

'So, you're going to write a kids' picture book...'

Feature Article by Narelle Oliver (Writing Queensland Magazine, March 2002)

Commissioned by Queensland Writers' Centre.

'I'm thinking of writing a kids' book one day'.

Heard that before? If I had a dollar for every time somebody told me that, I'd have no need to look at the grant application handbooks anymore.

Well, maybe that's a slight exaggeration. But writing a children's book, especially a picture book, does seem to be on the 'things to do' list of more than the odd person. I suppose it looks easier and quicker than turning out the Great Australian Novel – there are certainly less words.

Yet, like a lot of things in life, doing something that looks simple is not always as easy as it first appears. In fact, my belief is that writing (and/or illustrating) a children's picture book requires as high a level of obsession and commitment to re-structuring, re-working, and word-by-word editing as any piece of writing, and that really good and original ideas for picture books don't come along all that often.

Fifteen years ago, no person or thing could have stopped me writing and illustrating my first children's picture book, *'Leaf Tail'*. I was a woman possessed and have clear memories of patting a new baby to sleep in the middle of the night while mentally re-configuring the plot of *'Leaf Tail'* or mulling over the sound of a particular sentence. No post-natal depression for me! After two years of re-writing and re-working illustrations, jammed in between part-time teaching young hearing-impaired children and raising a baby, I finally had something I felt I could show a publisher.

At this point, you may be wondering about a few things: how did I get turned on to picture books in the first place to the stage where I simply had to do one? how did I get my idea for the story? how did I actually structure it and choose my words? how did I know when my story and illustrations were at a publishable standard? and indeed, what form did the submission of written text and artwork take?

This is where the story jumps backwards again to my stint at teachers' college in the late 70's. Looking back now, the 70's were really the dawn of a new consciousness in Australian picture book publishing and the excitement and interest generated by many new titles filtered into children's literature courses. My own childhood memories of picture books were an American blur of Little Golden Books and Dr. Seuss, so I was startled to discover that during my teenage years, significant changes had taken place in the world of picture books of which I had been totally oblivious. 'The Bunyip of Berkley's Creek ' by Jenny Wagner and Ron Brooks had been published and won the Children's Book Council Picture Book of the Year. There was something about its understated text allowing the pictures to reveal vital aspects of the story which captured my intense interest. The voice was somehow simple but not patronizing, and the illustrations, apart from being a visual treat like nothing I had seen before, held ideas and details which were captivating, intelligent, yet totally accessible to children. Having majored in drawing, design and print-making while at college, the visual communication of new picture books was particularly intriguing.

So to answer that first question about the drive to write and illustrate a book of my own, it all began with a close-up look at books like 'The Bunyip of Berkley's Creek ' while dabbling with my own visual expression. Based on this experience, my first bit of advice for prospective picture book authors (presuming that you already have a pretty strong if not obsessive will to do one) would be to look very carefully at good contemporary picture books and try to figure out how the pictures and words work together.

In my early teaching years which followed, I was immersed in picture books and came to know the picture book market of the time like the back of my hand. I was also immersed in the act of reading to young children on a daily basis so that part of my brain became almost hard-wired with picture book language and plot structures. Herein lies the answer to another one of those earlier questions about knowing how to structure the story and choose words. From all this experience, I was able to get a feel for common threads and variations in plot structures, writing styles, themes, ideas, appropriate word choice and sentence length. This knowledge helped guide my construction of a satisfying plot and to write the text.

My familiarity with a large number of current picture book titles, from Australia and overseas, especially award-winning ones, also provided a kind of benchmark for determining the technical standards required in illustrations and in writing, particularly in regard to honing down a text and making every word count. So the advice here (if you're still interested!) is to read, read, read as many good contemporary picture books as you can get your hands on, and if possible, read them to children.

Through a stroke of good fortune when 'Leaf Tail ' was still in the thinking stages, I had the opportunity to attend some workshops conducted by Melbourne-based author-illustrator, Irena Sibley. I'm sure I learnt heaps of useful tips on how to present the words and pictures to a publisher, but more overwhelming was the sense of reality about a person and a process behind the finished artifact of a picture book. Somehow this made the whole project seem more achievable and less like a future pipedream, not to mention the frightening fact that participants were expected to exhibit some illustrations and written text by the completion of the workshops!

Last but not least – how did I get the idea for the story? Since childhood, I have always been fascinated by biology and animal adaptation in particular. Knowing the picture book market as I did, I was convinced that there was a need for picture book stories with plot lines based on concepts such as camouflage set in natural Australian habitats. Having said that, many picture book plots are not based on actual subject areas such as camouflage, but feature human relationships, so if you enjoy thinking about what makes people, and especially children, tick and how they react and interact in various situations, then go for it.

Now if you still want to know more, perhaps picture books are for you. I could go on about the process of constant re-structuring, re-writing and re-doing finished artwork after long emotional discussions and negotiations with editors, once a contract is signed, but I think that's another story.

And if you're wondering, I haven't lost my obsession to create a new picture book. In fact, mentally re-configuring picture book plots keeps me sane through many a schoolboys' cricket match these days!