

**The
Children's
Books
of Nancy
Willard**



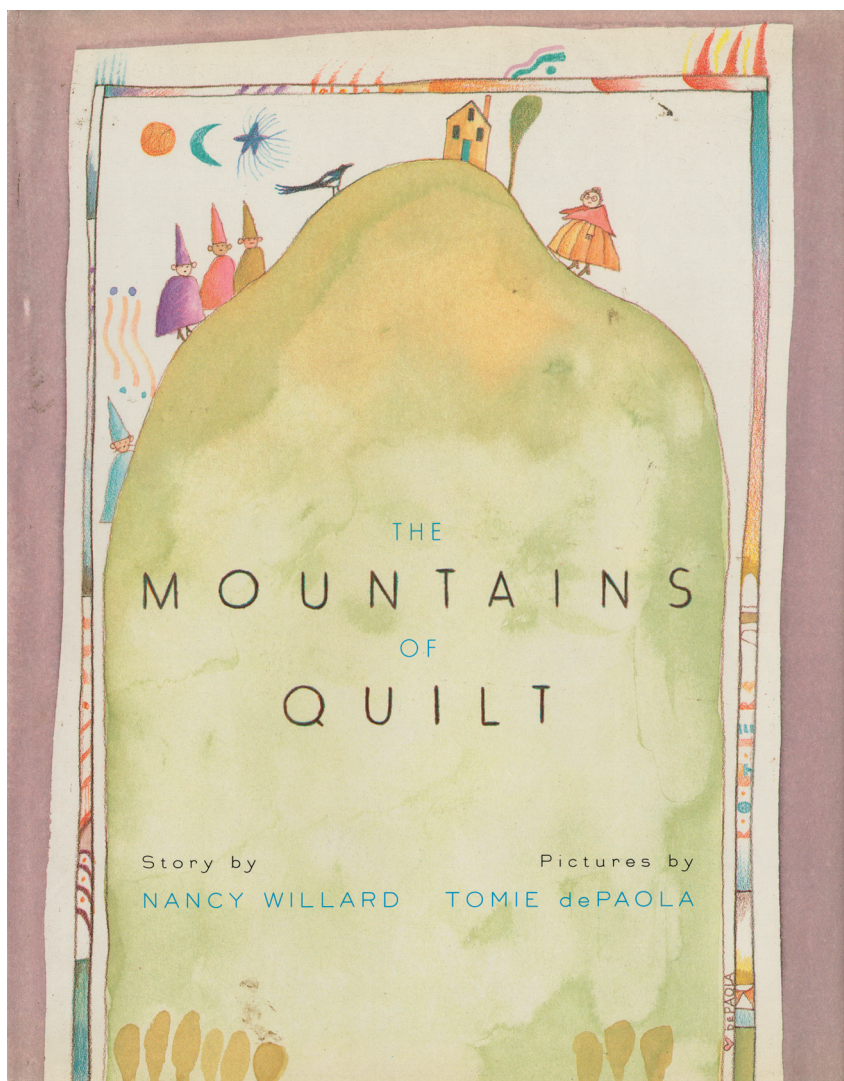


Photograph by Eric Lindbloom

The Children's Books of Nancy Willard

An Exhibition

Vassar College Library • 2017



Checklist # 16

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

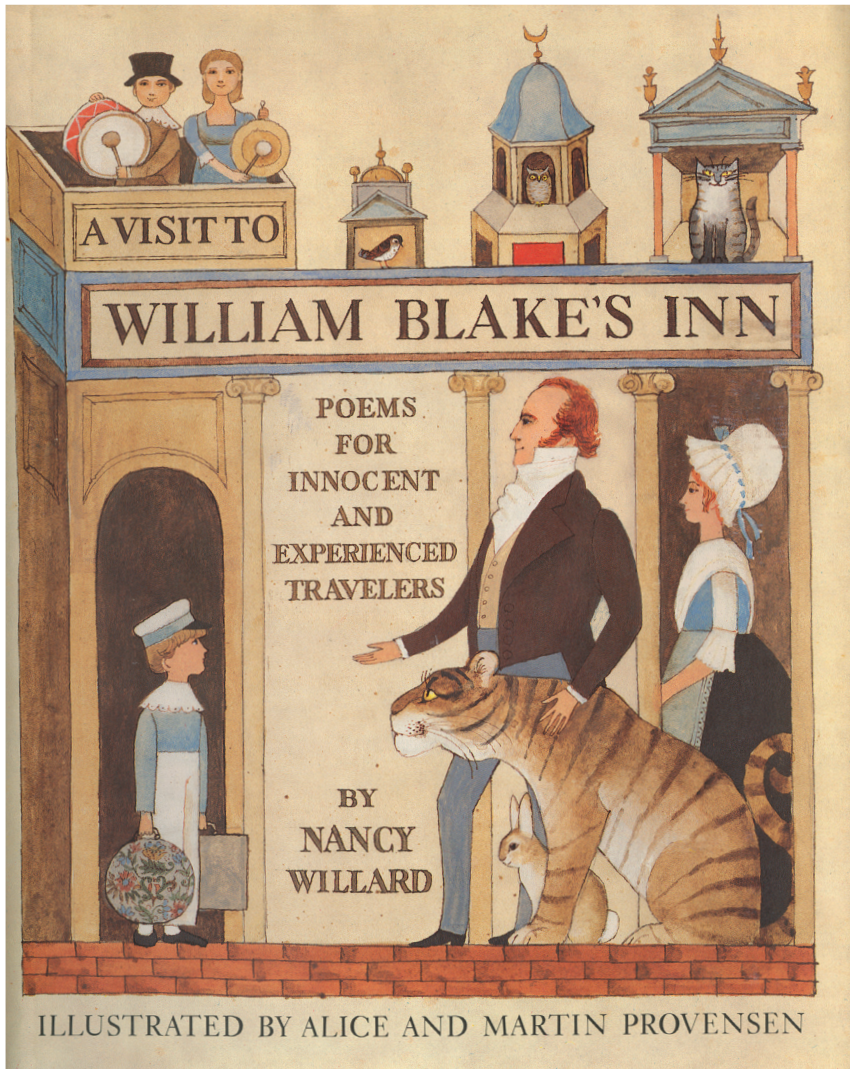
painter and his upset housekeeper who can't deal with all the weird creatures who inhabit his home as well as his art. It's hilarious, touching, romantic and . . . just . . . pitch perfect.

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



Checklist

1. *The Merry History of a Christmas Pie: With a Delicious Description of a Christmas Soup.* Illustrated by Haig and Regina Shekerijian. New York: Putnam, 1974.
2. *Sailing to Cythera: And Other Anatole Stories.* Illustrated by David McPhail. New York; London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974.
3. *All on a May Morning.* Illustrated by Haig and Regina Shekerijian. New York: Putnam, 1975.
4. *The Snow Rabbit.* Illustrated by Laura Lydecker. New York: Putnam, 1975.
5. *Strangers' Bread.* Illustrated by David McPhail. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975.
6. *Simple Pictures Are Best.* Illustrated by Tomie de Paola. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976.
7. *The Well-Mannered Balloon.* Illustrated by Haig and Regina Shekerijian. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976.
8. *The Highest Hit.* Illustrated by Emily McCully. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978.
9. *The Island of the Grass King: The Further Adventures of Anatole.* Illustrated by David McPhail. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979.
10. *Papa's Panda.* Illustrated by Lillian Hoban. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979.
11. *The Marzipan Moon.* Illustrated by Marcia Sewall. New York; London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981.
12. *A Visit to William Blake's Inn: Poems for Innocent and Experienced Travelers.* Illustrated by Alice and Martin Provensen. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981.
13. *Uncle Terrible: More Adventures of Anatole.* Illustrated by David McPhail. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982.

14. *The Nightgown of the Sullen Moon*. Illustrated by David McPhail. San Diego; New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1983.
15. *Night Story*. Illustrated by Ilse Plume. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986.
16. *The Mountains of Quilt*. Illustrated by Tomie de Paola. San Diego; New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987.
17. *The Voyage of the Ludgate Hill: Travels with Robert Louis Stevenson*. Illustrated by Alice and Martin Provensen. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987.
18. *Firebrat*. Illustrated by David Wiesner. New York: Knopf: Distributed by Random House, 1988.
19. *The Ballad of Biddy Early*. Illustrated by Barry Moser. New York: Knopf: Distributed by Random House, 1989.
20. *East of the Sun and West of the Moon: A Play*. Illustrated by Barry Moser. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989.
21. *The High Rise Glorious Skittle Skat Roarious Sky Pie Angel Food Cake*. Illustrated by Richard Jesse Watson. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990.
22. *Pish, Posh, Said Hieronymus Bosch*. Illustrated by Leo, Diane, and Lee Dillon. San Diego; New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991.
23. *Beauty and the Beast*. Wood Engravings by Barry Moser. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992.
24. *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*. Illustrated by Leo and Diane Dillon. New York: Blue Sky Press, 1993.
25. *A Starlit Somersault Downhill*. Illustrated by Jerry Pinkney. Boston; Toronto; London: Little, Brown & Co., 1993.
26. *An Alphabet of Angels*. New York: Blue Sky Press, 1994.
27. *Gutenberg's Gift*. Illustrated by Bryan Leister. Baltimore, MD: Wild Honey; San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1995.
28. *The Good-Night Blessing Book*. Illustrated by Nancy Willard. New York: Blue Sky Press; Scholastic, 1996.
29. *Cracked Corn and Snow Ice Cream: A Family Almanac*. Illustrations by Jane Dyer. San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1997.

30. *The Magic Cornfield*. San Diego, Harcourt Brace, 1997.
31. *The Tortilla Cat*. Illustrated by Jeanette Winter. San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1998.
32. *Shadow Story*. Illustrated by David Diaz. San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1999.
33. *The Tale I Told Sasha*. Illustrated by David Christiana. Boston: Little, Brown, & Co, 1999.
34. *The Moon & Riddles Diner and the Sunnyside Café*. Illustrated By Chris Butler. San Diego: Harcourt, 2001.
35. *Cinderella's Dress*. Illustrated by Jane Dyer. New York: Blue Sky Press, 2003.
36. *The Mouse, the Cat, and Grandmother's Hat*. Illustrated by Jenny Mattheson. Boston: Little, Brown, 2003.
37. *The Tale of Paradise Lost: Based on the Poem by John Milton*. Illustrated by Jude Daly. New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2004.
38. *Sweep Dreams*. Illustrated by Mary GrandPre. New York: Little Brown & Co., 2005.
39. *The Flying Bed*. Paintings by John Thompson. New York: Blue Sky Press, 2007.
40. *The Three Mouths of Little Tom Drum*. Illustrated by Kevin Hawkes. Somerville, Mass.: Candlewick Press, 2015.

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.

NIGHT STORY



Written by
NANCY WILLARD

Illustrated by
ILSE PLUME

VASSAR COLLEGE LIBRARY