

1999/Oct ERIC CARLE - Publishing News

“Dear Eric,” says the note scribbled in tiny letters the writer has squeezed into the upper corner of the page, “You draw good. I like your pictures. Our teacher made us read all your books. Will you ever retire? Love, Jennifer”. This last is a very good question, particularly when it’s being asked of Eric Carle, because he’s celebrating his 70th birthday this year and the thought does occur that retirement might, just possibly, be imminent.

Carle was here this summer, on his first trip to the UK in ten years, to help Puffin promote its re-issue of eight of his best-selling picture books, all re-sized to their original hardback format. The list includes the first children’s book Carle illustrated - *Brown Bear, Brown Bear What Do You See?*, written by Bill Martin Jr - as well as his personal favourite *Do You Want to be My Friend?* and, no surprises, the book that’s sold over 15m copies in the last 30 years, making him world famous in the process, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. And next year? Next year he’s got not one, but two new books coming out.

“They’re both very different,” says Carle. “*Does the Kangaroo Have a Mother Too?* began three or four years ago when a Japanese publisher called Maruzen Mate, who sell foreign language books, asked me to start illustrating animal prints for a premium marketing offer they were doing.” These were, it should be noted, not just any old prints. Maruzen produced each one in up to 30 colours on special paper imported from France and, now there are enough of them, they’re coming out - sadly only in the standard four colours - as a book.

“The other book I’m kind of reluctant to talk about,” says Carle, eyes twinkling behind his round glasses. “I had always said I wouldn’t do a Christmas book, but now that I am, I don’t want to put a hex on it! The book is called *Dream Snow* and is about a farmer - who looks a bit like me - who has five animals called One, Two, Three, Four and Five and a small tree called Tree. I won’t give the whole story away, but he metamorphoses into Santa Claus and the book has one of my surprise endings.”

There you go, he didn't want to talk about his book, but he's so excited by the idea he just couldn't stop himself. And that's the thing about Mr Carle - still pumping out the ideas, still bubbling with enthusiasm and always with a book on the go. "That's not to say I'm always illustrating," he says, "I spend a lot of time on the dummies, that's where the hard work is."

From start to finish the whole idea for *Dream Snow* took him a day to work out, although the notion, he said, had been brewing for some time: take an encounter with a friend's four-year-old daughter, mix in seeing another friend's Christmas-decorated birch tree, add a New England winter where the first snow didn't come till 24 December and, with a bit of magical creative alchemy, you have the genesis for a book.

It would, I suppose, be an easy assumption to make that Carle had always been an illustrator and always worked in children's publishing, but you'd be wrong on both counts. Carle was born in Syracuse, New York, in 1929; in 1935 his émigré family moved back to Stuttgart, where he stayed until he was 23 years old. By now the art director of the promotion department of a fashion magazine, Carle was ready to return to the States. "I had a nice portfolio and \$40 in my pocket," he says in his autobiography. "I landed in New York on a beautiful day in May of 1952. The sky was a bright blue, without a cloud in sight, and I felt that I had come home."

You can, if you care to delve beneath the energetic colours and vibrant shapes and seek out the core framework and structure of his work, see where Carle comes from, artistically. Like a number of the very best illustrators he's a brilliant typographer and designer, which is exactly what he was until he was introduced to Ann Beneduce, an editor at World Publishing. "She 'discovered' me," says Carle, "and we still work together, even though she's retired...Simon & Schuster, HarperCollins and Putnam all hire her as the consultant editor on all my books. An editor is very, very important...the books are mine, but the final polish is hers and she always gives them that certain something, pushing me to do more."

They are, he says, very much a team. "I very quickly realised that the writer and the illustrator should be one," Carle goes on, as we talk about his early career, "and as I wasn't trained as a writer I wasn't scared...very

often you find that it's the untrained people who invent things, out of naiveté they just jump in while the professionals always seem to complicate things or use 'accepted procedure' without thinking why they're doing it." By jumping in Carle has racked up 70 books in the last 30 years, and to date been translated into 30 languages, but what you can jump into you can also leap out of.

"Two years ago I said I'd never do another book and I began painting," says Carle matter-of-factly. "I didn't work on any book for a whole year while I did about a hundred beautiful pictures...I painted on silk, I used aluminium, I experimented with glass...it was all experimental, and I joke that it was better than playing golf in Florida. But actually this was the first time in my life that I experienced true inspiration. It was great!" What was also pretty good was that people liked what he was doing, the Japanese liking it so much, in fact, that they're exhibiting it next year alongside what he calls his regular work.

A very open man, Carle readily admits that some of his early work has not survived the passage of time all that well - pictures made with hand-coloured tissue paper and ordinary glue having a tendency to fade almost as quick as a Costa del Sol suntan. "I now work with special archive materials, so it will last," he tells me, "but I've had to re-illustrate *Caterpillar*, along with five of my other books, and no one's ever spotted it!"

Realising that you can't compartmentalise creativity, Carle now admits that he's happy to let the ideas happen and see where they go - be it fine art or fine books for children. "I really don't know what I'm going to do in the future," he says as we finish our meeting; but the smart money would, I've no doubt, be put on the answer to Jennifer's question about retirement being 'not yet'.