



Keeping His Childhood Alive

**Floyd Cooper's art
bridges the gap
between author and reader,
between one generation
and another.**

BY LYNETTE LOBBAN

Illustrations © by Floyd Cooper

In a way, it was his family who set Floyd Cooper on the path to becoming an award-winning illustrator of children's books. In an era before television grabbed a starring role in households throughout Oklahoma, Cooper's mother entertained her children by telling stories. On summer nights, on a front porch crowded with cousins, his grandfather "held court" with neighbors and friends, expounding on any number of subjects, while Cooper listened and translated the words to pictures in his mind.

"Mom loved to tell fairy tales, while my grandfather's stories were more of the non-fiction variety," says Cooper. "But both sparked my imagination. I've always been a very visual person."

His fascination with art came to his parents' attention when Cooper was little more than a toddler. "My dad was building a house, and I just started drawing on the sheetrock," he recalls. "I showed my mom this bird I drew, and she went into the house and brought me markers and paper. I haven't stopped drawing since." *continued*



from *I Have Heard of a Land*, HarperCollins Children's Books, 1998



from *Miz Berlin Walks*, The Putnam Publishing Group, 1997



from *Miz Berlin Walks*, The Putnam Publishing Group, 1997

Yet Cooper did not always entertain the idea of making a living with his art. Growing up poor, the eldest of four children, his thoughts of employment ran along more practical lines.

“I was going to be a doctor,” he explains. “But at Central High in Tulsa, you had to buy your own books, and I couldn’t afford mine. I had to share a chemistry book and kind of got off the pre-med track.”

While his hopes for higher education were dimming, his art was beginning to shine. Cooper’s realistic pen-and-ink portraits attracted the attention of Alpha Rho Tau, the local arts organization, which encouraged him to compete in shows. During his senior year, Cooper received a thrilling yet puzzling announcement. Without having so much as filled out an application, he had been awarded a merit-based scholarship to the University of Oklahoma. He always has suspected a high school counselor of surreptitiously sending out samples of his work. Cooper’s art became his ticket to college.

In the OU School of Art, he met a professor who recognized Cooper’s potential and pushed the young man to do the same. “Roger Huebner rescued me,” says Cooper. “He gave me the confidence to believe I could make a living doing something I loved. The man is one gifted individual.”

Fully aware that Cooper possessed both talent and shyness in great measure, Huebner asked the young artist to speak in front of his classes. The professor’s ulterior motive was to help Cooper develop self-confidence, a trait he knew would be indispensable to the student once he entered the highly competitive job market.

“He knew what he was doing,” Cooper says. “He helped me make the transition from school to work. I was literally saved by the faith he had in me.”

Cooper graduated in 1980 and took a job illustrating textbooks for an Oklahoma City publishing house. The fast pace of the work sharpened his skills and prepared him for a career move to Hallmark Inc., in Kansas City. Cooper had no trouble handling the demands of his new job, but soon

his creativity began pushing the envelope at the greeting card company. Then his career got an unexpected boost.

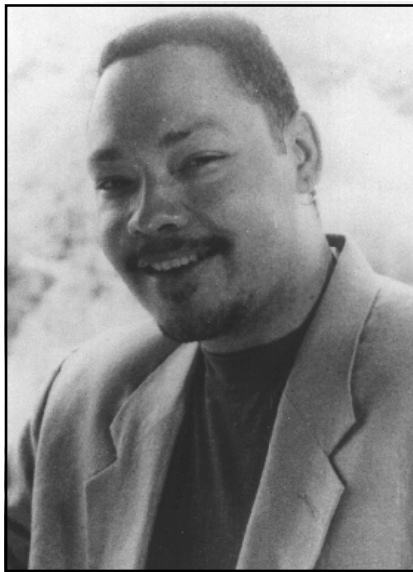
Hallmark had hired world-renowned illustrator Mark English to teach classes to their artists in Kansas City. Much to his dismay, Cooper was not included in the first workshop. Determined to see the man he describes as “the Da Vinci of illustration,” Cooper slipped in on his own.

“Somehow, I got to him and showed him my work,” Cooper recalls. “He was very encouraging. He became my mentor.”

English’s praise was like a shot of adrenaline to the young artist. Cooper began making job-hunting excursions into New York City, knocking on publishers’ doors and returning home when the money ran out.

“That was a tough time, but I tried not to get discouraged,” says Cooper. “I kept telling myself: ‘If Mark English likes my work, it must be good.’”

By 1984, Cooper had relocated to the East Coast and had an agent doing the footwork. “I never really knew all the places he was taking my portfolio, so I was surprised when a job came from a children’s book publisher,” he



Floyd Cooper

says. The project was to illustrate a new book by Eloise Greenfield, which told the story of a little girl’s relationship with her grandfather. Cooper got to work at once. It was as if his entire childhood had served as research for the project. He did not need a model for the wise old gentleman of the book’s title. The pictures, he says, came from his heart.

Grandpa’s Face, Cooper’s first attempt at illustrating for children, won

the 1988 American Library Notable Book Award. *Publisher’s Weekly* raved that he had created “family scenes of extraordinary illumination” and had captured “the feelings of warmth and affection that exist between generations.”

It was the start of a whole new career. Cooper since has illustrated more than 20 children’s books and won nearly as many honors, including three Coretta Scott King Awards for *Brown Honey in Broomwheat Tea*, *Meet Danitra Brown* and *I Have Heard of a Land*.

Over the years, his sensitive drawings have helped children come to terms with some fairly weighty subjects. He has explored society’s treatment of the elderly (*Miz Berlin Walks*), Down syndrome (*Be Good to Eddie Lee*) and has created a fortress of strong female characters, among them the protagonists of *The Girl Who Loved Caterpillars* and *Meet Danitra Brown*.

“There’s a challenge to portraying characters sympathetically without condescending,” Cooper says. “When I first started looking for models for Eddie Lee, I met with a lot of resistance from parents. It’s a very sensitive issue. Then I met Kyle, and I learned so much about Down syndrome. He was terrific, and I hope that image of just being a kid comes through in the book.”

Although Cooper now lives on the East Coast, his strong ties to Oklahoma often are reflected in his work. “*I Have Heard of a Land* was a special project for me,” he says. Both he and the author, Joyce Carol Thomas, are descendants of black settlers who participated in the Oklahoma land run of 1889. The book gave them the opportunity not only to honor their relatives, but also to illuminate the achievements of the African-American pioneer.

To this day, Cooper’s family still lives on the farm his great-grandfather staked more than a hundred years ago. “Every year, I come back to visit,” says Cooper, who lives in New Jersey with his wife, Velma, and two sons, Dayton, 12, and Kai, five. “I want my children to know the feel of big family and big space.” *continued*



from *Satchmo’s Blues*, Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, 1996

“I create with shapes instead of lines. It’s really kind of improvisational. The shape evolves, and I see where it leads.”



from *The Girl Who Loved Caterpillars*, The Putnam Publishing Group, 1992

In April 1995, Cooper received a call from his editor saying, “Stop what you’re doing right away.” The bombing of the Murrah Federal Building had rocked the nation, and Cooper felt the effects in a surprising way. “Everyone I met in the East was deeply affected, and since I was from Oklahoma,” he adds, “they looked to me as their connection. I wanted to contribute, and my editor offered me a way.” Cooper did the art for the picture book, *One April Morning*, in about 10 days. The proceeds went to children of the victims.

“Floyd is so good at what he does because he has kept his childhood alive,” says fellow illustrator and OU alumnus Mike Wimmer. “He knows how to relate to kids and combines a natural talent with good taste. Everybody in the industry knows his name. And he’s got this incredible face. I drew him once as Kublai Khan. He has a great sly smile.”

Cooper often has described himself as “a bridge” for writers. “Writers have a story they want to get to their audiences,” he explains, “but in the case of children’s literature, not all of their audience reads. I have a

primordial mission. I use pictures to get the message very quickly from page to reader.”

This is something Cooper does deftly, in hues of browns, violet reds and turquoise blues. His pictures have an ethereal quality, a softness, like visiting a memory. To achieve the realistic, yet dreamlike, quality of his illustrations, Cooper starts with a black-and-white image then adds layers of oil paints. He retrieves the image underneath with a kneaded eraser, a technique he learned from Mark English.

“I create with shapes instead of lines,” he says. “It’s really kind of improvisational. The shape evolves, and I see where it leads.”



from *Meet Danitra Brown*, Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Books, 1994

Cooper says working on a book with an author is more a matter of trust than collaboration. “We’re actually kept apart as much as possible. It’s a very unusual situation to have two

people sharing a project with equal input," he says. "You have two different artistic mediums, two artistic egos. It could be a recipe for trouble or greatness. What a good publisher will strive for is mutual artistic achievement."

Cooper says a publisher wants the text to be inspirational, not instructional, to the illustrator. "Sometimes I get the copy, and the descriptive phrases will have been literally cut out. It looks like a ransom note," he laughs. "They try not to suppress the artist's vision of the character or the story."

"A funny thing happened when I was working on [Meet] Danitra Brown. I drew her with purple glasses, even though I hadn't read that in the copy," he recalls. "I had no idea Nikki (Grimes, the author) had given Danitra purple glasses. So, writers get their messages to me somehow."

A personal triumph for Cooper was the writing and illustrating of *Coming Home: from the Life of Langston Hughes*. One night while he was having dinner with his publisher, she offered him a blank contract if he would write as well as illustrate his next

project. Out of the blue, Cooper said, "I want to do a biography on Langston Hughes."

"I went home that night, and I didn't know why I'd said that," relates Cooper. "I had read Hughes' poetry growing up, but no more than anyone else in high school. Then I started doing research on his life, and it was *eerie*, all the connections to my life. Our situations, growing up in Oklahoma." Cooper was hooked.

"Whenever I work on a project, I try to find a metaphor for the person's life and use that in the book," he explains. "With Langston Hughes, I tried to give the book a flow, a rhythm of words that mirrored his poetry."

According to critics, his strategy proved successful. *BookPage* said, "Hughes and Cooper share a poetic soul . . . Cooper's voice is filled with a lyricism uncommon in most biographies." Since then Cooper has been given the green light on other writing/illustrating projects. He currently is working on a biography of Michael Jordan and hopes to start one soon on Arthur Ashe, whom he describes as a personal friend and hero. He also is

working again with Joyce Carol Thomas on a collection of poetry entitled *The Blacker the Berry, the Sweeter the Juice*.

Not only is Cooper busy in his studio, he often takes his show on the road. This year, he will conduct more than 200 workshops at schools across the nation. "I love seeing kids get excited about art," he says. "I'll be up there working with my eraser, and an image will start to take shape, and the kids will go 'Oooh, Mr. Cooper.' You can't beat that kind of reaction."

Cooper has not always felt so positive about his trade. "There's a hierarchy in art circles," he says. "First and foremost, there's fine art, the milk and honey of galleries and museums. Then there's commercial art, and somewhere down the list is the art of a children's book illustrator. I used to kind of cough in my hand when someone asked what I did for a living."

Not anymore. On any of his frequent flights, as people in suits begin to rustle their *Wall Street Journals*, Cooper reaches into his briefcase, pulls out a shiny new picture book and breaks into a great sly smile.

from *African Beginnings*, Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Books, 1998

