



Author Spotlight

Steve Antony chats to Graham Marks

Steve Antony is a debut picture book creator with an inspiring story to tell; here he talks to Graham Marks about his new picture book, *The Queen's Hat*.

Before we talk about the new book, let's start with some background information about you: When did you start drawing?

I started drawing, I can't even remember the age, it was so long ago. I think my earliest memory is when I was drawing, and it goes right back to when I was very, very, very young - four or five, that sort of age. I can't remember ever not drawing. It's always been something that has come naturally to me.

Was it always what you wanted to do? Was it a 'That's what I'm going to do when I grow up' thing for you?

Definitely. Absolutely, it was. It was something I felt...it's hard to explain, but it was something I could never imagine not doing. I could never imagine not drawing; whether it would lead to a career or not was a question, but I always knew that either way, I would still be drawing, no matter what job I was in. Whether it was working in a call centre or whether it was working wherever, I always knew that drawing would be there. So it's fantastic. It's great, and I'm doing it now as a job.

When did you realize that actually you wanted to write as well as draw?

When I started drawing...I do know that when I did draw, I also told stories in those drawings, so the stories were there. They may not have been written down as words, but they were there in the pictures. For me, I think the idea and the drawing happens hand-in-hand, so I think of an idea for a story, maybe, or an idea for a character, and then comes the drawing, and the rest of it grows naturally.

When I was a teenager, I used to create comic books. I have a huge collection of comic books that are still in America, [where I lived for eight years]. I used to make my own superheroes and my own comic book covers, and my own adventures, and I had lots lots of them. I still love comic books, but after that, I went on to studying illustrators and picture books specifically.

Where did you train?

I went to Cirencester College when I was 16. I was there for one year, and then went on to Swindon College, and I did a GNVQ course in advanced art and design, [as well as] an HND in Illustration. But there was a huge gap between the graduation and going on to do a Master's degree.

I worked in a call centre for a very long time and in 2010 I was made redundant [and] I was given some money; with this money, I decided I would go back to university and study more specifically the craft of children's book illustration, because I knew that was what I wanted to pursue as a career.

I applied for the course at the Anglia Ruskin University, and when I found out that there was a part-time course available, which was one day a week, I thought that this was realistic. I could just find a part-time job to work around it. I applied and was accepted for the interview, and then eventually was given a place, [which] I would say definitely played a huge part in the course of my career, and is why I'm doing what I'm doing now. It presented so many opportunities, and I learned so much, and it helped me channel my passion for storytelling through pictures, something I've always loved doing.

I graduated in 2013. While I was on the course, I was signed by an agent and, just after I graduated, I was offered a deal with Hodder, which was actually for a book called *Please Mr Panda*, which is out in January 2015; but then shortly after that, I was offered a book deal for *The Queen's Hat*, which they decided to release before *Please Mr Panda*.

When I look back, maybe three or so years, I was working in a call centre. I was happy, the people there were great, I made some fantastic friends there, but I knew it wasn't the job for me, and I knew that I had to do something about that. Being made redundant was a huge blessing in disguise because it did enable me to really go for it...[even though] I didn't really have any other backup plans.

You're passage to publication sounds almost like a fairy tale. How did you find an agent when you were still a student?

My tutor arranged a meeting with her own agent when we were at the Bologna Children's Book Fair.*

* The Bologna Children's Book Fair, in Italy, is an annual international event dedicated to the children's publishing industry. Each year some 1,200 publishers from 75 countries, along with authors, illustrators and literary agents, attend.

You went as a student?

Yeah, the majority of us from the class went to the book fair. That was back in 2012, a year before we graduated. Interviews were set up, and I had a meeting with [an agent]; I showed her my work, and I did have *The Queen's Hat* at that time, and she liked it. About a week or so after the returning from Bologna, we arranged a meeting in Cambridge and she signed me up. It was great to have an agent before even graduating. As I say, I didn't have any other plans, I didn't know what I was going to do if this didn't work out - I guess I would have just gone back to working in a call centre, maybe, or wherever else there was work available in Swindon - so yeah, I was very grateful.

You had the idea for *The Queen's Hat* when you were at college. Was it part of a project that you were doing, or was it something that just occurred to you?

It was part of a project, which was to create a sequence of images without text, a sequence of images that tells a story, but doesn't rely on text to tell that story. There is text in *The Queen's Hat* but there isn't much text, because the illustrations tell the story, so even if you remove the text, the story is still there. The story itself was inspired by a newspaper article which I stumbled across...an article about the Queen on a very windy day. It was one of these funny, slightly amusing photos, a picture of the Queen holding onto her hat in a very windy day.

When I saw the photo, I thought to myself, 'Wouldn't a story about her chasing her hat be quite funny and quite interesting?' And then I thought, 'Wouldn't it be great if she's chasing her hat all around London? And wouldn't it be hilarious if she's be followed by all of her Royal Guards, along with her pet corgi?' So that night I devised a very rough storyboard for *The Queen's Hat* and the rough storyboard is actually quite similar in terms of composition to what's actually in the final book. The next day, I went back to university and I showed one of the tutors the storyboard and she really liked it, and recommended that I finish in time for a contest. It didn't win or get highly commended or anything, but [that competition] spurred me on to complete the book.

Do you have a favourite spread in the book?

I think, for me, my favourite spread is probably the Big Ben spread, because that was the first one that I finished; I was really impressed with how it looked, but I knew, if I wanted the whole book to go with this image, it was going to take a long time. I knew this was how I wanted to whole book to look, so in a way that dictated how I was going to complete the rest of the illustrations.

That's probably my *favourite* image of the book, but my second favourite would be the London Zoo spread, the spread where there are lots of animals chasing the Queen, because that allowed me to have a lot of really funny characters, really interesting characters chasing the Queen chasing the hat. Most of the other pages feature buildings, and this page allowed me to feature some animals, and add another level of humour to the book.

Your colour palette is a very patriotic red, white and blue, with a black line. Was it difficult for you to work with so few colours, or did it make it easier?

It was very difficult. I decided quite early on that I wanted it to be in those colours. I do tend to work with not very many colours, and that's partly because I do struggle with colours, but while I was trying to work out how I'm going to colour in things, I decided that the best approach would be to just use a very limited colour palette. Actually, for *The Queen's Hat*, it's worked out very well, I think.

It was quite difficult to work out how I would define certain characters. It did take a while, especially with the London Zoo spread because there were so many animals. There's so much going on on that page, but it took a long time to actually figure out what was going to be red, what's going to be blue, what's going to be left as negative space, what's going to have black outlines. It all took a long time to figure out.

You use quite a spare style for *The Queen's Hat*...is this the way you've always worked, or did you devise a specific style for this book?

No, I wouldn't say that I devised a specific style...that's something that developed throughout the course, where I did lots and lots of observational drawings [which] allows you to understand anatomy and things like perspective, and I think once you have that initial knowledge, you can then play around with the imagery quite confidently. For me, it happened just naturally; I didn't sit down and think, 'OK, how am I going to draw? What style am I going to draw this in?' It's just something that naturally evolved as I was experimenting with different ways to create imagery, and to make it really as effective as possible.

Do you have any artists and illustrators who influenced and inspired you, then?

Oh, gosh, absolutely. Not necessarily children's book illustrators, I love art in general. When I was a child, I used to love books by Jan Pienkowsky, *The Haunted House* pop-up book, and the *Robot* book, and I also liked work by Raymond Briggs, as well; I still do love Normal Rockwell. I think I'm attracted to very bold compositions and iconic imagery...very strong images really do inspire me.

Do you have a personal favourite picture book?

I think one of my favourites is probably Ezra Jack Keats' *A Snowy Day*, which was published in the '60s. It's very much comprised of shapes and patterns to create the compositions and the overall imagery, but one of the things I liked about his work is that it was very brave, because that book was the first mainstream picture book to feature an African-American as the protagonist, and that made me realize that picture books aren't just about creating pictures, [they're] also about conveying a message, a positive message, and maybe even challenging the norm, which is what that picture book did.

The thing that struck me, as I read the story, is the strong element of slapstick, a kind of silent movie humour in the book, and I wondered if you were a Buster Keaton or a Charlie Chaplin fan?

I wouldn't say so, but I somehow wanted to channel British humour in the book, and I think because I lived in America for all those years, I also could see this romanticized version of Great Britain - almost from an outsider's point of view - as well as from the point of view of someone who lives in England, someone who is English. Once I had decided that it was going to be an all-out British book and I would really go for it, I thought, 'What icons can I put in here? How can I make this book as British as possible?'

I knew that it was a bit of a risk as there was a possibility some publishers might not be interested because it is just a British book, but I still wanted to go for it and just have fun with it. And I do like slapstick humour, I do like to convey wit in illustrations as well, so that's something I hope I succeeded in doing.

So more Benny Hill than Buster Keaton, in a way?

Yeah, silly, silly humour.

But the story has that movie chase thing going for it quite strongly...right to left movement throughout the whole book.

Thank you...I do tend to look at things very two-dimensionally, but everything isn't flat, but there isn't much perspective going on, and [maybe] that's because I used to really enjoy video games when I was a kid, and a lot of the video games were two-dimensional - you had characters running along, and the screen would move, and they would encounter something on the next level. I do wonder whether things like that have subconsciously influenced me in the way that I've created the book.

It seemed to me that the book is quite architectural, there are a lot of buildings, but there's also a blueprint element to the style. Do you like architecture a lot?

No, not particularly, no! However, I really wanted to make the illustrations as good as they possibly could be. I wanted them to be majestic and glorious pictures that celebrated these icons, so they couldn't just be a quick sketch. I really felt like I had to commit myself 100% and make sure that *every* line was *just* right. I would go to London, I would take photos...it was quite difficult to actually figure out how to draw it flat, so I did use a bit of artistic license here and there when creating the illustrations, but I just wanted them to be as spot-on as they possibly could be...it's not how I *imagined* Big Ben to be from a memory, that is how Big Ben looks.

Have you sent a copy to Buckingham Palace?

I haven't, but I believe the publisher might have.

No response from them?

No, no, no. No response from anybody from the Royal family, but it would be great if they have read it, and if they enjoy it. Because it's meant to be a very fun, playful book, and it is a celebration, it really is a celebration, and it's a very romantic book, I think, as well. Romanticized...it's looking at Great Britain through romanticized bubbles, almost.

What's next? Can you tell me what you're working on right now?

Yeah, sure. It may not be the next book to come out, because there is another one I'm working on which I can't talk about, unfortunately, but the one I can talk about is a book about war. This book was inspired by a magazine cover, and on the magazine cover was a picture of eight red rectangles. Now this image caught my eye and it was a piece of modern art by a Russian abstract artist called Malevich, Kazimir Malevich. From that image came inspiration for a story about war, and that's going to be released next year, so that's what I'm currently working on.

Yours is an inspiring story, Steve.

Thanks. Yeah, it's nice to talk about the journey I've been on, because it didn't happen just after I graduated the first time around, but it happened much later for me. And it just goes to show that if you have, as corny as it sounds, a dream, then you should pursue it. That's how I felt. That's how I *always* felt. I knew that one day - I *hoped* one day - that I would be doing this for a living, and that drive and that commitment has been what has helped me to get to where I am today. And a little bit of risk-taking, too.

No point in playing safe, is there?

No, no, not at all. Not at all.