

# *Robert McCloskey, 88, of 'Make Way for Ducklings,' Is Dead*

By Eleanor Blau

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Robert McCloskey, the writer and illustrator whose classic children's books -- among them "Make Way for Ducklings" and "Blueberries for Sal" -- captivated generations of young readers and their parents, died yesterday on Deer Isle, Maine. He was 88.

A small-town boy with a gift for keen observation, Mr. McCloskey wrote and illustrated only eight books, all for Viking Children's Books, and illustrated 10 by other authors, including Ruth Sawyer, whose daughter, Margaret Durand, a children's librarian, he married in 1940. "I'm not prolific," he once said. "I have to wait until it bubbles out." It had to be right, and it often was.

Mr. McCloskey twice won a Caldecott Medal, the American Library Association's annual award of distinction for children's book illustration. The first was for "Make Way for Ducklings" (1941), perhaps his most enduring work, in which baby ducks in line behind their mother waddle along busy Boston streets to take up residence in the city's Public Garden. The second honored "Time of Wonder" (1957), a kind of prose poem with large watercolor paintings of life on his cherished islands of Maine, where he lived much of his adult life.

"All of his work has always been very exact," said Marc Simont, the illustrator who shared a studio with him and with live ducks that Mr. McCloskey bought before writing "Make Way for Ducklings."

"He wanted to study them perfectly before he could make a book about them, so he made drawings of them in every position," Mr. Simont said, adding that the experience remained vivid in his memory. "Ducks start quacking at the break of day, very loudly and emphatically."

Mr. McCloskey's books seemed to spring from his life experiences and observations. He was born on Sept. 14, 1914, in Hamilton, Ohio. The small-town America of his youth is reflected in "Lentil" (1941), about a boy who learns to play a harmonica, and in the tall tales of "Homer Price" (1943) and its sequel "Centerburg Tales" (1951).

Boston, where Mr. McCloskey studied art, is the backdrop for "Make Way for Ducklings." And life on the family's island in Maine, with his daughters, Sally and Jane, and some of their neighbors, are featured in four picture books: "Blueberries for Sal" (1948), in which Sal and

a bear cub mistakenly follow each other's mother while gathering berries on the same hill; "One Morning in Maine" (1952), in which Sal loses her first tooth; "Time of Wonder" (1957); and "Burt Dow, Deep-Water Man" (1963), his last book, which is full of typical Maine doings despite a whopper of a tale involving a fisherman swallowed by a whale.

Mr. McCloskey is survived by his two daughters and two grandchildren.

He often said he didn't know anything about children's literature. "I think in pictures," he said. "I fill in between pictures with words. My first book I wrote in order to have something to illustrate."

Mr. McCloskey took awhile to find his niche. "From the time my fingers were long enough to play the scale, I took piano lessons," he recalled. "I started next to play the harmonica, the drums and then the oboe. The musician's life was the life for me -- that is, until I became interested in things electrical and mechanical. I collected old electric motors and bits of wire, old clocks and Mechano sets. I built trains and cranes with remote controls, my family's Christmas trees revolved, lights flashed and buzzers buzzed, fuses blew and sparks flew. The inventor's life was the life for me -- that is, until I started making drawings for the high school annual."

In 1932 he won a scholarship to the Vesper George School of Art in Boston and two years later was commissioned to execute bas-reliefs for a building in his hometown. Then he moved to New York and studied at the National Academy of Design.

He painted for two years on Cape Cod, but sold only a few watercolors and considered his art career "a bust." So he called on an editor of children's books in New York. "She looked at the examples of 'great art' that I had brought along (there were woodcuts, fraught with black drama)," he said. "I don't remember just the words she used to tell me to get wise to myself and to shelve the dragons, Pegasus and limpid pool business," he recalled. "I think we talked mostly of Ohio." He went back there, started drawing and painting what he saw and the result was "Lentil."

Next came the ducklings, Mr. and Mrs. Mallard's offspring, in order of their birth: Jack, Kack, Lack, Mack, Nack, Ouack, Pack and Quack. "I had first noticed the ducks when walking through the Boston Public Garden every morning on my way to art school," he said. "When I returned to Boston four years later, I noticed the traffic problem of the ducks and heard a few stories about them. The book just sort of developed from there." The picture-book versions live on in bronze in Boston's Public Gardens, sculptured by Nancy Schoen and dedicated to Mr. McCloskey in 1987. They're also in a park in Moscow, where a replica was presented to Raisa M. Gorbachev by Barbara Bush during a 1991 summit meeting.

Mr. McCloskey's works won wide critical praise. Writing about him in her "Children's Books and Their Creators" (Houghton Mifflin), Anita Silvey said, "Each of his books is a gem, and each accomplishes a different goal, though they are alike in their innocent, homey humor and the best kind of patriotism."

Mr. McCloskey, a shy man who endured the adoring crowds of readers lined up at bookstore signings, won a Prix de Rome in 1939 but World War II postponed his study abroad for 10 years. During that time, he said, "My greatest contribution to the war effort was inventing a machine to enable short second lieutenants to flip over large training charts in a high breeze." Among his many other awards, Mr. McCloskey was named a Living Legend by the Library of Congress in April 2000.

Speaking of his art, Mr. McCloskey once said that while the hand is trained, "it's an automatic part like shuffling cards or knitting" and that "drawing is most of all a way of seeing and thinking."

"Most of my friends and neighbors just don't seem to see as I do," he continued, "even looking at simple things like a ball of string. But I'm not a nut, really, as anybody can see. I have one foot resting on reality and the other foot planted firmly on a banana peel."

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