

Jody Wheeler

Portrait of an illustrator

'Twas the night before Christmas in 2007 when I donned a Santa cap before dashing through the snow bound for the nearest Dunkin' Donuts.

There I was to rendezvous with a popular children's book illustrator who had journeyed from Manhattan to celebrate the holidays with loved ones at her girlhood home in Ballston Spa.

However before Jody Wheeler could wrap and give away her presents, she first needed to receive them. Specifically she was awaiting receipt of several copies of a Limited Edition bicentennial book about the village for which she had prepaid.

In an ideal world, the signed and numbered books would have been delivered to her art studio in The Big Apple weeks before her homecoming. But in the aftermath of a series of unfortunate events, the only way to try to make things right was to venture out while other family members put out cookies for Jolly Old St. Nick and his reindeer.

Aside from the maternal guilt I felt about leaving home for anything other than a Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve, a sense of wonder filled my heart as I pulled into the parking lot and began to watch others making merry over cups of hot cocoa and coffee.

I'd been worried that Jody Wheeler might be late or call at the last minute to say she wasn't coming or that we'd somehow pass like sleighs in the night. Then what to my wondering eyes should appear but a tall brunette with twinkling eyes and a million dollar smile.

I assumed my meeting with Jody would be of the "Once upon a time. The end" variety. Instead our Christmas Eve encounter in a busy donut shop became the first chapter of the story of a friendship that would never have gotten off the ground had a series of seemingly unfortunate events not caused the publication of a book to be delayed.

Had my prayers for its timely completion been answered according to MY will, I'd be sitting at my keyboard several years later with absolutely no memories of Jody to draw upon rather than recalling times spent together in Internet cafes, Victorian tearooms, museums, schools, private homes, nursing homes and even a few funeral homes.



“This isn’t a profession where one becomes complacent. There are many talented children’s book illustrators out there today – the literary world has probably never been as exciting in that respect. It’s fulfilling to be involved in a part of the arts that fosters literacy.”

-- Jody Wheeler



Photographer Antonio Bucca captured Jody Wheeler at work in her studio and with some of the more than 75 books she has illustrated for young readers. The picture of Jody with author Ann Hauprich was snapped at a 2010 celebration. Samples of Jody’s artistic creations may be enjoyed by visiting www.wheelerillustration.com.



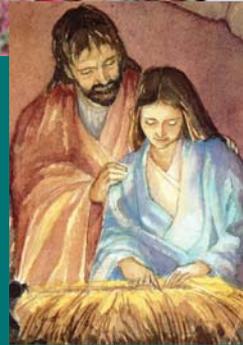
Jody Wheeler at the 2012 Alumni Recognition ceremony at Ballston Spa High School flanked by fellow award recipients Tobin Danison, Vince Johnson, Robin Gawrys, Donald Stack, Wayne McCormick, Dr. J. Peter Hansen. Missing is Patty Mangino. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY STUART WILLIAMS, BSCSD.

One of those we mourned side by side was The Unsinkable Patty Rutland whose story will be told in the second edition of this book. Patty had expressed an interest in meeting Jody after reading an article I'd written that mentioned the dozens of books Jody had illustrated for young readers. The fact that Jody had created artwork for titles in the *Nate The Great* series especially intrigued Patty because Nate was the nickname that had been given to her daughter Rebecca's then newborn son.

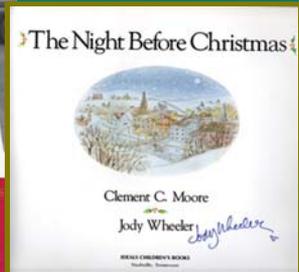
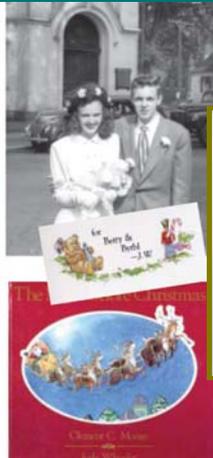
Jody was fascinated to learn that Patty's many talents included being a licensed wildlife rehabber who had nurtured and nursed infirm squirrels back to health before releasing them back into the woods surrounding her Brookline Road property. Upon hearing that Jody was putting the finishing touches on illustrations of a character named Earl The Squirrel for Don Freeman's *One More Acorn* book, Patty insisted I invite Jody to come to her home to sip tea right next to a cage where her special guest could see, hear and touch one of Earl's distant relatives.

Another time I marveled as Jody warmly welcomed children into her home to demonstrate step-by-step the process by which a picture book comes to life, patiently answering questions along the way. On another memorable occasion, Jody captivated young readers and their families inside of the National Bottle Museum in Ballston Spa by reading aloud from a copy of *The Night Before Christmas* she had illustrated for Ideals Publishing. Talk about a full circle moment!

More recently, I had the joy of applauding Jody as she was called to the front of the auditorium inside of Ballston Spa High School to be presented with a 2012 Distinguished Alumni Recognition Award for outstanding contributions to the arts at which the above photograph was taken and the tribute on a forthcoming page was shared with the audience.



Friends and loved ones have long served as models for illustrations by Jody Wheeler. Brother Rodney inspired Joseph in *The First Noel* while his wife (also named Jody) posed as Mary. Models seen on the next color page in this chapter include Principal Joe Lopez (for *My Hand Pruners*) as well as pals Heather Kennedy and Julia Wheeler who posed as members of Louisa Mae Alcott's family for *An Old-Fashioned Thanksgiving*. Jody dedicated illustrations in *The Night Before Christmas* to parents Betty and Byrhl. Flanking Jody in photo on a coming page are author/storyteller Joseph Bruchac and photographer Antonio Bucca. All three had donated their talents to a 2014 "Salute to Literacy" benefit at VFW Post 358 in Ballston Spa.



A tribute Alumni Recognition award winner Jody Wheeler

The following overview of Jody Wheeler's accomplishments was shared with the community upon her selection as a distinguished Ballston Spa High School Alumni in 2012.

Jody Wheeler is a Class Act not only because she has created captivating illustrations for scores of books for young readers across the nation but also because she is quick to award credit to the Ballston Spa teachers who encouraged her earliest artistic efforts.

In publicity linked to exhibits at Brookside and the National Bottle Museum, Ms. Wheeler observed: "I had some absolutely wonderful teachers who encouraged my creativity throughout my years in the Ballston Spa Central School District. There was Mrs. Seibert at the South Street School, Mr. Eisenhower at Malta Avenue School and Mr. Komar at Ballston Spa High School as well as others too numerous to mention. I don't think I could have gotten a better education any place else; the teachers and principals in Ballston Spa were simply outstanding."

One of three children born to Betty and Byrhl, Ms. Wheeler sometimes draws upon memories of her girlhood when crafting artwork to accompany stories for young readers. For example, visions of Ballston Spa were among the first to dance through her head when she was commissioned to create artwork for a special edition of *The Night Before Christmas*. Cherished recollections also inspired some of the illustrations inside of *An Old-Fashioned Thanksgiving* and *The First Noel* from Ideals Publishing.

If one were to fill a canvas with images of Ms. Wheeler's life as a professional artist, it would have to include pictures of her at Elmira College where she earned her BA after studying also at Drew University. Her first job was with a book publisher in Manhattan; she subsequently launched a freelance business in 1980 where her first assignment involved a kindergarten math textbook. Before long her illustrations were gracing the covers and pages of books published by such prominent names as Scholastic, Simon and Schuster, Random House, Penquin Books, Golden Books and HarperCollins.

At last count Ms. Wheeler had more than 75 titles in her portfolio – ranging from fiction titles for young readers to nonfiction titles for middle readers as well as paper dolls, activity books, calendars, greeting cards and a diversity of other products. Included are illustrations that have breathed new life into books and products featuring Ludwig Bemelmans' *Madeline*, Don Freeman's *Corduroy the Bear*, Ezra Jack Keats' *Roberto* and some of Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* characters – especially the early days of Laura's husband Almanzo Wilder in Malone, NY.

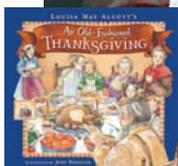
Despite her success, Ms. Wheeler exudes a humility that is at once surprising and inspiring: "This isn't a profession where one becomes complacent. There are many talented children's book illustrators out there today – the literary world has probably never been as exciting in that respect. It's fulfilling to be involved in a part of the arts that fosters literacy."

The prolific children's book illustrator insists the most rewarding part of her profession is "seeing kids enjoy the books in libraries, classrooms and in the homes of friends and relatives." Ms. Wheeler once used Milton Terrace Primary School principal Joseph Lopez as a model. To show her thanks, she gave talks to students in his charge on such topics as "How A Picture Book Is Made." The illustrator has also given back to the community by donating books to such organizations as the Rotary Club of Ballston Spa in conjunction with the Maurice "Christopher" Morley Literacy Fund.

To learn more visit www.wheelerillustration.com
and <http://www.zazzle.com/wheelerart>



“Whatever I’m painting, I hope to touch the heart or spark the imagination of the viewer – no matter what age. Be it a smile on the face of a child reading a picture book or the calming effect of a landscape or still life on an adult’s busy day, the visual arts have the power to inspire. It’s fulfilling to be involved in art that fosters literacy as well as being engaged in a variety of other rewarding projects.”





Jody Wheeler and her mother Betty being entertained by old-fashioned toymaker Maurice "Christopher" Morley at Brookside in 2010.

But it is perhaps the picture of Jody's devotion to her beloved mother Betty that I hold dearest to my heart.

Throughout her now late Mom's long battle with Alzheimer's (which was diagnosed shortly after Jody and I met), I witnessed unconditional love that transcended any descriptions a mere writer could put down on a piece of paper.

What many would consider sacrifices above and beyond the call of duty, Jody made over a period of several years with a joyful spirit that was a blessing to behold.

Despite all of the above, Jody somehow found the time to write me a poignant letter as my youngest daughter was preparing to graduate from high school.

Tissues were needed as I read a passage in which Jody praised me for helping to prepare the last of my three "chickadees" to leave the nest in order to pursue her dreams.

The theme of taking flight again watered the seeds of our friendship when Jody encouraged me to connect with siblings Lora Lee and Tom Ecobelli about a cookbook they'd written to help finance a movie they scripted titled *Chickadee*.

But that's another story for another day. Or at least another chapter that can be found by turning the page ...



Ideals Publications

FALL 2013



An artist for all seasons

Winter, Spring, Summer or Fall the five senses of young readers are further enriched by seasoned artist Jody Wheeler's creations. As an example, Jody crafted this playful autumn scene for a Touch and Feel Ideals board book titled *Happy Thanksgiving Day!* Illustrating the story by author Jill Roman Lord was a special thrill for Jody who chose Peter Shillito as the model for the book's fictitious main character, with siblings Charity and John joining in the joyful leaf jumping adventures.

Parents Janelle and Art Shillito also participated as models (with the family's house and barn in the background) as maternal grandparents Leslie and Dave Charbonneau cheered them on. All three generations were elated when Jody's whimsical image was showcased on a 2013 Ideals catalog cover. Two years later, Jody was joined at the Saratoga County Fair by three generations of artist friend Joanne Mould's family. That's Joanne holding granddaughter Ellie Nadeau (bottom right) while grandson Nick works on a picture. Sister Sami drew the image being displayed by Jody when she posed with the children's mother Nicole and older siblings Bryan and Amaya. The Nadeaus were among the young readers who participated in the fair's free 2015 workshops for budding artists presented by the book illustrator.

