

FAQ's: Frequently Asked Questions

On the following 3 pages is a Q&A about the process of book illustration. Some of this is general in nature, and some is much more particular to me.

How are illustrated books started?

In the beginning, a book needs an **author** and story. The author sends the story they've written to an **editor**. My job starts with the editor sending me the **text** of the story.

Does the author decide which illustrator is used?

No. The author may suggest an illustrator. But it is the editor's choice to whom she offers the text.

Do you work closely with the author?

Generally I don't work with the author. The editor will consult with the author, then give me any important feedback — but the editor has the last word.

Where do ideas come from?

The first ideas come from carefully reading the text. Make sure you understand it! Make sure you understand what the author is really on about. Your illustrations need to respect that, and support the text. But the text should allow that the illustrations can stretch the story in some unexpected way. Maybe, if possible, have a little story in the illustrations that isn't in the text at all? (e.g., a cat or bird reacting to what is going on).

How do you become inspired?

A good way to find inspiration is to go to the library or bookshop. Find work that really excites you. Think about why? Have a go at drawing and painting in that style.

Inspiration is aided by **research**. The more you know, the cleverer will be your ideas.

What is the process for illustrating a picture book? And is it simple?

It is a two stage process. First is the **rough draft**, then the **finished artwork**.

To plan the rough draft (also called the **roughs**) I am told by the editor how many pages the book will have. (Usually 32 pages for a picture book). Then I work out where the words will go on each page.

Actually it is a little bit more complex. A book is usually planned in 'spreads'. When you read a book, one page is on the left, one page is on the right. The two pages together is called a spread. Illustrations might be on one page, or go right across the spread... This rough arrangement of words and pictures is the **layout** (it can be changed as you go).

So, then I start planning the illustrations with pencil, eraser, and tracing paper. My first roughs are drawn the same size as the book will be. Another way is usually done smaller, called a **storyboard**.

Rough drawings in a storyboard are a useful map of what goes where.

However, you will never know your story as well as when you are doing the roughs.

So I do my roughs larger. I can imagine it in finished form much more clearly.

A photocopier is useful, especially being able to change the size of a drawing.

Bits of rough drawings can be sticky-taped together. They do not have to be neat.

These roughs show the important bits of the picture, but not all the details. Lots of things can be left for later. (Especially colour, of course).

Then they get sent to the editor.

The editor may require some changes, or many changes! With the editor's ok I can then start the final artwork.

That usually means tracing the roughs onto artboard, re-outlining them in ink, then finally painting them. Sometimes it takes forever going from first rough to finished artwork. In recent years I have been colouring on computer. I'll write about that a bit further on.

How do you know when an illustration is finished?

There is a moment when you start to get tired of it. After that you can no longer see it clearly. Time to hang it on the rack and start the adventure of the next picture.



An Editor

FAQ's: An approach to book illustration

Why did you want to be an illustrator?

In the 70's a lot of change was happening in Australia. I wanted to be a political cartoonist, be involved that way. I did a few cartoons for a magazine. The dilemma was I found that I didn't like being offensive, even if the offensive cartoon was funny! Doing book illustration was a way of being involved, picturing our new Australia, without giving offense.

Who inspired you to illustrate?

The example of my sister, Maire. She has much more drawing skill than me, but I am more interested in storytelling than her. Then my lecturer at art school, George Tetlow, whose guidance made sense of life drawing for me.

I have some heroes. Firstly, the graphic designer Milton Glaser. I had a library book of his work with me through much of art school. Looking at his work was like rocket fuel for my imagination. After him, a whole lot of European illustrators, Freidrich Karl Waechtar, Etienne Delessert, Heinz Edelmann, Roland Topor, Tomi Ungerer and others that I knew through art magazines and books. They were different and amazing, funny but not cute.

It was different from English and American books, TV and comics.

It is good to have hero models. As a student I didn't want to copy them, I wanted to think like them, perhaps draw a bit like them – but work it out in my own way!

How do you decide what approach and style to use for a book?

In my case, sometimes the drawings are a bit cartoony, sometimes they are a more realistic depending on what I (and the editor) think about the story. Sometimes they are a bit of a mix. My usual style is comic and somewhat simplified – especially faces.

Using humour and drama I do hope my illustrations can take the reader to some unexpected place, some imaginative place, some exaggerated place. To bring life to my illustrations I do rely on drawing people doing things. More particularly I like working out lively or meaningful body language.

Each illustration should tell you something about the story that the words do not.

What medium do you use for illustration?

I draw the linework with an old fashioned pen and nib.

Colour is applied with a mixture of ink, gouache paint and coloured pencils. Or software. I'm not convinced that the painting style matters much, but you do need to get to know your paints, pens and brushes etc.

Do you use a computer to illustrate?

This is a big, complex and interesting subject. Here are just a few thoughts.

In recent years, I've done lots of books on computer using different drawing tablets, styli, and various software. (I've not done any on an ipad.)

I scan the the hand-drawn outline drawings into the computer. I use the computer software to apply colour to this **linework** (the linework can also be called the **outline**).

The best thing the computer allows is to have the linework on one transparent layer. The colour is applied on a different layer. But the linework is always on the top layer. The linework doesn't change, bits of it don't get painted out. All of that suits my style.

(There is one other tool I can't live without – the **clone stamp** tool in ®Photoshop!)

Right. However in my long experience things tech don't always work as they should. Too much time and money is spent trying to work out why and fixing it. As well, it is hard on your body and eyes, sitting or standing at a computer for hours. On computer it is much more difficult to track what you are doing on the many files you are working on for book illustrations.

Bottom line is; a computer is a necessary production tool now, but I no longer think it can do everything well. I would say the best illustrations have a hand-made quality – difficult to get digitally!

FAQ's: Other things you might like to know!

What were you like in school?

Shy, scared, loved the library and the oval. In primary school loved spelling. In secondary school loved reading. Left school not able to understand numbers, or write an essay, but happy. Loved recess and lunchtime.

What was your favourite book growing up?

At 13 years old, the book that changed my life was William Golding's **Lord of the Flies**. Reading it marks the end of childhood. After reading it I started thinking about what sort of grown-up I might be.

What are the tricks you like to use?

Use tracing paper for the roughs.

Use a mirror to try out body positions and facial expressions. Put the mirror high, or low. Put the mirror at unfamiliar angles. This alters the point of view.

Read the story out loud. Do it in a way that is lively and interesting. Better still, read it to a very young child. This may guide you to decide which moment to illustrate.

Draw with pencils, pastels, charcoal etc. These will give you an expressive range of lines and texture. (I have never yet met anyone who **learned to draw** fluently on computer.

Though the pens and brushes are getting better).

The words in a picture book should generally not describe what the illustrations can show.

Do you ever copy?

No.

What's more important, the writing or the pictures?

I think the writing. A brilliant story with ordinary illustrations can still be a good book. A bad story, even with brilliant illustrations will probably not be around for long.

How do you feel about people not liking your work?

It doesn't particularly fuss me. I suppose I would like to know why?

Do you have a real job? What occupies your mind when you work?

No. This is my job. Nowadays I like to get out and draw in schools – that is quite special. When doing roughs I think about the story. When painting I probably think about politics mostly. And about economics, water and climate change. That's a lot to think about. Also, what I'm reading, gardening, fixing up in the shed, sewing, cycling, driving. I like being a grandpa, and I think about that.

Do you think about the kids who'll read your book when you're working on it?

More now than I used to. Nowadays I do think about childhood more. Including my own. I illustrate from the point of view of wanting the drawings to be fun. So I draw in a lively, silly sort of way. I'm guessing young kids don't mind that.

What did your parents always tell you ...?

They told me many things – like stop picking my nose. Or that I was required to work in the shop on Saturday morning. My dad did like to talk about what I was reading. My mum told me I could only read if I had exhausted myself doing all sorts of boring jobs.

What are you always being asked ...?

Why do all your characters look the same? (The answer is; I was trained by an editor many years ago to keep facial expression **underdrawn** – dots for eyes, dashes for mouth and eyebrows. Quite simple and amazingly expressive. It is easy to **overdraw** the face with too much detail). The result of this simplification is my characters do have a sort of mainstream similarity.

