



The New York Public Library
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture,
Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division

Guide to the

John Steptoe Papers

1877-1991 [bulk 1969-1989]

Sc MG 416

Processed by Tamara Stewart & Hanna Bailey.

Summary

Creator: Steptoe, John, 1950-1989

Title: John Steptoe Papers

Date: 1877-1991 [bulk 1969-1989]

Source: Gift of John L. Steptoe Estate by Ann Armistead White, Executrix, 1991. SCM91-9.

Abstract: The John Steptoe Papers consist of personal papers, personal and professional correspondence, examples of his writings, reviews of his work, news clippings and programs regarding his seminars and lectures, and material from various organizations to which he belonged. The personal papers contain clippings and press releases about Steptoe's achievements, correspondence with family members, a resume and biographical essays, and obituaries. There is professional correspondence and fanmail from adults and children, as well as letters from other artists.

Conditions Governing Access:

Pamela Knicely-John Steptoe correspondence closed until December 31, 1996.

Preferred citation: John Steptoe Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library

Language of the Material: English

Processing note: Processed by Tamara Stewart & Hanna Bailey; Machine-readable finding aid created by Apex Data Services.

Separated Materials:

The following items were removed from:

Name of Collection/Papers John Lewis Steptoe Papers

Accession Number SCM 91-9

*Donor:*John L. Steptoe Estate by Ann Armistead White, Executrix

*Date received:*April 24, 1991

*Date transferred:*May 4, 1991

The item(s) listed below have been sent to the division indicated, either to be retained or disposed of there. Any items that should receive special disposition are clearly marked.

span class="emph">Schomburg Photographs and Print Division:/span>

Five (5) photos of John Steptoe. Five (5) photos of family and friends, two (2) slides of Steptoe's illustrations from *The Story of Jumping Mouse* (1983)

*Processed by:*H. Bailey/T. Stewart/D. Lachatanere

*Date:*July 28, 1995

Related Materials:

Drawings by Steptoe can be found hanging in the Children's Room at the Stapleton Branch Library on Staten Island.

Creator History

John Lewis Steptoe was the first prolific African-American author and illustrator of children's books. His books were written about African-American children, allowing them to identify with characters and environments that previous children's stories ignored. Steptoe was born in 1950; his parents, John Oliver and Elesteen Hill Steptoe, raised him in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, New York. Steptoe loved to draw as a child and later attended the Manhattan High School of Art and Design. He studied with painter Norman Lewis while working for HarYou Act, an anti-poverty program. He left high school in his final year, during which time the publishers, Harper & Rowe agreed to publish his first children's stories.

In 1969, Steptoe's first book, *Stevie*, was published; first in LIFE magazine, and then by Harper & Rowe. Prior to *Stevie*, no children's story had ever been published in a national magazine. The story was written in "black English," and was about a young boy living in the ghetto. The American Library Association (ALA) declared it a notable children's book, and the Society of Illustrators gave Steptoe a gold medal award. *Publisher's Weekly* and the *School Library Journal* each included *Stevie* on their "Best Book of the Year" lists. In the following three years, Steptoe published three other children's stories with Harper & Rowe: *Uptown*(1970), *Train Ride*(1971), and *Birthday*(1972).

In his earliest books, Steptoe used his own experiences as the basis for his writing. Later, he turned to his children as models, and parenthood itself, as inspiration for his work. Viking Press published *My Special Best Words* in 1974, a story told from his daughter Bweela's perspective. In *Daddy Is A Monster... Sometimes*(Lippincott 1980), Steptoe used his relationship with his children as the basis for a story discussing parental mood-swings and how these emotional shifts are perceived by children. Steptoe's first novel, *Marcia*, published in 1975 (Viking Press), is about growing up and some of the difficult issues which face teenagers. His final book, *Baby Says*(1988), was written for infants and

toddlers and was published by Lothrop.

Step toe began by writing everyday-life stories, but as his career progressed, he started writing fantasy tales. He believed that the latter would encourage children to exercise their imaginations and fulfill their dreams. In 1983 he illustrated and retold a Native American legend called *The Story of Jumping Mouse* (Lothrop, Lee and Shepard). *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters*, an adapted Zimbabwean Cinderella story, was also published by Lothrop in 1987. He spent a year researching the plant and animal life which he recreated in his illustrations for this story. An unpublished fantasy tale entitled *The Prince and the Enchanted Zebra*, also exemplifies this tendency towards fantasy.

Step toe illustrated several books written by other authors. These are: *All Us Come Cross the Water* (1973) by Lucille Clifton, *She Come Bringing Me That Little Baby Girl* (1975) by Eloise Greenfield, *Mother Crocodile* (1981) by Rosa Guy, and *OUTside/INside Poems* (1981) and *All the Colors of the Race* (1982) by Arnold Adoff. His early illustrations concentrated on color, then changed to black and white drawings with an emphasis on line and form, and ended with a combination of these two techniques. He received honors for many of his early books, and in 1970 a library in Brooklyn was named after him. Step toe twice received the Coretta Scott King Award for Illustration for *Mother Crocodile* and *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters*. In 1987 he was given the Boston Globe—Horn Book Award for Illustration. Both *The Story of Jumping Mouse* and *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* were declared Caldecott Honor Books by the ALA. Step toe was also honored by receiving fellowships to the MacDowell Colony (an artists' retreat in New Hampshire), on four separate occasions.

Throughout his career, Step toe lectured at universities across the country, including Keene State College, Amherst College, and Louisiana State University, among others. He also taught a design class at the Brooklyn Museum School in 1971, and in 1976 he taught at the Eighth Annual Upper Midwest Writers' Conference at Bemidji State University in Minnesota. In 1986 he led a two week illustration seminar at Vashon High School in Missouri, however, the seminar was temporarily canceled due to teachers' disapproval over his students' time away from their regular course work. Step toe occasionally exhibited his work at museums and other spaces, such as the Rochester Museum (1974), and the Boston Public Library (1975).

Step toe had two children; Bweela, born in 1970, and Javaka, born in 1971, whom he raised as a single parent. Step toe also cared for his nephew, Antoine, intermittently throughout the child's early years and Antoine lived with Step toe during the last three years of Step toe's life. In the fall of 1987, John Step toe contracted AIDS. He died on August 28, 1989. Two months later, the organization "Visual AIDS" declared an AIDS awareness day in which most museums closed to protest the large number of AIDS victims in the art community. On that day, the Museum of American Illustration exhibited some of Step toe's original illustrations.

Scope and Content Note

The bulk of the John Lewis Step toe Papers date from 1964-1991. A file on the genealogy of the Step toe family contains copies of documents dating from the 1930s and 40s, with one document dated 1877. The papers consist of Step toe's personal papers, personal and professional correspondence, examples of his writings and illustrations, reviews of his work, clippings and programs regarding his seminars and lectures, and material from various organizations to which he belonged.

Arrangement: Organized into four series: I Personal Papers; II Professional Papers; III Writings and Illustrations; and IV Organizations

Key Terms

Subjects

African American authors -- New York (State) -- New York

Children's drawings

Children's literature, American

Illustrated children's books -- United States

Illustration of books

Illustrators -- United States

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Drawings

Names

Step toe, John, 1950-1989

Container List

Personal Papers

The *PERSONAL PAPERS* series (.5 lin. ft.) contains four folders of personal correspondence, and a folder entitled "Family" which includes correspondence among immediate family members, and letters and brochures concerning Steptoe's children's education. There are journal/diary entries, book reports done by Steptoe when he was in grade school, and notes and correspondence written and received while Steptoe was at the MacDowell Colony in 1973. This series also contains Steptoe's résumé and biographical essays about him, and a folder of genealogical research comprised of photocopies of documents tracing the Steptoe family in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Lastly, there are obituaries and appreciations.

- b. 1 f. 1 r. Biographical Information 1986, n.d.
- b. 1 f. 2 r. Journal/Diary Entries 1975-1977, n.d.
- b. 1 f. 3 r. Notes, Book 1, June 19, (MacDowell Colony) 1973 -Nov. 29, 1973
- b. 1 f. 4 r. School Essays & Reports ca. 1964-1966
- b. 1 f. 5 r. ca. 1964-1966
- b. 1 f. 6 r. ca. 1964-1966
- b. 1 f. 7 r. Family History 1877-1981, n.d.
- b. 1 f. 8 r. Family 1976-1990

Personal Correspondence

- b. 1 f. 9 r. A-Fim 1973-1989
- b. 1 f. 10 r. Fin-K 1975-1989
- b. 1 f. 11 r. Pamela Knicely 1975-1980
- b. 2 f. 1 r. L-W 1973-1989
- b. 2 f. 2 r. First Name Only 1975-1987
- b. 2 f. 3 r. Healing the Broken Relationship Seminar Training 1987
- b. 2 f. 4 r. Appreciations & Obituaries 1989-1991

Professional Papers

The *PROFESSIONAL PAPERS* series (1.2 lin. ft.) contains professional correspondence which is arranged alphabetically. There are separate folders of correspondence for Ann Armistead White, a long-time friend and Richard Gaugert. Gaugert was the Events Coordinator for the Saint Louis Art Museum, and an independent promoter of films and picture books for children, who was a friend, fan, and promoter of Steptoe's work. Fanmail is divided between adults and children, and is arranged chronologically. The series also contains requests from Steptoe's fans, and inquiries from artists seeking advice or asking him to illustrate their books. Press releases, nominations, honors and awards, speech and presentation notes, and material from courses Steptoe taught, are also part of this series, as well as a folder of writings by other authors which Steptoe saved.

Correspondence

- b. 2 f. 5 r. A-G 1970-1989
- b. 2 f. 6 r. Richard Gaugert 1980-1988
- b. 2 f. 7 r. H-Q 1970-1988
- b. 2 f. 8 r. R-Z 1970-1989
- b. 2 f. 9 r. Ann Armistead White 1973-1990

Fanmail

- b. 2 f. 10 r. Adults 1969-1989
- Children
- b. 2 f. 11 r. 1970-1974

Professional Papers (cont.)

Correspondence (cont.)

Fanmail (cont.)

Children (cont.)

- b. 3 f. 1 r. 1974-1982
- b. 3 f. 2 r. 1983
- b. 3 f. 3 r. 1985-1987
- b. 3 f. 4 r. 1988-1989
- b. 3 f. 5 r. 1990
- b. 3 f. 6 r. Fanmail Requests 1982-1989
- b. 4 f. 1 r. Artists' Inquiries 1976-1989, n.d.
- b. 4 f. 2 r. Speech & Professional Presentation Notes n.d.
- b. 4 f. 3 r. Public Appearances 1972-1987
- b. 4 f. 4 r. Nominations, Honors, Awards 1974-1990
- b. 4 f. 5 r. Press Releases 1983-1989
- b. 4 f. 6 r. Clippings 1969-1989
- b. 4 f. 7 r. Bemidji State University/Writers' Conference 1976
- b. 4 f. 8 r. Vashon High School/Project 1986
- b. 4 f. 9 r. Writings by Other Authors 1975-1989, n.d.

Writings and Illustrations

WRITINGS AND ILLUSTRATIONS collection (1.4 lin. ft.) is the largest series, and contains manuscripts, rough drafts, outlines, galleys and editors' proofs of several of Steptoe's books. Oversize items from this series are housed in box #7. There are galleys and/or illustrations from *Marcia*, *Inside Outside Poems*, *Train Ride*, *Daddy Is A Monster... Sometimes*, *Uptown*, *My Special Best Words*, and *Baby Says*. Published reviews of Steptoe's books and illustrations are part of this series, and in box #9, there is a book of reviews and drawings entitled "IMPRESSIONS OF STEVIE," which were created by children from District 16 (located in Brooklyn, New York), in 1970. Also included are poems, published artwork (non-book illustrations), and miscellaneous and unpublished writings, and an undated, reflective piece of writing entitled "Literary Retrospect of John Steptoe."

- b. 5 f. 1 r. "All the Colors of the Race," n.d.
- b. 5 f. 2 r. "All Us Come Cross the Water," n.d.
- b. 5 f. 3 r. "Birthday," n.d.
- b. 5 f. 4 r. "Jeffrey Bear Cleans Up His Act," 1980-1981, n.d.
- b. 5 f. 5 r. "Marcia," n.d.
- b. 5 f. 6 r. "Mother Crocodile," 1981, n.d.
- b. 5 f. 7 r. "Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters," 1985
- b. 5 f. 8 r. "My Daddy is a Monster... Sometimes," 1975-1979, n.d.
- b. 5 f. 9 r. "My Special Best Words" 1973-1974, n.d.
- b. 5 f. 10 r. "OUTside/INSide Poems," n.d.
- b. 5 f. 11 r. "Stevie," 1969
- b. 5 f. 12 r. "The Story of Jumping Mouse," 1981, n.d.
- b. 5 f. 13 r. "Train Ride," 1970-1971
- b. 5 f. 14 r. "The Prince & the Enchanted Zebra," n.d.
- b. 6 f. 1 r. Pamphlet Cover Illustrations 1983-1989
- b. 6 f. 2 r. Published Artwork 1973-1988
- b. 6 f. 3 r. Poems 1968-1979, n.d.
- b. 6 f. 4 r. "Literary Retrospect of John Steptoe" n.d.
- b. 6 f. 5 r. Miscellaneous Stories 1976-1981, n.d.

Writings and Illustrations (cont.)

- b. 6 f. 6 r. Miscellaneous Writings 1976-1980, n.d.
- b. 6 f. 7 r. Miscellaneous Drug-Related Writings 1969, n.d.
- Galleys and Proofs
- b. 7 f. 1 r. "Baby Says" - First Proof Drawings n.d.
- b. 7 f. 2 r. "Marcia" - Master Set n.d.
- b. 7 f. 3 r. "My Daddy Is a Monster... Sometimes" - Galley 1976
- b. 7 f. 4 r. "My Special Best Words" - Copy of Final Proof n.d.
- b. 7 f. 5 r. "OUTside/INside Poems" - Galley 1979
- b. 7 f. 6 r. LIFE Magazine Stevie" and Interview with John Steptoe Aug. 29, 1969 - "
- b. 7 f. 7 r. "Train Ride" - Proofs 1971
- b. 7 f. 8 r. "Uptown" - Printed Book Jacket n.d.

Reviews

- b. 8 f. 1 r. "All the Colors of the Race," 1982-1987
- b. 8 f. 2 r. "Baby Says," 1988-1989
- b. 8 f. 3 r. "Daddy Is a Monster... Sometimes," 1980-1985
- b. 8 f. 4 r. "Jeffrey Bear Cleans Up His Act," 1983-84
- b. 8 f. 5 r. "Mother Crocodile," 1981
- b. 8 f. 6 r. "Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters," 1987-1989
- b. 8 f. 7 r. "OUTside/INside Poems," 1981-1984
- b. 8 f. 8 r. "Stevie," 1969-1988
- b. 8 f. 9 r. "Story of Jumping Mouse," 1984-1989
- b. 8 f. 10 r. "Marcia," "My Special Best Words," and "She Come Bringing Me...," 1974-1976
- b. 8 f. 11 r. Cover Illustrations 1984-1985

Organizations

Steptoe belonged to several *ORGANIZATIONS*(.1 lin. ft.); the collection includes pamphlets, brochures and newsletters from a variety of them. Many of the folders contain letters inviting him to join their group and it is unclear whether or not he did.

- b. 8 f. 12 r. The Authors' Guild 1975
- b. 8 f. 13 r. Children's Book Collections 1975-1982
- b. 8 f. 14 r. High School of Art and Design 1975, n.d.
- b. 8 f. 15 r. Illustrators' Guild 1977
- b. 8 f. 16 r. MacDowell Colony 1973-1980
- b. 8 f. 17 r. PEN American Center 1987-1989
- b. 8 f. 18 r. Reading Is Fundamental 1973-1976
- b. 8 f. 19 r. Society of Illustrators 1980-1989
- "Impressions of Stevie," 1970