



Perfect your Portfolio: Portfolio Workshop with Donna Rawlins 17 May, 2015

I'll make a little advance apology for myself here before I start out on these master class notes. Recently an acquaintance rolled her eyes and said, 'I sense another anecdote coming on,' when a moment arose that prompted me to relate something that I felt was pertinent to the moment. 'Old' people tend to do that—rattle on about the things they've learnt over time. It's happened over tens of thousands of years—by firesides—in song—in story—in image.

When we are children, we are the receivers of story. And, as we grow, from child, to adolescent, and eventually, to adult, we become the custodians and bearers of story. Whether we keep and store away, or pass on those stories is our own choice. And, how we do that depends on the motivations and skills we develop.

A book illustrator for children—is that what you would like to be? Or, do you want to be a 'children's book' illustrator?

While it might sound like semantic obfuscation here, it is really important. As an artist wanting to join others in this rich literary field we must first look inward to test our motivation. Knowing for sure why you want to do something has to be a good place to start.

Editors are forever asking writers to look within themselves to investigate where their story ideas spring from. Writers are asked to test their ideas—to be sure that, while they may well be telling an 'old story', that their telling is with a fresh voice, a new clear eye, and a depth of authority that only a polished craftsperson can muster. And, editors must always be vigilant to be sure that a writer means to write for children. You see, there are so many who make a decision to be a 'children's writer' or 'children's illustrator' based on flawed ideas about what the craft entails.

So, first let's revisit that earlier question.

- Do you want to tell stories to, and make art for children?
- Or, do you simply want to find a vehicle for your skills as an illustrator / graphic designer / fine artist?

And the next two questions are important before we move on:

Answer them honestly inside your own head.

- Do you regularly read children's fiction and / or picture book texts?
- And do those stories speak to the child within?

Every developing civilisation told story to preserve and pass on all of their accumulated wisdom.

The Grimms brothers knew it; the Opies with their assiduous collections of playground lore— every fortunate child who’s grown up with adults who shared “Once upon a time”...

It makes you jealous of the artist who reached the story before you, who claimed that space on the page as their own, then you’re on the road. Jealous is good! Because it means you know what it is to passionately attach to a text!

The Rationale

Earlier I mentioned that editors do their level best to help the writer dig deep— to mine the questions and truths of their own storytelling.

I’m about to do the same, because, an art director IS an editor. The art director who nurtures an emergent illustrator through a book is there as the guide, the objective partner who’s there to help the artist explore and take risks, try new things, test their motivations and ideas, stretch themselves. The more rigorous the first experience we have as new illustrators with our first editor or art director, the easier the task becomes in all our future projects, because we go on to hear that person on our own shoulder encouraging us to question our work, to test its success or limits.

First I’d like to assume that you do want to be an illustrator for children (rather than a decorative picture maker). The first thing you must have is a passion for a text that is just right for a child. Sometimes what we ‘think’ is child-friendly when we begin, is proved, very quickly, to be of little real merit.

The best place to start, of course, is to take ourselves right back to our own childhoods, where we have an inbuilt art director and editor already sitting there on our shoulder!

Authenticity in art and text for children is critically important. Kids can spot a mile off a creator whose heart isn’t in it. So, this brief is to help you, the grown up, speak directly to you, the child. This exercise will also help you to develop an understanding of how art and text for children work together to build literacy.

To become literate a child must be spoken to and with, and sung to. His and her exposure to language much be rich and varied. A child’s received (heard) language through conversation, rhyme and song becomes the foundation of his or her later success with expressive (spoken and written) language. And, for the pre-reader nursery rhymes are quite evidently one of the most successful pathways to independent reading.

In our master class, we’ll be exploring more detail about how this works in the development of a child’s language acquisition and literacy.

The Brief

Most people have had exposure to nursery rhymes in their childhood, and if you have, you will have carried that lyrical little story around in your memory for a long time and grown to ‘own’ it for yourself. An illustrator must love the text he or she takes on — really love it, so that the illustration comes from the heart. Otherwise the task of illustrating it will be a chore and the image will be nothing more than an exercise in decoration.

Your task is to find a nursery rhyme that you loved as a child, and to create one or more illustrations for that rhyme. You may choose to create one illustration for your rhyme, or, you may want to split the rhyme into lines or stanzas and explore a sustained visual narrative.

You can choose any format or medium. If you have sufficient time on your hands, you may like to explore the very same rhyme or image in more than one medium.

At the Workshop

We’ll have a little ‘exhibition’ of your work where you might like to take a few moments to share with the class what you discovered and learnt about the text, about your approach to the task, and perhaps what you learnt about yourself and your own work in the process of the exercise.

I look forward to seeing all your fabulous work!

—Donna