

Highlights[®]

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for Children

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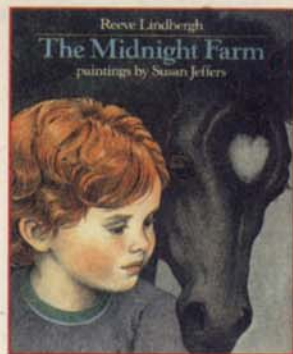


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A Return to Childhood



When Susan Jeffers illustrates a book for kids, she recalls the favorite toys and characters of her youth.

By Juilene Osborne-McKnight

The forest is black and white, the limbs of the winter trees powdered with snow. Hidden among the branches, deer and owl and tiny squirrels and chipmunks peer out. A little man steps out of his horse-drawn sleigh. He wears a red and black plaid coat, a bright green scarf, and a hat with ear flaps. He flops on his back in the snow and swishes his arms up and down. When he stands up, a perfect little snow angel remains.

The pictures that tell this story are in a book called *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* by Robert Frost. They were drawn by Susan Jeffers, a children's book illustrator. Jeffers fills the pages of the books she illustrates with beautiful pictures of the outside world.

"The New Jersey where I grew up was wild and pretty," says Jeffers. "What I did when I was a little girl was to go out in the woods and just stay out there all day." It was in those woods that Jeffers learned to look closely at trees and flowers and squirrels and deer. But what she liked most to do when she was young was to be around horses.

"I shared a room with my sister when I was growing up. Every night we would tell each other horse stories as we drifted off to sleep. I dreamed of owning a horse, but our family never had enough money, so I would save

up my babysitting money so that I could go riding once a month. I think probably because I couldn't ride very often I fantasized about it and drew pictures. I might never have drawn horses if I had owned one."

When Jeffers was growing up, she knew that she wanted to be an artist but did not know then that she would illustrate books for children. After high school, she went to the Pratt Institute of Art in New York City to study drawing. This was a time when "op-art" was very popular. Op-art uses geometrical shapes and vibrating colors to make a painting. But Jeffers preferred to draw things the way they really look.

Not sure what she wanted to do with her art after graduating from Pratt in 1964, Jeffers worked with several publishing companies. She started out repairing type, pasting up illustrations, and designing book covers. She kept watching books illustrated by other artists come across her desk. "I decided to try one myself," she says.

The first book that Jeffers illustrated was a story by Joseph Jacobs called *The Buried Moon*. While drawing the pictures for the story, she discovered that she loved illustrating for children.

When Jeffers illustrates a book, she begins by doodling little sketches. Sometimes she

Brother Eagle,

Paintings by SUSAN



puts a pad of paper by the phone and doodles while she talks to her friends and family. This helps her to get started.

Next, with light streaming through the many windows of the studio in her home, at a table filled with brushes and paints, she makes small pencil drawings of her ideas for the book.

Once she chooses the sketches she likes, she draws them on expensive, handmade drawing paper to the proper size. She then adds the exquisite detail and color that make her drawings so outstanding. It takes her about nine months to do the illustrations for a book.

"When I look back, I realize that what I am really doing now is redrawing all of my favorite childhood toys, characters, and experiences," Jeffers says.

In fact, all of her books seem to capture her magical feelings of

Sister Sky

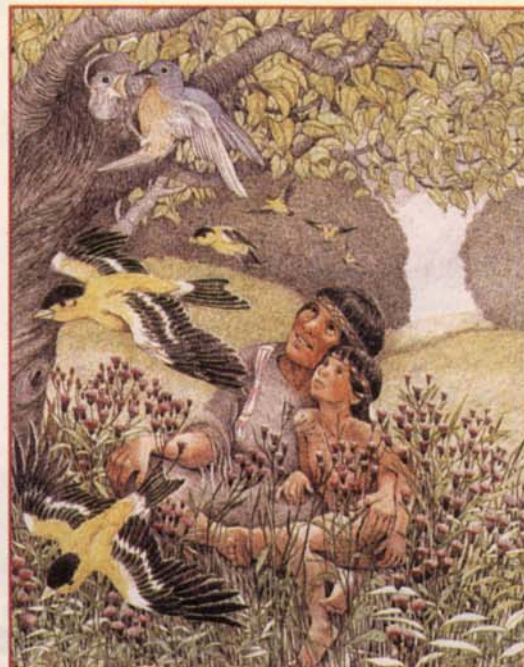
JEFFERS



Jeffers's paintings bring freshness to the well-loved fairy tale *Cinderella* (above).

The cover of Jeffers's book *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky* shows her detailed style of drawing (left).

The artist at work in her studio (lower left).



Longfellow's poem *The Song of Hiawatha*, a childhood favorite of Jeffers's, inspired her to do her own book about Hiawatha (above).

The artist's love for nature is apparent in *Forest of Dreams* (below), and in *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky* (lower right).



childhood. Her night pictures are filled with starlight and moonlight, her forests run wild with flowers and animals, and sometimes even magical fairy folk are included.

Jeffers uses live models for characters in her books. Sometimes she uses her friends' children as models, and sometimes her daughter, Ali, poses for her mom. Even Jeffers's husband has posed for her drawings.



God gave me time to listen.
God gave me everything.

Now Jeffers has horses of her own. She and Ali ride them near the Teatown Lake Reserve close to where they live. She has become a successful illustrator by getting close to what she cares most about. "What I am doing now is what I'll be doing later, because I love it so much. It just gets better and more exciting," says Susan Jeffers.

