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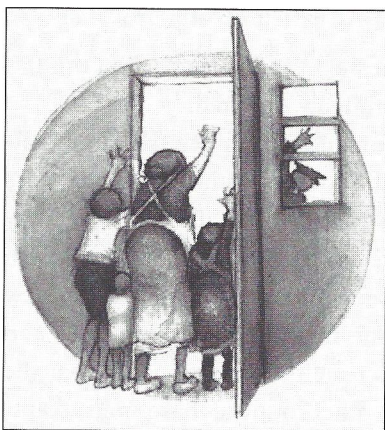
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EVERYDAY WONDER

Women and Pregnancy in the Picture Book

Illustrations of Julie Vivas

Megan Lambert



A striking example of Vivas's Rockwellian roots is found in this illustration from *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge* by Mem Fox (Brooklyn, NY: Kane/Miller, 1985) as Miss Nancy remembers her brother who died in the war.

Fromkeen Medalist Julie Vivas is perhaps best known for her collaboration with Mem Fox on their 1983 homage to Australian animalia and cuisine, *Possum Magic* (Adelaide, Australia: Omnibus Books; New York: Harcourt Brace, 1983). Enjoying record sales at home in Australia and abroad, this book assured Vivas and Fox fame and ongoing success in international children's literature and thrust their native land of Australia into the limelight of the children's publishing world.

Vivas's most remarkable work can be found in those books focusing on human characters, Australian and otherwise. Through her instantly recognizable, expressive style, which includes liberal use of white space, comfortably rounded figures, vibrant movement, and earthy, muted watercolors with colored pencil, she creates down-to-earth images of people going about their day-to-day lives.

In fact, Vivas has cited Norman Rockwell, the artistic champion of everyday America, as an early influence on her artistic development.¹ Following his populist vision, she too focuses on everyday life, but Vivas goes farther than Rockwell's rather antiseptic style and communicates deeply held, progressive, socio-political convictions. Time and again she infuses feminist sensibilities into her depictions of human experiences and relationships, placing women and their concerns at the center of her work, while maintaining a

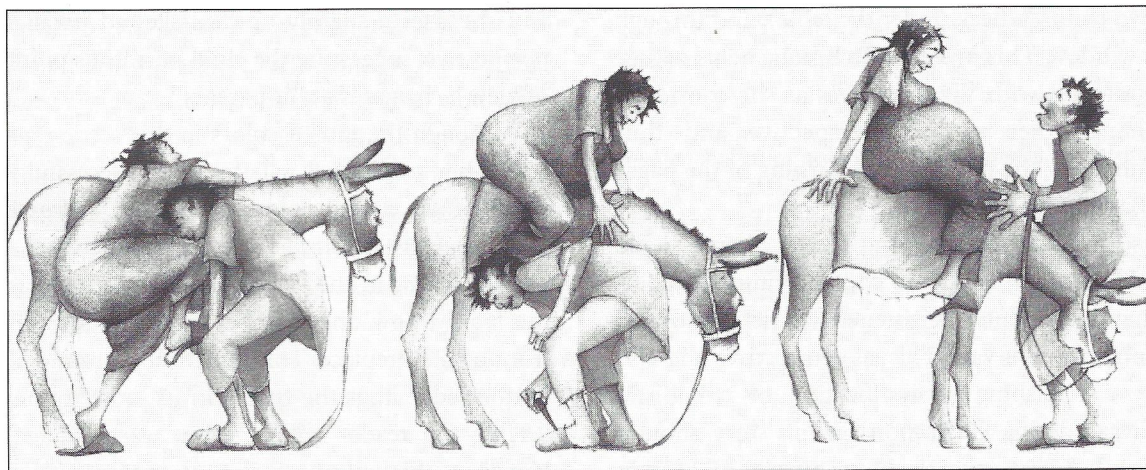
keen sense of her intended child audience. This is particularly evident in Vivas's three books featuring images of pregnancy: Jenni Overend's *Welcome with Love* (Brooklyn: Kane/Miller, 2000; first published as *Hello Baby* in 1999); *Let's Eat* (Omnibus Books, 1995) by Vivas's daughter, Ana Zamorano; and *The Nativity* (Omnibus Books, 1986). These books stand as remarkable displays of Vivas's feminist-informed, humanist convictions as they communicate to children the everyday wonder of pregnancy and childbirth.

When asked to illustrate the Christmas story, Vivas stated that she would not produce another pretty Christmas book and argued, "I've been pregnant myself—and I have never been able to tell my own children the nativity story, so I tried to figure it out from a humanist point of view, not a mystical one."² Ultimately, Mary, Joseph, the Three Wise Men, and the shepherds appear as everyday folks with mussed up hair and ragged clothing. Even the angels, with their tattered, torn wings, are demystified, soaring through illustrations wearing coarse robes and work boots.

Vivas's characteristic blend of a feminist-humanist perspective also shifts the focus of *The Nativity* from baby Jesus to his mother. Mary is

not depicted as the serene Madonna with child as Vivas demystifies her as well and even uses her pregnancy for humorous purposes. In the cover illustration, Mary looks incredulously at Joseph, who is crouched down, ready to hoist her tremendous bulk onto the unsuspecting donkey. The fifth double-page spread, which betrays Vivas's roots as a former animation studio artist with its comic-book-like panels, shows Mary and Joseph following through on this action and perfectly captures the cumbersome nature of their task.

Vivas's vision challenges readers to re-think and perhaps come closer to the wonder of this famous birth story. Of course, many would argue that wonder is apparent at all births, not only in the telling of the first Christmas, and Vivas communicates this notion in both *Let's Eat* and *Welcome with Love*. *Let's Eat* is set in Spain, where beginning in 1969, Vivas lived with her husband Luís for four years. During this period, she often sketched passersby in the marketplace, leading one critic to comment: "Spain is the key to all those wonderful moving figures bathed in gentle watercolors" (Morris, 21). *Let's Eat*, with its illustrator's dedication to "la familia Vivas," stands as a tribute to Vivas's Spanish family in particular and



Vivas's humanist vision, along with her commitment to her child audience, led her to avoid images of a serene Madonna and to humorously emphasize the awkward, uncomfortable reality of Mary's pregnancy—and its implications for the donkey. (*The Nativity*; Adelaide, Australia: Omnibus Books, 1986).

to Spanish art and culture in general, as it presents a window into the everyday life of a family that gathers daily to share a mid-day meal. The mother of the family, like *The Nativity's* Mary, is expecting a baby, and Vivas again avoids romanticizing or obscuring the physical reality of late pregnancy. Mamá, depicted on the verso side of the opening double-page spread, stands with her feet planted widely as she reaches behind her back to tie an apron around her enormous belly. As Vivas actually exaggerates Mamá's size, she communicates the power and sensuality of her pregnancy, and by making Mamá's belly big and round enough to hold perhaps three babies, Vivas lets readers experience pregnancy through the eyes of the small boy from whose perspective the story is told.

Besides incorporating the child's perspective into her work, Vivas also adeptly uses the picture book format to incorporate varied visual perspectives into *Let's Eat*. Zamorano's text required Vivas to present eight scenes of the same family sitting around the same table. In order to avoid dull repetition from one double-page spread to another, Vivas allows readers to view the family from varied angles: up close, from a more distant parallel view, from above and to one side, from directly above, from below and to one side (as two children peek under the table), and through a window. This inventive technique helps engage audiences with Vivas's images as she constantly changes her readers' perspective and thus enhances "the drama of the turning of the page" (Bader, 359).

Vivas's groundbreaking recent picture book, *Welcome with Love*, also contains numerous dramatic moments, heightened by her continued application of varied visual perspectives and also by a refreshing demystification of childbirth. Vivas's daring illustrations in this story about a little boy witnessing the home birth of his brother are a frank depiction of labor and childbirth as they present an image of a strong, supported

woman going through the pain and exhaustion of labor and childbirth. Later, the visual perspective of the first full illustration of the newborn baby places him against an all-white background as he descends from the upper-right corner of the recto page, which represents his emergence downward from his mother's standing body. This illustration also includes far greater attention to human physical detail than Vivas usually accords her figures. For example, the images of baby Jesus in *The Nativity* do not include the cone-headed, saggy, wrinkled appearance of *Welcome with Love's* newborn. This signals both Vivas's growing technical skill, and again, her commitment to presenting a humanist vision of life as she artistically embraces the precious natural, if not idealistically adorable, realistic appearance of a newborn.

Another of this book's most effective illustrations appears earlier in the story, on the recto side of the sixth double-page spread. Set in the center of the page, without superfluous detail, Mum leans against Dad during a contraction. Dad embodies a supportive, nurturing presence, and both figures are held in the warm, womblike roundness of the reddish-yellow background with which Vivas frames them against the white of the page. Here Vivas is at her minimalist best and she uses a slightly upward-skewed parallel perspective, suggesting the child narrator's point of view as he gazes at his parents.

Although the muted colors in this scene represent her traditional palette, Vivas successfully incorporates darker colors into other *Welcome with Love* illustrations. For example, she creates a cozy darkness in the last double-page spread as the family, now one member larger, cuddles in front of the fireplace. This illustration's rounded bottom edge hugs the family in its loose frame, leaving the reader with a calm, warm image. However, this calmness also resonates with a powerful energy that effectively communicates the excitement of a family anticipating and cele-

brating birth. Vivas accomplishes this with liberal use of swirling, tangled, blurred colored pencil lines that provide texture to her illustration. William Moebius terms this artistic code "capillarity"³ and with it, Vivas claims new technical ground in this illustration and in others throughout the book.

Ultimately, even as it returns to the familiar ground of pregnancy and childbirth, *Welcome with Love* marks new directions for Vivas's artistry as she moves into a more diverse palette and liberally uses colored pencil as a medium with purposes beyond outlining and sketching. Furthermore, in this book, as in *The Nativity* and *Let's Eat*, Vivas's feminist convictions help her avoid the objectified representations of pregnant women by artists such as Gustav Klimt and Edvard Munch,⁴ and her humanist attention to presenting authentic and emotionally powerful images of human experiences keeps her from succumbing to the rather antiseptic depiction of pregnancy found in many children's books. Instead, her illustrations of pregnant women, like her books exploring themes beyond pregnancy and childbirth (including Mem Fox's *Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge* [Kane Miller, 1984], Margaret Wild's *Our Granny* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993], and Libby Hathorn's *The Tram to Bondi Beach* [Sydney: Methuen, 1981]) avoid presenting idealized visions of humanity and communicate human sensuality and strength. Her mothers are cooking, laughing, talking, clothes-hanging, loving, laboring, donkey-riding, wild-wind-walking, cuddling mums in the company of equally vibrant and believable characters. All the

while, Vivas's technical use of expressive line to create fluid movement, earthy colors to connote the vitality and warmth of her subjects, varied visual perspectives creating a dynamic presentation, and her consciousness of a child's view combine to create books communicating the experiences and relationships of real, flawed, miraculous everyday people.

1. In an interview with the Australian children's literature journal *Review*, Vivas stated, "I well recall...Rockwell's illustrations in the *Saturday Evening Post*" (William Fleming, "The New Illustrators: Julie Vivas," *Review*, June 1984, 26-29).

2. Jill Morris, "Meet the People: Julie Vivas," 21-22. Personal communication provided by Omnibus Publishers.

3. "Introduction to Picture Book Codes," in *Children's Literature: The Development of Its Criticism*, ed. Peter Hunt, 131-47 (New York: Routledge, 1990), 142.

4. In an exploration of the representations of female sexuality during pregnancy in erotic art in Edo, Ueno Chizuko cites these two artists as Western examples of male painters who made pregnancy a favorite theme in their work. "The male gaze became centered on the women's [*sic*] womb as the distinctive feature which defined womanhood" (113). Ueno Chizuko, "Lusty Pregnant Women and Erotic Mothers: Representations of Female Sexuality in Erotic Art in Edo," in *Imaging Reading Eros: Proceedings for the Conference: "Sexuality and Edo Culture, 1750-1850,"* Indiana University, Aug. 17-20, 1995, ed. Sumie Jones (Bloomington: East Asian Studies Center, Indiana University, 1996), 110-15.

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