

# PROFILE: Karla Kuskin

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"My parents and my teachers were my best audience," said Karla Kuskin in remembering childhood influences that had impelled her to write poetry. "Beginning when I was very young, both my parents and teachers read poetry to me and listened to me read aloud. I had wonderful teachers. Of course, there were a few special ones who adored what they were teaching. That was at *Little Red School House*, and then on through *Elizabeth Irwin High School*. My memories of *Little Red* are quite clear. I went there when I was eight. That's when it really began. We were always being read "The Highwayman," or Robert Frost, or whatever and we relished it. It was food and drink. In summers we went to June Camp, and once we put on *A Midsummer Night Dream*. Language was so important and so wonderful."

Love of language and special joy in poetry shine through the twenty-odd books Kuskin has written and illustrated. It is fortunate for us who have tried to buy copies of some of her books, now out of print, that she is working on a collection that will include poems from *In the Middle of the Trees* and *Alexander Soames: His Poems*, both of which are out of print, plus *Rose on My Cake*, *Any Me I Want to Be*, and *Near the Window Tree* (these three are still in print). She is doing new illustrations for this forthcoming anthology so that it will have its own special unity. A new story in verse, *Herbert Hated Being Small*, should be out in the fall of 1979. In addition she is working on a book for which most of the poems are done but not the illustrations. This new book is waiting for a title.

Quite a different venture is a projected filmstrip for Weston Woods Studios. Pied Piper of California has already done a filmstrip about Kuskin, but this new one she is writing herself. "And otherwise, I'm doing the dishes and laundry," said this busy wife, mother, author, illustrator, and occasional teacher.

### Ways of Working

Kuskin nearly always writes first and illustrates later. One exception is the book, *Which Horse Is William?* This one started with a picture she had in her head of a horse with a hat on. The story was then built around that picture. "But usually the words are much closer, and they light an idea for a picture," she added. Whether writing or illustrating, Kuskin finds work deeply satisfying. "What is important to me about what I do, is doing it," she said.

The author was very clear about how she gets ideas. "When I used to take a lot of photographs, I found that if I walked around with a black and white camera, I would see black and white pictures: if I walked around with color film, I would see color pictures. When I write poetry, wherever I look I find I'm thinking in terms of words and rhythms and sound. Lines that might go through my head I try to hang on to. I'm afraid I let a lot of good lines go at times when I'm not receptive. It's being receptive that has a great deal to do with what you write."

"The hardest thing in the world is being a critic of your own work. For me *time* has always been the best critic. If I can put something away and then come back, it's like taking a painting you're working on, turning it upside down, squinting at it, or walking away to get a new view. Time helps you know whether it's worth saving or whether it should be dumped."

It is entirely clear from Kuskin's books that she knows what is worth saving and what is important to children. Her pictures and her verse and poetry are brimming over with the experiences of children growing up in a big city. She feels that her own roots are no less firm because of her growing up in Greenwich Village in Manhattan. Since her marriage to Charles Kuskin, an oboist, she has lived in Brooklyn Heights. Much of her published writing and illustrating has been done in her various "work spots" in the big old brownstone that gives her room to write and draw and experiment in the midst of an active family.

### **Poems Recalled from Childhood**

Many poems that were read to Karla Kuskin in her childhood are still with her. "And I remember when I was seven, my mother gave me *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, by T. S. Eliot. That was the most wonderful thing I could imagine."

"There's a line in *The Night Before Christmas* that will stay in my head forever because when I first learned it, I didn't understand all the words:

As dry leaves before the wild hurricane fly,  
When they meet with an obstacle,  
mount to the sky,  
So up to the housetop the coursers they flew,  
With the sleigh full  
of toys, and St. Nicholas too.

I didn't know *hurricane*; I didn't know *obstacle*; I didn't know *coursers*; but I just loved the way they sounded."

"Everything was read to us,—A. A. Milne who wrote wonderfully for children; there's also some Emily Dickinson in my memory and Robert W. Service. It was a very eclectic experience."

In contrast to her own happy experiences with poetry are those that turn many children away. Kuskin was vigorous in telling how sad are the results of much of our teaching of poetry. "Often pupils are told to memorize forty lines, and that is followed by analysis of the various layers of symbolism under the surface of something that bored them from the start." Having just come from two weeks of teaching eight- and nine-year-olds, her examples of more congenial beginnings were vivid. "I start little children with tongue twisters like 'chica la chee, chi lie, chi lo,' jump-rope jingles, verses to bounce balls to. There's all the sound and rhythm and funniness that catches them—anything but the rarified atmosphere of 'poetics.' If you get to like the feel of rhythm and love the sound of words, then you're dealing with some of the elements of poetry." Kuskin was very definite about what response pleases her most when she reads to children: "When they laugh, then you know they're listening."

### **Writing for Children versus Writing by Children**

The poetry that children write themselves and the poetry that adults write for them are distinctly different, thinks Kuskin. "When I write I rhyme, and I'm very much concerned with rhythm because children love the sound and swing of both. But when children write, I try to discourage them from rhyming because I think it's such a hurdle. It freezes all the originality they have, and they use someone else's rhymes. It's too hard. And yet their images are so original."

Kuskin tries several ways of starting children to express their ideas and feelings in poetry. She doesn't begin with talking about poetry, but on the first day of a sequence of a week or more, she tells them about how she works. Then she might ask them to close their eyes and describe the rug or what she is wearing or what the person next to them is wearing.

"Then we talk about really seeing," she says, "and the fact that if you are going to draw, you have to look at that leaf and see the way the lines come down. You have to see the way the leaf is shaped and the way each plant grows differently. When you're drawing; you're drawing details. That's what you're writing about, too. And so I ask them to write a description. I ask them to look at a picture on the wall at home, or a piece of furniture, or an animal and then describe it so we can see it. We do different things like that and end up talking about imagination and feelings. I may read them a poem which describes two things at once, for instance, the grey of the day and the way the writer feels."

It is grey out  
It is grey in.  
In me  
It is as grey as the day is grey.  
The trees look sad  
And I,  
Not knowing why I do.  
Cry.<sup>1</sup>

It is Kuskin's observation that when eight- or nine-year-olds write these feelings and impressions much of what they write is poetry. Sometimes I say, "Look, if you want to write it out in short lines and not worry about making sentences and paragraphs, it will look like a poem, and it will read like a poem." She notes that when their poems are appreciated, they discover they are talking in the same language in which a poet speaks.

The author draws yet another distinction in the growing field of poetry for children. Some of her published books are "story books in verse" and some are books of poems. True, even precise dictionary definitions of verse and poetry do not make such a distinction. She says, "My verse stories are, to me, very light and swingy. The verse is the shortest, most streamlined way to tell a story. My poems center around feelings and language. When I began writing poetry, I started out using much more rhyme and a very regular beat. I've tried in later work to break that and to write with greater flexibility, to play with rhythms and word sounds. Many of my poems will tell a little story but it is incidental. The language of the poem gives it its shape, as does its mood. The story shapes the verse."

Thus, the poem seems to her a stronger form. "In my mind, verse has a lightness, even a frivolous quality," she reflected. "The poem is often, too, to entertain, and often to make you feel a certain way or to make you think about something. Or it's just an expression of my own thought and feeling. But it's closer to my heart than a story I've told in verse. On the other hand I love to laugh, and that's what much verse is about."

### **Preferences in Poetry for Adults**

Despite the time and thoughtful reflection given to poetry for children and to their own writing, Kuskin is also a discriminating reader of poetry by adults and for adults. She especially loves lyrical poetry. "I read poetry, and I always have," she recalled. "There is modern poetry that I love and a lot of old poetry that I love. I love Yeats and T. S. Eliot; whether they could be called modern or old isn't important. There are people writing today whose work I find very moving. I love things most that have a song somewhere in them. With anything you really like, there's never one favorite. As soon as I start naming, I always think, 'What am I leaving out?'"

Kuskin is sure, too, that poetry can be a great source of strength in people's lives, something they can turn to when needed. She is not afraid that reading and writing poetry may often serve as therapy. Great writers of the past have used their art, whether by design or not, as a means of strengthening themselves. The fear expressed by some critics that poetry could be relegated to the role of therapy she disposes of by saying, "Well, if it becomes *only* therapy, nobody else has to read it."

### **Illustrating Her Own Books**

Of the more than twenty books that Kuskin has done, only the last was illustrated by someone other than herself. Her pictures and page decorations add a note of fun or an extension of the printed words. The book, *All Sizes of Noises* (1962), shows this harmony between words and pictures vividly. In one picture, John sleeps in his bed, and his dog sleeps on a rug beside the bed; the verse on the opposite page tells how quiet the house is. The next double-spread contains fourteen letters, six inches tall and printed in bold black ink: BRRrrrrnnnggg. The visual suggestion of noise needs no explanation. Effect on boy and dog, Arf, is instantaneous both in verse and pictures. The following two pages present a strong blue background with white bubbles containing letters of different sizes for *gargle*, *slosh*, *scrub*, and *rub*. And as John dresses, Arf brings him his socks. Any child would love such assistance.

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<sup>1</sup>Reprinted with permission from *Near the Window Tree*. New York Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc., 1975. p. 15.

The first book by Karla Kuskin was *Roar and More* (1956), which she did as part of her master's thesis on children's books at the Yale School of Design. She was graduated there in 1955 with a B.F.A. degree. This first book, too, used print to depict various noises in addition to the lion's roar. Each animal comes to the reader in a verse and a picture; then a double-page spread shows its noises in varied type faces arranged in strong patterns.

Animals appear frequently in Kuskin's books. Among her many story books in verse are *Roar and More*, *The Animals and the Ark*, *The Bear Who Saw Spring*, and *James and the Rain* (1957). In the last, James sets forth on a rainy day, dressed in yellow slicker and yellow hat, carrying a huge umbrella. He meets an amiable cow and asks it:

"What do you do in the rain?" said James.  
"Do you have any excellent rainy day games?"<sup>2</sup>

The cow's answer is in the affirmative, and James climbs on her back still carrying the big umbrella which now protects both of them. They meet two ducks who also have some ideas for rainy day games. They are invited to stroll along with boy and cow until they meet three toads. The cumulative tale mounts up until they meet eight cats. Their favorite rainy day game is to go inside.

"But best of all  
As the wind howls higher  
We like to sit by a roaring fire"  
So they went inside and sat by the fire"  
The rain came down  
And the wind howled higher  
And that is the end  
It rained and it poured  
They all fell asleep  
And all of them snored<sup>3</sup>

Here a double page of verse and picture shows each animal in friendly repose, James snuggled up against the cow while a fire on the hearth warms them all. But one animal has one eye open. It is a cat looking at a mouse. A two-year-old will see this faster than a six-year-old, who in turn is more observant than a thirty-six-year-old.

In one of her books of poems, *Any Me I Want to Be* (1972), Kuskin tries to get inside each subject and tell how that animal or person or clock or tree perceives his world. These poems do not try to tell what the thing or creature looks like or sounds like to a human observer. The pictures for each poem are gentle in color and strong or fragile in feeling according to the mood of the lines. Facing the picture of a small gray bird in a gray and green tree, the poem begins with an apology but ends with triumph.

What there is of me to see  
Is short with feathers  
My eyes blink small.  
I am not wonderful colors.  
I am not tall at all.  
I am a puff of dusty grey.  
Fluffed  
Ruffed  
Stout.  
But sometimes  
I open my small, grey beak  
And beautiful songs come out.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2,3</sup> Reprinted with permission from *James and the Rain*. New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc., 1957. p. 4.

<sup>4</sup>Reprinted with permission from *Any Me / Want to Be*. New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc., 1972, p. 11.

*Near the Window Tree* (1975) introduces us to Karla Kuskin and her world as vividly as would a number of personal conversations. Beginning with the introduction's title, "Children May Skip This Introduction," she tells succinctly how poetry writing happens to her. She presents the arrangement of the book: thirty-two poems, each preceded by a paragraph telling how that poem began. Her philosophy of poetry-making pervades the book, but never pedantically. She shows us a picture of a window through which one sees a tree in full leaf. A big black cat snoozes on the radiator in front of the window. Close by sits a lady comfortably reading a book. She tells that she drew this picture of herself. All the pictures are finely detailed, black and white drawings. The first poem of the thirty-two is about three wishes—for a tree, a chair, and a book.

Asked for a favorite from her own writing, Kuskin confessed to difficulty in selecting only one. However, she chose "Three Wishes" as one that is quite representative of *Near the Window Tree*.

Three wishes  
Three.  
The first  
A tree.  
Dark bark  
Green leaves  
Under a bit of blue  
A canopy  
To glimpse sky through  
To watch sun sift through  
To catch light rain  
Upon the leaves  
And let it fall again.  
A place to put my eye  
Beyond the window frame.

Wish two:  
A chair  
Not hard or high  
One that fits comfortably  
Set by the window tree  
An island in the room  
For me  
My own  
Place to sit and be  
Alone.

My tree  
There.  
Here my chair,  
Me,  
Rain, sky, sun  
All my wishes  
All the things I need  
But one  
Wish three:  
A book to read.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Reprinted with permission from *Near the Window Tree*. New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc., 1975. pp. 10-11.

### **The 1979 Award**

The NOTE Poetry Award is given annually to a living American poet whose publication contributes to excellence in poetry for children. In 1979, there are two unique features in this tribute. Karla Kuskin both writes and illustrates her books. Second, she herself designed the medallion for the seal that may now be placed on each book of verse and poetry she has written. This dual contribution to the art of poetry could happen only once, and surely it portends good things both for the recipient and for the radiance of the award.

### **Bibliography**

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*Any Me I Want to Be.* Harper, 1972.

*In the Middle of the Trees.* Harper, 1958.

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*Just Like Everyone Else.* Harper, 1959.

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*What Did You Bring Me?* Harper, 1973.

*Which Horse Is William?* Harper, 1959.