

RAR SPECIAL EPISODE: **The Woman Who Gave us Miss Rumphius**

Sarah:

[00:00](#)

One of our key missions here at Read-Aloud Revival is to help you choose great books for your kids, and choosing really good books consistently is something of an art form. Here's one thing that will make you better at choosing great books: learning to recognize a really good author or illustrator's name. This little trick will take you far. That way when you're at the library, in a bookshop, scrounging through a pile of books at a garage sale or a used book sale, you'll notice a book you don't recognize but a name that you do. And that is a key skill to learning how to recognize a gem when you see it in the wild. There are certain authors and illustrators you should just snap up whenever you see books by them, and the more familiar you are with these giants of wonderful children's books, the better your home library will fare. So today I want to give a name to you to learn to recognize. When you see this woman's name on a book, you should read it, no matter what it is. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Welcome to this special edition of the Read-Aloud Revival.

Imagine this, you're with a group of happy people at a big barn in the little town of Damariscotta, Maine. It's a summer evening. The stars are twinkling and the light of the moon reflects off the Damariscotta River. People are chatting, moving about, giving hugs, handshakes, and filling their plates with lobster and corn on the cob, green salad and heaps of blueberry cobbler. It's a celebration of a successful auction. Original illustrations have been auctioned off. And not just any illustrations, the illustrators who contributed them are Maurice Sendak, Jerry Pinkney, Tasha Tudor, Eric Carle, Melissa Sweet, Trina Schart Hyman, Gail Gibbons, Lane Smith, and many, many others. Some of these artists are in fact milling about.

Toward the end of the evening, a tiny woman with a white braid wrapped around her head, pulls sparklers from a glass jar and passes them out to all in attendance. It's an explosion of low-lying stars. Who is that tiny woman with the long, elegant painter's hands and the bright blue eyes? The one who made all this happen. Oh, I bet you know her already, and if you don't, you are about to meet one of the world's greatest children's book authors and illustrators. Friends of the Read-Aloud Revival, meet Barbara Cooney.

RAR SPECIAL EPISODE: **The Woman Who Gave us Miss Rumphius**

You'll know Barbara Cooney's work if you're familiar with Miss Rumphius, Island Boy, Hattie and the Wild Waves, the Ox-Cart Man, The Year of the Perfect Christmas Tree, The Story of Holly and Ivy, Roxaboxen, Eleanor, Letting Swift River Go, and so many others. Barbara Cooney illustrated 110 children's books and she wrote a few of those as well over about 60 years. She was the winner of not one, but two Caldecott awards, her first for the picture book Chanticleer and The Fox, her second for one of our favorite autumn books written by the poet Donald Hall, The Ox-Cart Man. Her books are truly wonderful. In my obviously completely unbiased opinion, they're some of the best books in existence for children.

In this special edition episode, I want to introduce you to the woman behind these wonderful books. Now, Barbara passed away in 2000 so I never got a chance to meet her, but today I'll peel back the curtain on her life just a bit so you can have the same pleasure I have in getting to know Barbara Cooney through her legacy. I'll share with you pieces from conversations I've had with her oldest son and daughter in law, Barnaby and Susan Porter, as well as an editor from Viking who worked with her on several books. Let's start with my own favorite. Let's start with the wonderful Miss Rumphius.

Claire Danes:

[05:19](#)

Miss Rumphius, story and pictures by Barbara Cooney. The Lupine Lady lives in a small house overlooking the sea. In between the rocks around her house grow blue and purple and rose colored flowers. The Lupine Lady is little and old, but she's not always been that way. I know, she's my great aunt and she told me so. Once upon a time she was a little girl named Alice who lived in the city by the sea. From the front stoop, she could see the wharves and the bristling mass of tall ships. Many years ago her grandfather had come to America on a large sailing ship.

Now, he worked in the shop at the bottom of the house, making figureheads for the prows of ships, and carving Indians out of wood to put in front of cigar stores - for Alice's grandfather was an artist. He painted pictures too of sailing ships and places across the sea. When he was very busy Alice helped him put in the skies. In the evening, Alice sat on her grandfather's knee and listened to his stories of far away places. When he had finished,

RAR SPECIAL EPISODE: **The Woman Who Gave us Miss Rumphius**

Alice would say, "when I grow up, I too will go to faraway places. And when I grow old, I too will live beside the sea."

"That is all very well, little Alice," said her grandfather. "But there is a third thing you must do."

"What is that?" asked Alice.

"You must do something to make the world more beautiful," said her grandfather.

"Alright," said Alice, but she did not know what that could be. In the meantime, Alice got up and washed her face and ate porridge for breakfast. She went to school and came home and did her homework, and pretty soon she was grown up.

Sarah:

[08:25](#)

So begins my favorite book by Barbara Cooney, Miss Rumphius. Many thanks to Weston Woods for permission to air that portion of the audio book. Barbara Cooney herself was a decisive woman who knew the world is a good and wonderful and beautiful place, and she wanted that beauty to show up on the pages of her books. She vowed never to talk down to children and she achieved that. Her books respect children as full persons with a wide range of emotions and dreams and troubles. Her protagonists often have a keen sense of empathy for strangers and outcasts. So let's learn more about this wonderful woman who made Miss Rumphius. She wrote it, she illustrated it. She took home two Caldecott awards and made so very many stories for children.

Barbara was born in room 1127 of the Hotel Bossert in Brooklyn Heights. She was the odd one out in our family, a girl in a house of rough and tumble boys. But Barbara knew beauty when she saw it. She tried to pin that beauty she saw to the page through her art. Over time, she traveled all over the world as she made her books, including France, Spain, Greece, North Africa, Mexico, Finland, and she returned home from each trip with notebooks full of sketches and notes, hundreds of photographs and boxes of reference books.

She never felt more alive than when she was traveling. Her attention to detail in those books is astounding. In fact, if you have a copy of Miss Rumphius, look for the Saint Nicholas icon on the dedication page. That was based on

RAR SPECIAL EPISODE: **The Woman Who Gave us Miss Rumphius**

a tin metal that she found during her travels to Greece. The soft gray blanket on Miss Rumphius' bed, that's a blanket that Barbara Cooney actually bought when she was traveling. She wrote and illustrated Eleanor, a picture book biography about Eleanor Roosevelt, and if you look carefully, you'll see a lot of very historically accurate details including Eleanor's baptismal gown that she wore as a baby. The very intricate design is absolutely accurate. Carpeting designs in her books, a room layout, structures, buildings; they are often based on real places in Barbara's life, and if you saw the photographs of the actual places and things and the likeness that she painted, it's breathtaking. But I'm talking too much. Let's hear from someone who knew Barbara Cooney in the flesh, shall we?

- Regina: [11:01](#) The illustrating came more easily to her than the writing, and she labored over the writing, although she was very good at it.
- Sarah: [11:08](#) That's Regina Hayes, Editor at Large at Viking, the publisher of Barbara Cooney's most celebrated books.
- Regina: [11:15](#) I think she was as confident in it as she was in her illustrating, although again, in her illustrating, she loved to tell the story of how one of her early editors had told her she had no eye for color. I mean, you have only to look at those books and though she has absolutely exquisite eye for color. But I think it took her a long time to become confident in her use of color, which is surprising, isn't it? But with her writing, she labored draft, after draft, after draft to boil it down to exactly what she wanted. And I think in many ways, that was the beginning of Barbara blossoming as an author/ illustrator.
- Sarah: [12:00](#) Which is after she won both of her Caldecotts, right?
- Regina: [12:03](#) Yes, exactly. I remember when I first saw Ox-Cart Man, Barbara Hennessy, who was the Art Director who was "Little B," had brought it to me at lunch one day and I remember I looked at it and said to her, Oh Barbara, you better think where to put the medal, because it was so exquisite. I was like, Oh my goodness, this is going to blow everything else out of the water. And it did.
- Sarah: [12:25](#) It totally did.

RAR SPECIAL EPISODE: **The Woman Who Gave us Miss Rumphius**

- Regina: [12:26](#) Yeah, it did. I mean she was just, I think an amazing person. Amazing. I just wish we had more time together.
- Sarah: [12:39](#) Regina told me that Barbara was strong willed, adventurous, curious and intrepid perfectionist, talented; a very small person with a very big personality as an artist. Barbara liked to use real references as she painted. I got to speak with her oldest son, Barnaby, a little about that.
- Barnaby: [13:01](#) She really liked to have when she was drawing right before her, if at all possible. So when she did Chanticleer and the Fox, for example, a local farmer, he loaned her this beautiful Bantam rooster and a couple of hens and we had them in cages in our house for quite a long time. And that's how she was able to get some really, really good illustrations of chickens and a beautiful <inaudible> rooster.
- And when she did a series of books, mouse family, I mean there was The Greymouse Family, I guess that was named, but there were three or four of these books and she had a little mouse cage on her drawing table. It was shaped like a house and an exercise wheel and so forth. And I don't know if I caught the mice for her or she caught them somehow herself. She drew an off a lot of pictures of mice. And I remember the days when she used to do chalk talks at various schools and places like that. And one of the things she would always draw would be a mouse, and she'd always explained the outset. She said, I always start a mouse at the tip of its tail. So that was, that was how she drew him out.
- Sarah: [14:20](#) Barnaby told me another story about his mother and mice. At one point, Barbara discovered she had mice living in her car, a bright blue Subaru she named The Blue Hornet. She'd been noticing certain irregularities in the car. She had bits of an old paper napkin, a woolen glove that had looked chewed on, an acorn on the seat. The car had been in the garage through the winter and a family of mice had made themselves somewhat comfortable during those cold months. Well, now her adult son inspected the car for her and told her he was pretty sure the mice had moved on and were no longer bunking in The Blue Hornet, so she could drive it, but still she wasn't quite so sure. One day before leaving for Boston, she stopped by Barnaby's to say goodbye. "Have you seen any sign of the

RAR SPECIAL EPISODE: **The Woman Who Gave us Miss Rumphius**

mice lately?" He asked, "I wouldn't want you to be startled behind the wheel doing 50 when one of them runs over your feet."

"Oh, that won't be a problem," Barbara replied. "I took care of it, see?" And she leaned back in her seat and pointed down to her feet. Sure enough, she had big rubber bands bound around both of her pant legs at the ankles, so no mice would run up them.

Barnaby: [15:30](#)

I used to raise mice as a kid. I had all, I don't know, maybe even a hundred of them. I had all kinds of mice. I was breeding them. I was trying to breed the perfect Palomino mouse. One time Susan's younger sister came down to see my mouse menagerie and there were these very cute little baby mice. The problem with baby mice is they're real jumpers. And I took them out of this cage and they were leaping all over the place, like popcorn. And one of them fell on the floor of the cellar and ran right up her sister's pant leg and she completely freaked out, ran up the stairs, ran out of the house in the driveway, and I was yelling to her to pull her pants down and get rid of them up. She finally managed to shake it out of her pant leg, but somewhat traumatized. Yeah. So mice have played a certain role in our lives.

Sarah: [16:28](#)

And your mom was probably like, "hold that thing, I want to sketch it!"

Barbara was adventurous too and she was always traveling as research for her books. She became very good friends with Barnaby's wife, her daughter in law, Susan. I talked to Susan and she told me about a particularly adventurous running they had with a donkey in Greece. Susan and Barbara watch a man tether his donkey. They're in Greece, right? And he tethers his donkey, but the donkey is not very happy about it and starts kicking up his heels. Barbara and Susan get up a little closer to get a better look.

Susan: [17:07](#)

As we approached, he got loose and started chasing us down the road and he owned it up, I mean for us to see. And there were some very low houses and we sat on the roof of one of the houses or we didn't know what we were going to do. And fortunately man grabbed the leash or went after him and got him and we were saying, but we

RAR SPECIAL EPISODE: **The Woman Who Gave us Miss Rumphius**

had considered running into the water. We did have a lot of fun on those trips.

I should point out, Sarah, my mother really had tremendous zest for life. She had a wonderful sense of humor, but I mean things like that she took very much in stride even if she was scared to death. But I mean I think she just felt more alive than ever when she was traveling cause she was just so much she couldn't get enough of it.

- Sarah: [18:08](#) Barbara raised four children in Massachusetts with her husband, a country doctor. She loved picnicking with her children. She was, Barnaby told me, "a picnicker of the first water" pulling out all the stops for a lavish outdoor meal. One story I found particularly moving was written by her mother-in-law. "Barbara," she said "was an astoundingly good mother. In fact, when Barnaby, the oldest of her four children had a difficult time with the arrival of younger siblings. He was feeling a little starved for mama's time and attention. Well, Barbara solution was to rise an hour earlier in the morning so she could have some time just for Barnaby right at the outset of the day. Her mother-in-law wrote that it's a special sacrifice for an already sleep-deprived tired mother to lovingly give her son the first hour of the morning, and yet it's exactly what she did." I told Barnaby I had read this account and this was his response.
- Barnaby: [19:12](#) She was a good mother. She was pretty good at coping with problems like that. You have to say she had boundless energy. It's really quite amazing. Even when she was late, she could pull an all nighter if she had to do certain things. She was tiny, but she was tough.
- Sarah: [19:32](#) Barnaby told me that it didn't matter where she was on a project in her work, in her illustrations, if her kids interrupted her, she put her paintbrush down. She gave them her full attention and then she'd pick up right where she left off. Here's one thing I know for sure about Barbara Cooney after speaking with Regina Hayes and indeed with Barnaby and Susan, she was unforgettable.
- Regina: [19:58](#) We were in <inaudible> and of all places, Las Vegas. Talk about an inappropriate venue, but we were going I think to the Newberry dinner and Barbara had the most marvelous outfits that she had bought in India. It was a turquoise

RAR SPECIAL EPISODE: **The Woman Who Gave us Miss Rumphius**

tunic and the hot pink silk pants, tight at the ankle and this incredible hot pink shawl that she just had draped over one shoulder. And most people when they drape it over one shoulder, it falls off. But in Barbara, it didn't dare fall off. It was just there. And she was walking along this little car door that led to the ballroom and it was going past, I don't remember, but the white tigers were in, you know, some kids and everybody going past, they weren't looking at the tigers. They looking at Barbara, this little five foot tall woman with her white braids with a bright blue eyes. And this bearing of a queen was walking along and everybody was just mesmerized by her. She had such presence. She was just, for her time in particular and her upbringing, a very privileged upper class upbringing. Barbara was just as adventurous and strong willed and curious and determined to be an artist and a complete perfectionist in everything she did and, above all, so talented.

- Sarah: [21:23](#) She was full of life and zest. She had a sense of adventure, a love for beauty. She was persistent, hardworking, loving kind. I asked Barnaby and his wife, Susan, what they wish the world knew about Barbara Cooney. This is what they said.
- Barnaby: [21:40](#) She opened my eyes to beauty in this world. She was always urging me to look at this and look at that and look at the view of the landscape. She would point out little tiny (inaudible) on the forest floor and things like that. She made me very aware of my natural surroundings.
- Susan: [21:58](#) He would feel that way too. That said, it's about appreciating natural beauty and the beauty around you, nature but also in people and find what's this all about people.
- Sarah: [22:15](#) And you know, she didn't just open her own children's eyes to the beauty of the world and the people in it. She's done that for all of us through her books and what a gift they are. Shortly before she died, Barbara Cooney decided to do something even more to make the world more beautiful, which brings us back to that summer auction, that auction of illustrations by the Damariscotta River on a clear summer evening.
- Barnaby: [22:48](#) One of the things she wants to do, she was kind of winding up for affairs and she wanted to do something for

RAR SPECIAL EPISODE: **The Woman Who Gave us Miss Rumphius**

our community, Damariscotta, Maine, a town which had thoroughly embraced her. She just loved the place and she wanted to do something for the town, something meaningful. She decided she wanted to build a new library or you know, take a big hand in bringing the new library to the town. We had a good library, but it was in an old house, nowhere near big enough and so forth.

So she's launched this idea of rebuilding the same library, which has kept its name, it's called Skidompha. One of her ideas was to get in touch with many of her colleagues or favorites in the business and ask them to please contribute an original work from one of their books. And she got an amazing number of them to agree to do just that. And so we held this wonderful auction. We raised \$110,000 in one night. She had this wonderful <inaudible> party. One of the things she, she kind of liked the sparkler, what do they call them? Morning glories. They're the fancier than just regular sparklers and they have many different colors. So she handed out these sparklers to everyone. It was evening. It was beginning to get dark and it was just a wonderful scene.

Looking back on it, this was really very much, I mean, it was right at the very end of her working life, that was in many ways the pinnacle of her career. I don't think I've ever seen her happier than on that night.

Sarah:

[24:36](#)

That auction, along with another generous donation from Barbara herself spurred the building of a new bigger library for Damariscotta, Maine. A library that would introduce the kids of the town she loved to the stories that would take them anywhere they wanted to go. She had planned to live to be a hundred but alas, not all of our plans go as we wish. Barbara passed away shortly after the auction at the age of 82 but her life and her work live on in the pages of some of the best books our children have privileged to read.

Thank you. Thank you, Barbara Cooney. This has been a special edition of the Read-Aloud Revival podcast, written, narrated and produced by Sarah McKinsey. Many things to Barnaby and Susan Porter and to Regina Hayes for getting on the phone with me for the show. Also, thanks to Western Woods for permission to use a portion of the audio book. Miss Rumphius, written and illustrated by

RAR SPECIAL EPISODE: **The Woman Who Gave us Miss Rumphius**

Barbara Cooney, narrated by Claire Danes. You'll find my own favorite books by Barbara Cooney in the show notes at readaloudrevival.com/barbara. Meanwhile, anytime you see a book with Barbara Cooney's name on the cover, whether that be at your library, a bookstore, a used book shop, or a garage sale, snap it up. You'll be glad you did. She was a gift to so many, and she continues to be a gift to us all through the books on our children's shelves.