

Poet, critic and indefatigable writer and reviewer of children's literature

Naomi Lewis, who has died aged 97, was many things: a poet, a critic, a reviewer and writer of children's books, a renowned authority on Hans Christian Andersen and a fervent proponent of animal rights. Her output over a 60-year career was prodigious, but despite her early work as a critic and the well-received collection of articles and essays in her first book, *A Visit to Mrs Wilcox* (1957), it is for her work on children's literature that she is most noted.

Lewis was a great admirer of Andersen and used her own affinity with the world of magic and fairy tale to translate his genius. It was not just her retelling of the stories that infused them with new energy, but the wonderful introductions that accompanied them; urging and explaining to young minds the individuality of each tale and the personality that had formed them.

This interpreter and reteller of fairy tales was as petite and mysterious as one of the little folk herself. Her love of animals was often in evidence at her home in Red Lion Square, Bloomsbury, central London, where she rescued stray cats and injured pigeons, often taking the latter to the rest rooms of Conway Hall at No 25 to give them flying practice safe from her feline wards.

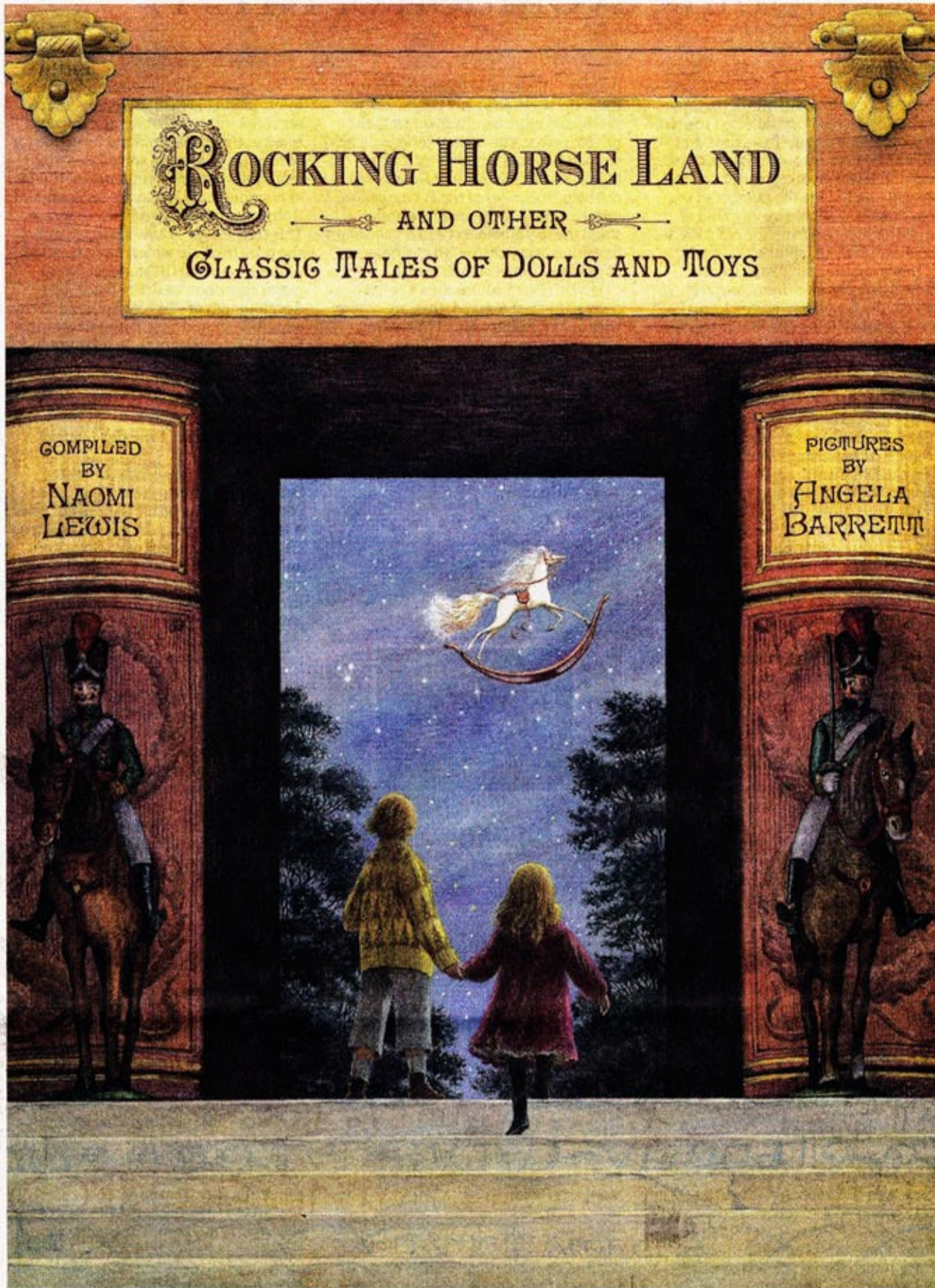
The second child of four, she was born into a Latvian Jewish immigrant family in Great Yarmouth, Norfolk. Her father was a fish merchant, her mother a gifted artist and musician. Despite financial difficulties, the house was filled with music and the conversation of professionals and intellectuals. These early days spent playacting with her siblings and foraging for books in the attic bestowed on her that unique gift and probable source of all the best fairy tales: the happy childhood.

Lewis was educated at the local high school in Yarmouth, and after reading English at Westfield College, University of London, she taught briefly in Switzerland, before returning to England to teach in a number of state schools. Her career as a critic began just after the turbulent war years. Sending in streams of entries under a number of pseudonyms to competitions organised by the *New Statesman*, she won prizes week after week. Eventually she decided it was time to identify herself to the editor, and was promptly offered a position as a book reviewer, receiving a generous double-page spread in the centre of every issue. She could never quite give up teaching though, and ran evening classes in poetry appreciation and creative writing at London's City Literary Institute (popularly known as the City Lit) until she was in her 70s.

She later described setting foot on the threshold of the *New Statesman* offices as being "born again". She found her voice as a critic there and it was to provide much of the material for *A Visit to Mrs Wilcox*. But it was a casual request from her colleague, VS Pritchett, to look at books for young readers that set her firmly on the course of reviewing children's literature and led on to her anthologies and translations, such as Hans Christian Andersen's *Fairy Tales* (1981), *Arabian Nights* (1987) and *The Snow Queen* (1988), as well as her own original poetry: *Come With Us* (1982), an anthology of favourite verses, *Messages* (1985) and *The Mardi Gras Cat* (1993). She also wrote for the *New York Times*, the *Listener* and the *Times Literary and Educational Supplements*, as well as regularly contributing to the *Observer* under its literary editor Terry Kilmartin, often delivering her copy by bicycle.

Through her boundless enthusiasm and dedication to the work of children's authors, she helped build the reputation of the genre and paved the way for the great successes of the postwar years. Her own work was recognised with the Eleanor Farjeon award for distinguished services to British children's literature in 1975, and she was made fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1981.

When asked in an interview for the children's book magazine *Books for Keeps* if she believed in fairies, Lewis



replied: "Of course, but I am never sure if they believe in me." Another of her favourite ideas was the fine line between the worlds of reality and magic. Was she perhaps thinking of this when she came across the crime writer Julian Symons fast asleep in front of the fire that used to be kept at the reading room of the London Library? Mischievously, she left a note on his lap with the message "All is discovered, fly at once!" and claimed never to have seen him there again.

Fittingly, Lewis often dedicated her books to those unsung heroes, librarians, whom she knew from many hours spent meticulously researching her articles. Yet most of her work was actually welded together during the small hours: a nocturnal being, like the cats she adored, she lived alone for many years in the flat in Red Lion Square, to which her parents had moved in 1935, among huge piles of books and correspondence, which took over wall space and spilled on to the floors. A tireless worker, from her hospital bed, at the end of her life, she was in the process of creating the fanciful childhood of Dick Whittington.

I first met Naomi outside a book shop, almost 12 years ago. Like her, I am a teacher turned writer, and she immediately took me under her wing; recommending books and poems for my classes, as well as introducing me to her favourite authors and allowing me glimpses into the fascinating workings of her quick mind. She will be greatly missed, yet in her own poem, included in an *Anthology of Nature Verse*, which she edited in 1983, we find a kind of promise: "Don't grieve. Don't grieve. I shall be there/Look for my footprint on the air."

She is survived by her brother, Toby, and her two nieces, Gina and Rae.

Susan Curtis



Rocking Horse Land (2000), top, comprises six classic children's stories chosen by Lewis, above Walker Books

Julia Eccleshare writes: When I took over editing the quarterly *TLS Children's Books Supplements* as a raw 22-year-old, I inherited Naomi as a reviewer. She gave me all the education I needed. She had an encyclopedic knowledge of children's stories, especially folk and fairy tales, and much wisdom about them and how and why they worked.

Her reviews came handwritten, not so unusual in those days, but also, more problematically, in many drafts and always late. Phone calls would do little to hurry her. But it was always worth the wait to hear what she had to say.

She loved stories where boundaries between the real and the imaginary were easily slipped through; refused to review anything with a whiff of cruelty to or even taming of animals and had a passion for stories about inanimate objects, especially dolls, which was perfectly reflected in her own collec-

tion of stories *The Silent Playmate* (1979). Such was Naomi's phenomenal memory for stories that Kaye Webb, head of Puffin, who was then getting the Puffin Book Club up and running, would ring her to check out the originality or otherwise of a story a child had submitted. Kaye would read out the opening and Naomi would pronounce. It was a gift which also allowed her to quote readily and extensively from both fiction and poetry and that played a part in the very special nature of all conversations with her.

Blake Morrison writes: Naomi Lewis wrote book reviews for the *Observer* over four decades. I overlapped with her during the last of these, the 1980s, when she was in charge of children's books - she herself wrote all the reviews.

Twice a year, she would be given the space to cover all the different categories (picture books, teenage, etc), though it was never enough space for Naomi, who was passionate about what she did and wanted to cram in as many titles as she could. In those days, we used compositors, who were pushed to the limit to decode Naomi's wonky typing and scrawled amendments. Press day would see her tinkering with galleys and agonising over cuts. But the end result, on the page, was always lucid and authoritative: no one knew more about children's books than Naomi.

Occasionally I'd run into her at a party - though security sometimes mistook her for a bag lady and could be difficult about letting her in. Eccentric she might have been, but she was sweetness and benevolence personified. She never met my children, but always asked after them and when we last spoke, she still remembered their names.

Naomi Lewis, children's writer and critic, born 3 September 1911; died 5 July 2009