

## 2006/March Nick Sharratt - Publishing News

World Book Day, apart from being an annual jamboree to celebrate books and reading, is also a chance to showcase the work of an illustrator. This year the spotlight is on Nick Sharratt, the man with arguably one of the most recognisable - and recognised - styles in the business, and while there are some who probably think of him as 'Jacqueline Wilson's illustrator', there was a life before he met the current Children's Laureate and began illustrating her books.

Sharratt trained at St Martin's art school, where he took a graphics course, specialising in illustration, and, when he left in the mid-1980s, he started working almost immediately for magazines - everything from the specialist, and rather prosaic, car, financial and gardening titles to the more *outré* pages of Cosmo. While children's books were, he says, what he always wanted to do, he didn't feel confident enough to go straight into it, and benefited from the training editorial illustration gave him, particularly when it came to deadlines.

So when and where did he find his way into the world of children's books? "As well as the magazines, I did any other illustration I could get my hands on, including a lot for educational publishers, one of which was Oxford University Press," says Sharratt. "David Fickling was an editor there, and he commissioned me to do my first picture book - *Noisy Poems*, edited by Jill Bennett. It was published in about 1987, is still going strong and has just had a new cover."

Mr Fickling was to play an equally pivotal role in Sharratt's life a few years later when he'd moved to Transworld Children's Books, the company which would later morph into Random House Children's Books. "David was the editor working on Jackie's book *The Story of Tracy Beaker*; she wanted the book to be very heavily illustrated, so he put the two of us together." If you weren't paying attention it would be easy to think that all Sharratt did was work on Wilson's books, but that's never been the case. "Jackie's pretty much the only novelist I illustrate for, but I do lots of picture books and picture book collaborations."

Sharratt's first solo picture book was *I Look Like This*, one of the original Sainsbury own-brand titles produced by Walker Nooks, which, like *Noisy Poems*, is still in print, although now with the title *What Do I Look Like?* "It led onto a series I did with Caroline Royds, who, along with David, always encouraged me to write." As he is, by training and inclination, an illustrator, was he surprised to be asked to start doing the words as well? "No, it was something I really wanted to do, although I do find it quite a struggle, as the writing doesn't come as naturally as the drawing side does." Is there, then, any chance that he might 'do a Lauren Child' and write a novel? "I'd love to, but it's a total mystery to me how to write more than two sentences a page. That's about my limit, seriously, and it takes me as long to write a picture book as it would most people to write a novel."

While he seems to have an almost elephantine memory for all the books he's done, ask Sharratt how many publishers he's worked for over the years and he's stumped. "Quite a lot..." he says. "Quite a lot...because people do move around a lot. I reckon I've done between 150 and 160 books in total, everything from baby books to teenage. I really like the variety, it's good and I find it very appealing and challenging at the same time."

Does he have any unfulfilled ambitions, to be animated, maybe? "In terms of ambitions, I would like to push my writing, as it's such a satisfying thing to create the whole book by yourself, and I'd like to focus more on that in the future. And I am actually animated in *The Story of Tracy Beaker* on TV. Every time she has a daydream, they have a little animation of my drawings. Although it would be nice to go further with that and have one of my younger characters with their own animation."

The way Sharratt draws is deceptively simple, a style often imitated and rarely bettered - is it the way he's always drawn, or did he have to slave for years to develop it? "It's kind of pretty much how I drew before I got to art school, when I was a kid and in my teens. I experimented a lot at art school, but then I came back to the style where I started off. I've always liked drawing with a clean black line; very graphic, quite simple, clear imagery."

Comics were an influence, he says, and they've always been something he's loved, from the visual point of view. In fact he did draw his own strips when he was a kid. "I love the way they're put together, and in the very latest Jackie Wilson book, *Candyfloss*, I've used a sort of comic strip form for the illustrations...the way I've designed the pages harks back to comics and the way they look."

Comic, of course, also means funny, and Sharratt's illustrations, while often poignant and telling, can also be extremely humorous - it would take a hard heart not to crack a grin at the crocodile and a moose dancing their way across this year's World Book Day postcard. It is very much an accolade to be approached to do the illustrations for World Book Day - the cause and the exposure are both fantastic - and it has been, he says, "an honour to be involved and have a role to play."