Virginia Lee Burton's life may bring to mind a steam shovel and a man called Mike Mulligan, a charming little house, and a snow plow named Katy. Yet to speak only of Burton's achievements as a picture book creator would be to paint only part of the canvas of her life. She was also a dancer, an illustrator for an early Boston newspaper, and a musician, designer, sculptor, and printmaker. *Virginia Lee Burton: A Life in Art*, by author and well-known children's literature expert Barbara Elleman, is an inspiring introduction to the exuberant life, art, and books of this truly extraordinary woman.

Together with her husband, George Demetrios, Virginia enjoyed a full life. In a small community located outside of Gloucester, Massachusetts, they raised two sons, gardened, kept sheep, entertained friends, and taught art and design classes. Led by Burton, these design classes, which were composed of local artists, evolved into the Folly Cove Designers. A cooperative of sorts, this internationally known group created elaborately intricate designs of rural scenes and other natural elements, which they would carve onto linoleum and print onto fabrics. Simultaneously, Burton began her career in children's book writing and illustration. The early success of her first books, *Choo Choo, Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel,* and *The Little House,* which received the 1943 Caldecott Medal, was an auspicious beginning for Burton. These same books, along with others she created throughout her career, have now become classics, as well as lasting examples of the fine art of children's book creation.

Barbara Elleman spent nearly four years interviewing family members, colleagues, and members of the Folly Cove community, as well as collecting archival illustrations, examples of Burton's Folly Cove designs, and never-before-published family photographs. The end product of her
careful research is an intimate portrait of a remarkable woman who successfully juggled the demands of family and a full-time career as an award-winning children's book creator and an internationally known fabric designer.

About Barbara Elleman

Before being named Distinguished Scholar of Children's Literature at Marquette University, Barbara Elleman served as editor of the Children's Section of Booklist magazine and then as editor in chief of Book Links, both published by the American Library Association. Prior to that she worked as a school librarian and as a public librarian. She has been a judge for the American Book Awards, the Golden Kite Awards, and the Boston Globe/Horn Book Awards, and she served on the 2000 Caldecott Committee. She is currently a member of the Laura Ingalls Wilder Committee. She has also participated in the Excellence in Poetry Committee of the National Council of Teachers of English and the U.S. Hans Christian Andersen Committee, and she serves on the advisory board for the Riverbank Review, the New Advocate, and the Parent's Guide to Children's Media. Her awards include the Jeremiah Ludington Award, given by the Educational Paperback Association, and the Hope S. Dean Award, from the Foundation for Children's Literature. In 1999, Putnam published her first book, Tomie dePaola: His Art and His Stories. Since then she has written Holiday House: The First Sixty-five Years (Holiday House, 2000) and Virginia Lee Burton: A Life in Art (Houghton Mifflin, October 2002).

Interview with Barbara Elleman

Q) What first interested you in writing a biography of Virginia Lee Burton?

A) Illustration has long been an interest of mine, and writing about Burton gave me the opportunity to examine her artistic style in an intense way; it intrigued me that, although she died more than thirty years ago, her books have continued to be popular with children and revered by adults. I welcomed the opportunity to learn more about her life and work and to bring my findings to the attention of readers.

Q) Virginia Lee Burton's sons, Aris and Michael, gave you unlimited access to her art studio, and you've written that the "bounty" you found there "illuminated your appreciation of Burton's energetic life and distinctive work." Did something in particular in her studio stand out?

A) Finding the original art piece she used as a basis for her illustration of the character Slumber in Arna Bontemps's Sad-Faced Boy was very exhilarating, especially as I had found in my
research where Burton verbally described her work on that book. Being able to link word and image was highly satisfying, and I knew it would be a special heretofore-unknown piece of her art to put in the completed book.

Q) What was the most surprising aspect about Virginia Lee Burton's life that you discovered while conducting your research?

A) Learning about her leadership and participation in the Folly Cove Designers. I was completely unaware of this once nationally known textile collective, which I found had been written up in Life magazine, whose works had been exhibited in dozens of museums and had been displayed in Lord & Taylor's windows on Fifth Avenue, and had then disappeared in the annals of time. I wanted those who knew only her illustration work to know this aspect of her life as well.

Q) You've written that finding anyone to be critical of VLB was virtually impossible. Having researched her life's work thoroughly, why do you think this was so?

A) From what I read and the people I talked to, Virginia Lee Burton had an unaffected way with people, a wonderful sense of fun, a belief in everyone's innate artistic ability, and, especially, a simple joy in life, all of which combined naturally to infect everyone she came in contact with. I wish I had been one of them.

Q) Can you share an anecdote — funny or frustrating or both — from your time conducting research?

A) I found an old newspaper clipping showing a house being moved across Manhattan; juxtaposed was a similar image from Burton's The Little House. For clarity, I set about trying to get a print of the original photo from UPI. I called the New York office and was given a number to call in Washington, D.C.; there I was told to call New York — at a different number; the person there said to call a company in Chicago that now handled old UPI photos. There I was told that the photo I wanted was an "inconsequential image" and not on-line; the original was in the process of being stored for posterity in a mine in Pennsylvania and hence not available. Frustrating to say the least! The image in the book is from the old newspaper clipping.

Q) What do you feel is the appealing quality of Virginia Lee Burton's work, and why is it still relevant to parents and children today?

A) I think the "hero" aspect in her work appeals to children, as well as to their natural tendency to root for the underdog — Mike Mulligan and Mary Anne's determination to dig the basement in just one day, Katy's determination to clear Geoppolis's snow piles after a blizzard, Maybelle's "no hill too steep, no load too heavy" philosophy, and the Little House's endurance through a miserable situation. Plus, children love happy endings, which Burton supplies. I think that adults relate to Burton's underlying themes — adjusting to change, the inevitable cycles of life, not giving up — as well as to the artistry of her illustrations on the page.

Q) Did you have a favorite Virginia Lee Burton book when you started this project, and did it change after you finished your book?
The Little House had always been my favorite Burton book, and, while I gained new appreciation of Life Story and The Song of Robin Hood, I find that The Little House combines story, image, theme, color, perspective, use of the page, and harmony of image and text to the fullest. It was surely deserving of its 1943 Caldecott Medal and continues to have a special place in my heart.

About Virginia Lee Burton (1909-1968)

I was born on August 30, 1909, in Newton Centre, Massachusetts. My mother was English, a poet and a musician. My father was the dearly beloved Dean Burton of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology . . . their first dean and only dean until he retired in 1921.

My memories of early childhood in Newton Corner consist of English folk songs and English folk dancing around a Maypole . . . celebrating Twelfth Night when everyone dressed up in costumes and the neighbors came in to sing and dance and "wassail" the old apple trees. On other holidays our parents put on marionette shows for us and our friends. Our old barn was converted into a school, and I believe the first Montessori System in this country was taught there. Dad, instead of giving us toys for birthdays and Christmas, gave us beautifully illustrated children's books, which he would read aloud to us. I am sure my interest in picture books stemmed from this.

We lived in Newton Corner until I was about eight. The New England winters were getting to be too much for my mother's health, and as it was about time for my father to retire, we moved to California. We stayed one year in San Diego and then moved up the coast to Carmel-by-the-Sea. Carmel was then a simple unspoiled small town inhabited by retired and semi-retired artists, writers, and musicians. There were three theaters and a little old two-room schoolhouse. Always there was a play or an operetta in rehearsal going on and everybody took part. To be sure it was all amateur, but it was a lot of fun. My sister and I loved dancing and studied at every opportunity (of which there were many) and appeared in the local productions.

When I was sixteen and a junior in high school, where there was a good art teacher, I happened to win a state scholarship to the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco. In my senior year I was editor of the school annual and, on the side, started a dancing class of my own.

Having no desire to go to college, I thought I might as well go to art school and continue studying dancing with a good ballet teacher in San Francisco, which I did. I lived across the bay in Alameda with my school friend, Mabel, who also had a scholarship. There were no bridges in those days, and it took us at least two hours by train, ferryboat, and cable car to get to school — sometimes longer when it was foggy. I mention this because I used those long commuting hours to train myself in making quick sketches from life and from memory of my fellow passengers.

In 1928, after a year in art school, I returned east to join my father in Boston. My sister had already started her dancing career on the stage in New York. There was a chance for me to join her troupe and I had even signed the contract when my father broke his leg, so I stayed home to
take care of him . . . and that was the beginning and end of my dancing career, which was just as well because I wasn't very good anyway . . .

My practice in sketching on the San Francisco ferry led to a job as a "sketcher" on the now extinct *Boston Transcript*, where I worked under "H.T.P.," famous drama and music critic. In my two and a half years with the *Transcript*, I was able to see and draw the good and great dancers and actors of that time. I signed my sketches "VleeB."

In the meantime I had been a lifeguard and swimming instructor, taught art at a newsboys' foundation of which my father was the director, and been an art counselor in a YMCA summer camp.

Through mutual friends I had heard of George Demetrios and what a great teacher of sculpture and drawing he was, so in the fall of 1930 when I was twenty-one, I enrolled in his Saturday morning drawing class at the Boston Museum School. In the spring we were married. We lived in Lincoln, Massachusetts, where our first son, Aris, short for Aristedes, was born. A year later moved to Folly Cove, Gloucester, where we have lived ever since. Our second son, Michael, was born in 1935, coincidentally on my birthday. The last act in my book, *Life Story*, tells the story of our life here in Folly Cove.

*Choo Choo* is not my first book. My first book, *Jonnifer Lint*, was about a piece of dust. My friends I and thought it was very clever, but thirteen publishers disagreed with us. When I finally got the manuscript back and read it to Aris, age three and a half, he went to sleep before I could even finish it. That taught me a lesson, and from then on I worked with and for my audience, my own children. I would tell them the story over and over, watching their reaction and adjusting to their interest or lack of interest. The same with the drawings. Children are very frank critics.

My subject material, with a few exceptions such as Calico the Wonder Horse, comes directly from life. I literally draw my books first and write the texts after — sort of "cart before the horse." I pin the sketched pages in sequence on the walls of my studio so I can see the book as a whole. Then I make a rough dummy and then the final drawings and, when I can put it off no longer, I type out the text and paste it in the dummy. Whenever I can, I substitute picture for word. Each new book is a new experience, not only in subject material and research, but also in learning a new medium and technique for the drawings.

*We regret to say that Virginia Lee Burton died on October 15, 1968, at the age of fifty-nine. She is survived by her two sons.*

---

**Biographies of Virginia Lee Burton's Sons, Aristides and Michael Demetrios**

Aristedes Burton Demetrios, Virginia Lee Burton's oldest son, is a renowned contemporary sculptor whose works can be seen throughout the United States and elsewhere around the world. Educated at Harvard University in history and literature, Aristedes later studied sculpture with his
father, George Demetrios, in Gloucester, Massachusetts. Since then, he has worked with some of the nation's leading designers — Thomas Church, Lawrence Halprin, Peter Walker, Ken Kay, Peter Calthrope, and Michael Taylor — to create bronze fountains and sculptures, large-scale outdoor stainless-steel sculptures, and painted steel sculptures commissioned for public pavilions, private residential gardens, and corporate facilities. Aristedes also exhibits his work in galleries throughout the United States. He is currently an artist-in-residence at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Michael Burton Demetrios was born on August 30, 1935, in Groton, Massachusetts. When he was four, Virginia Lee Burton dedicated *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel* to him, and he served as the model for the little boy who helps Mike and Mary Anne dig the cellar in one day. A graduate of Harvard Business School, Michael was the president of Marine World Africa USA for more than twenty years. While president, Michael, together with a group of businessmen, purchased the park from Resorts International and successfully relocated to Vallejo, CA. Now, Marine World Africa USA is a world-class facility and has reached annual attendance levels of 1.9 million. Since January 1998, Michael has served as president of Intra-Asia, a U.S. company with two amusement parks in China and plans to have five additional parks within the next four years. He travels extensively throughout China and sees this as an "exciting and fascinating time to be doing business" there. Michael Demetrios lives outside Los Angeles.

**Mike Mulligan and More: A Virginia Lee Burton Treasury**

Best known for the ever popular *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel* and the Caldecott Medal winner *The Little House*, Virginia Lee Burton wrote and illustrated stories that have been entertaining children, parents, and grandparents for more than sixty years. Many of her books — with themes that honor a simple way of life and celebrate heroes who endure through determination and by adapting to change — have become classic American tales.

With an introduction by Barbara Elleman, author of *Virginia Lee Burton: A Life in Art* (October 2002), this handsome collection commemorates four of Burton's most popular stories in their entirety: *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel* (1939), *The Little House* (1942), *Katy and the Big Snow* (1943), and *Maybelle the Cable Car* (1952). Their appeal today, as strong as when the books were first published, is a tribute to Virginia Lee Burton, one of America's most innovative illustrators, designers, and writers of stories for children.

**The Little House**

Winner of the 1943 Caldecott Medal
A gem of a book, *The Little House* has delighted readers for more than sixty years and is an enchanting classic of American children's literature. Seasons pass and the Little House on the hill watches the first robins return from the south, the daisies cover the hills, the first frost turn the leaves yellow, and the children coasting and skating on the snow. Slowly, the city lights in the distance grow closer and brighter, the children move away, and the Little House finds herself surrounded by gasoline stations, apartment houses, schools, and stores. She finds herself yearning for the "fields of daisies" and the "apple tree dancing in the moonlight." No one wanted to live in her and take care of her until, one day, the granddaughter of the original owner happened upon the Little House and returned her to her the hill in the country where she can watch the seasons pass and the stars twinkle above her roof.

**Praise for The Little House**

"Once upon a time there was a Little House way out in the country. She was a pretty Little House and she was strong and well built." — from *The Little House*

"In *The Little House* Virginia Lee Burton, with lively imagination and genuine power, has made an original and charming picture book . . . There is something fortifying for [children] in the lasting qualities of *The Little House* and the sturdy round of the turning year." — Anne Tyler, *New York Times Book Review*

"This engaging picture book cleverly presents a wealth of information — the changing seasons in the country, the advancement in architecture and transportation, growth in population, and the accelerating tempo of city life." — *Booklist*

**Other Titles by Virginia Lee Burton**

- **Choo Choo (1937)**
  Also available in [hardcover](#) and [audio](#)

- **Calico the Wonder Horse, or the Saga of Stewy Stinker (1941, reissued in 1997)**
  Also available in [hardcover](#)

- **The Little House (1943)**
  Also available in [hardcover](#) and [audio](#)
Katy and the Big Snow (1943)
Also available in hardcover and audio

Maybelle the Cable Car (1952, reissued in 1997)
Also available in hardcover

Life Story (1962)
Also available in hardcover

Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel (1939)
Also available in hardcover and audio

Mike Mulligan y Su Maquina Maravillosa (Spanish)
Also available in hardcover and audio