

# Frequently Asked Questions and other stuff!

## THE BOOKS



### **How did you get into writing and illustrating Children's Books?**

I've always thought books were beautiful things. I snuck into to picture book illustration and publishing through a back door. I loved books so much that I worked in Libraries, then Children's Libraries. I never studied to be a librarian because I wanted to be an artist (library assistant was the lowest job in the library - my job!). I could draw OK so the librarians always used me to create their displays. I offered my illustration services voluntarily to children's book organisations (i.b.b.y. y.a.b.b.a and the C.B.C.A). This helped me to build a joyful portfolio. After doing a 17 week course in animation, I landed (begged for) a job with Walt Disney Australia. Eventually I took a job with a children's magazine as an illustrator. I showed my first story to a publisher who liked it but didn't feel they could risk publishing it in a financial downturn. They offered it to a bigger publisher on my behalf. It was accepted.

### **Which of your books is your favourite/the one you are most proud of?**

Leaf! I have hearing loss. Leaf is me. When I was younger I mostly wore green and brown (like a barefoot Robin Hood) ... now I'm much older ... I live near the sea and my hair is grey so I wear a little more blue. Leaf is a quiet book with sound effects. It's a good example of how not to cement ideologies into a story.

Some people interpret the bird as "intuition", others "spirit", and then there are many people who simply see it as a bird with a seed.

Then there's the scene where the boy's hair is cut off, the point in the story where the protagonist loses the one thing he's been protecting/nuturing/fighting for; it reminded my editor of a "holocaust child", while other readers imagined "a Buddhist monk" from the image. There are readers who only see a child with a haircut.

If you look closely at the endpaper there is a small mantra I wrote to myself. While creating this book, some publishers/editors/readers wanted the little green book to have words. I quietly kept them out, but it was a battle even for me. I questioned many times if I was making the right creative choice.

"Leaf" is my favourite!

### **What prompted you to sit down and write your first story?**

After working in animation for a few years, I landed a job as an inhouse illustrator for a children's magazine. I was also offered a few book illustration jobs, but it was apparent that I'd have to wait a long time, maybe a lifetime before someone offered me a book that suited me. I forced myself to write every day, although it seemed as though I would never write a picture book. "The Man Who Loved boxes" was written at about 3am one morning when I'd awoken from a dream.

### **How many books have you written?**

I haven't counted for a while. I think I'm at around twenty; Snail and Turtles Rainy Days is my latest. I've illustrated over one hundred books. Wow! That's a lot of drawing. I recently illustrated a series of books about a white fluffy dog named "Fizz" who wants to become a police dog. They were lots of fun to illustrate because I love drawing dogs. I have three dogs and all these books are dedicated to them.

## **What is the most important thing your readers can take from your books?**

I want to make beautiful books. I want children to read them. Mostly I want parents to read them to their children. That's how I imagine them being used. If all people ever see is lightness and fun then I have little to complain about. If there are children and adults who discover personal truths within, then I can pat myself on the back for keeping space for them. Either way/any way as long as they're happily read . . . if not then books taste delicious!

## **THE PROCESS: Writing and Illustrating Children's Books**

### **How did you develop your style?**

I love to draw. Growing up I was quiet and shy. My drawings never looked how I wanted them to until after leaving school, when I studied art. My drawings became the place where I wanted to be, and all my characters became better forms of myself. Style seemed impossible to find, it came one day when I wasn't looking for it. I saw a tree – a snow gum – and I could see how the wind had twirled around it. I could feel the tree trying to grow to the sun, but fighting the cold winds, and I drew, not with my eyes/my hand, but from a place of feeling. All my characters are free and fighting against natural obstacles – just like that tree. As I grew as an an illustrator, I found that I couldn't impose my will upon my characters: I couldn't make them move and do as I wish. I listen and watch my characters, and they create, grow and fight for themselves.

### **Where do you get your inspiration from?**

Everywhere: other artists, nature, poetry, philosophy, my family, my dogs...

I love to learn and have a natural curiosity. I've always loved making things and expressing myself visually. I'm quiet and have hearing loss so gardening, dancing and drawing are my favourite forms of communication.

### **What comes first in your creative process: illustrating or writing?**

It's all a big blobby mess. Sometimes I'm painting, other times I'm scribbling . . . scribbles turn into writing and blobs of paint turn into shapes, then form emerges one splat at a time.

### **Is there any part of the creative process you don't like?**

Maintaining character. Every line I draw wants to drift off the page and onto the wall. I find it hard to constrain myself. Once the idea is locked in and the book is being painted the creative part of my job settles into a pair of comfortable slippers. I find it hard not being able to chop and change all the time/every day.

### **What are your favourite materials to use for your art work?**

I like simple. I can paint, sculpt, build things . . . I use, wood, steel, water colour, waterproof ink, and I can illustrate on the computer . . . but paper and pencil is still my favourite (especially if it's just doodling for fun).



## **How long does it takes to write a book?**

It varies. I write and draw all the time so it's hard to add up my hours. Some books are complicated like "Milli, Jack and the Dancing Cat" while others are simple like "You" and "You Too". Strangely, they all take about the same time, about two to three months to do the finished art. Coming up with a good idea seems to take about six months. I don't sit and write all the time. I think a lot about stories, and every time a good idea pops into my head I write it down. Eventually I sit down with all the little ideas I have written over the months and I work for an hour or so every day until I have a story and its as simple and perfect as I can make it. That last process usually takes about a month.

## **Any advice for people wanting to make a career in Children's Book storytelling?**

All I can say is: Offer your services to children's book organisations that have big hearts and empty wallets. Try to work in something book related even if it's a cleaner at a publishing house or a shelver at a library, this will keep you connected to your dream. If you don't become a successful illustrator you'll still be surrounded by beautiful books. Keep pushing forward with a childish spirit and a smile. Humbly believe in yourself and other people will believe in you. It takes a long time to make money. Patience is the key.

Eventually you'll have to do a few books a year, for a few years, before the money builds so a part time job is a good idea. I had to wait two - three year before my first decent royalty check and about six years before I could live from my art. You're never likely to own a Ferrari but if you're lucky you'll own your life and have work/ family life balance.

## **What excites you about the future of children's books?**

Authors and illustrators give so much of themselves so that children have beautiful books. It takes a year or two to put together a good children's book.

I'm happy there are bookshops to visit again and the new bookshops are such beautiful places. Books - design/paper/format - are so considered now that reading on a tablet (even if it glows) feels quite dull to me. Children can once again touch and consider well made, paper bound, beautifully designed books and discover why books have been treasured for lifetimes. I can't part with any of mine. I like making bookshelves too. I remember the day I bought "The complete works of Oscar Wilde". I felt so privileged that I could hold a man's life work in my hand for the small cost of a book.

## **A MORE PERSONAL NOTE**

### **At what age did you start drawing?**

My Dad has a baby photo of me. In the photo I have a stick in my hand and I'm banging it into the dirt on the ground. My dad used to insist that I'm not "banging it" that "I'm drawing with it". My mum, who loves books, has a story about me. She says that she brought a book home for me when I was about seven or eight years old; I didn't like the pictures at all so I spent a rainy weekend redrawing the whole book. She laughs when she tells this story.

### **What is your all time favourite book?**

My favourite book by someone else is "Mr Magnolia" by Quinton Blake. It makes me smile every time I read it. I also love "Danny the Champion of the World" by Roald Dahl. I have an autographed copy and the last page is my favourite page.

## Do you have kids?

My website says I love being a dad. My website is old and so are my kids. I love being a dad but wow are they all grown up now. My daughter is smarter than me, debatably more creative and now twenty years old. My son is about to turn eighteen and has recently begun to ride a motorbike. All grown up children! I'll try talking them into giving me grandchildren one day.

## How old are you?

I was born in 1963. I was 29 when my first book "The Man Who Loved Boxes" was accepted. It has been in publication for 20 years—a special 21st anniversary edition was being released in 2016.

## Do you have any other hobbies?

I'm learning the ukelele (trying to sing along too) and I juggle (if you can call it that) when I'm thinking too much. I've started surfing with my son and daughter over the last few years (they're beautiful, fluid and balanced . . . I can stand up and fall off).

## What is your hearing loss story and how has it affected you?

In year four (when I was ten), I always thought my teacher was mumbling. I had a hearing test at school in year five that came up negative. I then went to a doctor who told me not to worry, it was wax and the trials of growing up. By the time I was in year seven I couldn't hear my friends or teachers. It wasn't until year eight that I received my first pair of hearing aids. It was exciting to hear sound again. My dad drove me home after I had my aids fitted; his car rattled and his clutch peddle squeaked. His voice was loud, but beautiful. Hearing distant noises like traffic, faraway kids playing and the volume of bird noise was bliss.

My hearing loss meant that I failed every subject at school except art. My mum was a teacher and my family loved learning, and that natural love of learning meant that I read everything about art, design and animation—including Asterix and Obelix. Later on, I read everything I could related to writing picture books. I studied anything I could to rebuild myself. Books had been a window through . . . and I eventually found myself working in a library, followed by Walt Disney, and then book publishing.

I can lip read (I didn't realise this until my mid twenties when a hearing councillor pointed it out). I haven't learnt sign language, but my daughter is keen for our family to learn so that we can easily communicate when I'm older.

