

Martha Weston -- colorblind artist, wrote kids books

- Sabin Russell, Chronicle Staff Writer

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Martha Weston, a Marin County author and illustrator of more than 60 children's books, died unexpectedly Thursday of heart disease at her Fairfax home. She was 56.

Her most recent works include the illustrations for six new books in the famed Curious George series, the many adventures of a mischievous little monkey who first appeared as a children's favorite by Margret and H.A. Rey 60 years ago.

Ms. Weston has been illustrating children's books since 1975. Her first was "The I Hate Mathematics! Book," by Marilyn Burns, which is still in print, a rarity in the highly competitive industry nowadays. In 1981, she published "Peony's Rainbow," the first of 11 picture books that she also authored as well as illustrated.

Only last May, she published her first children's novel, "Act I, Act II, Act Normal," a book inspired by her son Charley's experiences in middle-school musical and drama programs.

Although Ms. Weston had a long and successful career as an illustrator, her recent work was reaching new heights. "It was amazing how much momentum she was gaining," said Berkeley author Elizabeth Partridge, who was a friend of Ms. Weston's and the author of two of her picture books. "She had just published her first novel, was working on her second. It was fantastic to see her fly like that."

Ms. Weston had developed a large group of friends in the children's book illustration field, and earned praise as a hard-working mother, a dedicated professional, and a source of creativity and inspiration to her peers. "She was deeply woven into many people's lives," said Partridge.

San Francisco children's book author and illustrator Ashley Wolff said Ms. Weston's bright, playful illustrations were a reflection of her own spirited wit. Ms. Weston's humor was offbeat, larky and often self-deprecating. One source of that humor was how she outwitted nature: she consistently produced beautiful, hand-colored illustrations despite being colorblind.

She compensated for her colorblindness by schooling herself in the technical details of how colors interact, by carefully labeling her paints and palette, and by relying on colleagues to check her work.

Ms. Weston was born in Asheville, N.C., and grew up in Ann Arbor, Mich. After graduating from the University of Michigan, she moved to San Francisco, began work as a freelance artist, and eventually settled in Fairfax, where she raised two children.

On her Web site, www.marthaweston.com, she describes her own childhood in which she spent hours drawing fairies and princesses. "For me," Ms. Weston wrote, "the best part of writing and illustrating is creating a world of my own -- generally a goofy one -- and feeling like I am stepping into it."

Ms. Weston is survived by her husband, Richard, and son, Charley, of Fairfax; her daughter, Dory, of New York City; her brother, Nelson Hairston, of Trumansburg, N.Y.; her sister, Margaret Searcy, of Miami; and her parents, Dr. and Mrs. Nelson Hairston, of Chapel Hill, N.C.

A memorial gathering will be held at the picnic area of Samuel P. Taylor State Park, at 1 p.m. Thursday. Donations in lieu of flowers may be made to the Nature Conservancy, 201 Mission St., 4th Floor, San Francisco, CA 94105.