

• Meet the Illustrator •

Catherine Stock

Interview conducted by Carol Surges.



When did you know that you would be an artist?

CS: I don't know that there was a conscious decision that I would be an artist. It was kind of something that came quite easily to me so I didn't value it. I was intending to do something else. In fact, when I went to the University of Cape Town, I originally signed up to do marine biology. I had images of paddling around rock pools and snorkeling and I thought it would be very cool. Then I looked at the curriculum and I realized that I would have to do physics and algebra and all these things that were not my strong points. So I moved over to the art school.

I wasn't a star in the early days of art school because it was very different than doing art at school. I am still not really an artist, I don't consider myself an artist and I think a lot of artists look down their nose at me as an illustrator.

When did you decide you wanted to illustrate children's books?

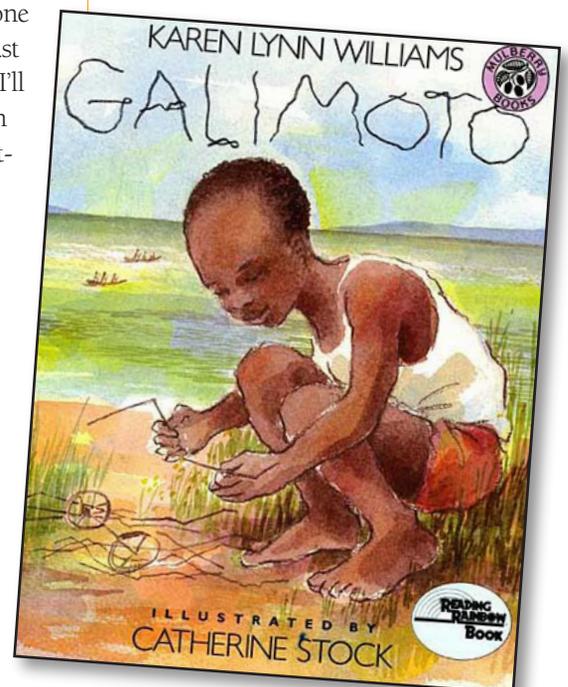
CS: I was an art teacher for a while and I taught art in South Africa. Then I went to London to do a teaching diploma, which wasn't a very happy experience for me. My parents, at that time, were living in New York, so I went to New York for a few weeks on a holiday. My mother, bless her soul, commissioned me to do the family portraits. I didn't have a bean to scratch my bum with, so I thought okay, I'm going to charge you \$100 a painting. She actually paid me, I think, \$500 a painting, which was wonderful!

During that time, I started thinking about exploring other possibilities. I went to see someone at the Pratt Institute who just loved my work. This man, I'll never forget his name, Eitan Manasse, looked at my portfolio and said, "But these are wonderful." I'd never had that kind of reaction before. People never took my work seriously at art school because it was too funny and playful. And then a friend of mine who was working at Scribners saw some of my art and she said, "Can I borrow these to show my edi-

tor?" I didn't think anything of it, but suddenly Scribners asked me if I would do a book with them. That was my first book. So I fell into it backwards. Publishing, I think, when you're looking at it from the outside, looks so distant and you don't think real people are involved in doing those paintings, but they are.

You seem to have developed a reputation for illustrating stories of everyday life in third world areas—particularly the southern countries of Africa and the Caribbean. How did that happen?

CS: That's quite interesting. Initially, one of the reasons I never put my photograph on the back flap is because I was



not only white but I was South African. Publishers liked the idea that a lot of libraries assumed I was black. I had done some traditional folklore, but a friend of mine, Niki Daly, had done a book *Not so Fast Songololo*. It was the first really good children's picture book about contemporary Africa. I was very influenced by Niki's book. That was when I did *Armen's Fishing Trip*. The publishers were very nervous about it. They didn't want to mention South Africa.

At the same time, Greenwillow Books, a different imprint at HarperCollins, published *At the Crossroads*, my friend Rachel Isadora's book about South Africa. Her editor said, "It's a wonderful story from a very troubled land." They really pushed that the story was from South Africa, whereas, my publisher tried to downplay it. That was a big mistake. It was right at the time that Nelson Mandela was released from prison. Rachel's book got lots of

positive attention and my book kind of disappeared. It was the "best book of the year" in South Africa but in America it was just too hot. The salesmen were too uncomfortable with it.

Another reason I've done a lot of African books is because I can paint the African physique well. I respond to the very sculptural faces of Africans and the rich skin tones. It makes for stronger palettes, rich reds and greens and yellows. After painting a book in Africa, I notice that my palette gets kind of pale and wishy-washy if I'm doing a white character.

As a white person illustrating books about people of color, have you received criticism, because you are not from those cultures?

CS: It was an issue for my editor when I did *Armen's Fishing Trip*. She was very twitchy about it. Whereas, Dorothy Briarly, my editor for *Galimoto* and *Gugu's House*, was a very confident editor. She felt I was the best person for the book. Having said that, the editor of *Armen's Fishing Trip* let me do *Where Are You Going Manyoni?* But those were stories that I wrote. Dorothy approached me with *Galimoto*—I wouldn't say that was a brave thing, but I wasn't the obvious choice. None of us thought that story was going to be as successful as it was. In fact, when Dorothy Briarly left Morrow Junior books and another person took over, she

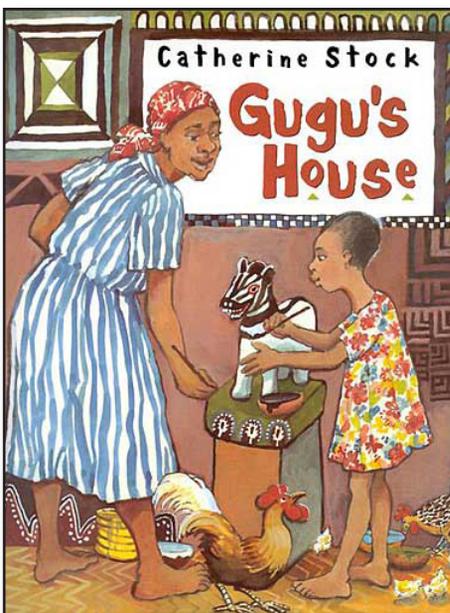
took me out to lunch to talk about my future with Morrow. She said, "*Galimoto* is a sweet little book but it's never going to go anywhere." Then *The New York Times* said it was one of the best books of the year.

I think the message there is you have to go with your gut. Don't try to follow trends. Don't try to predict what the market wants, what children want. Just do your best and choose the best illustrator or person that's going to do the best job. Obviously you want them to have knowledge and experience about a place. Hopefully we will get past this period and we will become color blind after a while.

Since you describe yourself as an illustrator foremost, how did you begin to write?

CS: One of my editors said, "to really become established, you need to write your own picture books." And I said, "Me? Write some stories?" I didn't think I could. But I looked around and sketched out some ideas. The first story I actually put together was *Emma's Dragon Hunt* and at the time, the editor had so much confidence in me that she just gave me a contract without my even having a story. She just liked these images I had in my portfolio. I had done them as lithographs, so they weren't as rich as those in *Emma's Dragon Hunt* but they were similar.

You've described *Where Are You Going Manyoni?* as



Meet the Illustrator

your favorite book. Can you talk about where the idea for that book came from?

CS: That book is set on my sister's game farm on the Limpopo River in Zimbabwe. I went there to do a very different story. I had a different book under contract and it was a high point in my career. I was very confident. I got up very early in the morning and did a lot of walking and I suddenly lost interest in the project that I'd come to do. I just wanted to paint the landscape. In a flash, I got the idea of doing this little girl walking, walking, walking. At first I thought she was going to be collecting firewood and it would be an environmental story on conservation and trees. But then I decided to make it more universal; she was going to school, because that was something everybody everywhere could identify with.

A book works best when it's very local but the characters have something in common with children everywhere. I had a lot of fun working on that book and I think the art shows my involvement in the detail and the animals.

Gugu's House is a tribute to Mrs. Khosa, the main character. Can you tell us about Mrs. Khosa and her house?

CS: My sister and I were driving on a long, long dusty road. We were trying to find a short cut to Bulawayo and we just suddenly saw her houses. They were in a compound, a group of

little houses. All the houses there have courtyards because it's quite hot and people like to sit outside around the fire in their little courtyard.

She's a very lovely person. She didn't speak a word of English and I didn't speak any Venda, but my brother-in-law grew up there and he speaks fluent Venda. But Digby was hopeless. He's one of those taciturn sort of guys. Mrs. Khosa might talk for five minutes and I'd say, "Digby, what's she saying?" and he would say, "Oh, she's run out of salt." The person who really helped me with that book was my four year-old nephew, Tarquin. He speaks fluent Venda.

I would go and visit Mrs. Khosa whenever I could. What impressed me so much about her was her optimism, her love of life, and the imagination she displayed. She was obviously well loved in her community, but very, very poor. I would take her little presents and she would always give me little clay animals to take away. You could give her a few glittery plastic dangles and she would be very excited. She had this childlike joy of life. Even when her beautiful house was completely destroyed by the rain, because it wasn't very strong, she would just say, "Oh, the next one's going to be more beautiful." She claims that she got a lot of strength from God. She was a very religious woman.

Was Mrs. Khosa the only person who painted houses in her village?

CS: Mrs. Khosa's family probably came north into Zimbabwe. She was probably from the Ndebele

people in South Africa who have a tradition of beautiful painting. There might be some attempts at painting in her village, but her house was uniquely beautiful and her big sculptures were unique, too. I'd never seen sculptured animals before. She used to make these little clay animals that she fired in an old abandoned termite mound.

You and Karen Lynn Williams have had several very successful collaborations including Galimoto, which was a Reading Rainbow selection. How did you begin working together?

CS: It started off purely professional. Karen wrote *Galimoto*, and sent it to my publisher. They knew that I knew something about Africa. Normally, a story like *Galimoto* would have been offered to a black illustrator, because it was an African story. I knew I had to go to Malawi to research the book. I knew a lot more about Africa and I lived with an African historian for a long time so I was very sensitive to Africa.

Anyway, by the time I got to Malawi, Karen wasn't there anymore. I met her in New York after *Galimoto* came out. Karen and I really hit it off well. When I was offered her Haitian stories, I actually went and stayed with her.

We are very good friends and we have a lot in common. Karen is quite funny. She wanted her daughter to meet me because she said, "You know you don't have to get married and have lots of kids. Look at Catherine. You

can have a great, rich, full life as a single woman.” We think of ourselves as alter egos. She has four kids and her house is always full of kids and activity. I thought if I hadn’t had my life as it is, I would have liked to have Karen’s life. And Karen feels the same way about me. We’re kind of sisters.

The main character in *Painted Dreams*, another collaboration with Karen Lynn Williams, is an artist, like Mrs. Khosa. Can you tell us anything about the background for that story and how you researched it?

CS: *Painted Dreams* was the second book that Karen wrote while in Haiti. The first one was *Tap Tap*. *Tap Tap* was supposed to be a picture book, so I made plans to go to Haiti to stay with the Williams’ family in Deschapelles to research the illustrations. The editor decided to make it a chapter book just before I flew over, which was a little disappointing for me and Karen, but in fact the book did quite well anyway.

So Clarion accepted another title set in Haiti, *Painted Dreams*. The story took a long time to come together. I didn’t like the first drafts that Karen showed me while I was with them in Haiti, but she was persistent and really pulled the story together. The painter in the first draft was an American tourist. Everything started coming together when Karen changed the tourist into a local bocor, or village priest. Painting has long been an

important tradition in Haiti and Haitian painters are well-known throughout the world, so that concept filled out and completed the story.

We can’t leave out the Gus and Grandpa books. You’ve been illustrating Claudia Mills’s series for quite a while. How do you approach those books?

CS: I think the stories are so wonderful, Claudia writes so well. She writes about very particular American situations. She writes about her family. The grandpa in the story is her father-in-law and Gus is her son. The stories are based on real situations.

It’s very funny, Grandpa said to her, “How does Catherine Stock know what my house looks like? Did you send pictures to her?” I just made them up. He grew a mustache because Grandpa in the book has a mustache. He couldn’t figure out which side he should part his hair and then I noticed that I didn’t always pay attention and grandpa’s hair was parted on different sides in different pictures. The real grandpa was really annoyed about that!

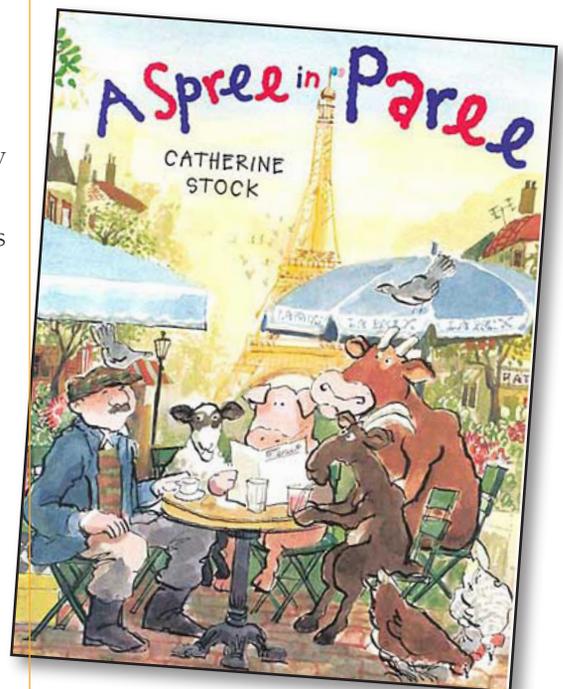
Those books are forty-eight pages long instead of thirty-two. I have to do them very quickly and I knew there was going to be a series so I didn’t want to run out of steam with the books. Because the stories are so strong, they didn’t need elaborate illustrations. The art is scribbled compared to illustra-

tions in my other books.

***A Spree in Paree* is quite different from any of your other books. How did that story happen?**

CS: I am inspired by the people and places I visit. I don’t know that *Spree* is really different from my other books, even though it is a bit of a silly farce. I think it’s more that people have the idea that I am serious artist because my funny books, like *Alexander’s Midnight Snack*, are not known as well as my more realistic stories. My most successful books have been books set in Africa, or are books about difficult subjects like death or AIDS so I am known as a “sensitive” illustrator. Those books set me apart because not many illustrators have first-hand experience of Africa, and I think I am quite good at drawing people, rather than caricatures.

You’re working on a sequel to *A Spree in Paree* now. Can you tell us a little about it?



Meet the Illustrator

CS: *A Spree in Paree* was widely reviewed and received, even though the story was rejected initially at least thirty or forty times by both U.S. and French publishers. Because I intimated that the animals were planning another holiday to New York in *Spree*, I was relentlessly pressured by both children and editors to come up with a sequel. One local friend told me that he loved *Spree*, but wished that there had been a love story in it. That gave me the idea for the sequel.

What other new book projects are in the works?

CS: I've got a few things in the pipeline. I do want to write about the lions on my sister's farm. There are too many exciting things going on at that farm not to write about them. I'm very annoyed at my sister for not keeping a journal. She has a very exciting life so I kind of have to write about her life for her.

I've got, I think, a wonderful story about a little adopted Chinese girl. Unfortunately, publishing is going through a strange phase where concept books are

more important than really good story books. So I haven't been able to find a publisher for some of my ideas because they're filled out stories and publishers are looking for quick, clever concepts.

You're living in France year-round now. How has that impacted on your creative life?

CS: I'm not quite sure yet. The reason I left New York was I lost [the view from] all the windows in my apartment when a new building went up. But I love having a big airy, open barn studio, which is great for painting. I'm hoping that I'm going to do exciting new work there.

I've been spending the summers in France for about sixteen years. I've been bracing myself for the winter. I thought it was going to get really rainy and cold and I would get cabin fever. In fact, I commute over to America two or three times a year. Last winter went by in a flash. I started a blog and I intended to do a painting every day but I found I had too much other work that I needed to finish.

Thanks to technology and the Internet and a scanner and jpgs

and being able to keep in contact with everybody in New York, sometimes they don't even realize that I'm calling them from France. I think that I'm going to pull it off. It's a little far away. It's more the psychological problem but most illustrators don't live in New York anymore—they live in Vermont or Wisconsin or Colorado. It doesn't matter where you live anymore.

For a bibliography, and more information about Catherine Stock, visit www.catherinestock.com.

❖ ❖ ❖

Carol Surges is the library media specialist at McKinley Elementary School in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin.