The Children’s Books of Nancy Willard
The Children’s Books of Nancy Willard

An Exhibition

Vassar College Library • 2017
Preface

For many years Nancy Willard (1936-2017) was one of Vassar’s most colorful and beloved faculty members. She could often be seen riding her bike across campus, and always took time to talk with others. Willard taught in the English Department, and in her classes she encouraged students to develop their imaginative skills and tell their own stories. She was also a major writer who published many works and won a number of literary awards. Her output was wide-ranging, and included poetry, novels, short stories, and scholarly articles. In addition, Willard was especially well-known for her stories for children.

This fall’s library exhibition, *The Children’s Books of Nancy Willard*, therefore focuses on one remarkable aspect of the author’s writing life. Forty books are on display here, dating over a period of several decades. Many of the books were collaborations with important artists. Perhaps the most acclaimed title is *A Visit to William Blake’s Inn*, which won the John Newbery Medal in 1982. As a group these titles represent Willard’s amazing creativity and substantial contributions to the field of children’s literature.

The exhibition takes place during the same year as the 90th anniversary of Vassar’s Wimpfheimer Nursery School. Throughout its long history, the school has offered a child-centered environment and a developmentally appropriate curriculum on Vassar’s campus. A key part of this work has long been the presence of activities and projects that encourage a love for books and reading among students. Because of their common interests, the Library and the
Wimpfheimer are collaborating on a number of events this fall, including the exhibition.

Several people deserve thanks for their contributions to the exhibition. I’d first like to acknowledge Eric Lindbloom, Nancy’s husband, who donated many books to the library. As a result of this donation, the library now houses a nearly complete collection of Willard’s published work (it also holds selected papers, including the manuscript to *A Visit to William Blake’s Inn*). We’re also grateful to author Jane Yolen, who agreed to write the essay that follows. Yolen’s reflection offers interesting insights into Nancy Willard’s life and work. We also would like to thank Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, and the artists Tomie dePaola and Ilse Plume, for permission to use images that accompany this text.

Ronald Patkus
Associate Director of the Libraries for Special Collections, Vassar College
Nancy Willard

I loved Nancy Willard’s work long before I actually met her. And when I read her 1982 Newberry Medal winning *A Visit to William Blake’s Inn*, a controversial choice at the time, I stood up and applauded the committee. With its perfect gemlike poems, the whimsy crossed with a deeper emotion, and its sometimes Blake-ian echoes, it’s a perfect book.

In fact because of those echoes, one of the poems has created another kind of controversy (emphasis on *verse*): “Two Sunflower Move Into the Yellow Room” continues to be misattributed to the great Blake himself.

Thomas Pitchford, a librarian at Hitchens Boys School, a Hertfordshire secondary school in England, who first discovered the ‘mislabelling’ as he called it, had this to say in an interview: “This mislabelling shows how the internet can replicate errors. We just accept too quickly.”

But as much as Nancy was influenced by Blake—and may have been amused by the two controversies—she is much more playful, outrageous, and full of whimsy in her poetry than he ever was.

How do I know this? Because about ten years after her Newbery win, Nancy and I began a correspondence, in which we wrote angel poems back and forth to one another on the subject of angels after she sent me a letter with an angel poem attached. Often one poem echoed another in tone or form or served as a provocative answer to the originating poem’s internal provocative questions. For example, she wrote “Angels in Winter” and I answered with “Angel in Summer:
West Virginia.” But the questions and answers went both ways.

We didn’t think of these letters as preparation for a book until we’d been at them for some time—about two years worth. Her poems were informed by a Christian upbringing and interest in the whole panoply of Christian mythic imagination, me by my Jewish background, less religious than cultural/folkloric.) But as we were both book people and published poets, by the time we’d reached twenty or so poems, we were both thinking Book, and so our poetry collection, Among Angels was born. It was produced by Harcourt Brace as a children’s picture book with gorgeous illustrations by the pseudonymous S. Saelig Gallagher, because we three were all better known in the children’s field. But the majority of poems were actually written for adult.

However, it was on a New England book tour that took us through Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Connecticut, that Nancy and I cemented a friendship. Especially when we visited a poetry center in Cambridge where the woman in charge told us an amazing story about how she used to see angels regularly Not the pretty ones with white feathery wings but the awesome ones. She used the old meaning of awe—that of fear and trembling before the powers, not the tamed and ridiculous “awesome” that became a staple of childhood a few years ago. Her angels were so frightening, she went to the doctor to get pills for hallucinations which effectively did away with the angels, the awe—and her own poetic instinct. Nancy and I could not stop talking about this woman’s experiences as we drove on to the next stop of our tour. We both knew we would write poems about it as soon as we reached a stop-over spot. And we
both agreed that if we had to choose between hallucinations of terrifying angels and loss of the ability to write poems, we’d continue witnessing the awe-filled power of the creatures of darkness and light.

It was a friendship effervescent and effernascent with words and poems, and books. We loved one another’s books and valued our conversations (alas, too few of them) and that two year correspondence. But the exchange of letters after the book appeared, trickled into inconsequences. I am not sure why, except that when magic strikes, it’s hard to replicate the experience. One has to accept that and move on.

Besides, there were still her books to love. For me especially, the irrepressible Pish, Posh, Said Hieronymus Bosch, the angelic and challenging High Rise Glorious Skittle Skat Roarious Sky Pie Angel Food Cake, and the ever-astonishing Ballad of Biddy Early. All have her characteristic brilliant engagement with language: coruscating, diamond-sharp, fantastical. With an imagination to match.

Who else could have turned a quasi-biography of the nineteenth century peasant woman Biddy Early (who reputedly could heal the sick and read the future) into a fandango of ballads, songs, limericks? Along with the whimsy and playfulness, there is an undertone of honor, passion, and tenderness that never fails to make me tear up again on a re-read. Mythpoetic in both its parts and whole.

Who else could have taken the uproarious, tongue tangle title of High Rise Glorious Skittle Skat Roarious Sky Pie Angel Food Cake and make a story that fits it to a tee?

Who else could have visited the art of Hieronymus Bosch and tease out of his small bio a rhymed tale about the
painter and his upset housekeeper who can't deal with all the weird creatures who inhabit his home as well as his art. It's hilarious, touching, romantic and... just... pitch perfect.

Who else but Nancy Willard.

P.S. She was regularly blessed by the illustrator angel who found the finest artists for her work almost every single time.

Jane Hyatt Yolen

Jane Hyatt Yolen often called “the Hans Christian Andersen of America,” is the author of over 350 books, including *Owl Moon*, *The Devil’s Arithmetic*, and the *How Do Dinosaurs* series. Her poetry collections for both children and adult readers are almost 100 in number. A graduate of Smith College, with a Masters in Education from the University of Massachusetts, her books, stories, and poems have won an assortment of awards—two Nebulas, a World Fantasy Award, a Caldecott Medal, two Golden Kite Award, three Mythopoeic awards, two Christopher Medals, a nomination for the National Book Award, the Green Earth Book Award, the Jewish Book Award, among many others. She was the first woman to give the St Andrews University’s Andrew Lang lecture since the lecture series was started in 1927. And the first writer in the Connecticut River Valley to win the New England Public Radio’s Arts and Humanities Award. Six colleges and universities have given her honorary doctorates. For her body of work, she has been made a Grand Master by the World Fantasy Association, a Grand Master by the Science Fiction Poetry Association, and a Grand Master by the Science Fiction/Fantasy Writers of America. Also worthy of note, her Skylark Award—given by the New England Science Fiction Award for lifetime achievement, set her good coat on fire. If you need to know more about her, visit her website at: [www.janeyolen.com](http://www.janeyolen.com)
A VISIT TO WILLIAM BLAKE’S INN
POEMS FOR INNOCENT AND EXPERIENCED TRAVELERS
BY NANCY WILLARD
ILLUSTRATED BY ALICE AND MARTIN PROVENSEN

Checklist # 12
Checklist


The exhibition

*The Children’s Books of Nancy Willard*

was planned and mounted by the
Archives and Special Collections Library,
Vassar College.

At the Frederick Ferris Thompson Memorial Library

*August 30 — December 20, 2017*

Cover illustrations are # 15 in the Checklist.
The front cover is a detail of the illustration of the
back cover of the original book.