

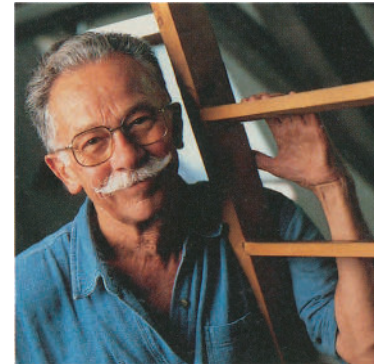
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## Bruna, the Friendliest Maker of Picture Books in the Netherlands

No one in the Low Countries can claim *never* to have seen any of Dick Bruna's pictures. Child or grownup, everyone in the Netherlands and Flanders is acquainted with his work. Despite the fact that for some reason or other his cartoon characters miffy, snuffly, boris & barbara and poppy pig aren't part of common literary parlance, every single person in the Low Countries has, consciously or unconsciously, made eye contact in some way, at some time or other, with one of his pictures on stamps, posters or paperback book covers.

His children's book characters have gone out into the world – the whole wide world – although of course primarily, for two generations already, into the world of the very young. From Amsterdam to Tokyo they grace baby cream jars, bibs, tote bags, sweaters, cereal bowls, puzzles, boots, rain ponchos, coloured pencils, kids' games, towels and lots of other things for children. Their subtle design lends an extra aesthetic dimension to all these products. They offer children in particular a sense of recognition, of familiarity, because of course what kids see first on these products are their own trusty book characters.



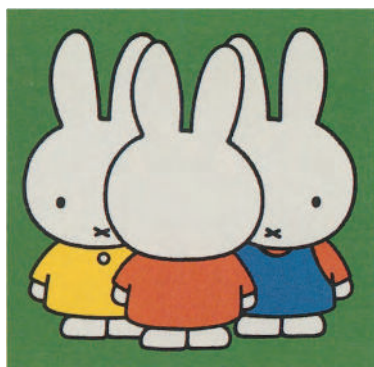
Dick Bruna (1927-). Photo by Sjaak Ramakers.

### **Books for little hands**

Now, who is this internationally successful maker of picture books, this loveable author and illustrator of some ninety little books for the very young (printed in enormous quantities in thirty-three languages)?

Dick Bruna (1927-) was born in Utrecht, the city where he still lives and every morning still bicycles to his studio downtown to work. As a young man he had no desire at all to pursue a career as the fourth generation in the well-known family publishing business A.W. Bruna & Son. Instead, he became a graphic designer, without any real academic training, and so is a self-taught artist. Since 1947 he has designed some two thousand book covers (for the *Zwarte Beertjes* series) and lots of posters, for which, as an outstanding designer, he has also received a number of awards.

In 1953 Bruna produced his first children's book, *the apple* (de appel),



From *miffy is crying*  
(*nijntje huilt*, 1991).  
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From *poppy pig goes on holiday*  
(*betje big gaat met vakantie*, 1998).  
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1,250 copies of which were published by the family firm. However, the book was not a success. Only 554 copies had been sold by mid-1955. Evidently at that time the Netherlands wasn't yet ready for a children's book with such a 'modern' design. But the essence of his later work can already be seen in it. The text is rhymed and the story, about an apple that really wants to have arms and legs in order to see the world, is friendly and simple. The illustrations share the same simplicity that his posters and book covers already had at that time. Only the technique differs slightly from the later books. The early children's book illustrations are still cut-outs rounded off by black brushwork. Besides this completely new formal language for children's books, with its flat composition, absence of perspective and daring use of colour – green and blue side by side! – the format was larger and longer than the currently popular Bruna books, which is probably also one of the reasons why his first children's book did not immediately strike a chord with the public.

Only after Bruna had seen small children handling their books did he realise that his books should have different dimensions, the better to be held by little hands. Since that time he has produced 6 x 6-inch books, typically with twelve illustrations on the right-hand pages. The product, sometimes hardback, is always durable (washable!) and will survive a great deal of family life.

### Primary colours and clever simplification

Right from the start, Bruna's illustrations show an extraordinary feature: a surprising and idiosyncratic simplicity of form that he consistently uses. Striking, also, are his black brushed contour lines, the absence of perspective, again, and his use of predominantly primary colours: red, black, blue, yellow, white, green; along with brown, never purple and rarely orange. In this, Bruna remains in a certain sense an adherent of De Stijl painters and a great admirer of Mondrian, among others. He says about his own use of colour: *'Blue is a colour that recedes. It is a cool colour and a colour that moves away from you. Red and green come toward you. They are warm colours because they contain yellow. Blue I use when I want it to be cold. But when I draw children in a house I give them a red or yellow background because I want them to be warm in there. I have really always tried to limit myself to those primary colours, De Stijl colours.'*

Bruna's highly personal use of colours has remained practically unchanged over the years, but their application has become subtler and bolder. In addition, in many of his books he also makes the best possible use of white, employing it as an exciting 'colour element'.

As a self-taught illustrator, he should perhaps be seen as a gifted designer rather than as a virtuoso draughtsman. The influence of non-representational painting on his work is in fact unmistakable. In his illustrations we can recognise elements characteristic of painters such as Braque and Miró, and particularly the late Matisse; influences he freely acknowledges in interviews.

The design of his characters is always the result of a well thought-out process of simplification. Starting off in pencil, he draws much more natu-

realistically and uses greater detail, searching from there for what is essential in the form. Leaving out more and more detail does not, however, diminish the recognition factor. In their deceptive simplicity, his drawings give the impression of having come into being effortlessly, as if, for instance, the contours were ‘merely’ accented with felt-tip. Nothing is farther from the truth. He cuts, pastes and experiments, with poster paint and brush, initially producing at least a hundred preparatory versions for a book of twelve pictures, and finally arriving at a number of definitive pictures, each of a unique economy.

His stories always have a positive focus and intent. His human characters – as well as his anthropomorphised animal characters – have big heads with little hair set on fat little bodies with short arms and legs, attributes they clearly share with human and animal babies. These attributes are also why, according to psychologists like Lorenz, they appeal to our feelings of tenderness and our nurturing instinct, as well as possibly inducing a sense of recognition in very young children.

Bruna’s characters also always look straight at the reader with their friendly, oval, black eyes. According to developmental psychologist Dolf Kohnstamm, the result of this eye contact is that it holds the reader-viewer’s attention. Through minimal changes to mouth and eyes, Brunna successfully adds expression to the faces, sometimes having a tear hang dramatically under an eye to suggest great sadness. He suggests movement or action in his relatively stylised stills through the use of horizontal ‘velocity lines,’ a trick also often employed by comic strip and animation artists, and therefore easy for children to interpret as such.

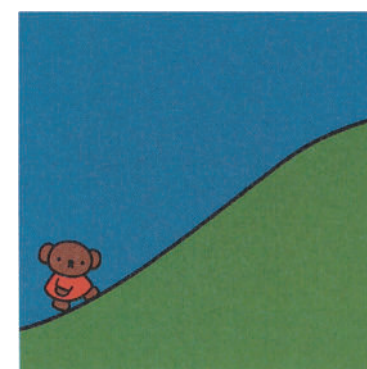
### Safety and security

Typical of the design of Brunna’s books is the fact that the text is always printed on the left-hand page in a simple sans-serif bold typeface – without capitals – in little quatrains whose second and fourth lines rhyme.

From as early as the mid-sixties on, not only has the graphic structure of his illustrations become tighter and subtler, but the textual side of his books has grown as well. Consequently the total harmony between picture and text becomes an obvious given in his books.

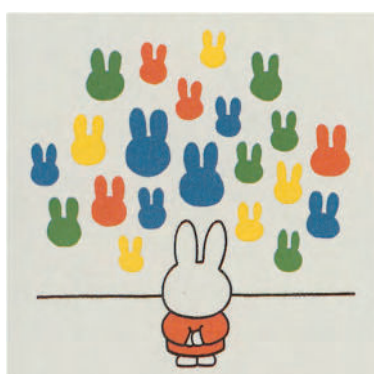
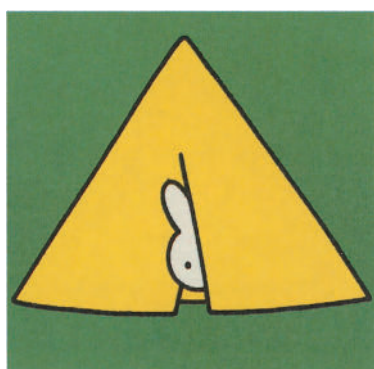
The regular rhythm in his little poems makes for a pleasant cadence when reading aloud, and it invites young children to fill in the last word themselves. In his language use, Brunna remains close to the children for whom he is writing, aged roughly between two and five. Research in creches and play-schools shows that this author-illustrator’s vocabulary is instinctively well-attuned to that of his young audience. Undoubtedly this is also one of the reasons for his enormous popularity among pre-school children.

Brunna’s subjects are usually simple. Most of his books are about small events, like a trip to the zoo, a bicycle ride or a birthday party. There are also wish-fulfilling fantasy stories, with adventures that are warm, stay close to home and have satisfying endings. Safety and security are always a part of the basic ingredients of his work. Only one small socially critical sound is to be heard in *the king* (*de koning*, 1962), based on the romance between



From *do you know why I'm crying?* (*weet jij waarom ik huil?*, 1997). © Mercis b.v.

From *boris on the mountain* (*boris op de berg*, 1989). © Mercis b.v.



From *miffy in the tent*  
(nijntje in de tent, 1995).  
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From *miffy at the gallery*  
(nijntje in het museum,  
1997). © Mercis b.v.

Edward VIII of England and the American Mrs Simpson which led to his abdication. The little king in Bruna's book also takes off his crown so he can marry the girl, rosemary.

As an author, Bruna is at his most daring when he deals with the tough facts of life in *dear grandma bunny* (lieve oma plus), a little book about the death of miffy's grandma. It is totally different in tone from all his other books. In this one, published in 1996, Bruna describes very clearly and with distinct emotion the difficult process of saying goodbye to a beloved family member, and from miffy's point of view, as she tells what happened when grandma bunny died:

*grandma was just lying in bed really  
but it was the last time she would  
it was like she was lying there sleeping  
but she just wasn't breathing like she should*

Everyone is sad. Even grandpa bunny cries ('miffy had never seen him cry / grandpa had never done that before'). Grandma's coffin arrives ('in which grandma lay all comfy / it looked very pretty inside / and seemed really soft too'). Everyone cries saying goodbye to her, and then a lid is placed on the coffin ('now nobody could bother her any more / now grandma could rest quietly').

This emotional book could encourage a child to ask more questions about the topic of death. A child might also find comfort in it if death has entered his or her life. The adult reading aloud also often experiences this publication as a 'book of comfort', as the fan mail Bruna received in response to the book testifies. It was especially for the text of this book that Bruna, the artist, was awarded the *Zilveren Griffel* (Silver Pencil) during the 1997 Children's Book Week.

### **Pictograms and international success**

When we look at the output of all these years, we are struck by the fact that the artist not only often uses the same characters, but also the exact same pictures for different books. When snuffy has become the basic form for 'dog,' the same rendition can be used for dog in another book as well. However, colour variation still causes the existing contour to undergo certain changes.

When Dick Bruna has drawn something, has distilled it in his absolutely personal way from the reality around us, this depiction of a subject or character gains a kind of generic value that can't be improved on any more. It becomes a pictogram, as it were, from a universal 'imagistic world language.' His images are immediately interpreted correctly in a variety of countries, despite all the differences in culture. It is likely that this is why his pictograms have been used on the giant signposts for young beachcombers along the North Sea.

Children everywhere laugh at the same jokes in his books. His 'Bruna House,' for instance, is also immediately recognised by Japanese children as the concept of 'house' even though they aren't familiar with houses like this.

Bruna is, by the way, incredibly popular in Japan. The enormous success of his pictures there has to do no doubt with a certain congruence between his imagistic language and artistic tradition in Japan. After all, Japanese prints historically also display strong contour and the subtle effect of a sober and well thought-out composition.

Dick Bruna not only creates tasteful work, but also shows good taste in selecting the assignments he accepts. His work is never linked to questionable products or dubious, purely commercial projects. In so doing, he has, for instance, designed pictures and posters for a number of idealistic enterprises such as Safe Traffic in the Netherlands, The Red Cross, the Dutch Dairy Board, Unicef, Amnesty International, Terre des Hommes, SOS-Children's Villages, the Humane Society and the Ronald McDonald Children's Fund. A list that also speaks for his friendly and positive attitude toward the world.

Surprisingly (and with considerable success) Bruna approaches adult viewers likewise in his painted poster and logo messages using exactly the same simple formal language.

### Official recognition

At the end of the 1960s critical notes could frequently be heard from the ranks of educators and librarians in connection with Bruna's little books. His work was considered a bit too flat, too cool and lacking somewhat in emotion, and its content was a little on the saccharine side. Therefore it was only very late in his career as a maker of children's books that Dick Bruna received official recognition in the Netherlands. In 1990 he was finally awarded the highly coveted *Gouden Penseel* (Golden Brush) for the illustrations in his book *boris beer* (boris beer). He had already received the royal distinction of knighthood in the Order of Orange Nassau in 1983. In 1987 Bruna, whose pictures have brightened many events in his community, was awarded the medal of the city of Utrecht because he had '*brought the city to a higher level through the illustrious power of his imagination*'. The Soroptimists' Club of Utrecht also had a bronze statue erected (made by his son, the sculptor Marc Bruna) to honour his picture book character miffy. However, the long delay on the part of adult juries in awarding the *Gouden Penseel* never mattered much to him. After all, two generations of fans all over the world, children and grown-ups, don't worry about prizes. They prefer to enjoy his unique and friendly little picture books!

TRUUSJE VROOLAND-LÖB  
*Translated by Wanda Boeke.*

From *boris and barbara*  
(*boris en barbara*, 1989).  
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