Sept 2014 – SARAH MCINTYRE / Just Imagine

You're originally from America, where every newspaper seems to have at least one page of comic strips every day, and a whole section of them on Sunday – do you think it was because of that early exposure to comics that you do what you do now?

Probably…I mean I loved comics growing up, but then I went off of them when it came to all the superheroes – boobs and guns and tanks and things – and it wasn't my kind of thing.

   I was doing some books in the States and people kept saying they were cartoonish and I thought that was an insult…then I started reading comics again and I thought 'No, actually, that's not a bad thing, nothing wrong with being cartoonish'.

Did you always want to be an illustrator?

I always wanted to do something with drawing and painting, but when I went to University I thought I wanted to be an archeologist and illustrate the things I dug up – a bit of a vague concept from *Indiana Jones*.

There is a literary side to you and and artistic side, so you have both the words and the pictures – when did they start to come together in an author/illustrator kind of way?

I made lots of little stories, growing up, magazines, comics and little books – I can show you some… [reaches behind her and bring out a small, handmade book] …this is one of the first books I ever made, I can barely draw. This was done about twelve years ago and I made about four copies…and here's the first

pop-up I made; I did about 20 of them, which I had properly bound, and it took me ages.

A lot of what you're showing me is drawn in Indian ink with a steel nib dip pen, my favourite way of drawing.

It is, and I still use it…it's getting quite popular again, all the manga artists use nibs now, not brushes.

For a long time it used to be just Chris Riddell…

It's true, and his lines are so thin…whiskery.

Apart from the drawing, your typography and lettering is also very lovely. Have you ever made up your own typeface?

I did for *Morris the Mankiest Monster*, it's kind of an anti-font, it's all wobbly and intentionally rough-looking; and in *When Titus Took the Train* I did a lot of the lettering in that to show exaggeration and sound effects.

Do you have a favourite comic strip?

Bill Watterson's *Calvin and Hobbes* is my absolute favourite – in fact I named [my project] *Vern and Lettuce* and not *Lettuce and Vern*, because I thought the latter might sound too much like *Calvin and Hobbes*. And that was my benchmark - I said that I'm going to try and make a comic as good as *Calvin and Hobbes*, and I know I won't be able to make something that good, because it's the best comic in the world, but that was my goal.

I first came across you from your work in the DFC, which I saw as comic strip for younger people, and not a lot of people were doing that…

I never thought of it as a kids comic, really, I just thought of it as accessible to kids – it doesn't have any big swearing or anything. A lot of my readership has been the traditional comics crowd, you know, men in their 40s.

Why do you think there is such a lack of understanding in this country about the value of comics?

I think that's changing…I think people are beginning to appreciate how sophisticated the medium is, and how good it is for visual literacy; if you give kids a page of text they often don't want to [get involved], but give them a comic they almost can't help but read it. And another thing I've noticed about comics is that, when kids read a comic – if they liked it - they instantly want to start drawing one of their own, and you get them making a book straight away. Even the ones who can't draw start to draw and learn despite themselves.

Are there particular illustrators who have influenced you?

Posie Simmonds, for one, and Satoshi Kitamura is also another – I love his drawing style and the way he uses colour and line. He actually mentored me a bit right at the beginning, introduced me to his editors and was really nice. I've always looked at his work, aesthetically, as how it should be, it's just perfect. *Sheep in Wolves Clothing* and *Me and my Cat* are absolutely gorgeous examples of really subtle line work and colours.

You've said that you think comics are a medium, not a genre. Does that mean you think genres are a bad thing?

Well when people call comics a genre, that's a bad thing, because usually they're just thinking of superheroes, or Shakespeare manga; that's all they know so they think that's what comics are. They don't realise you can have a Western comic, or a film noire-style comic – comics can do anything that other books can do, and a lot more, it's wide open. A lot of British people have a very limited view of who comics are for…they think they're just for children, or they think they're just political cartoons.

You work in the comic strip format as well as the picture book format – do you have to change the way you think when you change from one to the other, or is it simply a difference in layout?

Just a difference in layout, they're both very similar. A lot of the picture books I've done have been written by other people, and illustrating someone else's text means you can't keep changing the whole thing – which is actually really good training, in a way, because it means I have to focus on the pictures. If I was doing a comic I could change anything…I might say 'I think I'll write it this way because I want to draw that picture', and you can't do [a lot of] that with someone else's script!

Given the choice, would you prefer to do more comics or more picture books?

I kind of like mixing it up…I have done a lot of comics on my blog and it's quite liberating as they can be as bad as I want them to be…it's nice that they don't have to be up to a standard and I can just express what I'm feeling at that moment, quickly [and] in comic form. If it's good, great, but if it's a bit throwaway then that's fine, too. It's a blog, nobody minds.

Without your blog, what would have happened to those ideas?

It was like a notebook...a lot of my first comics were done online - I did a travel comic when I went to Berlin - and it lets you get feedback from other people who are doing comics. I tried to do something every day on the blog, although I didn't always manage to, but it kept me making things and pushed me into places I wouldn't have gone. And I probably wouldn't have gone so much into comics if I hadn't been trying to do something for the blog.

I met Philip Reeve [a couple of years ago] at the Edinburgh Festival; he hadn't been illustrating for a while and I told him about posting something every day on my blog, and so he started as well.

What decided the two of you to work together?

Because we'd started to both post things on our blogs; he was posting pictures of Dartmoor landscapes, which were amazing, and I started going to Greenwich Park every day and doing landscapes because of him...and we got to be friends doing that. Then we thought, because we had so much fun, we need to do something together.

To start with I did four pictures for a Christmas *Mortal Engines* short story he did for his blog, and then, as the *Phoenix* comic was really keen on getting me to do something, I suggested we did a comic, but that we swapped roles. So I wrote it and he did all the pencils – he's done quite a few of the *Horrible History* books and is actually a lot better illustrator than me in some ways...he totally denies it, but he is. So he inked it and I coloured it.

Then we thought, why not do some chapter books? There's this middle bit in publishing, which is often seen seen as being a little bit uncool in 'Writer'sWorld', between the YA stuff he was doing and the picture books that I do. There's this middle ground, stories for older kids, but with pictures that would draw them through; Philip likes doing long-form stories, and I quite like working with line and a limited colour palate – I can do more pages in the same amount of time, and I also like the elegance of the limited palate.

Do you spend much actual time in the same physical space, or is this a virtual team-up that you two have?

It's mostly virtual, on Skype, although we do end up doing lot of events together and have had a lot of fun putting them together – with *Cakes in Space* we've had all the costumes made, we've made up two songs and learned to play the ukulele, things that have stretched us in different ways. The thing is with children, you put them in a room for an hour and it's not really fair to subject them to yet another school event…especially the younger age range…we want to make it something they'll remember, not just a lecture.

You've now done two books together – *Oliver and the Seawigs* and *Cakes in Space* – and you couldn't really have two more different stories; was that always the plan, to see where you could go?

We didn't want to pigeonhole ourselves into one story and have to use the same characters; we thought, let's just have adventure stories. They are similar in that they both feature a kid who's on their own and has to deal with things – one is maritime, one is in space and the next time it's going to be the frozen north.

  Readers have asked what happens to Stacey de Lacey [from *Oliver and the Seawigs*], because he's not redeemed in the end, he's just sent him off on a raft and we think it would be fun to bring him back. And maybe do something more with the sea monkeys, who were really just meant to be incidental.

You've also co-created the *Jampires* project – is this now a preferred way of working for you?

It's because I was working on picture books with people I'd never met before and didn't meet until after the book was finished; I never really enjoyed that because it didn't feel organic, I couldn't ask them questions and if something needed to be changed it was really difficult. I wanted that thing where the text and the pictures really interplay and we all work at making it a better book.

So where did the idea for *Jampires* come from?

It was a comics jam that David O'Connell and I did online; he would post one picture and I would post the next and so on; we wouldn't confer we'd just see what happened with the story. Then we presented our comics jam, called *Jampires*, to [the publisher] David Fickling and he said 'This is great, but let's turn this into a picture book!'.

  So we did, and David and I both wrote back and forth – we went through 18 drafts but we finally got there. We both did the characters sketches, then David did the pencils and I did the final artwork. So that was incredibly collaborative…the end result was completely mixed, there was no difference between the writer and the artist. It's quite unique…

I think it's *totally* unique…I don't think I've come across anything quite like it before.

Weirdly, because we both have slightly different styles, when we work together they both meet in the middle and we create something that doesn't look like work either of us has done; neither of us know what's going to happen. It almost feel like building a world and then you release the characters into it and you get to see what happens. Like having a child and letting it go.