

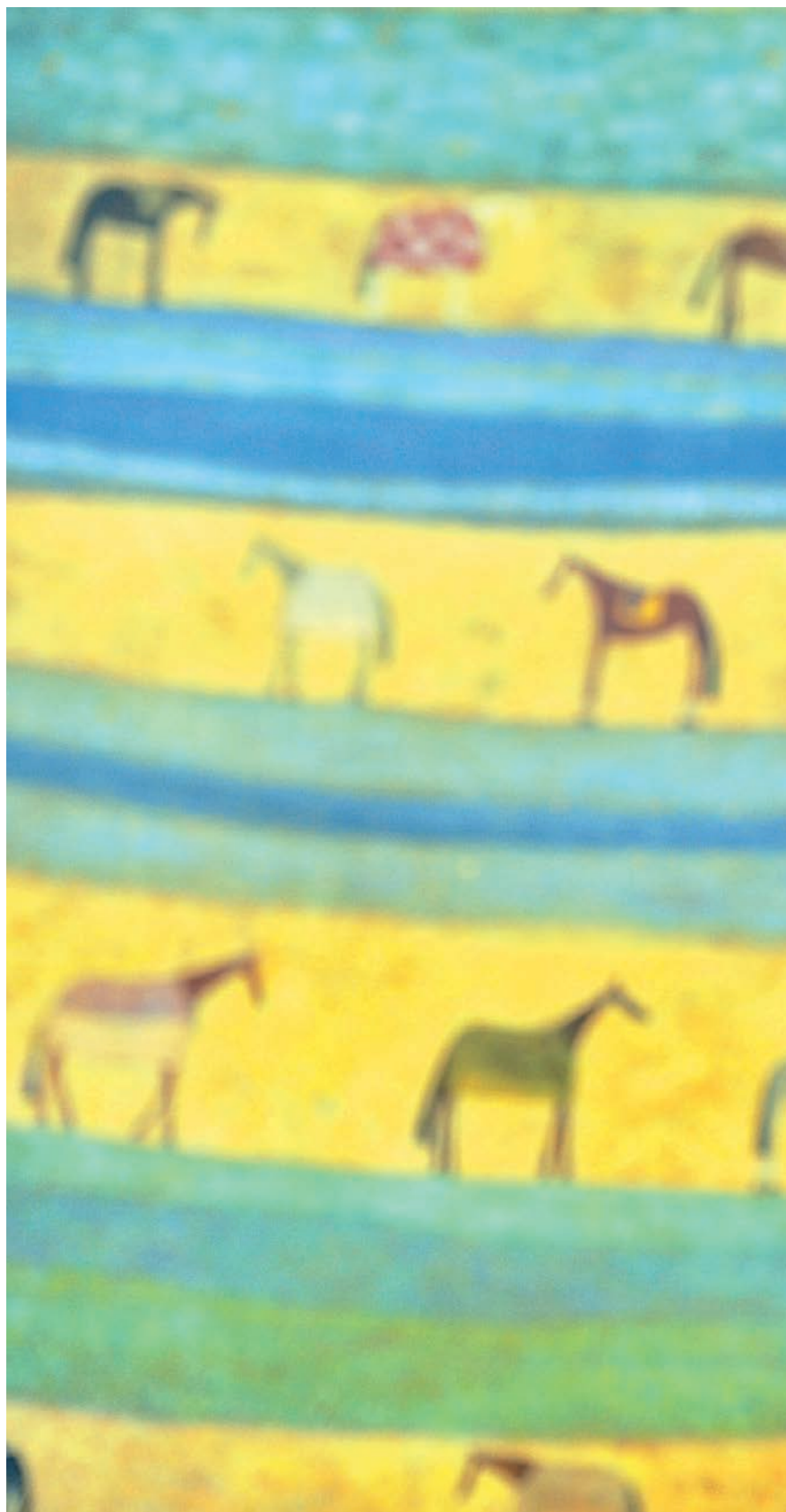


book
benches
project

finding her voice

Visual artist Ellen Skidmore
also is the author of a children's
book that recounts
a childhood struggle

By Jarrett Van Meter
Photos by Rick Samuels







Ellen Skidmore creates her distinctive work in a sunroom-turned-studio in her downtown Paris home.

it starts with coffee; nothing happens before coffee. After filling a mug from her press pot and adding cream and sugar, Ellen Skidmore takes a single step down from her kitchen into the adjoining sunroom of her home in downtown Paris. Her three dogs are usually there waiting for her, snoozing beneath her work table. She takes her paint from a wicker basket on the table, turns on classical music, and pivots to her large wooden easel immediately to the left of the table. From there she dives into the craft that is both her livelihood and her therapy.

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Skidmore's paintings have become coveted focal points for living rooms across the Bluegrass. The vibrant pieces meld imagination and brilliant color with observations of our relationship to the world around us. A curiosity about the rolling hills and the creatures that roam them is what initially drew her to Central Kentucky and what continues to lend to the timelessness of her work.

"A lot of people say it's kind of primitive, folksy, whimsical, and expressionistic all in one," Skidmore said of her style. "There's a little simplicity to it, like Grandma Moses. I try to get a richness in the color and texture and design more like Matisse."

Skidmore grew up in Baltimore and made several stops before ultimately landing in Central Kentucky, receiving a BFA from the University of Kentucky. Though she cites horses and the area's rumpled topography as substantial influences on her work, fingerprints of her previous stops are evident as well.

"I sailed a lot as a kid growing up in Baltimore, so the water has been a big part of my life," she explained. "I put water in a lot of my paintings. Water makes me feel incredibly peaceful with the unknown, with the abyss. I also lived in Arizona and Oregon for a bit, and I loved that. The mountains and the sky of the West had a huge impact on my work. The sun out there was more consistent, and the color was more vivid."

Skidmore combined her love of color, sailing, and horses when she took on a project of a new sort in 2014: an autobiographical children's book. Born with a severe stutter, Skidmore hoped to share her own story in a form that was both accessible and valuable for kids facing challenges of their own. The result was *Ellen, The Little Girl Who Found Her Voice*.

"It came out really quickly, and I tried to tell my own story from a child's perspective," she said. "After I wrote it, I felt strongly that it was a message that could help a lot of kids that had



something where they didn't feel perfect or up to snuff."

The story and accompanying paintings caught the interest of Fran Taylor of West High Publishing. The book was initially launched with events in Aspen, Colorado, and Fort Lauderdale, Florida, before its debut in Lexington with a show at ArtsPlace. At each event all of

A wicker basket contains a vivid spectrum of paints. Below, Skidmore has a special bond with her horses Gstaad, left, and Jimbo.



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the book's 28 paintings were displayed, along with the accompanying text. Bold colors, horses, and dogs abound throughout the pages. The story concludes with young Ellen sailing away in a boat.

The book has been a hit. Skidmore has been asked to do readings at numerous elementary schools. With the images from the story projected on a wall behind her, she reads the story and then opens the floor for questions and discussion from the children.

"The main impact I have seen is that it teaches kids empathy," said Skidmore. "At first, they notice that I stutter, and they start to giggle or they are like, 'Wow.' But as the story goes on and they see the paintings up on the wall, they are quiet by the end."

After the story the kids begin to raise their hands and, one by one, share their own stories.

"You can tell that they are kind of inspired to be OK with themselves, to be OK

not being OK," she said. "It's very touching how they respond to my stuttering before and then after the story."

The book has been particularly well received by parents and grandparents, many of whom find its core message of listening to your heart throughout life to be an essential lesson to impart to their little ones. Craig and Madonna Turner of Lexington were among the ranks of the grandparents touched by Skidmore's story and book. The couple sponsored a bench inspired by Skidmore's work for Lexington's Book Benches public art exhibit. The Book Benches project, a collaboration among Arts Connect, LexArts, and the Carnegie Center for Literacy and Learning, curated 37 fiberglass benches, each painted in homage to a different Kentucky author.

"When my husband and I went through the list, Ellen stood out because she was both the author and the illustrator of the book, and because of her



From top, horses are a central theme in Skidmore's art; bold colors define her palette; a page from *Ellen, The Little Girl Who Found Her Voice*.



Skidmore says people describe her art as “kind of primitive, folksy, whimsical, and expressionistic all at once.”

Below, “Mojo” appeared in the first edition of *Ellen, The Little Girl Who Found Her Voice*.

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personal story,” said Madonna Turner. “We had great admiration for what she had overcome. It was an amazing story, not only that she went to college but that she was able to become a renowned artist in our area.”

The Turners took their five grandchildren to the bench reveal party in Gratz Park last year to meet Skidmore and see the bench for the first time. The book

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—Ellen Skidmore of her book

still lives in the grandchildren’s bedroom at their house.

“The story itself is a beautiful one that every child in school should hear,” said Turner. “Not only accepting differences, but also treasuring the differences within people. Everyone belongs.”

While Skidmore had to venture into new creative territory to write her first book, she was forced to step outside of her actual comfort zone to paint the bench. The piece was too large for her studio. She had to paint it in her living room instead.

“It was extremely difficult to paint,” she said. “I had to really contort myself to get around it and paint on it. It had tons of odd curves. The art itself was

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relatively simple compared to some of the elaborate and beautiful ones that people did.”

The bench portrays what Skidmore calls the “Ta-Da!” moment of her book, when little Ellen sails away with her dog.

“She’s found her peace and is sailing away with her best friend,” Skidmore explained. “She has done it alone. She’s courageous and looking forward like ‘What’s next?’ So, I knew that’s what I wanted to put on there.”

The process of painting the bench took place while one of Skidmore’s own dogs, a scruffy terrier mutt named Biscuit, was dying. Because he lay on the couch every day watching her paint the piece, Skidmore decided to dedicate it to him. The book’s final scene shows little Ellen

sailing away with her black lab. For the bench rendition of the scene, she painted Biscuit in the boat instead. As sailing did for her as a young girl, painting helps Skidmore make sense of life’s friction.

“When I don’t understand something, or when I am sad about something, I paint it,” she said. “It doesn’t come out as sad, though. It comes out as something that people interpret as peaceful. A lot of people say that my paintings are peaceful.”

The image of the little girl sailing away with her dog on the bench outside of downtown Lexington’s Historic Courthouse brings to mind moments in childhood when bravery and simplicity meet. It is a sentiment Skidmore hopes to revisit with her second book, this one about

a little boy named Happy who struggles with worrying. As with most of her work, horses will play a central role. Happy’s life changes when he is invited to the racetrack for the first time by a friend.

“The minute he steps into the track, his worries fly away because he is so taken by the beauty of the horses and the whole sensory experience,” explained Skidmore. “He can hear all sorts of new sounds like neighing, the clanging of the bell, and the crowd roaring. He finds himself being completely in the moment, and when you are in the moment, you are not worrying.”

Biscuit is no longer around, but Poppy, Maggie, and Cookie will be under the work table in their beds watching on as Skidmore steps to the easel to tell



The artist credits horses with helping her exist in the present.

Happy's story. Richly colored skies, water, and horses will spring to life as she makes her way through her first, then second, cup of coffee. The ritualistic melting of inhibition is what she hopes to share with her new protagonist. That, and the importance of being "present," which Skidmore achieves by riding her horses, walking her dogs, savoring the grass under her feet, and putting brush to easel.

"Being present, not dwelling on the past or worrying about the future has been a very difficult hurdle for me," said Skidmore, "but well worth any effort." **KM**



Skidmore took a year to complete "Aftercare," which was promoted at this year's Preakness as a poster.

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