



Author Spotlight

Lauren Child chats to Graham Marks

Lauren Child is the best-selling, multi-award winning illustrator and author of the *Charlie and Lola* and *Clarice Bean* books, among many others. She started her creative journey making lampshades and is now an MBE; here she talks to Graham Marks about how it all began, and the fact that it's now ten years since *I Am Absolutely Too Small For School* was first published...

Why did you change your name?

Oh, I don't know why someone picked up on that – it must've been one of those nosy journalists! The reason I never said anything is that it's so boring to talk about...it's just one of those things. I never particularly liked my name, and the reason I've always avoided saying that is because there are so many people called that name and it feels bad, it would be upsetting to anyone called that name...I don't know, I just never felt it suited me.

Did you draw up a long list of alternatives to choose from?

No, it was very easy, because I wanted something quite plain and not kind of twirly, if you know what I mean - I didn't want anything that ended in a Y, for example, which felt like it would be too blousy. After having been called something that ended in an N, I felt like [my new name] also had to end in an N. I remember someone doing it when I was at school, who was only nine years old; he was called Toby and got fed up with every single dog and every single kid in a book being called Toby, so he changed his name. I just remember him saying to my mum, who was a teacher, 'I'm not called Toby any more, I'm called John', and he was called John for ever after. I just think, why be stuck with something you don't really like?

True, but it does show a certain strength of character to do it – how old were you?

I think I was twenty five.

Wow, there must have been so many people you had to tell - worse than changing your e-mail address!

Everyone was very good about it, though.

In some biographical notes I found it says you went to art school, but only briefly. Why was that?

I went to Manchester for a year, and I knew after two weeks of being there that it wasn't going to work, it just felt awful. The tutors weren't interested in teaching, and it was so dismal and very quickly all these very talented, very excited students were all very depressed and it was really grim. I should have left after a term, but I wasn't quite strong enough to do that and waited a year to leave.

I then took another year out, during which I applied to do everything because I didn't know what I wanted to do, and I got in on every course – textiles, architectural interior design, all kinds of things - except for the one to do illustration. It was really funny...I remember going to Brighton, for the illustration course, and they turned me down, with the advice that they didn't think I should write books, and I thought, Oh...OK. I ended up doing a mixed media course, at the City and Guilds in London; it wasn't really the right choice for me at all, but I did stick it out, I did do three years there.

I was interested by the list of artists who have inspired you, which includes Edward Gorey, Ronald Searle and Quentin Blake – all great penmen – and then there were a couple of people I'd never heard of: Carl Larsson, for one, such a modern artist, so far ahead of his time [late 19th/early 20th Century] in the way he drew and painted.

Yes, really beautiful, I'd looked at his pictures from childhood and found them very inspiring.

Is this because your dad was an art teacher?

Yes, we always had lots and lots of books around, and my father has very broad taste and understanding of art, so that was fantastic and we always went to shows. But Carl Larsson was someone I discovered on my own, partly because I've always been very interested in illustration, and even though he's an artist, and would be termed a fine artist, his art is very illustrative, it tells a story.

The other person was an extraordinary character called Ludwig Bemelmans; I'd never seen his books before...

Oh you hadn't? We always had the Madeline books, so they were just around...[his books are] probably one of my earliest memories. We actually owned only one of the them, because we mainly used the library.

You've always talked about your love of movies and how they influenced you and what you do – any ones in particular?

My dad was very keen on watching movies, and when I was a child there wasn't a lot of children's TV around then, so you watched a lot of older programmes. I watched Westerns and things, and so the films I really remember are the Spaghetti Westerns, particularly, and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. But I watched everything, from all those caper comedies, like *What's Up Doc?*, which have great language, and even things like *Love Story* I found very inspiring, because there's a lot of comedy in it. It's a very well crafted film, with really lovely dialogue – and whatever you think of the death scene, it's fantastic in terms of its sparky chat. And then there were all those Cary Grant films and Hitchcock films; all watched before I was ten, because that's all there was. There really weren't many children's films that I remember, apart from [the original] *Freaky Friday*, which I thought was very good.

What was it like to see *Charlie and Lola* come to life on TV?

It was very exciting, it really was...a bit like that high you have when you see your first book published – I remember when my first book was published I walked into every single bookshop to see if it was there. You can never quite recapture that feeling. I suppose with *Charlie and Lola* I was terribly excited every time they began to animate one of the stories we'd been writing and working on; and then, I don't know, it just became incredibly hard work because it's like a treadmill and everything has to be done to-the-day, and you have to make everything happen so everyone else can do their job. It's probably the hardest I've ever worked in my life and it was very, very stressful, and I was pleased when it all wrapped.

What was it like going from the situation where it's all down to you, you are the compete team, to working in a team and your idea is now their idea, too? How was that?

That was really hard. But luckily I went in with my eyes open, because I'd had a couple of things optioned in the past.

One of them never really went anywhere beyond a conversation, the other one got right through pre-production and was very close to being made, and it was awful. I quickly realised how something can be taken away from you and you have to be very careful with your contracts. That was really the reason I sold *Charlie and Lola*...I knew I had to bring something out before this other awful thing came out, or no one would ever work with me after it did.

With *Charlie and Lola*, I was very straight with the producers about what I wanted – we had to have children's voices, and it had to look like a piece of paper, everything had to look like paper. I'd had a very yucky, bad experience, but I always think every success is made up lots of bad experiences and failures, and that's how you know when something's going to work. I was ready for it with *Charlie and Lola*, but it was tough.

You were slated as an Associate Producer on *Charlie and Lola*, so what exactly does an associate producer do?

Well, it seemed like a lot, I have to say. I've never really understood what it all means, but it seemed like my job was either to be there, or be on the end of a phone a lot...involved in all aspects of the shows: script

ideas, plotting, drawings and sketches, dialogue, props...back and forth, checking everything.

All the way through trying to make sure everything looks like you and sounds like you?

Yes. And you're creating [what is called] a bible for the programme, a style guide that they'd use. It's a lot of work initially, and then it gets less and less, but it was the scripts that were the heaviest thing. It's very hard to come up with eighty stories about the tiniest moments in life. It was a lot, because once you've got past a messy bedroom and a wobbly tooth it gets really difficult – how many teeny-weeny things are there? And then there were certain subjects that weren't allowed - you can't do anything about head lice, for some reason - lots of funny little rules.

I have seen people search for clues in your work as to your motivation and inspiration - is there more to your stories, a deeper sub-text, than simply a small tale well told?

Not especially, not in the *Charlie and Lola* stories, not really...but I suppose one of the reason for writing them is that we sometimes forget what a big deal it is for a child to have eat a tomato for the very first time. And everything you do at three years old is for the very first time, pretty much. It's all about that, it's all about having to tackle something – even if you eat a tomato prepared in someone else's house it tastes different to one at home. I wanted to talk about this in a different way, and see it from the child's point of view, which is why there are no adults.

Before you started illustrating, you had a company, Chandeliers for the People, making lampshades - would you agree with a comment I read that said there's a link between those designs and your very distinctive illustrative style?

That's someone's flight of fancy, or they've misinterpreted something that I've said. What happened was, me and my lampshade partner, Andrew, who was an out-of-work actor, were both sort of struggling for any kind of career success, and the whole thing began on a whim. It just so happened that he needed a lampshade, then realised there weren't any interesting ones anywhere, and what was available was terribly expensive.

So we decided we were going to revolutionize the lampshade business by making really interesting ones for really affordable prices. But once we got into it, we suddenly realised why lampshades cost so much money, and I have so much more understanding now about shops and why things seem very expensive – it's because it costs an awful lot to make anything in this country, and we were trying to make it all in Britain. Again, it was a failure that taught me so much!

But, what came out it was that we [had been to] research all these places for interesting fabrics; we went to Southall and Wembley and bought saris and had them made up into lampshades. The lampshade business didn't last very long, and we gave up, but there were all these fantastic fabrics that we'd managed to source. All the fabrics scraps have since appeared in my stories and my pictures, so that's what's been the big influence. I was always interested in collage, but it was suddenly having all this resource, all these wonderful prints and things, that played a huge part in my work.

Over your career I've watched you move up the age range, writing for older kids, about older characters, and I wondered whether you ever saw yourself writing an adult book?

I think very quickly, probably after writing the first *Clarice Bean*, before it was even taken on or published, I wondered if I should take all that writing and make it into an adult book – obviously make it more complex and gritty – and I did wonder if Clarice, in fact, could become part of an adult novel.

I did start writing one at that time, and I really do want to do it, but it's having the time. As much as I'd love to write an adult book, I'd say at the moment I can't afford to stop and explore and do that. It would take [too much] time and if you've had success in one area you get more nervous about moving into another... I'm a little frightened of doing [an adult novel], but I want to.

In terms of time, did working on the TV show take a huge chunk of it and put a halt to any other work?

Yes, it did, it really did. It must seem odd to any outsider, but during that time of working on the TV series I didn't write one *Charlie and Lola* book of my own. Everything was TV tie-in, and in retrospect you see that it had to be capitalised on, but eventually you feel like you don't ever want to see those two children again! Everything I thought about was that and I wanted to do something else! I was doing three picture books a year before the TV series.

It's ten years since *I Am Absolutely Too Small For School* came out - fourteen since the first Clarice – and I think all your books are still in print; how is it to have that reminder of what you've done all the time?

It's nice to have everything in print...they take a long time to do, even with a picture book that might take six months to illustrate, getting to that point takes a lot longer. I'm about to start a new picture book now and I actually started the story several years ago; it's been written over the course of that time, so I've been with the character a long while.

It's not that I don't look at some of the books and gasp at what an awful picture that was, or why didn't I edit that sentence. But I don't think I'd feel good if I didn't feel that...and there's always a page [in every book] that I would change. I think *Too Small For School* is probably one of my favourite books that I've ever written, because I felt got it right.

Do you ever feel creatively trapped by what your audience expects you to do?

Yes, I do. I do. And that's why I try and do other things, so when I did *Hubert Horatio*, it's a very old fashioned-looking book, and on purpose; the type is set, on the whole, quietly where it needs to be quiet. It's a very different style. I like to experiment with other things and make people say 'Ooh! I didn't know you could draw like that!'. People do very much want to slot you in, saying 'Well, [her characters have] got round faces and big eyes and she always chops up bits of fabric' and that's what they want to see. So I do think it's important not to let that happen.

You now have a child of your own, do you think that's changed your work, or simply reinforced your understandings and memories of your own childhood?

The experience layers into my work, just like meeting you might layer into it, or meeting anybody really, because everybody is an external experience coming into your world. You notice things about people. Obviously she's in my life and home every day and I see the changes all the time, so it's a particular kind of influence. One thing that's been terribly interesting is that I realise that, if anything, I underdo it, because her way of looking at things and her speech is much more eccentric than I put forward in my books.

The thing about writing is that it's not about imitating, it's about making something believable and taking, maybe a part of real life and making it a believable truth, even though it's all imagined and concocted. So, if I simply noted down exactly what she said it would just be cloying and annoying and it wouldn't work. So she's having an effect, but not so much that she's giving me ideas, but that she's fascinating to watch.

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