



Author Spotlight

Jane Simmons chats to Graham Marks

Jane Simmons is a uniquely talented award-winning illustrator and author, and the creator of some of our best-loved children's books. Here she talks to Graham Marks about boats, motorbikes and making a mess, as well as her words, her art and her latest picture book, *Lily Gets Lost*.

I discovered, researching for this interview, that we first met 15 years ago, when your debut picture book, *Come On, Daisy!*, was first published – long time!

Did you come down to the boat for that?

No, I didn't.

Well I'm still living in much the same disgusting conditions as I was back then, not a lot has changed!

You were living on an old boat called Prosperity in Penryn then.

I've still got that, and it's now in Normandy.

Is it sea-worthy?

It is now, it wasn't then, it was full of rats. That's why we got Doris, and his life is now a novel: *Ship's Cat Doris!*

Do you still have the old Triumph motorbike?

No, we've got a Ducatti, with a trailer – we've got more animals now! We've done a lot of our traveling like that, and we can put the bike and trailer on the boat as well, and unload them wherever we are.

I know you went to the Anglia Polytechnic University, on an art course; was painting and drawing all you ever wanted to do?

It's all I've ever done. It's what I always did, from the moment I could hold anything...I've done an awful lot of other things as well, but the thing was, I was very reticent about 'spoiling' what I drew by trying to earn money from it. And that was the big problem.

But you must have had a bit of a commercial eye, you went in for a lot of prizes, didn't you?

Once I'd gone to college all that changed. I used to think we'd all be dead by the time I was thirty – I thought nuclear war would probably wipe us out...it's hard to imagine that now, that feeling of Red Alert. But when I got to thirty, and that hadn't happened, I realised I'd actually have to start thinking of some other things to do. Maybe this was the time to turn what I'd always done into a job, because doing other things would be so dull.

What prompted you to go to college?

I'd been avoiding work for a number of years, and then, when I needed a job and went looking, I found out that I hadn't been avoiding work at all because there was a recession and there wasn't any, and there hadn't been any for ages! It came as complete surprise to me, and was a bit of a shock.

You see what happens when you don't pay attention!

I just thought it was something everybody was saying, that they couldn't get a job! Anyway, then I started to try and find work, and didn't like anything I tried, so I began to sell some of my paintings through cafés and that was when I found out they were going to cut the student grants. I thought, this is it, if I'm going to do it I'd better do it now. When I was seventeen I did a Foundation Course, and I wanted to do illustration then, but everyone said 'You'll never get in', so I didn't go and do it because I wouldn't get in. This time round I just decided to have a go and fail at what I really wanted to do, rather than do something I didn't want to do. Time was running out.

Apart from illustrating, right from the start you were writing your own stories as well; was that just the most natural thing for you to do?

I've always written anyway, but because I'm dyslexic it has been a bit of a problem as well, in that you feel you're sneaking in under the radar. But I always enjoyed writing stories and poetry...just writing, creative writing. But that's not why I went into it; I always felt my illustrations were such rubbish that I'd never find anyone do anything with them. But if I produced the entire thing, then they might be interested.

You had a very peripatetic childhood – I think you described your mother as a 'global traveller' - do you think this was responsible for your love of storytelling?

My storytelling really came from lying, and getting into terrible trouble. I've always made up stories and it became really extreme – I haven't got into any problems since I've been writing professionally...because I've found an outlet. If you can't tell the truth, you need an outlet, and if you have that you can live in a fantasy world without upsetting people.

From an early age it was like that with me, and all the travelling actually aided it...we were what they called ten quid Poms, we got on a boat and we went to Australia. We were there for three and a half years, and it was where I went to my first school...I knew I could tell them anything I wanted, it didn't matter as I knew I wouldn't be there for long. After Australia there was France, and Africa and bits of England, and there were no - what's the word for end results? - no repercussions to lying for me; it was just entertainment, I just entertained people.

At what point do you begin to paint?

Always painted, there hasn't ever been a part of my life when I haven't. Because of the dyslexia it was the only thing I was good at. I had good and bad English teachers, some who recognised that I loved to read and write, but I couldn't spell, and they could see past that. Others just seemed to want to hammer away at everything you were bad at, concentrate on everything you couldn't do. They were like your worst enemy.

But I could always paint and nobody ever told me I couldn't do that. Any trouble I had at college was with people who could see I could paint, but not necessarily in the way they liked, in a tidy way. One particular tutor, in Graphic Design, almost refused, came very close refusing to mark my work because it was sticky. And I'm sure he hates me to this day because I just laughed at him!

Are you still painting with oils?

No, I stopped using oils for health reasons. Because I was working on my boat, which was sealed in the winter, and we had paraffin heating and paraffin lights and I realised, with all these fumes, I was living in a bomb – waiting for it to go ka-boom! So I changed to acrylics, mainly, but also water colour and inks, but not the fummy stuff any more, and it's nicer.

Do you start by sketching everything out first?

Oh yes.

Onto what?

Oh, depends, anything that's to hand. Sometimes I'm really cheap and use wallpaper lining paper, the really thin stuff. I'm not precious about it. The Illustration Cupboard asked me to bring in some roughs for an exhibition, so I found the ones for *Daisy and the Egg* and took them in, but they're on really flimsy paper and I did wonder whether they'd be at all interested in them. But they were very good about it, they thought they were great.

Has your technique changed much over the years?

How do you mean?

Have you developed as an artist, in the way you do what you do?

Oh yes, the latest stuff is a lot different, I'm using a lot more line and it's lighter. And *Lily Gets Lost* is quite different, in a way. The 'me' in there is huge, but it is different; the way I get there is different, and it has to be otherwise you'd be just churning things out, which I can't do. Which is why it takes me so long.

Does it take you a long time?

Yeah, some more than others...generally it just takes me a long time. Sometimes I cram the time into a short space and that just means it doesn't stop, I don't stop, until it's done.

What does take the most time? The layout, the writing?

It all takes the time...the roughs, the story, and the work with your editor; how I want it to be and how they want it to be. And there's compromises with all of that, which is always a hard slog...

Are you a good compromiser?

No...Yes...No - that's the worst bit of it, isn't it, compromising things? It's always about trying to get the best book, it's just whether you think your ideas are right. I think the whole creative process is so very difficult, because it is emotion, pure emotion, so you can't behave well, and yet you have to because you have to collaborate.

Do you think you always end up with a better book than if you'd been left to your own devices?

Oh yes, absolutely, but it usually takes me eight months to think that! But then some decisions have been horrendous, like with *Come On, Daisy!* they wanted loads of ducklings in it; I'd just come out of college and had managed to get this one duckling looking like a duckling, over a lot of spreads, and the whole idea of then having to do another load of them...I'd have had a mental breakdown, there was just no way!

So I told them, 'Actually, I can't do that because I've already written a second book, so it doesn't work'. And they went, 'Oh...you've got a second book?' and I said, 'Uh, yeah...', and off the cuff I said that Daisy's was going to have a brother. And they said great, send it in. So I had to go home that day, write the story and send it in, like it was just there - with all the roughs! It was a nightmare, but they gave me a two-book deal on the strength of that. All because I didn't think I could do a load of ducklings...

Did you have a favourite illustrator and writer when you were a kid?

Well I didn't really have many books...I loved Winnie the Pooh, I had those; I loved every book I had, actually, I loved *Cat in the Hat*, because I had that, and *Green Eggs and Ham*. But I didn't really like the older, Arthur Rackham style of illustrations.

Were there illustrators you liked and wanted to copy their style?

No. I wanted to copy people like Monet and Georgia O'Keeffe, her flower paintings...not really from illustrators.

Your style has been influenced by painters, then?

Yes, definitely a lot by the Impressionists, they're just gorgeous; although I'm not a great art history buff and I have a memory like a colander and can never remember names. Writers were different, I loved *Wind in the Willows*, but I never got into the illustrators.

What you do certainly is very painterly, and not especially illustrative...

It's a mess!

No, it's not...

Yes, it's a mess and there's nowhere near enough mess in this world! Computers are generating tidiness at a horrendous rate...all of the animation today is very clever and very witty, but dreadfully tidy. There's just too much daintiness. I was painting pictures at this school today and it was just such good fun, because kids have all been brought up with this terrible clean tidiness; I was showing them how to paint Daisy and they got so distressed because I was splodging paint everywhere and making a complete mess. They wanted it clean and tidy!

Ideas come out of chaos, don't they?

I think so, otherwise all you get is a load of neat ideas. Which is nice; I think neat ideas are great, but there also has to be the mess, there has to be a balance. It's my duty to create mess, because I think it's being lost.

How soon do you know, when you start on a new mess, that you've got an idea worth pursuing?

Ah, well, I can't answer that...

What, if you tell me you'll have to kill me?

No, no, no...it's just at the moment I've got about six ideas running concurrently. Working out the characters for picture books, sketching, I've got a novel sitting there which isn't quite right...it's finished, but it isn't, because it needs another re-write; it's 40,000 words sitting there all wrong and I need to deal with it. Things just go until they're right.

If I could have more time, if every day was lengthier somehow, and I had the more time to deal with some of these things. I could get on with my donkey book, which has been going now for like eight months and should be dogs, really, because that would be better, but I like donkeys. It's about how we all have big dreams, but actually what we're doing is struggling with everyday life.

Tell me about where the idea for *Lily Gets Lost* came from.

We've moved from Italy to Normandy now, and Lilly was sort of a black lamb we rescued, even though Lily isn't black in the book. Every time I looked out of my bedroom window there were sheep everywhere, but they've moved now, nearer to where the farmer lives.

How has it been, going out and working with *Come on, Daisy!*, revisiting a book you finished fifteen years ago!

Fascinating, absolutely fascinating, actually, because I didn't like it at the time.

Didn't like it?

I didn't think it was very good; there was so much I could have done differently...I'd just come out of college and I didn't feel like I had the skills. But now I look back at it and there's loads of elements that I really like about it; I suppose I'm fifteen years removed from it so I can look at it much more objectively, instead of thinking, Oh, I should have done that.

If you had the chance to redo *Daisy*, would you do it differently?

I'd love to have the chance...although I think it's pretty good as it is, to be honest. Although I think I'd have to move her because I've forgotten the landscape I put her in as I don't live there any more. I went from Lincoln to Norwich on this trip and I'd forgotten how black that soil is and how amazing those reeds are. I don't think anyone would want me to re-do it, actually, and if I did I don't know if it would be any better. It was absolutely as good as I could get it then, and that's sort of part of it's charm as well, the whole thing coming together in these accidents throughout the artwork...I love that about art. And that's what I lost in the middle of my career; I think got too worried and too flash and I could control my paint, and that's never a good thing for art.

It's what I've been working on recently, which is why it's been brilliant going into schools, a very freeing experience. Because when you get better at your thing you don't allow for the accidents and the freedom; you can end up in a perfect, lifeless world, so I'm trying to bring back the accidents to my work.