

2008/Feb EMILY GRAVETT - Publishing News

In 2004 Emily Gravett was in the last term of her last year as a mature student at Brighton University; she was studying Illustration, with a side dish of Bookbinding thrown in for good measure, so she entered the Macmillan Prize for Children's Book Illustrations, which, to her total amazement, she won. Her book, *Wolves*, was published a year later by Macmillan. "It was," says Gravett, "a life-changing experience."

Wolves was very swiftly followed in 2006 by *Orange Pear Apple Bear* and *Meerkat Mail*, and then, seemingly without pausing for breath, last year she produced *Monkey and Me* and *Little Mouse's Big Book of Fears*. 2008 will see the release of her sixth and seventh books - *Odd Egg* in March and *Spells* in August - as well as her having the accolade of becoming the latest World Book Day illustrator. All in all, I think it's true to say, something of a whirlwind career path, but not one that ever looked like it was on the cards.

Gravett, a Brighton girl with artistic leanings, left hearth and home when she was 16 and took to the road as a self-described New Age traveller, living with her partner, Mick, in a 30-foot, khaki green, single-decker ex-RAF bus; in this peripatetic counter culture the worlds of illustration and publishing were absolutely nowhere on the horizon, and it was a road she travelled for almost a decade, until the birth of her daughter.

Motherhood took the wheels off Gravett's old life (they moved from the bus to a house, albeit one with no heating) and it also reintroduced her to books, more specifically the many picture books she read to her daughter; these inspired her to enrol on an art foundation course, a decision which would eventually lead her all the way back to Brighton.

Gravett is, as even a cursory glance at her work reveals, a natural; her style is loose, free and very animated, the characters she draws full of real life, the pages she designs crammed with ideas and alive with the story she's telling. At first sight you might assume that she works with tried and tested materials and in a time-honoured fashion, and, true enough, she does draw using an oil-based Pitt pencil, but she's also adept at the rather more

arcane skills required to use a scanner, Photoshop and a very high-end Mac set-up to produce her artwork.

“I *hated* computers when I first got to college...I thought they were evil, they gave me a headache and I had to get glasses; I love drawing, and it’s the most important part of what I do, but during my second year I was doing projects that I started wanting to make into books, but you can’t bind your original artwork into a book. Also, I’d begun to use found objects, like match boxes, and you can’t bind them in either, so I had to learn how to scan them in instead, and I realised that once I’d done that I could change things and move them around.”

Gravett had started to do bookbinding - not something you’d normally find at the top of an illustration student’s ‘Must Do’ list - because she didn’t much like being in the main part of the university and the bookbinding department was off the beaten track where not many people went. “It was a magical place, full of paper, tools and equipment; you didn’t need much and suddenly you’d have something that looked like a professional book...I made a lot of empty ones, but you’ve got to put things in them and they’re a lovely way to present your work when you’ve finished it. It was really all down to my quest for solitude.”

The other, possibly more important and far-reaching outcome of being at college for Gravett was that she recognised that the computer, like the pencil, was just another tool for her to use, another way of getting things the way she wanted them to be. “There really is no difference between me drawing something and me placing something on the page using Photoshop...and it also gives me a huge amount of control over my work - I don’t have to hand over bits of artwork to an Art Director and trust *them* to get it all in the right place, *I’m* going to get it in the right place.”

The end result, the final images you see in Gravett’s books, is virtual art, existing only as digital files, just like the images she has produced for World Book Day. Gravett can’t remember exactly when she found out she’d been chosen, just that she got a call one day from Macmillan and was amazed to have been asked. “They sent me a brief, telling me what they wanted, I did it and sent it back to them,” she says, then admits it wasn’t entirely that

easy. “The most difficult thing about the job was working to the brief, which was something I couldn’t change; I’ve not illustrated for anyone else before, never had to do what I’m told, but it was a good experience, and I learnt a lot through doing it.”

For someone who says she doesn’t make plans, Gravett’s life appears to be very well mapped out, as both this year’s books are delivered and she’s well on her way to completing the one due next spring - as well as being an author/illustrator, every publisher’s dream package, she’s also incredibly prolific. That all being the case, does she have some idea of what the future holds? “I felt like I’d been running quite fast to keep up with myself for the last three and a half years, ever since I left college...recently I did think I’d caught up, but the trouble with me is that I always think that what I’ll do next is give myself a couple of days a week to mess around in, but then I get a new idea and everything else goes out of the window, I zone in on the new project and that’s it!”