

From Cards to Santa Claus

The children's section in bookstores and libraries just got brighter. Illustrator Mary Engelbreit turns her colorful sights to literature for kids.

The huge biker, dressed in black leather and sporting tattoos and studs, stood politely in line with housewives, schoolteachers, and other fans. They munched on cookies and candy, waiting patiently for the woman signing autographs.

When the motorcycle man finally reached her, Mary Engelbreit said, "Well, you certainly don't look like my usual person in line. He said, 'Well, I really like [your art], and my girlfriend likes it too.'" Mary adds, "He was as nice as he could be. It was cute."

Aah, cute. The term follows the artist as doggedly as one of the Scot-ties she frequently draws. One wag even crowned Mary the Queen of

Cute, a play on one of her most famous art titles, the *Queen of Everything*. She bestowed that apt description on recurring character Ann Estelle, the sassy little girl who graces many of Mary's pithy greeting cards and other products.

The Business of Being Mary

Started in the late seventies, Mary's art licensing business now boasts agreements to reproduce her art on more than 6,500 gift and home-decor products. The illustrator lends her name to a retail store and is editor-in-chief of *Mary Engelbreit's Home Companion*, a 600,000-circulation magazine. Most recently, she signed



above: Mary's home decor mixes her own products with finds from jaunts to flea markets with friends. The group of friends call themselves the Flea Bags.

a four-year contract with HarperCollins Children's Books to illustrate 20 books.

Becoming a book illustrator isn't such a stretch for this artist. Words, such as "Life Is Just a Chair of Bowlies" and "Put the Fun Back Into Dysfunctional," have always inspired and accompanied Engelbreit art. Some lines are famous quotes from well-known figures. Others stem from her own family and lifelong friends in St. Louis, the town she grew up in and still calls home.

When Mary was 11, her mother obliged her wish for a studio by emptying a 6- x 4-foot linen closet. There the budding artist whiled away hours and hours, dreaming of illustrating books, not cards. Ironically, the recent book contract came 25 years after she was politely rejected by a cadre of New York publishers—one of whom suggested she try greeting cards.

A Classic Tale Revisited

The first book, a beautiful interpretation of Clement C. Moore's poem about the night before Christmas, debuted this fall. In Mary's version, reindeer with lavender and blue eyes magically transport a jolly Santa. A tiny mouse sleeps in a chipped teacup, surrounded by wallpaper that features a child's drawing (Mary's own) and a report on a mouse who finally landed the grand cheese prize after a long



above: Mary Engelbreit illustrates at her home studio in the evening, usually from 7 p.m. until 1 or 2 a.m. She believes her success hinges on a willingness to take opportunities as they come. "I think a lot of people wait for the perfect moment. That's probably a mistake," says the artist who started her business when she was eight months pregnant and the mother of a 3-year-old son.



left: Mary harbored doubts about beginning her book commitment with such a beloved classic. "There were so many wonderful versions of it out there," she says. **below:** Frisky elves and reindeer with different-colored eyes populate Mary's book, which is dedicated to her 19-year-old son, Will. For Mary, demands in her work dampen her spirit for holiday decorating. "I'd be happy putting up a little tabletop tree and calling it a day," she admits. Still, she lavishly decorates the family's St. Louis home for Will. "This is the kid in the baggy jeans and the big T-shirt, asking where the little elves are," she says with a laugh.



career in the field of cheese sculpturing. The wallpaper graffiti slyly refers to Mary's lifelong quest.

The book contract also calls for Mary to produce a full-color version of Mother Goose; a series, called Baby Booky, of board books (thick, chewable texts for infants); and a new series featuring Ann Estelle, the character many consider the artist's alter ego.

A Portrait of the Artist As a Writer

Mary finalized the text for the first two books in the Ann Estelle series, *Queen of Christmas* and *Queen of the Classroom*, and plans to do the same for the rest. "I definitely don't consider myself a writer," she says. "Somebody will write up a draft, then I go over it and doctor it up. Other writers

were having a little trouble because they didn't know the character." Mary, however, has no such problem.

"She wants what she wants and is determined to get it," she says of Ann, named after her maternal grandmother. "But at the bottom of it all, she's a nice girl and wouldn't hurt anybody."

That mix of determination and kindness sounds a lot like Mary, especially when she brushes aside a chance to be snide about the irony of publishers courting her long after that initial rejection. "Book illustration is different from what I do with the greeting cards," she says. "It's labor-intensive and time-consuming. Frankly, I don't think I would have been ready to do it earlier, so actually it worked out very well."

NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON

Visit www.maryengelbreit.com to learn more about the artist's business, products, and forthcoming books. ♦

DREAM WEEKEND FOR WRITERS AND READERS

Southern Living and the Biltmore host authors in Asheville.

The Inn on Biltmore Estate will host the second annual Writers' Winter Weekend February 7-9, 2003, in Asheville, North Carolina. *Southern Living* is pleased to be cohosting the event. Featured authors will include Jill McCorkle, Cassandra King, and Robert Inman.

Jill McCorkle's most recent release is a short story collection, *Creatures of Habit* (Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, \$22.95). The native North Carolinian first made literary waves at age 26, when she published her first two novels simultaneously. She's the author of *The Cheer Leader*, *Tending to Virginia*, *Ferris Beach*, and *Carolina Moon*, as well as two other short story collections, *Crash Diet* and *Final Vinyl Days*. Jill lives with her husband and two children near Boston.

Cassandra King is the author of the recently released novel *The Sunday Wife* (Hyperion, \$23.95). Fans will also recall her acclaimed first work, *Making Waves in Zion*.

Originally from Alabama, she now lives with her husband, novelist Pat Conroy, in the South Carolina Lowcountry.

Robert Inman is a novelist, screenwriter, and playwright. His most recent novel, *Captain Saturday* (Little, Brown and Company, \$24.95), was selected as a Book Sense 76 recommendation by America's Independent Booksellers. He has also penned *Home Fires Burning*, *Old Dogs and Children*, *Dairy Queen Days*, and *Coming Home: Life, Love and All Things Southern*. The Alabama native and his wife live in Charlotte and Boone, North Carolina. They have two daughters.

The Writers' Winter Weekend includes breakfast buffets and a wine-tasting reception; tours of the Biltmore House, gardens, and winery; and author presentations and a reception. For more information call toll free 1-877-843-4687. For reviews of the authors' most recent works, visit southernliving.com (AOL Keyword: Southern Living).

Other Southern Reads

For more books, visit southernliving.com (AOL Keyword: Southern Living).

To order these books, call 1-800-266-5766, or visit us at www.clicksmart.com/southernliving 