

ESTHER LAFFERTY MEETS:

Falling Stars

# Sophie Basilevitch



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“Traditional stories offer us a chance to reach deep into our imagination”

As the nights draw in and the stars twinkle in a crisp cold sky, it's a time that evokes traditions and tales at the fireside around the world. It is old folk stories drawn from afar and told across the generations as families and friends gather that inspire the art of Oxfordshire Artweeks printmaker Sophie Basilevitch. In the heart of Oxford, Sophie hand carves and prints beautiful, free-spirited animals in other-worldly settings, evocative of those moments when you step outside twenty-first century life into a seasonal softening of pace.

Illustrative in style, the animal heroes of Sophie's art are those which hold a special place in our hearts; from whales and bears to kingfishers and cranes yet despite the gentle grace Sophie depicts, there's also the feeling that they are wild and untouchable with awe-inspiring underlying powers, epitomising, perhaps, the perfect Christmas fairy tale.

“Traditional stories offer us a chance to reach deep into our imagination,” she explains. “The tales often involve animals with extraordinary qualities as helpers or heroes, and remind us to respect nature. For centuries philosophers have written about how looking at expansive nighttime skies made them feel part of something bigger and gave them a sense of awe and I hope to portray this by incorporating vaulted night skies and stars.”



Falling Stars (top) is inspired by a kingfisher who finds a gap in the sky where the stars fall through onto the lake below. “If one day, there was a crack in the sky, and the stars started falling through, would you be out there ready to catch them?” she laughs.

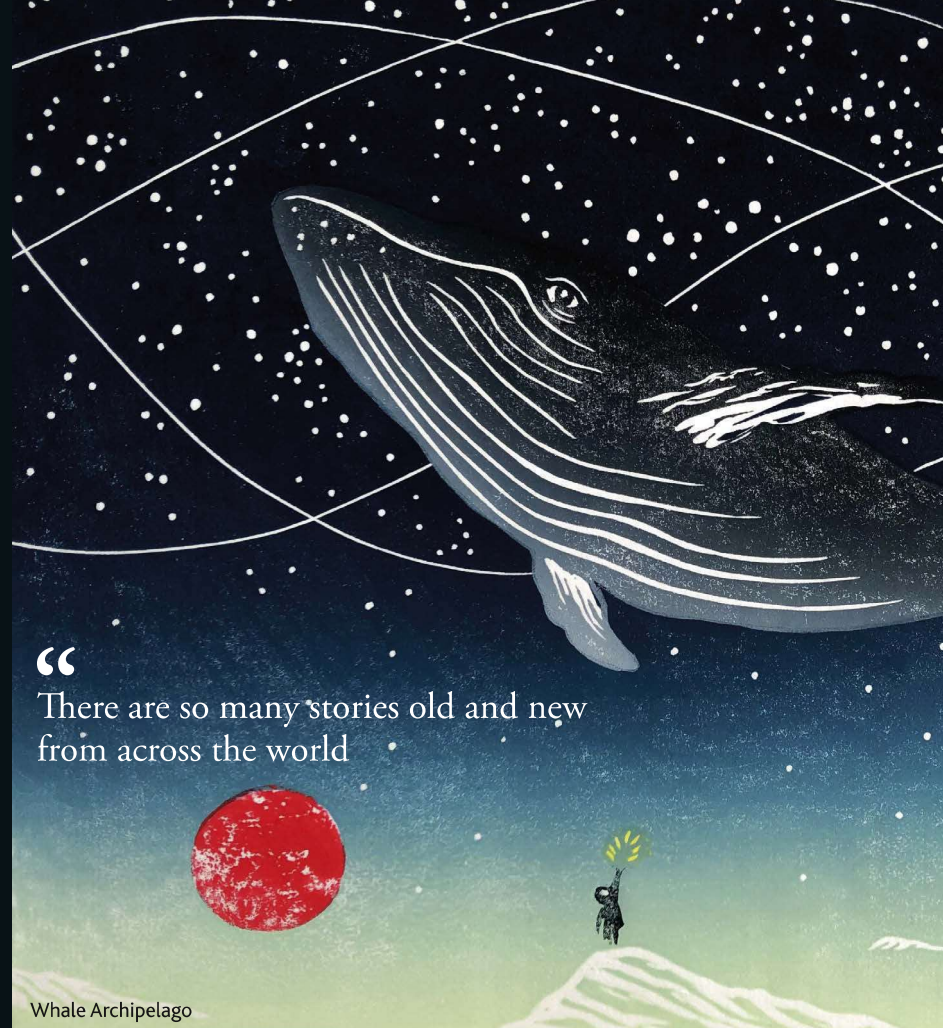
“The Pleiades, or seven sisters in Greek legend, are an open star cluster, a group of stars born around the same time from a gigantic cloud of gas and dust. Alcyone or Halcyone - ‘queen who wards off evil storms’ - was one of the seven sisters who married Ceyx, son of the King of the Gods, Zeus, drowned Ceyx with a thunderbolt thrown at his ship at sea. When Alcyone heard the news, she threw herself into the sea, and was transformed into a halcyon (kingfisher). Legend tells that the kingfisher laid her eggs in a nest out at sea and Alcyone's father, the God of the Winds, kept the storms at bay to keep them safe. And so, for seven days each ▶

on either side of the Winter solstice there is an unseasonal balmy period in the Mediterranean, when the wind doesn't blow and waves are calm. This is where we get our phrase 'halcyon days' from, those fondly-remembered times in our past.

"Perhaps though," Sophie continues, "the picture's a symbol of hope for brighter days ahead, the kingfisher catching falling stars representing those rare times in life when happy chances fall your way, glowing and sparkling! As an artist I love creating art that hints at a story and I often choose a Prussian Blue colour to represent a night-time scene, and often as a gradient from dark to light, both to add depth and a magical quality to my art, a sense of place between worlds. Perhaps using this colour is also because I loved to read fairy tales and folk stories at bedtime when I was a child. At this twilight time, there was a growing darkness, and as the night fell a tapestry of stars would scatter across the sky and my imagination was stirred before I fell into my dreams."

In *Whale Archipelago*, (right) made from two carved lino blocks, a whale floats in a star-pricked sky above a figure holding a light under a red moon. It is inspired by an ancient Korean story from as far back as the 11th century which tells of Yeono and Seo, a husband and wife who earned a living fishing and collecting seaweed. Yeono was busy collecting seaweed one day when he saw a large rock rise out of the seashore. He decided to climb up the rock to explore but when he reached the top, all of a sudden, it started to move and drift out to sea. Before long Yeono was in the middle of the ocean clinging to the rock. Eventually it reached the distant shore of Japan – people were so surprised to see someone arrive in such a way that they thought he had been sent by a god and declared him a king. Meanwhile Seo was worried about her husband and was searching for him until she also saw a rock and climbed on it, only for it to also take her to Japan to join her husband. Once this happened, the moon and the sun stopped rising and it was discovered that the rocks were really whales and Yeono and Seo had sailed across the sea on the back of a whale.

When you know the story, the figure in the print no longer appears to be standing on a chain of islands, but rather a moving archipelago of whales: things are not always as they seem. And, as the whale-rider stands



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Whale Archipelago



Deer With Antlers Of A Thousand Dreams

where the sea meets the sky and holds their light up high (perhaps as a celebration of the winter solstice) the whale beneath them is reflected amongst the stars from the sea below.

There is a very old legend in Hungary about a white stag. One day Hunor and Magor (the two sons of Nimrod, ruler of Mesopotamia) come across a wonderful giant deer which shone with antlers of glittering light. They gave chase and the stag led them across glades, meadows and rivers, through forests and plains and over mountains ever westward. Eventually he stopped by a misty blue lake. Watching brothers saw





the animal paw the ground where he stood before disappearing into the mist over the water. It was at this spot that Hunor and Magyar met two daughters of the King Dula, married them and settled there. Their descendents multiplied to form several Scythian nations which stretched from the Black Sea to Central Asia. With touches of seasonal red and gold, *Deer With Antlers Of A Thousand Dreams* was created with five individually-carved lino blocks, one for each of the different inks used. It shows a majestic white deer standing across a tapestry of mountains, forests and trees and holding the sun in its golden antlers.

“There are so many stories old and new from across the world about these animals and since I made the print I heard that there was a rare white buck which was said to be ‘almost a unicorn’ living in Magdalen College’s deer park until recently. One of those strange cases where you realise magical beasts are closer than you think. It is also said that seeing a white stag is synonymous with the delivery of a message or a great change,” she comments, and so once again Sophie’s art looks both to the past and to the future.



Owl Winter Night



For more on Sophie and her art visit her Etsy shop [etsy.com/uk/shop/beryozamade](https://etsy.com/uk/shop/beryozamade) and @beryozamade on Instagram

