

English transcription of the filmed visit to the « Posy Simmonds. Dessiner la littérature » exhibition

Paul Gravett :

Hello. We're in Paris, and Paris was very special to Posy Simmonds. She came here in 1962 as a 17 year old student to study French civilisation, and she fell in love with Paris and French culture. Here's a drawing she made, as a student, of the rooftops of Paris. And while she was here, she also fell in love with the cartooning traditions of France.

She had grown up in the U.K., in the countryside, and in her family home, there was a huge library, which she was exploring from a very early age. And it's here she discovered the cartoons of Ronald Searle, famously in *Punch*, but also famous for *Nigel Molesworth, the Naughtiest Boy in School*, which inspired Harry Potter and Hogwarts.

And then, another big inspiration shortly after were the American comic books, which her older brothers passed on to her, which included stories of horror and crime. And from this, she very quickly began drawing her own comics. We have an example here, called *The Red Dagger*, drawn when she was around 8 or 9 years old. It's quite a dark, sombre mystery story with murder and intrigue. So from the very beginning, she had a very rich imagination and was making writing and drawing at the same time, making her own comics.

After Paris, Posy came to study art in London and was very influenced by pop art, as we can see from these drawings. And even while she was a student, she was already getting commissions. Her first paid job was making this dust jacket design for a novel. But her career really took off in the early seventies, working for the British press, and especially for *The Guardian* newspaper. It was there she would have a long career, drawing on the page devoted each week to women and women's issues and rights and concerns. And it was here she developed a cast of characters who became beloved by readers for over ten years.

And we have here the first two comic strips, which she produced in 1977, introducing her cast of characters, the three women, all of them individuals who were given their own life and stories through the strips. And we have an example here, the kind of thing that she would do here. This story is called *The World Turned Upside Down*, and imagines a typical office scene, but with the sexual roles reversed: instead of men being sexist, it's women who are being sexist. And it is all, of course, a fantasy and dream of a long suffering secretary with a very chauvinist boss.

From the characters Posy created for *The Guardian*, she developed the very first graphic novel in Britain in 1981, called *True Love*, which is a story about a secretary who falls in love with her boss, but who then gets revenge by falling in love with the most handsome man in the world, Cliff Duff. *True Love* really was a landmark in British graphic novels.

We're now looking at Posy's second big career as a children's book author and illustrator, working for the first time in full colour. In her first book, *Fred*, in 1987, she imagines the secret life of a domestic cat. Her owners are a little boy and a girl, who think that Fred must be the most boring cat in the world, but they discover after the cat dies that he has a secret life. This is the funeral being held, when the whole neighbourhood becomes filled with cats. And the great revelation is that Fred is not just an ordinary cat. He is the Elvis Presley of the cat world. He's a superstar. And this story by Posy was adapted into an animated film, which was nominated for an Oscar. And it ends with a celebration of Fred's career and beautiful images of the children and the cat world having a big feast from the dustbins.

Among Posy's other children's books is *Baker Cat*, produced in 2004. We're lucky to have her sketchbooks and her large preparatory drawings for this lovely children's book. And here we can see Baker Cat with his bosses. Baker Cat works for a nasty human couple who exploit him terribly. He gets a tiny, tiny breakfast. But here he starts to conspire with the mice to develop a clever plot where... the more mice he catches, the more food he gets. So they actually start to produce fake mouse tails. And as a result, the mice get all the food they want to eat, and so does Baker Cat. It's a lovely conclusion with the baker's wife getting attacked by all the mice. And the revenge is sweet. This is a beautiful comment, really, on workers rising up against their masters.

Posy Simmonds has also adapted a short story by Hilaire Belloc, a cautionary tale about what happens if you tell lies. It's the story of Matilda who told that such dreadful lies and was burned to death, which shows how Matilda is a very mischievous girl who will actually have to suffer a terrible fate. Here is where the dog sets off the fire. And then here is when the fire engines roar to try and save her. But they will come too late. A cautionary tale with definitely a macabre atmosphere reminiscent of Charles Addams and his *Addams Family*.

So here we are now in the biggest exhibition gallery, devoted to Posy Simmonds remarkable graphic novel trilogy, three great works that began in 1999 with *Gemma Boverly*. These were serialised in *The Guardian*, and they allowed Posy to do longer complete stories inspired by, in all three cases, by works of literature. But she makes them her own. These are not just pure adaptations. Here, she took the story of *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert and modernised it to become *Gemma Boverly*, a story of a woman who has a dream living in Normandy and is escaping from the dull life she has in London. And what Posy does with the pages is revolutionary too, because she combines not only the conventional panels and balloons of bandes dessinées, of comics, with text and different forms of text typography. She makes the reading of the page much more rich, and it really just has changed the graphic novel completely. This became her first big hit and became a movie as well.

For her second graphic novel, Posy Simmonds had a chance to work in full colour and she took another 19th century novel, Thomas Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd*, and updated that to the English countryside - here, looking very peaceful, but as you may notice, there's a police car running through it, siren blaring. Her heroine, Tamara Drewe, appears for the first time in this page, looking beautiful, of course, and surrounded by men who have various desires for her. And she is really the character that ignites a whole turbulent storyline in this English village. But alongside Tamara's central role, there are other characters who are important. There are two girls, two teenage girls here who are stuck in an English village where there is nothing. There is no bus services. They are trapped. They are from the more

working class side, and their storyline is paralleled with the more upper class and literary world of the Tamara Drewe inhabits. And her techniques again combine images and passages of text, but where they really come together, and Posy's the most happy with these pages, are where she's able to relate the story completely in pictures. This is an entirely visual sequence of great power, set towards the end of the story. I can't reveal any more because it's a murder mystery. It's a masterpiece and made into a film directed by Stephen Frears.

So it took 11 more years for Posy to complete her third graphic novel, *Cassandra Darke*. For this book, she was inspired by *A Christmas Carol*, the famous Christmas story by Charles Dickens. And again, she brought it up to date and reflected the enormous divide in British society and in London between the rich and the poor. Cassandra Darke is a disgraced art dealer who lives in a very comfortable lifestyle, but has that shattered when she discovers that her live-in helper has left some clues to a murder. She's a misanthrope. She's a not at all an appealing character. She's like Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*, but of course, as a woman. But we do come to empathise with her plight and sympathise with her hopes. These are the clues, the tantalising clues that have been left behind by the murder victim, and Cassandra decides that she must try and solve this mystery herself, she ends up having to travel to other parts of London that she's never seen before. The lower class areas, the outer areas, the poor districts. And then by the end, Cassandra becomes a much deeper and transformed person.

And we come now to the last gallery, bringing Posy Simmonds work up to date and starting off with a section devoted to *Literary Life*, a series of one page features in *The Guardian's* literary section. These ranged from single panel cartoons to one page comic strips. Here, for example, showing a woman writer as she transforms graphically, writing an erotic sequence, a « purple passage » in her novel.

And here we have another commission. This is for *Le Point*, in French. And it was a two page comic about Posy's love of London, I think her home city for almost all her adult life. More recently, Posy made a drawing here, an affectionate one, I should add, showing King Charles 2nd in some very elaborate underwear. This was done as a charity book to coincide with the coronation of King Charles 3rd. And here we have some drawings of Theresa May's shoes. Posy is an observer of fashion. And we conclude with an exclusive, because Posy is drawing every day and she has two sketchbooks on the go right now, within which we can see the glimpses of her next graphic novel in gestation. So do come and visit this exhibition. It covers her entire career and even her future career.