

## Arts Almanac -- Exhibit BY KATHLEEN MELLEN

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When British artist Quentin Blake started illustrating children's book, some critics didn't immediately take to his work - objecting to his free-wheeling pen-and-ink style sketches of big-nosed people with long, droopy arms. They didn't much like his minimalist backgrounds either, in which a single roughly hewn bush or cloud was meant to represent an entire landscape.

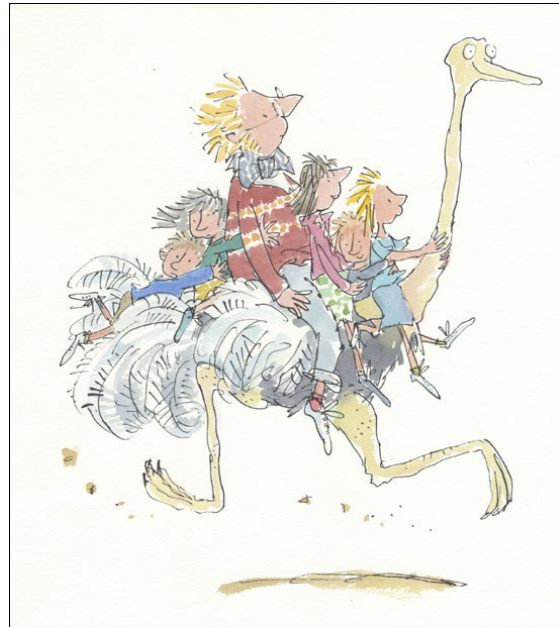
Nor were they crazy about his interiors. Drawn with economical strokes of his pen, he might use a few vertical lines to represent a stuffed bookshelf, or some quickly sketched circles for a pile of gold coins. Blake also selectively adds watercolor - sometimes just a splash - that adds warmth and depth to his pictures, but that didn't appease the critics either. The work, they complained, looked "unfinished."

Fortunately, from the beginning, kids loved Blake's spare and witty illustrations and many of his adult critics eventually saw the light and began to appreciate his unique style.

If Blake's name doesn't ring a bell, just look at a book by famed children's author Roald Dahl to see Blake's familiar illustrations, or check out "Celebrating the Theater of the Page," an engaging and fun exhibit of the artist's work that is now on display at the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art in Amherst. Most will recognize his signature characters, with their long, pointy noses, gangly arms and legs and unruly hair.

Since those first mixed reactions years ago, Blake has illustrated more than 300 books - among them Dahl's "The Enormous Crocodile," published in 1978, and has brought to life many of the author's other quirky characters, including Matilda from the book of the same name, a dream-blowing giant in Dahl's "The BFG" and, perhaps most famously, Willie Wonka and his chocolate factory.

Blake, who is in his 70s, says he's not sure where his penchant for drawing came from. Apparently neither of his parents was artistic, but Blake says that drawing came naturally and, in fact, has always been



COURTESY QUENTIN BLAKE  
This 1991 pen, ink and watercolor illustration "O is for Ostrich" is among the works by Quentin Blake now on view at the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art in Amherst.

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his favorite form of expression.

As an illustrator, it is important, he says in an artist's statement, "not to copy what you see, but rather to look away and capture for yourself the balance between what's seen and what's imagined, feeling the attitudes, gestures and physically acting them out as you draw."

That must be how he cooked up his avian art that is on display at the museum. Some of the birds, like the long-beaked bird wearing a striped shirt and sunglasses, and carrying a broad-brimmed hat, from Blake's book "Life of Birds," look remarkably like his people. Drawing birds, he has said, gives him the freedom to suggest human characteristics and behaviors in an inoffensive fashion. His birds are often down-and-out.

Over the years, Blake has drawn some characters who are real gems - like Ms. Fidget Wonkham-Strong - a thick-waisted, big bustled, iron-hatted woman in gray, from Blake's book "How Tom Beat Captain Najork and his Hired Sportsmen," published in 1974, the whimsical Willie Wonka in his signature top hat, ascot, tails and walking stick, from the 1992 book, "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory," and the gentle giant from "The BFG," published in 1997, who blows dreams into the ears of sleeping children, using a long trumpet.

Even for those who know Blake's work, there are a few nice surprises in the exhibit. Among them "Four illustrations," from his book "More Perfect than the Moon," published earlier this year. Each frame captures a moment of human tenderness, like two young girls lying in a field on a summer's day, sharing their secrets, or a granddaughter and grandfather sitting together deep in conversation. While Blake's legendary wit has been toned down here, a simple honesty remains.

- KATHLEEN MELLEEN

"Celebrating the Theater of the Page" will be on view through March 11, 2007, at the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art, located at 125 West Bay Road in Amherst. Hours are Tuesdays through Fridays from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sundays from noon to 5 p.m. For information, call 658-1100 or visit [www.picturebookart.org](http://www.picturebookart.org).



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