

2003/April LAUREN CHILD - Publishing News

Amazingly, it's just four years ago that Lauren Child made her publishing debut. Starting as she obviously meant to go on, she had two books out that year, each with different publishers - *I Want a Pet* appeared in February 1999 from Frances Lincoln and *Clarice Bean, That's Me* followed in July from Orchard. "I started to write," she says, "because I wanted to get into children's book design, licensed characters, film and products and writing was intended as a stepping stone." As it's turned out, a stepping stone has become the destination.

The first thing she wrote, *Clarice Bean, That's Me*, a signature book if ever there was one, collected a rejection slip from everyone she showed it to. Then she signed with agents David Higham Associates, "...and still nothing happened for a long time," says Child, "so I wrote *I Want a Pet* because I didn't want to feel defeated."

When you meet her - tall, blond, grey-eyed, cool - it's not long before you understand that Lauren Child doesn't seem to do defeat, that it isn't a part of her repertoire. What her repertoire does include, on the other hand, is one of the most imaginative palettes and instantly recognisable styles in children's books. Where, I wondered, did her 'look' come from? "I'm not sure...I thought it would be nice if the words became part of the illustration, so you could see Clarice's voice in the picture. She has a very strong voice, you can really hear it, and I've always been interested in graphics, always liked the look of type on the page...I guess it follows from those ideas."

Type, she goes on, should lend itself to the picture, not just be put where it can frequently spoil the illustration, something which she thinks often happens because, in publishing, there's a culture of snobbishness with the tenet that the writer is always more important than the artist. Even in picture books. "I didn't want to be an illustrator, and never thought I'd be a writer," says Child, who left college after a year as she felt she wasn't getting anything out of it. She ended up working for Damien Hirst, producing his spot paintings. "I was intrigued by them, and mixing the

colours and placing the spots was very therapeutic...it was supposed to be random, but you can't help making choices."

While there are no obvious parallels between Hirst's and Child's work, the same isn't true when you find out who her favourite artists are. "They're Edward Gorey, Ronald Searle, Quentin Blake and, when I was young, E H Shepard," she says, "and I also loved Sixties TV cartoons like *Top Cat* and *The Wacky Races*." Although her favourites are all classic pen men, she herself uses a simple Bic HB propelling pencil. "I tried with a pen," Child explains, "but I was no good, so then I started using a pencil and when I couldn't get the blackness I wanted I began photocopying and then scanning my drawings into the computer."

Computer printouts, cloth, stuff...her pages are an intense, multi-layered collage of cut-and-paste artwork that can end up so thick that they have to be photographed first before going anywhere near a scanner. Child has produced a book entirely on computer - *Dan's Angel* with Alexander Sturgis (published by Frances Lincoln in hardback last year and in paperback next month) - but only as an experiment; scissors and glue are definitely her favoured medium.

It was when Clarice Bean finally appeared that things started to happen, and I wondered if Child had any idea why. "Maybe Clarice came along at a time when people wanted to see something different? I don't really know, but Orchard took a bit of a chance on the book - and me - as everyone else had turned it down for practical reasons," she tells me. "Difficulties with co-editions, lack of story, too sophisticated for children...most said that you can't write like this for kids and suggested I either had to lose the text or the pictures."

Flying in the face of all the criticism, Orchard went with Child's vision. "When I saw the book finished it was nice to see it exactly as I wanted it to be. And then it got a Bronze in the Smarties and went up for the Greenaway and got Highly Commended, which was in some ways better than winning, as by the time I won I knew how people felt about my work."

Despite her success - which was, she says, nowhere near as overnight as it might appear to have been - having two books published and another

contracted by Orchard wasn't enough to live on. "My friend Cressida Cowell had walked into Hodder with her first book and been signed up for a two-book deal by Kate Burns. I was impressed by the way they got on with things and so I went to see them; I showed Kate an idea I had and she signed me up for two books and I thought I could relax a bit then."

Child fully understands that there's a lot of risk involved for publishers and that they'd always rather see you as an exclusive property but, she says, when it's your living you just need people to say yes. "Having more than one publisher also keeps *me* on my toes. I have to have ideas that are different for each of them, in looks and flavour; Orchard books are character-led, while Hodder's are much more traditional stories in the way they're told...they have boy characters and are more plot-driven than my work usually is."

And now she's added another publisher to her list. Back in January, Puffin announced that *Bat Cat*, a new Child creation, will publish as a Picture Puffin in 2005. No real surprises here as Puffin's MD was, of course, her publisher at Orchard. "I was devastated when Francesca [Dow] said she was going to Puffin, as it's hard parting with your editor," says Child. "But it's all right now...all the changes at Orchard have been for the best as they've given me a whole new take on my work."

While US imprints get jumpy about creators having more than two publishers, and her agent had momentary worries about it, too, Child is much more pragmatic: "I think it's a shame not to work with different people as I get so much out of it."

This might all sound as if the market is to be deluged with Child's books, but there will be only one new one out this year - *I Am TOO Absolutely Small To Go To School*, the third in the *Charlie and Lola* series which began three years ago with *I Will Not NEVER Ever Eat A Tomato*. She will spend the rest of her time getting some stories together, finishing a book and writing my second Clarice novel. In New York. Nice.