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**Shirley Barber, much-loved children’s author, dies aged 88**

Shirley Barber, one of Australia’s most loved children’s authors and illustrators, died peacefully in her sleep on Tuesday morning, her family and publisher have announced.

Shirley authored over 30 original picture books, each one illustrated in her hallmark style of rich detail, animated characters, and strong visual narratives. They went on to be published in several languages around the world, in countries as far flung as Bulgaria, Estonia, France and the US.

Her first book, *Martha B. Rabbit: the Fairies’ Cook* was originally published by Memory Press (an imprint of The Five Mile Press) in the late 1980s. Shirley had written the book many years earlier, in her childhood, and even created a little dummy book, or prototype, complete with a red ribbon tie. That little hand-made book is still in her family’s possession today.

At the time of publication, there were some concerns about how such a traditional book would be received by a contemporary audience. The publishers need not have worried. It was very successful, and it also received a prestigious Special Mention in the international Bologna Children’s Book Fair picture-book awards.

From Shirley’s children’s books sprung a sea of spin-off products: colouring books, jigsaw books, jigsaws, dinnerware, clothing, stickers, manchester, and other merchandise, all featuring fairies, bunnies, mermaids, and other folk living in busy fantasy worlds. In each of Shirley’s children’s books there are gentle messages of kindness, caring, friendship, and peace, never overstated but simply conveyed by the characters in her stories and their actions.

Shirley once observed that she had from time to time encountered criticism for creating fantasy books for children; fantasy is a popular genre today, but it was not always so. She nonetheless remained firm in her commitment to creating a beautiful retreat for children through her stories and artwork. She well knew that childhood can be a hard place for some, and she wanted her books to provide comfort and an escape, even if temporary, from less pleasant realities.

A third-generation artist, Shirley grew up in the Channel Islands before moving to Australia later in life. It was there that she first gained her lifelong love of nature and painting, and her extensive body of work includes not only children’s book illustrations but also an impressive collection of Australian birds, landscapes, animals, and floral artworks.

Shirley was first published by The Five Mile Press. In around 2012, she resumed a professional relationship with the publisher at Brolly Books, with whom she first worked for many years during the publisher’s time at The Five Mile Press. Shirley’s books have been published by Brolly since that time.

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Contact:
Emma Borghesi, Publisher, Brolly Books
0412781211
emma@brollybooks.com