

2002/Sept ROBERT SABUDA - Publishing News

With the cyclical nature of this business, you tend to think you've seen it all, only in a slightly different format. I mean, for instance, how different can one pop-up be from another? Well, if it's been done by Robert Sabuda, very different.

Sabuda is a New York-based artist and paper engineer who made his first pop-up appearance in 1994 with *The Christmas Alphabet*, published by Orchard. "Neil Porter had the faith and the nerve other people didn't have," Sabuda tells me from his Manhattan studio. "Orchard were willing to not just walk, but to run with the project."

That book was also the first appearance of what has become his trademark use of white paper images. "I'm originally from a small town in the Midwest, the sticks," he says. "Christmas was a big part of our family, and out there white was a big part of Christmas." When Sabuda left Michigan he went to New York's Pratt Institute to train as a designer, doing his internship at Dial Books for Young Readers.

"I was at Dial for a year and it turned my life around," says Sabuda. "I thought I was going to be a big suit designer, but saw what they did in children's books and wanted to do that." His first commission came in 1988 from Putnam's, not then, as he puts it, a part of the Godzilla empire it is today, and he began his career as an illustrator.

After successfully testing the waters with *The Christmas Alphabet*, Sabuda's next paper opus was for Simon & Schuster. The extraordinary *Moveable Mother Goose* is a collection of 18 nursery rhymes packed into six spreads and produced in the kind of flat colours reminiscent of early stone litho prints. He followed that with his version of L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, making all his own lino-cut illustrations in the style of the originals by WW Denslow. "We'd just gone digital in the studio when I was doing this book and we decided to have the same look as the 1900 edition," Sabuda explains. "We made all the colours by overlaying line tints by hand...it took forever, but it was worth it."

And for this festive season comes a brand new *The Night Before Christmas*, a triumphant return to his white-on-colour look. Was he at all worried that there might be a certain amount of ennui from the buying public towards a book that has been trotted out more times than the jokes in crackers? He wasn't worried, or bothered, he tells me, because if he allowed himself to be he'd start to second guess his own work, and he likes to be as surprised by it as the people who buy the books.

I wondered if he thought that what he makes are art books for children that adults like. A moment's thought, and then Sabuda agrees that this is a fair assessment of his work, adding that he feels people respond to the sophistication behind outwardly simple imagery. "People will invest in a more expensive book if they think it's worth it - they buy five or six copies at signings without a blink," he says. "I get good reactions, I think, because I'm prepared to go out on a limb...people like that."