



An Illustrious Life

ARTIST SUE CORNELISON
THRIVES ON EXPLORATION BUT
FINDS HER CENTER IN THE
SMALL-TOWN CARRIAGE HOUSE
WHERE SHE ILLUSTRATES
POPULAR CHILDREN'S BOOKS

WRITTEN BY ANN HINGA KLEIN



A blend of digital and tactile techniques gives a gentle softness to illustrations like this image of a sweet tyke riding a polar bear for a new American Girl story, "Bitty Baby Loves the Snow" by Kirby Larson. The charming concept and cherubic expressions are hallmarks of Sue Cornelison's work. © 2013 American Girl. All rights reserved. All American Girl marks are trademarks of American Girl.



There's a sense of quiet in traveling the blacktop roads that split the rolling farmland south of Des Moines, crossing the timbered tributaries that ramble toward the Des Moines River.

Artist, author and illustrator Sue Cornelison, 57, smiles when she recalls first making the drive with her husband, jazz musician Ross Cornelison, in 1989. They were living in Des Moines, squeezed into a ranch house with five kids, a drum set and a potter's wheel, but had given up on the dream of finding a bigger house that fit their budget.

Then Ross mentioned an ad he'd seen for a three-story Victorian in a small town south of the city. "We were driving and driving—it felt like *forever*," Cornelison recalls. "But when we pulled up to the corner, I knew it the second I saw it: We had to have this house!"

Raised in suburban Chicago, she marvels at the contentment she has found in rural Iowa. "I'm a transplant," she says. "But I can't imagine being anywhere else."

At the time, Cornelison also couldn't imagine becoming an illustrator for some of the top brands in children's literature, including the popular American Girl series. Yet she stands today as one of America's go-to illustrators in this genre, shipping charming and whimsical art from her home in idyllic St. Charles.

It's a world away from the Des Moines printing plant where she started her career. A Drake University graduate with degrees in art education and studio art, she had been unable to find a teaching job. But as she worked preparing pre-press materials for crafts books, she would admire the line art and quilting diagrams and think, *I can do this*.

Among her friends were six press installers from Italy. Inspired by their descriptions of Florence, she enrolled in the Studio Art Centers International there. "Art was *everywhere*, on every corner," she recalls. "People were walking around with portfolios, there were museums. ... It felt so natural and so wonderful to be there."

A marriage proposal from Ross drew her back to Des Moines after graduation. And for 10 years they built their family as Sue, a former high school athlete, taught gymnastics at a YMCA. Yearning to get back to art, she enrolled in a

This illustration from the bedtime storybook "Sofia's Dream" by Land Wilson received a silver award from the Society of Illustrators. © Sue Cornelison.

Opposite page, left: How would a child feed a dragon? With dandelions offered from a perch on the beast's belly, in Cornelison's view. "Dandelion Treats," a 12-by-18-inch oil on canvas, wasn't painted for a client's book. Instead, the artist says, "I plan to write one to go with it." © Sue Cornelison.

Opposite, right: When a prospective client challenged Cornelison to illustrate a baby elephant getting bathed, she came up with "Nose Bubbles"—and got the job. © 2013 American Girl. All rights reserved. All American Girl marks are trademarks of American Girl.

"She had developed a character with a huge personality. Whimsical and exciting, everything about the piece was breathtaking."

Gretchen Becker
American Girl art director



Sue Cornelison enjoys working in the light of large northside windows in her St. Charles studio. Photo by Molly C. Photography.

and abstract styles as needed. “She can get a manuscript and read it and be transported into the world of, *‘What’s going to tell this story in the very best way it can be told?’*”

Buoyed by early successes, Cornelison focused on children’s publishing. She and Ross added a studio to a carriage house on their property, then filled it with the tools of her trade, including a digital tablet she uses to collaborate with clients, developing art they can review in computer files before she refines it and layers in color, using both digital and traditional techniques in oil or colored pencil. “That gives me a softness and texture that are more organic,” she says.

Cornelison’s elegant work has earned her a client list of heavy hitters in children’s publishing, including Disney Hyperion, National Geographic, Sterling Publishing, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt and American Girl, for which she recently completed more than 175 illustrations for a new series of stories. And while hundreds applied for that opportunity, Cornelison’s work stood out.

“She had developed a character with a huge personality,” says American Girl art director Gretchen Becker. “Whimsical and exciting, everything about the piece was breathtaking.”

Cornelison’s technique of finishing digital images with colored pencil was unique, too. “Most illustrators I’ve worked with are specifically digital or specifically traditional,” Becker says, “and this is a good combination of both.”

Today Cornelison travels for inspiration, teaches gymnastics for fun, and takes time for country walks and treetop views that feed her soul. “We just got lucky and found one of those awesome houses,” she says. “My life really formed because I was in this little town.” ■

Writer Ann Hinga Klein freelances from a cottage in Des Moines’ Roosevelt neighborhood—her own attempt at nirvana in Iowa. She specializes in human interest journalism.

class where she confessed to another student that she dreamed of freelancing for Meredith Corp., the Des Moines publishing giant whose books she had admired in her printing-plant job years earlier. “The woman looked at me,” she recalls, “and said, ‘It only takes one day of being brave.’”

So Cornelison made the call. “Do you design cross-stitch?” a woman on the line from Meredith asked. “I went, ‘Yeah,’” Cornelison says, laughing as she recalls her next thought: *“Ohmygodohmygod....”*

In a conference room the next day, Sue poured her work samples from a garbage bag onto a table for the scrutiny of several graphic designers. “Finally, I said, ‘I really don’t know what I can do for you. Do you see anything?’”

One spoke up: “She said, ‘You’re an illustrator.’ And I said, ‘I am?’” Cornelison jumped at the opportunity. “I was going to be whatever they wanted me to be!” Soon she was finding work as an illustrator and, instead of a garbage bag, she had a growing portfolio.

She also had a great talent, says Randy Messer, design director for educational publisher Perfection Learning Corp. in Clive, a suburb of Des Moines. Messer hired Cornelison for a variety of projects, praising her ability to work in realistic



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