

Book Illustrator

by Jacqueline M. Duda



Cathy
Abramson

PHOTO COURTESY OF CATHY ABRAMSON

Chevy Chase artist Cathy Abramson applies a sculptural quality to her illustrations.

Inspired by her love of science, particularly anatomy, Abramson is interested in what lies underneath the surface.

A few years ago Abramson completed a collaborative venture with poet and friend, Nancy Arbuthnot. *Wild Washington, Animal Sculptures A to Z* is an illustrated alphabet book about animal sculptures in Washington, DC. Arbuthnot's poems, which accompany each animal sculpture, inspired the mood that Abramson conveyed in the illustrations. "Drawing is strictly intuitive," says Abramson, "you have an emotional reaction to something and just go with it and respond."

InSight: *How and when did your love of art begin?*

Abramson: As a child, I was constantly armed with my pad and pencil and crayons. But I didn't pursue formal art training in high school or even in college. I took some elective courses and dabbled in some drawing. But mostly I did lots of photography back then. Eventually, I combined my love of art with my love of science—especially physiology and anatomy, and became a medical illustrator. It seemed like a good way to earn a living. But after a while, I grew tired of the highly technical illustrations. I'd rather draw without as much restriction.

Nonetheless, the training was a great move. I served as the art director at *Washington Monthly Magazine*—I loved doing the political cartoons—I could do a pretty good Reagan. But no matter what my job, I've always kept up with my drawing and painting as much as I could. I'd get into local art shows. And illustrated my first book, *The Simple Secrets of Parenting, A to Z*. I would take art classes whenever I could at Glen Echo, and the

Artists Among Us

Washington Studio School in DC. Currently, I work at NOVA Research in Washington, DC as a graphic designer and art director.

InSight: *How did Wild Washington come about?*

Abramson: Nancy and I have been friends for ages—ever since our children were young. We were part of a Takoma Park playgroup. Nancy is a poet and a professor at the Naval Academy. And I always did artwork. So collaborating on a book seemed like a good idea. It occurred to us that there were many animal sculptures all over Washington. So, Nancy started writing some poems and looking around for ideas. And she thought I might be interested in doing the illustration work.

InSight: *Were there challenges involved in completing the project?*

Abramson: First, we decided to see if there were enough animals for a full alphabet book (laughs). Sometimes, it was a stretch. The “X” (in the book) stands for “extinct,” as in, the triceratops at the National Museum of Natural History. The “Q” was difficult. We grappled with that one. We were looking for “quail.” And then we came across the wonderful Friendship Archway and discovered the Qing Dynasty dragon! A rather good one, at that. This is such a phenomenal bridge, with hundreds of fanciful dragons. The “Y” was tricky. We blew that one off by saying “Washington lacks Yaks” and I drew a picture of a yak on the mall. Despite the challenges, it was a lot of fun to do the book. Most publishers don’t like to have teams, artists and poets, come in together with an idea. But by the time we found our publisher, Annapolis Publishing, we already had the book, and they went for it. The woman who ran the company retired, but you can still buy the book on Amazon and at Barnes & Noble.

InSight: *Did the book go through a transformation process, as most do, from the original idea to the finished product?*



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CATHY ABRAMSON

Abramson: Our collection of poetry and drawings morphed into a more comprehensive version that included information about the sculptures and the sculptors. Nancy and I ended up doing a lot of research—a real eye opener. We discovered some wonderful stories about the animals. For example, there was the penguin sculpture, the one at the old Walter Reed Army Hospital. At one point, a family of ducks took up residence in the fountain

and the baby ducks got trapped. They couldn’t hop the edge. Local firemen kept the fountain filled to the edge for a few days until the ducks could get out on their own. The kids really liked this story. The other interesting thing was that many of the sculptors were immigrants. It took a lot of work to refine the poems and do the research. We both had full-time jobs, and we were doing the book “catch as catch can.” It took eight years to complete the book. I would read Nancy’s poems and interpret them in the illustrations. We initially disagreed on the Louise Bourgeois spider. I thought it was a very scary sculpture (I had just read *War of the Worlds* with my kids, and imagined that the spider could have come straight from there). Nancy, however, thought it was a motherly spider protecting her young ones underneath. Eventually, we both reworked our pieces and it turned out well. But it just goes to show how different people will bring their background experiences to the interpretation of these sculptures. It’s fascinating.

On Saturday, February 7th from 10 a.m. to 12 noon VisArts in Rockville will host a family-centric illustration workshop, *Illustrate Animals & Pen a Poem in a Handmade Book*. The workshop is perfect for children ages 8 to 11. Abramson and author Nancy Arbutnot will serve as the instructors. The cost is \$50. For further information regarding the workshop, go online to VisArts website: www.visartscenter.org

Cathy Abramson's work can be viewed online at the book's website at www.wildwashingtonatoz.com and at the Eli Klein Fine Art gallery in New York City at www.ekfineart.com. She can be reached via email at cathya_email@yahoo.com.