

2007/March OLIVER JEFFERS - Publishing News

To be chosen as the World Book Day illustrator is a major career high point, a validation and recognition of your work which is hard to match - it says that you have a signature style and a talent recognised by both the public and the industry. Achieving this accolade after having published only three books is, to say the least, astonishing, but then Oliver Jeffers, who appeared on the radar just three years ago with *How to Catch a Star*, is something of a creative force of Nature and doesn't ever seem to do anything by halves.

Our paths crossed most recently when we were both in Dublin and, over a full Irish breakfast, I asked him how he felt about the rocket-like trail he has blazed these last few years. "I don't think about it that way...I don't look above the parapet very often. I just keep doing what I do," he says in reply, and it is not as disingenuous a comment as it might sound because Jeffers does a lot of things apart from illustrating books. "I keep myself busy with painting, graphics, typography, design, installations, and mathematics." Mathematics?

"I'm interested in the gap between two schools of thinking, and the mathematics thing is born out of an interest in how our world works and how we know what we know. I'm fascinated by the huge gulf between logical thinking and creative thinking, and about how an artist looks at something like that." Art, he says, has become the expression of its own self-doubt and he wanted to twist things on their head, to use figurative, still life, landscape and portrait painting, but interrupt the messages they were sending with mathematical logic.

As he followed the path he'd set himself on, Jeffers made other connections, with elements of psychology, philosophy and neurology, and he was having trouble containing and making sense of everything. "I knew I was going to have to talk to a mathematician to make sure the equations I was putting on to the canvases were right. I went to see Hugh Morrison, a Doctor of Quantum Mechanics at Queens University in Belfast, thinking that talking

to him would clear things in my head, but I didn't realise to what extent it would change the way I thought."

Did he think that his foray into this new world was going to have an effect on his illustration? "It already has, with the *Incredible Book Eating Boy*, because I'm interested in knowledge. It's like Francis Bacon's idea that knowledge is power, and the fact that he made science a testable thing...he invented proof, basically. The book is all about a child's rather simplistic view of getting smart and gaining knowledge, the two things tied in at a very elementary level. My meetings with Hugh Morrison have completely changed my way of thinking; I went in with ideas about the relationship between art and human behaviour, but they were wrong; there is no set of rules that tell us anything about how we should feel things. Some people get stuff, others don't."

This relationship between the artist and the mathematician, which Jeffers paints as something of a one-way street, does beg a question: did his rather more illogical, chaotic methods have any effect on the good Doctor? "They have had, which has been the biggest surprise to me; Hugh says he's changed the way he looks at art, and he's made parallels, not between illustrations and mathematical problems, but the way both disciplines try to describe things we don't know, and about the limitations of language. He says he's changing the way he teaches his course as a direct result of our conversations."

The word 'polymath' springs to mind as Jeffers peppers this exchange with references to Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem, mathematical equations that take into account the existence of God and Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle. Not to mention Johari Windows, which isn't a Microsoft program, but the metaphorical tool referenced by Donald Rumsfeld in his famously misunderstood "things we know we don't know" speech.

Should we, then, be looking more closely at his World Book Day illustrations to see if he's secreted any of this arcane knowledge in them? "No, you shouldn't. They had a different job...they're just all the characters from my books interacting, which really was a lot of fun to do. I used the

same technique as in *The Incredible Book Eating Boy*, which is a different one from the first two books; I used acrylic and gouache, along with pages and covers taken from old books that were going to be thrown away otherwise. Once a year the central library in Belfast gets rid of all the books that haven't been rented for ages; I went down there and filled up a box as I needed a lot of books to get all the different tones I wanted to use in the pictures.”

The whole project was delayed for some little time when Jeffers, ever the perfectionist, couldn't find a book cover with exactly the right shade of dark red that he wanted for a particular spread. “It was the same colour as my own full set of 1901 encyclopedias, but I could not justify ripping up a copy. And I couldn't scan my book either as it would have looked fake.”

For this World Book Day illustrator, the world is there to be travelled. He plans to leave Belfast, temporarily, to spend a year living and working in New York. Two of his brothers are already there and he has, he says, a very good relationship with his US publisher, Michael Green at the Penguin subsidiary Philomel. “I'll make a children's book while I'm out there, do some paintings, find a gallery to show them in. I'm looking forward to it, to the inspiration I'll get from the place, and being in New York will undoubtedly change the stories I'll tell; one of an artist's most important resources is the people they're surrounded by and bounce ideas off. I am very curious to see what happens.”