

## 2001/February HILARY KNIGHT - Publishing News

It seems to be the way of every generation to imagine that they created superlatives, were always the first to have done everything and have the patent on being original. But anyone who claims that Harry Potter is a unique episode in publishing terms has either forgotten the extraordinary events that took place in the mid-50's surrounding a children's book called *Kay Thompson's Eloise*, or are just far too young to remember. Most of us, I'm sure, fall into the latter category.

So, who was Kay Thompson and what was so phenomenal about *Eloise* that it can be mentioned alongside the all-conquering HP? Thompson was something of a phenomenon herself; she had voice-coached legends such as Judy Garland and Lena Horne at MGM; she'd had an immensely successful, ground-breaking nightclub act with an absurdly young Andy Williams and his three brothers and the likes of William Randolph Hearst regularly came to see her perform. She was a real star, one who dripped style and elegance and had a suitably ready wit; probably best remembered as Maggie 'think pink!' Prescott, the model for all fashion editors to come in the 1957 Fred Astaire and Audrey Hepburn movie *Funny Face*, Thompson's svelte, yet angular looks made her interesting rather than beautiful, famous but not box office.

Six-year old Eloise, the character, started life around 1947 as Thompson's *alter ego*, a voice she'd use to say things only a smart six-year old could get away with, a persona that amused and entertained those around her. By 1954 Eloise was a very rounded personality, and on the verge of being brought to life for a wider public. A friend of Thompson's, DD Dixon, a fashion editor at *Harper's Bazaar*, just happened to live across the hall from a young, up-and-coming magazine illustrator with a thing for the English style of pen-and-inkmanship, and especially the work of Ronald Searle. Hilary Knight was about to get the introduction of his life.

"I knew about Kay before I met her," Knight tells me, on a distinctly old-fashioned connection to New York. "She had this giant, super-sophisticated nightclub career and had made a dozen or so records, all with a completely

unique sound...I couldn't have been more excited to meet her, and we hit it off right away." Thompson wasn't a writer, but, as Knight says, she was adept at writing music and lyrics and took to the business of writing a book like ink to paper.

The book she wrote, although subsequently taken up by children, was never intended for them - in fact has the subtitle '*A book for precocious grown ups*'. "It's survived because it's not a true children's book," Knight tells me, "in fact Kay was always moving it out of the children's section of any bookstore she was in if she found it there." *Eloise* may not have been written for children, but the eponymous heroine's wild spirit and entrancing lifestyle are the stuff of the best dreams in the world. She does, after all, live with her English nanny - no sign of a parent; hardly even a mention of her mother, who knows Coco Chanel, and never, ever a sight of her - on the top floor of the Plaza Hotel, where everyone from the Bell Captain to the Manager, Mr Salamone, knows her.

Although set in America, there is a very English tone to the book. "I grew up looking at old copies of *Punch* and I loved Ernest Shepard's drawings for *Winnie-the-Pooh*," Knight tells me. "Both Kay and I were fans of England and had spent a lot of time there." Illustrated in a style that, while obviously reminiscent of Searle, is no slavish copy, Knight's delicate, intensely animated and very funny black and white drawings are enhanced only by a second colour. "That was normal then," says Knight. "It was very much a period thing, cheaper to do, but also it meant that the book appealed to a much wider audience."

Knight and Thompson took the completed manuscript to Simon & Schuster, where Jack Goodman, S J Perelman's editor, knew a good thing when he saw one walk through the door. The first print run was a modest 1,000 copies, but it was a rather oddball concoction - some 60 pages of almost stream-of-consciousness story intermingled with the finest, and funniest illustrations. Not your regular adult book, whichever way you look at it, *Kay Thompson's Eloise* was published on a Thursday in mid-November 1955, going for a reprint by Friday morning and featured in *Life* magazine two

weeks later. Not long after that the book was selling 4,000 copies a week and in the bestseller list alongside Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*.

And then came the mania - the dolls, the clothes for the dolls, the Neiman Marcus range of clothes for the growing multitude of junior fans, the toys, the food, the luggage, the novelties and even a room in the Plaza Hotel where visitors, and there were many, could pick up the phone and listen to Eloise herself. There was also, at one point, an ill-fated TV show, but while it didn't live up to expectations, the sequels certainly did. By 1963 more than a million Eloise books had been sold.

The first sequel was *Eloise in Paris*, then came *Eloise at Christmastime* and finally, in 1959, *Eloise in Moscow*. "We went to Moscow for four weeks to do the research," remembers Knight. "We worked all the time, going to the theatre or the ballet every single night...for it's time the book is a very accurate report on what Moscow was really like then, even though we were followed around by 'guides', who thought we were totally loopy, all the time."

And then, after the publication of *Moscow*, and during the creation of the fifth title, *Eloise takes a Bawth*, Thompson pulled the plug on everything - books, spin-offs, merchandise, the lot - and went to live in Rome. "The books were published here, initially by Penguin," says Martina Challis, Publisher of Simon & Schuster children's books, "but then they went dormant - although they were always available on import - and I found to my amazement, when I came here, that the rights were available."

Eloise was relaunched in March 2000, two years after Thompson died at the age of 98. "The series is selling everywhere - the first book reprinted three times before Christmas - and the independent bookshops really love it," says Challis. "We're publishing *Paris* in April and *Moscow*, complete with a mini volume of hints and tips called *Eloise' Guide to Life*, in the autumn."

Possibly the biggest surprise is that *Eloise takes a Bawth* will finally publish in 2002; Knight, who is a sprightly 73 and now a staff artist for *Vanity Fair*, is working with Thompson's original script, and the sketches he first made almost forty years ago, to recreate the magic once more. It will be the final chapter in an extraordinary escapade. "It was all just a game to

Kay,” Knight says, as we finish. “She was a very complicated, fascinating, funny woman who always got bored and moved on. I wish she’d done more writing, because she was brilliant at it.”