

INTERVIEW WITH HEDVIG RAPPE-FLOWERS,

illustrator of *An Open Heart — A Story About Moritz*

Oct. 1, 2006

by Ginny Merriam

Watch children, says artist Hedvig Rappe-Flowers, and they'll help you remember. Kids will stop and look at a line of ants moving across a sidewalk. Adults, years beyond that wonder about the natural world, walk right past.

“How often do we do that?” the Bozeman artist asked in a recent interview. “We forget. It’s not new anymore. “They know how to really see. As adults, we forget how.”

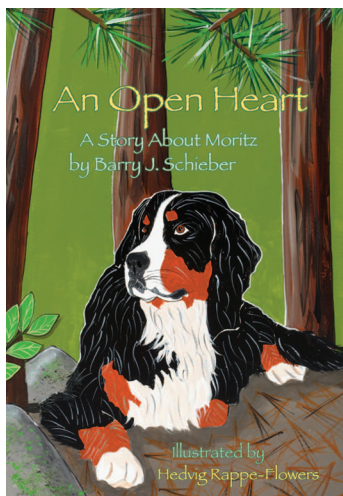
Creating the illustrations for Barry Schieber’s new book, “An Open Heart: A Story About Moritz,” took Rappe-Flowers back to that children’s-eye view of nature during the months she worked in her studio. In the story, Moritz, Schieber’s Bernese Mountain Dog, takes a hike in the Bob Marshall Wilderness forest of Montana in much the same way a child would. Retelling the story of the day for readers in his own voice, Moritz smells musty packhorses and the fresh green of pine needles. He watches squirrels and chipmunks – but doesn’t chase them – and feels the sun growing warmer as the day blooms.

Moritz takes a cooling dip in the creek, then shakes his coat off with a big spray. He enjoys the crunch of a cookie from Barry.

In her illustrations, Rappe-Flowers caught Moritz with a butterfly on his nose. She shows readers a marmot through Moritz’s eyes.

“I think because the story is from the dog’s perspective, kids will love it,” she said.

Children will be drawn in by Moritz’s experience with Barry, too: Moritz gets in trouble, just as kids sometimes do with their parents. On the way down the mountain, Moritz finds a fawn. When



Barry catches up, the fawn is lying in the trail, still. Barry is terrified that Moritz has hurt it.

Rappe-Flowers captures the moment in an illustration in which the mother deer looks on.

“The next thing is that Barry realizes the dog is really kind,” Rappe-Flowers said. “Kids are really kind, too, and they’ll understand.”

Moritz wants Barry to understand his kindness toward the fawn, she said, just as a child would. Dogs have unconditional love for their human companions, and children feel the same way about their parents.

Rappe-Flowers thinks of herself more readily as a designer than an illustrator. Illustrating doesn’t come easily for her, and she considered Schieber’s proposal carefully before she accepted it.

“As an illustrator, I really struggle,” she said. “It was challenging. But it was good because I learned so much.”

She approached the work from her love of nature, which for her is spiritual, she said.

“You’re out there, and it’s so grand, and you’re so insignificant,” she said. “It’s part of where we live. We have to be connected.”

One of her favorite illustrations in the book is a doe in beargrass – deer among her favorite animals and beargrass her favorite plants. The beargrass blooms’ feathery presence in her mind took her to an alpine meadow on a sunny summer day.

“It’s like a globe out there in the woods,” she said. “I had the most fun with the deer,” she said. “Deer are magical.”

Drawing Moritz was not so easy. She loves dogs but doesn’t know Moritz well. A good artistic depiction comes from a rounded knowledge of the subject. In her art teacher residencies at schools around Montana – the favorite work of her life -- she has learned that the best drawings of an apple don’t come from setting an apple on a table in front of young artists. Instead, she has children experience the apple in all its fullness.

“You’ve got to taste the apple, you’ve got to feel the apple, smell the apple,” she said. “You’ve got to employ all the senses.”

One year at Thanksgiving time, she brought a live turkey into a children's art class she was teaching. The young artists got to watch the turkey and hear it, feel its feathers, even smell it.

"They were the best turkey drawings ever," she said.

Rappe-Flowers tells a story about a child gripped by hyperactivity. It seemed that in the grip of large motor movements he wouldn't be able to concentrate on drawing. But, with just a little coaxing, the focused activity drew him in, the tiny movements of working with paint and subject overcoming his urge to run and jump. He grew quiet.

"It worked!" Rappe-Flowers said with a smile. "I love it."

That concentration works for her, too. While she turned only 50 during the past winter, Rappe-Flowers has lived with cancer for 11 years. As it has flared and ebbed with treatment, it has often stolen her physical energy and her time.

Art has grown even more important to her life.

"Doing art is the only time I don't think about having cancer," she said. "I'm thinking about color and shape. It's just too bad I can't do it more."

An accomplished athlete who loves to kayak and hike and ski, Rappe-Flowers doesn't call the last decade a trite "courageous battle." Instead, she calls cancer "inconvenient."

"I have way too much to do," she said. "I don't have time for it."

Rappe-Flowers was born in Sweden and spent her early childhood in the San Francisco Bay area. She moved with her family to Frenchtown, near Missoula, Montana, in time for her freshman year at Frenchtown High School. Hedvig laughs that she was the school's "first hippie." The family lived on a 30-acre farm outside of town.

Rappe-Flowers earned her bachelor of fine arts degree in art with a minor in psychology at the University of Montana. Her mother, Hanneke Ippisch, owned and ran the Ninemile Schoolhouse. The old schoolhouse, revived by Hanneke and her husband, Les, overflowed with the couple's Scandinavian-style wooden crafts, and they were famous at Christmas time for their whimsical Nativity scenes. Rappe-Flowers' work was for sale there, too, in later years, and she worked for a time with her mother. She illustrated her mother's book "Spotted Bear: A Rocky Mountain Folktale," which won a National Outdoor Book Award in 1999

For the past decade, she has been closely connected with Living Art, a Missoula nonprofit venture that provides a setting for people with cancer to explore their lives through art and nature. Rappe-Flowers organized their first art show in Missoula and has helped with more art shows of participants' work since. In the context of cancer, the work is powerful.

"That's what art is," she said. "It's meaningful. It hits the emotions."

She lives now in Bozeman, where her husband, Pat Flowers, is a manager with the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks. Her two daughters, Natalie and Ericka, are 15 and 16.

She takes comfort in a practice she learned from physician and writer Rachel Naomi Remen's book "My Grandfather's Blessings: Stories of Strength, Refuge and Belonging." An elderly Tibetan nun taught it to Remen.

In the morning, fill a bowl with water. As the bowl fills, reflect on the particulars of your life. Receive your life with an open heart, unconditionally. Carry the bowl carefully to a special place and leave it for the day. In the evening before sleep, take the bowl outside and slowly pour the water into the earth. It's a daily cycle, Rappe-Flowers says, of taking what life gives you, then letting it go. It gives much wisdom.

On the best days of her life, she drives up the mountains to ski in bright sun on snow. Then she goes home to paint. When she sees the column of ants crossing the sidewalk, she stops to look carefully at them. Her blessings are ever present.

"I've got it made," she says.

Ginny Merriam is a journalist who lives in Missoula, Montana.



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