family of teachers: my mother and father are teachers, my brother, my sister...I looove to teach. And I think it's a natural progression from that, from growing up around books. Then having taught in a multi-cultural school...I mean, why do you teach? You teach so that children can discover for themselves that they're the ones in charge of their own creation, of what they learn, how they learn, if they can learn. And you teach this by giving them the confidence to read and to discover, to create...to be free to do all of those things. You can learn anything from books! You learn how to live your life, you learn your culture - we learn from stories. And the art is their first connection to the story. For kids, that picture may be their first exposure to art, the first picture they can step into emotionally and become involved in, the beginning realization that there's something magical and irresistible about books. And that realization can open the whole world. That's the power of books!

**LM:** How does it feel thinking about all the kids who will see this exhibition, about those who might connect with books - through the art - perhaps for the first time?

**ZC:** Oh, it's exciting! I feel blessed.

