

## ILLUSTRATIONS

# Picturing history

C.R. art museum to exhibit work of local illustrator who captures slices of lives past

By Diana Nollen, The Gazette

Words and pictures are firmly entwined in the illustrator Jeni Reeves' being.

"Storytelling is part of the visual art. I've not really been able to separate it," she says. "I've always looked for narratives in things or reasons for things."

During her childhood in upstate New York, her mother made sure the budding artist and her four siblings would "sit around drawing pictures and cutting out things." Their musician father sat at the piano twice a week telling them stories he had composed, in which they had starring roles. And a couple of aunts who were artists supplied Jeni with art books and lessons.

She grew up to become a painter and book illustrator.

She passed her family's artistic traditions down to her now-grown daughter, who began drawing picture books as a preschooler. Reeves would question her about the stories,

then write text based on those drawings.

"She did 10 books like this ... then became interested in pottery and cheerleading," Reeves says with a laugh.

Reeves, 67, has had a globe-trotting career. Her husband's work as a research scientist has taken their family from New York to his native Great Britain, then Kenya and back to New York before moving to Cedar Rapids in 1996 to take a job with Diamond V.

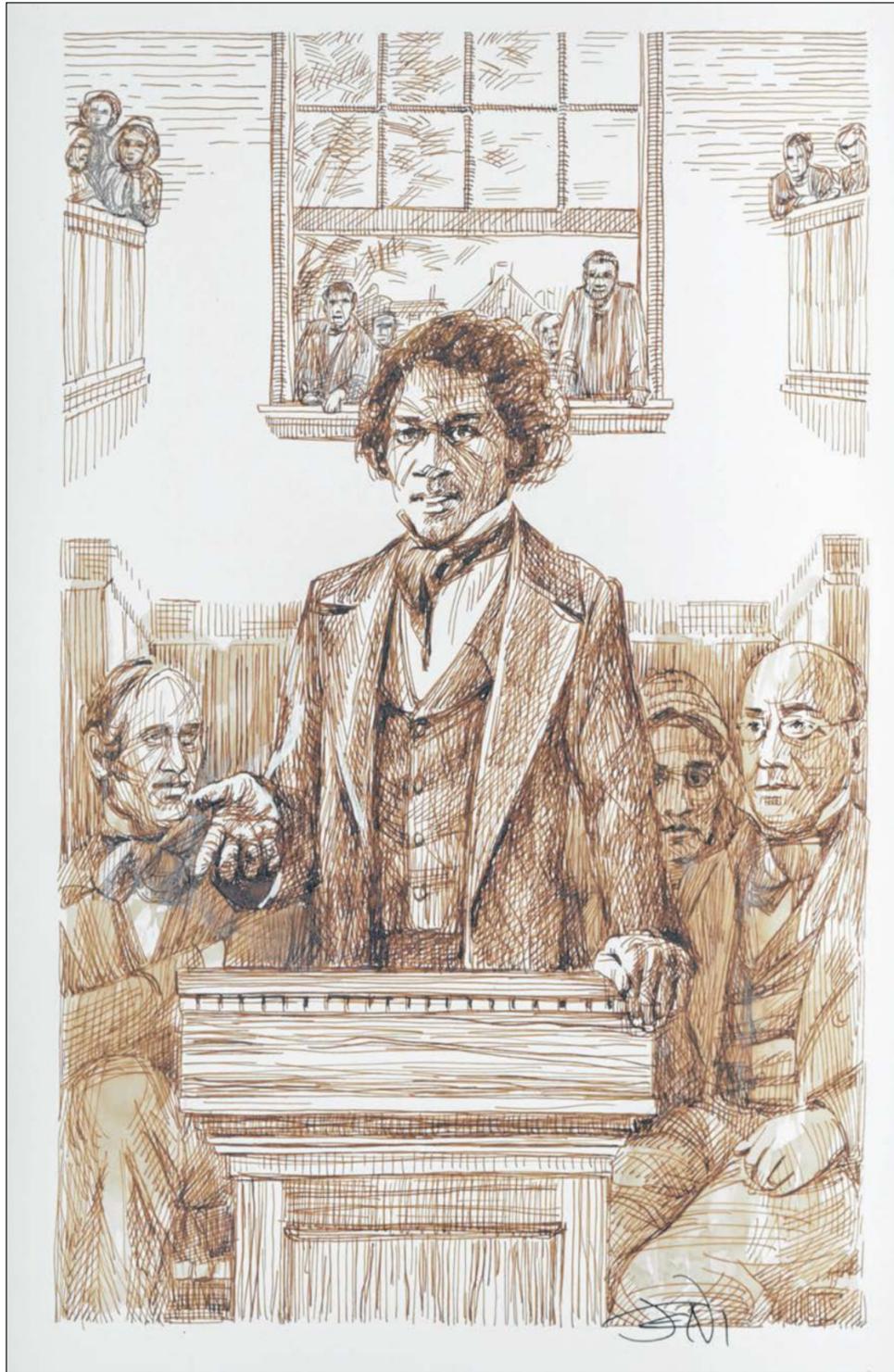
Reeves worked as a graphic designer and illustrator for television and a packaging design studio in London, where her interest in working on children's books was piqued. In Kenya, she turned to collecting African folk tales and painting the landscapes, landing a solo exhibition in Nairobi.

Returning to New York, she found it difficult to move into the publishing scene, but in the Midwest, she found success with Lerner Publishing Group in Minneapolis, illustrating 15 youth-oriented historical figure books from 1998 to 2011.

## EXHIBITION

Her exquisitely detailed pen-and-ink illustrations for the 2001 book "Voice of Freedom: A Story about Frederick Douglass" will be featured in a solo exhibition that complements two other illustration exhibits this winter and spring at the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art.

"Drawing on History: Jeni Reeves' Illustrations for 'Voice of Freedom: A Story About Frederick Douglass,'" opens Saturday and runs through May 3. "The ABCs of Children's Book Illustration: Selections from the Zerzanek Collection of the Cedar Rapids Public Library" and "Drawn to Illustration: Selections from the Collection of the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art" both open Feb. 14 and run through May 17. One of Reeves' drawings from the 1998 children's



This illustration by Jeni Reeves shows Frederick Douglass with fellow abolitionists.

book "Booker T. Washington" will be in the ABCs exhibit, as well.

Her solo exhibition not only will display her finished illustrations, but also the various visual aspects of her process, from inception to final product.

She finds that when she gives presentations on her artistry, "people are really quite stunned that so much thought and work goes into the illustrations in a book."

## PROCESS

Her deadlines have ranged from four months to six months with Lerner. The exception was the 2011 book "Enrique Esparza and the Battle of the Alamo," which the publisher put on hold for two years to facilitate other projects.

Because most of her projects focus on historic figures or situations, Reeves dives headfirst into research, seeking photographs and autobiographies that offer insight on their personality and

thoughts. When time allows, she'll visit the subject's home territory, or ask a historian there to send her photographs of the surroundings.

"When I research history, that period for me seems to come to life, and I'm able to use that," she says. "I really love the challenge, providing I have enough time to do it."

Finding original photographs is like striking gold.

"It's the photograph, to me, that really holds the secret of that person's core," she says. "And for Frederick Douglass especially, there's an early daguerreotype of him where he's just come out of slavery, and he looks frightened and angry and very, very ready to tackle the next stage of his life, which is to write his narrative."

Born into slavery in Maryland, most likely around February 1818, he escaped to New York in 1838 and became a voice for abolitionists, voting rights and other human rights causes. He died Feb. 20, 1895.

"He was fascinating. That

one early photograph was absolutely the core of who he was for me," Reeves says.

Her typical progression goes from reading the author's manuscript, to doing thumbnails or storyboards with small sketches of the action, then working up larger "roughs" to submit to the publisher. Once they're accepted, she seeks out models via word-of-mouth to hear the story, then pose as her various characters.

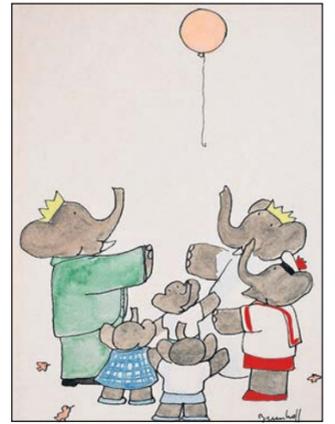
"I need a life source, since my work is fairly realistic," she says. "I like to use models. No matter how I see someone like Frederick Douglass, they always bring more information to their take on the story."

With those photos and her original "roughs" in hand, she then can draw the final roughs, transfer them to art-board and finish her illustrations.

In her contracts, she retains the copyright to her work so she can sell reprints and mount exhibitions like the one at the Cedar Rapids Museum

## IF YOU GO

- **What:** Book illustration exhibitions
- **Where:** Cedar Rapids Museum of Art, 410 Third Ave. SE
- **Title:** "Drawing on History: Jeni Reeves' Illustrations for 'Voice of Freedom: A Story About Frederick Douglass,'" Saturday to May 3
- **Title:** "The ABCs of Children's Book Illustration: Selections from the Zerzanek Collection of the Cedar Rapids Public Library," and "Drawn to Illustration: Selections from the Collection of the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art," Feb. 14 to May 17
- **Hours:** Noon to 4 p.m. Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday, Sunday; noon to 8 p.m. Thursday; 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday
- **Admission:** \$5 adults, \$4 college students and ages 62 and older; free ages 18 and under; free all ages 4 to 8 p.m. Thursdays
- **Opening reception:** For all three exhibitions, plus "Guardians of Grain: Bamana and Dogon Door Locks," held on Grant Wood's 124th birthday, Feb. 13; free; museum member preview 4:30 to 5:30 p.m., with tour at 5:15 p.m.; public reception 5:30 to 6:30 p.m.
- **Information:** (319) 366-7503 or Crma.org



Laurent de Brunhoff

This "Babar" illustration by Laurent de Brunhoff was created about 1960 and is from the Cedar Rapids Public Library's Zerzanek Collection. It will be among selected works included in "The ABCs of Children's Book Illustration," on display Feb. 14 to May 17 at the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art. Two other simultaneous exhibitions also will focus on book illustrations.

of Art.

## EVOLUTION

The Internet and the digital age have dramatically changed the way books are presented, as well as the way people read.

"Illustrations seem to be linked with what is possible," she says, from elaborate pop-up books and holograms to e-books.

"The transition between work that you do with your hands, and then work that you do with your hands, but through a computer, has really revolutionized things," she says. "We are living in more of a visual, digital-enhanced picture world than in a word-dominated world now."

"It's always changing and evolving, and I'd like to see it go back to where the pictures support the words or where they work back and forth together."

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