

# Los Angeles Times CALENDAR weekend

WITH THE KIDS

## An artist who softens that wild, wild world

By Brenda Rees, Special to The Times

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FOR three and a half decades, Rosemary Wells' artwork has accompanied children's books, magazine articles and storybook anthologies. But this weekend, Wells is putting the words aside and letting her art tell the whole story with a one-woman show that features her furry, childlike bunnies, raccoons, mice and cats.

Opening Saturday at Every Picture Tells a Story in Santa Monica, the exhibition is the largest art showing that the author-illustrator has put together. Wells will be on hand at 2 p.m. to sign books and meet her fans.

The show includes 35 of Wells' original paintings and character studies of such memorable creations as Timothy the raccoon, Noisy Nora the mouse and Yoko the cat. And a Wells collection would not be complete without images of the artist's wildly popular Max and Ruby characters, a bunny brother-and-sister duo whose sibling antics have appeared in more than 20 books.

"The bunnies are very good little actors," Wells says from her Connecticut home. "Max and Ruby are based on my two daughters. [When they were young] I overheard conversations they were having with each other, and the stories just crystallized."

The characters debuted in a 1978 series of board books that were among the few young children's books at the time to feature complete stories and deal with the more nuanced aspects of sibling relationships.

The bunny stories owe their appeal to "the universal set of rules about childhood," says Wells, who describes Max and Ruby as typical siblings, often with divergent agendas. "Even though the older Ruby seems to win most of the time, Max never minds," she says. "He gets his way in his own way."

Since their inception, Max and Ruby have baked cakes, gone shopping, attempted to clean up their rooms and even starred in their own versions of the Greek myths of Midas and Pandora's box.

Why bunnies? "When you use animals, you level the playing field," Wells says. "Animals are also just a virtual step away from the land of make-believe, so they can do things that humans can't. You can have them falling out of trees and other slapstick activities you wouldn't want to see real kids do. Plus, the animals can be any ethnicity — I don't want to stereotype anyone in my books." Indeed, Wells' artwork is full of sweet-looking dogs, cats, raccoons and mice that are, as she says, "Not 'cute' in the traditional cuddly sense, but very real. They are children, after all. I have to be true to who they are."

Growing up, however, Wells wasn't sketching gentle, furry things — she says she was a tomboy, fascinated with drawing "baseball, horses and violent activities, things with lots of action. I was really into drawing things like battles from the Middle Ages."

"I was blessed to have parents who valued books," says Wells, whose mother was a Russian ballet dancer and whose father was a playwright and actor. "I grew up in an age and time where childhood still was innocent and wasn't dominated by other media. Today, TV is promoted heavily, as is shopping and merchandise. It seems that books are considered elitist and expensive, and that's sad and frustrating."

Wells began her career in children's books in 1968, working as a designer at the Macmillan publishing house in New York.

Her first published book was an illustrated edition of Gilbert & Sullivan's "I Have a Song to Sing, O!" from the operetta "The Yeomen of the Guard." She's since published close to 100 books and isn't showing signs of stopping; her latest book, "My Kindergarten," celebrates simple school lessons in science, music, cultural holidays, the voting process and geography.

Overall, the kindergarten experience is an endless supply of ideas and images for Wells.

"Kindergarten is really a petri dish of emotions," she says.

"Here we have a bunch of strangers thrown together, and it's amazing to see what develops and how a child learns to adjust to people who are different. It's the first steps we take of getting out there in the wild, wild world."

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`The Art of Rosemary Wells'

**Where:** Every Picture Tells a Story, 1311 Montana Ave., Santa Monica

**When:** 2 p.m. Saturday, opening reception. Regular hours: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Mondays through Saturdays; 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sundays

**Price:** Free

**Ends:** Nov. 30

**Contact:** (310) 451-2700