

Raccoons, ribbons, and misfit toys: Inside the Swarthmore home of author Judy Schachner

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Posted: September 05, 2015

More than 20 books into her career, best-selling children's book author and illustrator Judy Schachner has finally written a memoir. Sort of.

Her newest book, *Dewey Bob*, out Tuesday, is ostensibly the story of a raccoon with a knack for turning junk into art. But, she acknowledges, "Dewey and I are one and the same. I thought it would be a great idea to have a raccoon who obsessively collects trash and repurposes it - which I have done my whole life."

Schachner, best-known for her now eight-books-strong Skippyjon Jones series, isn't exaggerating.

Every corner of her 100-year-old Craftsman-style house in Swarthmore is filled with such curated collections: a mismatched array of vintage mirrors lines the two-story wall of the living room she and her husband, Bob, added to the house a decade ago; a flock of bird prints swoops up the staircase; and, throughout the house, a taxidermy menagerie is frozen in formal poses on shelves and lounging casually on cushions.

To Schachner, it's not clutter, but source material.

In her studio, the jars of buttons, spools of ribbon, sparkly objects, strings of paper cranes, and a cabinet of misfit toys serve as inspiration. She currently shares the space with a number of stuffed raccoons, including one sporting a colorful headdress. They're helpful in conjuring the spirit (and anatomy) of Dewey.

"I'm inspired as much by the texture of that old piece of wood over there as I am by reading. Texture, shape, color - it all goes to enhance my work," she said. New configurations can spark fresh ideas. "In my studio, I like to rearrange things. It's like making still lives with objects."

It's been a lifelong passion for Schachner, 64.

"I've been accumulating since my mother took me junking when I was a little girl," she said. Her mother died when she was 15 but left her daughter with a gift for finding beauty in humble places.

She also models her approach, in some ways, after that of another local collector, Alfred Barnes, who likewise had a knack for pairing everyday objects with fine art.

So, that wall of bird prints includes, for example, at least one significant work: a 17th-century, hand-tinted piece Schachner bought out of stubborn pride. (When the clerk clarified that the \$9 price was actually \$900, she smirked as though to say, "You can never afford this," Schachner recalled. "I whipped out my American Express.") She cherishes it, but no more than the birds that are torn from Audubon Society calendars.

In between the salvaged and the scrapped, Schachner's own hand is evident.

There's the mural of trees sprouting from the staircase, and her doors contain paintings of loved ones: her late mother, her late cats. In the bathroom, she installed a wall-size mosaic of a mermaid, mostly because she wanted to include letter tiles reminding her daughters, when they were young, to wash their hands. And displayed prominently near the front door is a series of portraits of their dog, Buster, who died about four years ago. (She paints one for her husband each year as a birthday gift; when he opens it, everyone cries.)

Her daughter, Emma Schachner, 33, said growing up in the house was one epic adventure.

"My mom was able to give us an amazing and creative environment. She would hang up large pieces of paper in the hallway and we were able to draw all over the walls," she said. Her 12th birthday present was a stuffed fox.

"I just remember for years being a red fox until I was 9," she said. (Her sister was John Lennon.) Her teacher sent Emma to the school psychologist; her parents let her wear ears and a tail, and launched their taxidermy collection. Emma said it's no coincidence she's an evolutionary anatomist, working in a veterinary orthopedics lab at Louisiana State University.

She recalls the house as being in constant flux.

"My dad always jokes he gets up to go to the bathroom and the furniture has been rearranged. My mom will decorate based not always on what's functional or the most optimum path for moving around the house. It's what's the most beautiful and makes her creative juices flow."

All of that visual fuel powers Schachner's collaged "character bibles" - scrapbooks loaded with images torn from magazines, sketches, bits of text and found fragments that develop her characters, plot, and vocabulary in a nonlinear fashion.

For example, Schachner loved the patina on an image of a worn pair of jeans she saw in a magazine. She cut the picture out, pasted it into her book, and added a raccoon peeking out of the pants.

That yielded the first lines of her book: "Dewey Bob Crocket was born in the pocket of an old pair of pants. When he got too big for his britches, it was time to move out."

Lucia Monfried, her editor for 20 years at Penguin Random House, said visiting Schachner's studio is like peering into her creative process.

"It wasn't a surprise that her house should have been so beautiful, richly decorated, and completely unique and reflective of what her books look like," she said. "Dewey Bob makes art from the things around him, and that's what she does, too. All the ideas and images go into her head and are synthesized and come out as art."

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