

Dahlov Ipcar: A Maine Treasure

BY JUDITH ROSEN

As recently as five years ago, when children's author and illustrator Dahlov Ipcar (b. 1917) received the New England Independent Booksellers Association President's Award for her body of work, some in the audience asked, "Dahlov who?" Thanks to the efforts of Islandport Press and Down East Books, two publishers in Maine, and Flying Eye Books, which has offices in London and New York, the 97-year-old Mainer is poised for a comeback—and not just in New England.

Late last year *PW* spent an afternoon with Ipcar at her home on Georgetown Island, where she has lived and worked for over three-quarters of a century. She has seldom left, even to return to New York City, where she grew up. Ipcar missed the opening of her first solo exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in 1939, when she was 21. Among her rare out-of-state trips was one to Minnesota in 1998 to accept the Kerlan Award for children's literature.

Ipcar leads the way into the studio that she and her husband, Adolph, added to the farmhouse more than 30 years ago. It's a short walk from the summer home that her parents bought in the 1920s. Sculptures of Ipcar as a girl made by her father, the sculptor William Zorach, and mother, the artist Marguerite Zorach, stand on a shelf above her head. So does the Maine Governor's Award that she and Adolph received in 1972 for "significant contributions to Maine in the broad field of the arts and humanities." An unfinished canvas with animals, her favorite subject, rests on the easel.

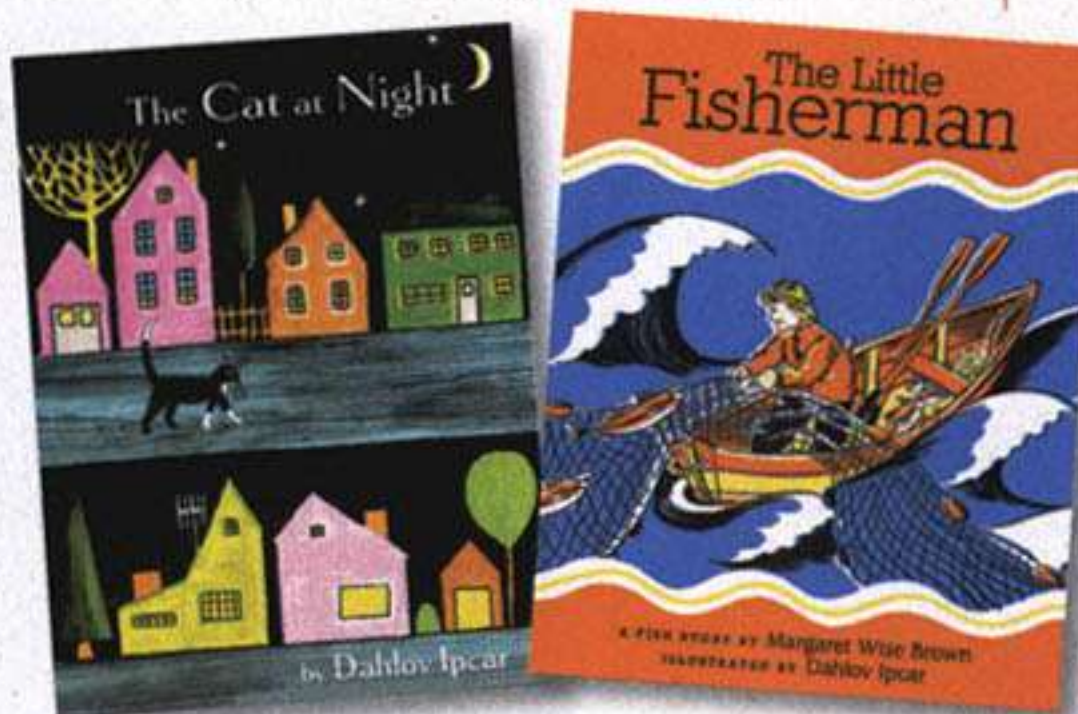
A fine artist and children's book illustrator—her art is part of the permanent collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum, and the Brooklyn Museum, among others—Ipcar continues to paint for an hour or



Dahlov Ipcar, in a still taken from a 2013 documentary video called *Creative Growth*, which she made with her son Robert Ipcar.

two every day. She stopped writing in the 1990s, with the exception of four board books recently published by Islandport. "No more ideas," says Ipcar. She has also given up illustration, except for one new one, her first in decades, of the letters X, Y, and Z, "high in a tree," for her *Maine Alphabet* board book (2012).

"My mother always said, 'Never get involved with commercial art. They'll milk your brain dry,'" says Ipcar, adding,



"I never felt that way about children's books. I always thought what I was doing was fine art." Certainly it has earned her critical praise. In recent years, Dave Eggers has been among those who champion her work. In 2009, when Islandport

reissued *The Cat at Night* (Doubleday, 1969), he called it "an underappreciated classic."

Becoming an Illustrator

Ironically, given her mother's feelings about commercial art, it was a friend of her mother's who gave the teenage Ipcar her first book to illustrate, a story about a colt. A few years later the librarian at her high school, Anne Thaxter Eaton (who later became co-editor of children's books at the *New York Times Book Review*), encouraged her to show her portfolio to publishers. "Nothing ever came of it, and I can see why," says Ipcar with the dry humor that marks her conversation. "They weren't very salable. I'd go in, and they'd say, 'Oh, we don't take fantasy. This is one of our bestsellers,' and they'd pull a book of fantasy off the shelf."

A few years later, in 1945, Ipcar's illustrating luck changed when a former teacher, Ellen Steel, put her in touch with William R. Scott. "[He] was starting out as a publisher and trying to do new, modern books and get young illustrators that he wouldn't have to pay much," says Ipcar. Her first assignment was to illustrate Margaret Wise Brown's *The Little Fisherman* (1945). And she continued illustrating and writing until 1986 and the publication of *My Wonderful Christmas Tree* (Gannett Books). "I had other ideas I would have liked to have published," says Ipcar. "But I would have liked to have [had] other illustrators illustrating them."

Altogether Ipcar wrote and/or illustrated 33 picture books and three YA novels. She is also the author of a collection of short stories and a novel, both for adults. Beginning with *One Horse Farm* (1950), her first book with Doubleday, eight of her books went on to become Junior Literary Guild selections. At the height of her career, Ipcar pub-



An interior spread from *Black and White*: "Black-and-white zebras and antelopes graze/ Through the long, hot jungle days."

lished two books a year. Ipcar's editor at Doubleday, Margaret Lesser, warned her that she was competing with herself. "If you took all my books, I wouldn't have to go to other publishers," Ipcar recalls telling her. She never considered it competition. "Each book is different in its own right," she says.

Looking back at her early work, Ipcar regards the 1940s and 1950s as one of the best times for children's art. "There were some marvelous illustrators: the Provensens [Alice and Martin], and one that I just really was influenced by and liked enormously was [Feodor] Rojankovsky, who did *The Tall Book of Mother Goose*. There was Garth Williams," she says. "We were all doing different kinds of stuff, but it was all in a new modern style, and now they call it midcentury modern, which I think is rather nice, because that is what it was. It wasn't art deco, and it wasn't what came later. It was just kind of a new modern style. I think these things are sometimes in the air. Everybody is doing the same kind of thing independently."

Ipcar never studied art, or illustration for that matter. "I was surrounded by art and I just naturally did it," she says. "[My son] Charlie says I'm my parents' great experiment. They went to proper art schools, both of them. And then when the Modern Art movement came along, they said they had to unlearn everything

they learned. They wanted to see what would happen if they left a child alone to go her own way. I've had influences. But you pick them up and put them down."

Since she was 14, Ipcar has relied on what she calls her "visual memory" to create her art. "I didn't

like copying, being dependent on photographs. When you see things in motion they're quite different from when you see them frozen in photographs. I explained that at the end of my book *Horses of Long Ago* [Doubleday, 1965]. In *One Horse Farm* [Doubleday, 1958] I tried to stick to the horses' photographic gait, but I gave it up on everything else. I don't need to look at photographs at all anymore. I know what a giraffe looks like."



Rediscovery

The first attempt to renew interest in Ipcar's work began in 1977, when Down East reissued *Lobsterman* (Knopf, 1962). It has gone on to sell 50,000 copies, and the press is planning a full-sized hardcover edition later this year. In 2015, it will also reissue *Deep Sea Farm* (Knopf, 1961) and *The Biggest Fish in the Sea* (Viking, 1972). In 2010, Down East published a retrospective of her art, *The Art of Dahlov Ipcar*, written by Carl Little.

Down East editorial director Michael Steere calls Ipcar "quite a phenomenon,

though hers is more of a slow burn than a sudden flash. For a period of time, her distinct style of illustration may have made her books seem dated and old-fashioned. But with the passing of more time, they have now become timeless classics."

Fifteen-year-old Islandport Press made Ipcar's work an integral part of its list early on, starting with *The Little Fisherman* in 2009. "She was so far ahead of her time. It was so amazing that we could take books from the 1940s and 1950s and change the font and make them look modern and not dated," says publisher Dean Lunt, who has been a strong champion of Ipcar's work. Islandport has reissued eight picture books along with the board books, and it added an Ipcar calendar to its list in 2013.

Ipcar's rediscovery took an international turn when Alex Spiro, cofounder of Nobrow, a U.K. publisher that places a strong emphasis on book design, found a first edition of *The Wonderful Egg* in an antiquarian shop and decided to reprint it for the press's Flying Eye children's imprint. Their goal is to republish the books exactly as they originally looked,

not easy given that the plates are no longer available. This spring it will publish *Black and White* (Knopf, 1963), a story about two dogs that was inspired by the civil rights movement, followed by *Wild and Tame Animals* (Doubleday, 1962). Spiro and cofounder Sam Arthur are creating an Ipcar collection that is intended to fit "aesthetically and conceptually around her passion for animals." Spiro said, "Her work is so bright and full of life, and her stories are so charming and witty. It has been a real honor to work with her and her family."

As former NEIBA president Dick Hermans, owner of Oblong Books & Music in Millerton, N.Y., said when he chose Dahlov for the President's Award: "Ipcar's lifelong body of work is entirely inspiring. Readers of all ages have delighted in Ipcar's work for many years and because her work is so timeless, they will do so for decades to come." ■