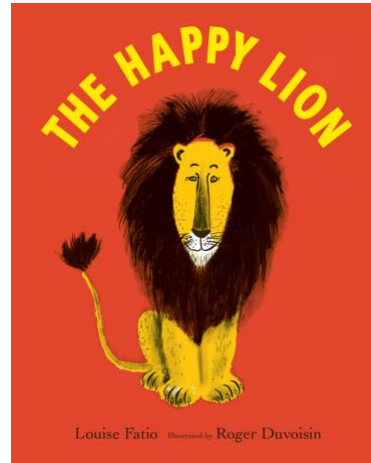


Interview with Anne Duvoisin, granddaughter of Roger and Louise Duvoisin



How did Roger and Louise (aka Loulou) meet, and what made them leave Europe to live in America in the late 1920s?

Both of my grandparents were born and raised in Geneva, Switzerland. My grandfather met my grandmother when they were both painting ceramics in a factory in Geneva. Along with friends, they moved to Paris. There, they and a number of their friends decided on a lark to do a year long internship contract in New York City with Maillinson's Silk Company, where they would work in designing textiles. So Roger and Loulou moved to New York along with several artist friends because it seemed like an exciting short term adventure. They had never imagined that they would stay stateside. However, the Depression hit soon after and Maillinson's closed down. This left a bunch of stranded French artist emigres all out of work and hardly being able to speak English. The husbands in the group all rented a garret apartment together in the Village, and took on every piece of work they could find in advertising and commercial art: they painted murals, did stage set designs and painted newspaper ads for department stores and other advertisers. The wives all lived outside New York in New Jersey, and their husbands would join them at weekends. That's where my father spent his early years, in Towaco, New Jersey. My father would be on the bus or subway and suddenly see huge posters designed by Roger such as one for 'Lifesavers', a popular type of candy, and think that was completely usual!

How did Roger first get interested in children's books?

It was really a result of having his own children. My father used to draw pictures of the people and things around him and invent stories about them. This led my grandfather to write a book about a little boy whose picture of a postman starts a conversation with him, and it was published as *A Little Boy was Drawing*, by Scribner in 1932. It was this book that launched my grandfather into his career as a children's book artist.

How did your grandparents like living in America, and did they ever consider returning to Switzerland?

In the early days they planned to ultimately return to Europe, but life kept getting in the way. The rise of the Nazis in the 30s put an end to any desire to return. They both retained thick French accents, particularly my grandmother Loulou, who was not

working in the commercial world in New York, and they did go back and visit Europe fairly frequently after the war. They missed European culture and history. They took me for trips to France, Italy, Great Britain and Switzerland. On one occasion, when I was seven, they left me with relatives in our Geneva family for several months while they travelled behind the iron curtain. You had to get special permission to do so in those days. My French was pretty fluent but has remained at that level, that is, with the vocabulary of a child!



How did they feel about being French Swiss but living in America?

My grandparents were not too bothered about it. They knew a lot of French emigres, continued to speak a lot of French and were nostalgic for the country of their birth. However, my father felt slightly awkward and wanted to show patriotism for America. When America joined the second world war, he snuck out under age and joined the navy. My grandparents would have never given him permission to go if he had asked them.

What do you remember about spending time with your grandparents, how did they live?

After becoming successful, they were able to buy some land in New Jersey and build a Frank Lloyd Wright design house, surrounded by their own 20 or so acres, which in turn were surrounded by enormous landholdings belonging to the very wealthy. It felt like living in a national park.

In the way of animals, they had peacocks, chickens, swans, ducks, guinea hens, dogs, cats, all manner of birds, and they rescued baby animals of all sorts. They had a beautiful vegetable and fruit garden and several chicken coops. They had several orchards, where they grew apples, cherries, peaches and pears. They also grew red currants and raspberries and rhubarb as well as virtually every vegetable and flower that was native to the area. It was a sort of small-holding where they were gentleman farmers. It was an idyllic place which they loved, as did I. My grandmother used to cook great feasts for the whole family and my grandfather's colleagues and publishers. She was a gourmet cook, and although she didn't develop her own career as an artist, she would make lace, sew beautiful clothes in her sewing studio and plan the garden. She made a beautiful home. They were epicureans and knew how to live life well.



What do you remember about the way Roger used to work? Did he have a studio?

My grandfather had a studio in the house, and would work at his drawing board all day and then sometimes more after dinner. He was a workaholic, a Swiss trait, but also loved his work. He made a second drafting table in the studio -- originally for my uncle Jacques, my father's younger brother (who would grow up to be an architect). During my childhood, I would use the drafting table alongside him, and he encouraged me to create artwork. In the early days, books could only be created using 3 colours, but Roger developed a technique using different cellophane overlays. He became famous for that. He could build up a collage effect by using multiple layers and create intricate results.

What about storytelling – did you grandparents like to tell you stories?

My grandmother was a great reader and really taught me a love of reading. She came up with the idea of *The Happy Lion*. They were on holiday in France when they read the real story of a lion who had escaped from a zoo. My grandmother wondered how the lion would feel when the visitors who had loved coming to see him were now terrified of him. After that, it was my grandfather who crafted the story.

He loved children and loved telling them stories, which he would make up all the time. We used to have an on-going joke about being ticklish, and he invented a character called Mr Ticklish who featured in endless games and stories he made up for me.



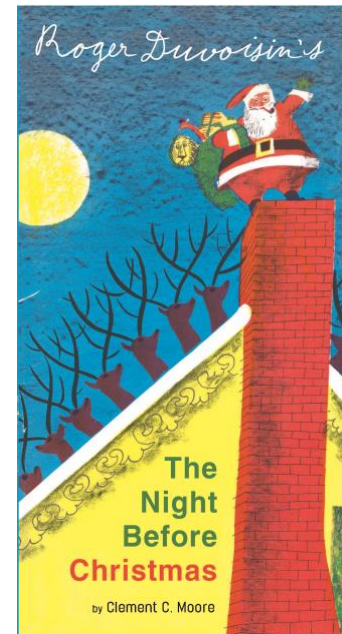
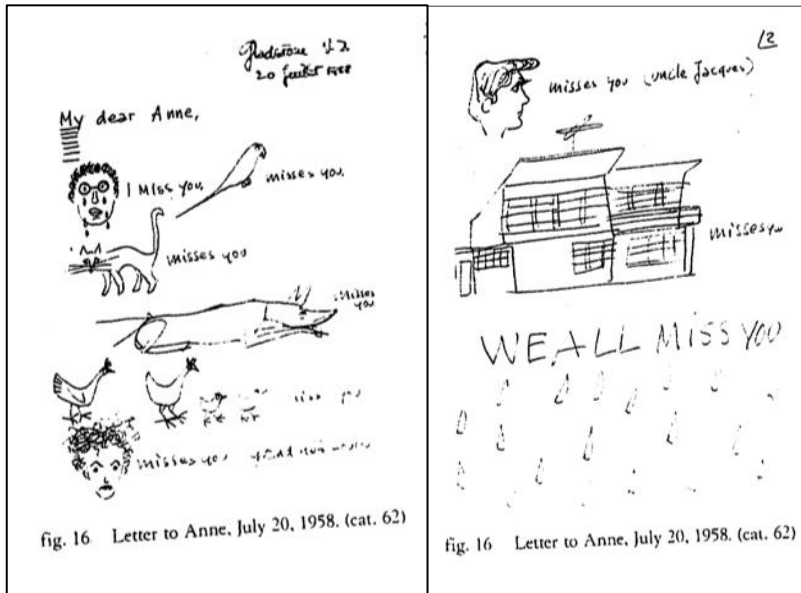
What about some of the times you would spend with Roger, what do you remember?

When I was about 5, my parents got a new apartment. They weren't very well off at the time, but my grandfather came and painted my room all over with colourful murals. It seemed completely normal to me at the time, the kind of thing everyone would have! My grandparents raised me for the first four years of my life, while my father was in medical school and my mother worked as a school teacher to put him through school. As a result, French was my first language. Later, they would take me on their travels and I particularly remember my grandfather's love of cathedrals and architecture. He had studied the importance of arches in the development of architecture, and would explain this and other features as we looked around. When the terrible fire at Notre Dame happened recently, I thought how devastated they would have been had they known.

They would take me to buy clothes, including my school clothes. When I hesitated between choices, in the hope they might buy me more than one, they would insist I make a choice! Their principle was that you should buy few things but always quality items which would last. They were keen on conservation and thoughtful about the environment. They loved animals and disapproved of hunting, a theme explored in *The Happy Hunter*.

Do you and your family see yourself in any of the books?

Yes, we do feature in many of the books. I appear in many books, as did my grandmother and other relatives. As a toddler, I was the model for *One Step, Two* and later as the protagonist in *A Doll for Marie*, which is about a girl who would dearly love to have her own doll; it has a really cool feature which is a pocket at the back which contains a book for the doll. My father is in *A little boy was drawing*. It's my grandmother who appears in *The Night Before Christmas*.



What is Roger's legacy as a creator of children's books?

From a family point of view, it is nice that my grandfather has inspired his children and grandchildren to write and be creative. My sister Jeanne has written a book for children called *How Does Sleep Come?* (2012, Sourcebooks Jabberwocky) and my brother has written the Emily Kane adventures, under the name Jacques Antoine. And I wrote *Heinz and Hobnail and the Great Shoe Hunt* which my grandfather illustrated (Abelard-Schuman, 1976). My cousins are creative in the fields of music (another love of my grandfather) and design.

My grandfather continued to work hard all his life, despite relatively early success, and always felt some degree of guilt that his work enabled him to live comfortably while some of his close fine-artist friends struggled to make ends meet. He created art not only for children's books, but amongst various other things for UNICEF cards and *New Yorker* front covers and spots.

His picture books were largely intended as modern fables, and aimed to teach gentle morals with humour. They continue to be published in over 30 languages around the world, and still seem to appeal to new generations of readers.

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