



# Andersen in Pictures

Article Author:

[Naomi Lewis](#) [1]

[25](#) [2]

Article Category:

Other Articles

Byline:

**Naomi Lewis** looks at two new picture books.

**The Wild Swans** and **The Little Mermaid**: the two newest picture book versions of Andersen stories.

**Naomi Lewis**, whose version of **The Wild Swans** is the inspiration for Angela Barrett's illustrations in the new Benn edition, is a greatly respected Andersen translator and commentator.

Here she talks about this story and about Andersen's particular qualities.

When I was making my selection for the Puffin edition I didn't include **The Wild Swans**. I was limited to a dozen and I wanted to put in the more important stories and one or two that I thought were not well enough known, like **The Goblin and the Grocer**. I left it out because at the time I simply thought of it as one that like several of his earlier stories - **Big Claus and Little Claus**, **The Tinder Box** - were based on tales he had heard from the women when they were spinning or gathering crops. But when I looked again at this fascinating story I found it certainly had the Andersen touch. He makes the story his own. The most interesting thing to me is the flight, when Elisa is carried through the clouds by her brothers, the enchanted swans. It's one of the great passages in fairy tale literature. Andersen, of course, had never been in the sky, but in a later story, **The Millennium**, or **A Thousand Years Hence** (the title varies according to the translation) he describes what will happen in a thousand years. He said there will be machines flying. people will book a hotel in Europe from America. The only bit he got wrong was that it would be in a thousand years; it happened in a good deal less than a hundred from when he wrote. He was always interested in modern inventions. I think he saw them as an extension of magic. The flight in **The Wild Swans** is a marvellous anticipation of the thing you feel in an aeroplane above the clouds, watching the clouds change shape. It's like that other flight in **The Snow Queen** with Kay and the Snow Queen; they fly up in the sky with the wolves howling and frost crackling.

Andersen was a wonderful storyteller. I think **The Snow Queen** is his greatest story; it's an extraordinary tale; you can find in it what I think is his instinct for the lost novels he never wrote.

**The Wild Swans** is an early story and it contains a great deal that is in many of the most famous stories. It's incipiently **The Little Mermaid**, **The Snow Queen**, **The Steadfast Tin Soldier** - and all the ones that show landscape and seasons.

The theme of the story, salvation through hardship and endurance, was one of his great themes. He knew it himself; it was one of his own. The central thread of the story, a princess who must remain silent until she has completed the task of weaving shirts for her brothers from freshly gathered nettles in order to rescue them from enchantment as swans, is one of great anguish. But in the story there is an absolutely beautiful evocation of the seasons and of the landscape. If you read through Andersen you discover the Danish landscape - the marvellous woodlands in spring, and the sea, of course, which is everywhere around the islands. In **The Wild Swans** there's a wonderful description of night in the woods with the glow worms and the fireflies. Andersen didn't write poetic prose, but there's a tremendous amount of poetry in his stories.

**The Wild Swans**, Benn, 0 510 00123 8, £4.95 (published April)

**The Little Mermaid** is a Canadian co-edition, published by Methuen. The story is retold by Margaret Maloney with illustrations by Lazlo Gal. It is perhaps the best-known of all Andersen stories: the classic tale of the beautiful little mermaid who falls in love with a prince, becomes human for his sake and, although he does not return her love, sacrifices herself for him.

**Margaret Maloney** is currently head of the Lillian Smith and Osborne collection of Early Children's Books, a library of rare and out of print Canadian children's books, and is an acknowledged expert in children's literature. She lives in Toronto.

**Lazlo Gal** was born in Hungary but has lived in Canada since he was a child. He is one of the best-known children's book illustrators in Canada and won the Canada Council's Children's Book Prize in 1981 for his illustrations of **The Twelve Dancing Princesses**. For **The Little Mermaid** he took as his inspiration the statue of Andersen's classic character which stands on the edge of the harbour in Copenhagen.

**The Little Mermaid**, Methuen, 0 416 46540 4, £5.95

**Angela Barrett**, the artist whose illustrations appear in **The Wild Swans**, claims she 'just fell into illustrating children's books'. She was a final year student at the Royal College of Art when Benn discovered her. **The Wild Swans**, though not her first book to be published was the first book she did for Benn and she finished it in 1981. Published first was **The King, the Cat and the Fiddle** with a story by Christopher Holt. 'I need good writing to spark me off,' she says. 'And I'm quite obsessive about going back to the text and making it right. I spent six months on **The Wild Swans**. I agonized over composition and made far too many rough drawings. I deliberately didn't look at any other illustrators' versions of Andersen. I'm glad I didn't, it would have demoralised me. When I'd finished and I did see some **Wild Swans** I found we all seem to have illustrated the same bits. Some of the effects, viewpoints I'd thought were mine and original, I found others had discovered too. Like all artists, I'd do it differently if I were starting now. I think I'd do it better.'

## Cover artist

### LISBETH ZWERGER

Lisbeth Zwerger whose illustration from Andersen's **The Swineherd** appears on our cover, was born in Vienna in 1954. Since her first book appeared, eight years ago, she has won international acclaim: three times a winner of the Graphic Prize at the Bologna Children's Book Fair, a gold medal at the International Biennial of Illustration in Bratislava, several Austrian State Book Awards, and twice included in the New York Times 10 Best Illustrated Books Awards. This year she is the Austrian nomination for the Hans Andersen Awards.

As a child she clearly showed artistic talent: but at art school became disillusioned and had all but given up when a young Englishman, also studying in Vienna, showed her some volumes of Arthur Rackham from the English Library. Brought up on fairy tales she immediately responded to Rackham's vision. She started work again, this time in illustration. Soon after, by another coincidence, the owner of a large fashionable gallery in Vienna, putting on an exhibition of her father's work, had some space left. Lisbeth's pictures filled it and sold immediately. The owner of Austria's Neugebauer Press wrote to her. 'I think you'd better go and see him,' her mother insisted, knowing her shy, modest daughter needed a push. From that visit came the first of ten illustrated fairy tales. Her books now appear in 17 languages and she works exclusively for Neugebauer Press (distributed in this country by A. and C. Black.)

She produces one book a year, starting in the winter and finishing in the spring. At present she is working on another Andersen, **The Emperor's Nightingale**. After many rough drawings to find the eleven or so pictures for the book, the final paintings, done to size, are worked in a combination of water soluble inks (available only in Vienna) and water colours, with an outline in brown ink. She spends months on one picture and there are 'lots of failures', when the

colours go wrong and the whole thing has to be abandoned. According to her husband, that same young Englishman, she hates being pressured but works best when a deadline is looming.

Most in sympathy with the classic and traditional subjects she is not attracted by contemporary stories. Her most 'modern' work so far has been for O'Henry's turn-of-the-century story, **The Gift of the Magi**. Her publisher thought it would be 'good for her' but it wasn't something she would have chosen. With so many fairy tales available you might think Lisbeth Zwerger would be spoiled for choice. The trouble is she doesn't want to do stories about little girls who, if they are good, grow up to marry handsome princes. With that limitation, she's rapidly running out.

Page Number:

20

---

**Source URL (retrieved on Feb '20):** <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/25/childrens-books/articles/other-articles/andersen-in-pictures>

**Links:**

[1] <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/naomi-lewis>

[2] <http://savfkn.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/25>