

Following is the text of remarks given by Holly McGhee, founder of Pippin Properties, Inc. and William Steig's longtime literary agent, sharing some of her recollections about the artist and author. These remarks were delivered at a press conference for the exhibition: *From The New Yorker to Shrek: The Art of William Steig* at The Jewish Museum on October 30, 2007.

William Steig, writer, illustrator, and artist, winner of the Caldecott Medal, a Caldecott Honor, another Caldecott Honor and a Newbery Honor in the same year, a Christopher Medal and so much more . . . And the writer of the book *Shrek!* that led to the Dreamworks movies. Although he sold his first cartoon to *The New Yorker* at age 23, William Steig didn't turn to children's books until he was 62 years old. He made up for it though, and wrote 39 of them, completing the last one at age 94. When he lay down his pen that final year, he quietly and gracefully went on.

Shrek! was not his most popular title, but it was the book that put his name on the big screen at age 93. After seeing *Shrek!* for the first time, he said, "It's vulgar and disgusting and I love it."

And there you have it.

The best thing about Bill Steig was that there was no "bull", and the worst thing about Bill Steig was that there was no "bull". Nothing got past him; his sensors were keen. If something was amiss, he didn't pause for pleasantries. He'd look you in the eye with his own piercing blues and say, "What's wrong?" He wore converse sneakers, blue jeans, and work shirts. A tie only if necessary.

He was the same in his children's books. The pictures look you straight on, face out, right there. They are drawn same size, no shrinking or enlarging required.

Illustrating was Bill's work--and he loved to say that he hated illustrating. He said, time and time again, that he hated drawing the same characters one page after another, painting the outfits the same way one page after another. Painting the windows, the curtains, the floors the same way one page after another. Bill wrote to me on September 8, 1995: "Hol, I sincerely hate the chore of illustrating. I illustrate Jeanne's work because we sleep in the same bed and I'd be uncomfortable if I didn't illustrate her work. Besides that, I like her work, it requires no repetitions, and I'd kill myself for her if necessary."

This was his system: He would dummy up an entire picture book, and once it worked, he would create his line drawings. Then he set up his painting factory. The book laid out in consecutive page order in his studio. He painted all the reds, the blues, the greens. And if you look very closely, you'll notice that some of the colors and the patterns fade toward the end of his books, the crazy Steigian patterns on the floors and the couches and the wallpapers. He was running low on paint!!"

But what Bill loved, as much as anything, was doodling faces. Doodling gave him great joy. As his wife so poignantly put it, "You see, as a young man Bill had lost considerable hearing to a bout of meningitis, and didn't always catch what was being said. The visual was what he was after, anyway. He loved television, and particularly relished a Spanish talk show, though he did not speak a word of Spanish. The excitement on the faces of the speakers, their intensity, captivated him. He drew hundreds of pages of faces; some were abstract, some resembled portraits, though they never were. Except for a few

of his many thousands of faces being published in *The New Yorker*, Bill's faces were for himself. Doodling was not about publishing.

Bill would have turned 100 on November 14. He knew that *Moby Dick* was his favorite book because he had read it more times than any other book. He knew that Picasso was his favorite artist because the work excited him more than anybody else's. His favorite animal was a donkey because he loved the way they looked. He relished a good football game. And as he wrote in his picture book autobiography, *When Everybody Wore a Hat*, "In 1916, when everybody wore a hat, I was eight years old. When I grew up, I wanted to be an artist or a seaman. I did become an artist, but not a seaman." And there you have it again. No "bull".