

# ANDY GRIFFITHS & TERRY DENTON

## THE ILLUSTRATOR AS CO-AUTHOR

A conversation between Andy Griffiths and Terry Denton,  
chaired by Anna McFarlane, Publisher, Children's Books, Pan Macmillan

**Anna:** Andy, how did you and Terry meet?

**Andy:** In 1991 I had a creative writing textbook accepted by educational publisher Longman Cheshire. It was called *Swinging on the Clothesline* and contained many short pieces of off-beat fiction (written by me) in a wide range of styles; pieces grouped under headings like, 'Good ways to annoy people' and 'Good jokes to play on people' — all the kernels of the ideas that I went on to explore more fully in the JUST series — but that wasn't published until 1997. *Swinging on the Clothesline* was published in 1993. I remember in an early meeting the publisher, Rina Leeuwenberg, and her assistant discussing who they might get to illustrate it and they both said at the same time 'Terry Denton ... he's got a good sense of humour!' I didn't know of Terry at the time, but when I saw the front cover that he drew for the book I was amazed. It showed a group of kids madly flying around on a clothesline so fast that they were flying up into the sky. It captured perfectly the sense of giddy freedom that I had tried to convey in the stories. The humorous approach of the book was well received in secondary schools and two years later Terry illustrated a follow up, *Rubbish Bins in Space*. The book contained a set of instructions for how to turn a rubbish bin into a space-rocket, and you can see Terry's cover picture not only captures what a group of children travelling in rubbish-bin space rockets might look like, but is a perfect extension of the journey of the children from the first cover onwards and upwards into space. (NB: These books are now out of print, but available via my website as free downloadable e-books: [http://www.andygriffiths.com.au/E\\_Books.html](http://www.andygriffiths.com.au/E_Books.html)) The idea of each book being an extension of the last has been very important to our collaboration over the last ten years.

**Anna:** So, at what stage did you actually meet?

**Andy:** Soon after *Rubbish Bins in Space* came out I joined Lauris Pandolfini's speaker's agency (Booked Out) and was getting work as a visiting author in schools, while still banging my head against the doors of publishers who felt that my work, while 'original and entertaining', was not likely to find an audience. Terry worked for the same agency. One day I was in the office when Terry was on the phone and Lauris gave me the receiver and said 'Do you want to speak to Terry?' I told him I

liked his drawings ... he told me I should publish a book in the trade because, and I quote, 'they're publishing a lot worse stuff than yours'. I told him I was trying, but nobody would give me a break ... he said to tell them that he would be interested in illustrating whatever I came up with. This was how I got across the line in the end.

**Anna:** **Terry, what did you respond to in Andy's writing? How do you, as you obviously did, intuit what his intention might be?**

Terry: I responded immediately to Andy's sense of humour. It is similar to my own. In fact when the Just! books were first released a few librarians were convinced that I was Andy Griffiths ... writing under a nom de plume. Fortunately I wasn't!!!! I loved the freedom of the early Just! books. We worked more or less separately but were communicating through the words and pictures. And I was free to wander wherever I wanted within that sense of humour realm.

**Anna:** **That first book was *Just Tricking!* How did that original cover with 'the wonderful world of freshwater fish' crossed out come about?**

Terry: Covers are often the hardest part of a book to get right. Andy had this idea that we do a spoof cover. Make a sensible book cover for Sir Andrew Griffiths' *The Wonderful World of Freshwater Fish* then give 'Andy' some art materials and let him graffiti that cover and turn it into *Just Tricking!* We did that cover for the first printing of the book. When Pan Macmillan took up the series and we were doing the cover for *Just Annoying!* we realised that the spoof cover idea was not going to work across a whole series. We needed a more recognisable brand cover. So we just simplified the drawing and type, made it less chaotic, kept the same level of fun. Of all the covers, *Just Disgusting!* was the most difficult. I did at least 12 versions before we had one Andy, Anna and I liked. It had to be disgusting enough for the kids to find it credible, but not too disgusting so the librarians and parents were put off.

Andy: I was particularly proud of the back cover blurb for the original cover of *Just Tricking!*. It took me ages to make it suitable for a book about fish and just as suitable for a book about practical jokes when a few key words were crossed out and replaced. Unfortunately the cover was too clever for its own good. Although the book took off quickly, I got sick of kids asking me why it was called 'the wonderful world of freshwater fish'! (You can view the original cover – including the blurb – online at [http://www.andygriffiths.com.au/Just\\_Tricking\\_About\\_the\\_Book.html](http://www.andygriffiths.com.au/Just_Tricking_About_the_Book.html))

**Anna:** **How did the whole marginal illustration style, talking page numbers and corner flick pictures develop?**

Andy: Having been an English teacher, I'd noticed kids flicking through books to see how big the print was. I thought if you put flick pictures at the corner of a book, it would hook them in and give them a connection to the book before they'd even read a word. I asked Terry to draw some flick pictures in the corners, and confine his illustrations to the margins as if they'd been drawn there by the characters themselves.

Terry: I think Andy was expecting one or two marginal drawings per page but I got carried away. I was having fun. I started with the page number fish and by the time I had finished I had crammed every page full of ideas that matched the sense of humour of the stories; rarely illustrating the stories, but leaping off at tangents and providing a whole other dimension to the book. Shades of *Mad* magazine's Sergio Aragonés; tricky ideas, comic strips, flick books, illustrated page numbers and puzzles which sent the reader all over the book looking for answers. I later discovered a lot of kids used the drawings as a rest from reading the stories. They looked at the pictures for a while then got back to the text. This was especially true with the more reluctant readers.

Andy: The galling thing was it took me four painstaking years to write this first book and Terry about four weeks to illustrate. The dead mosquito on page 10 was buzzing around Terry's head while he was drawing the pages. He swatted it and sticky-taped its body onto the page where it becomes a meal for the page number fish ... and don't forget page 101, Terry ... the infamous picture of how to annoy your school headmaster by putting a condom over your head. We subsequently took that particular cartoon out once we realised that primary school children were embracing the book as well as the target lower secondary audience. We began to receive letters of complaint about that drawing, and it really wasn't worth the trouble. (Believe it or not, causing offence has never been something that I'm particularly interested in doing. My main aim has always been to find out what my audience is interested in, and what makes them laugh, and then to create the most involving, funny, compelling book I can.)

Terry: They were not easy deadlines. Six hundred drawings in four weeks. One hundred and fifty funny drawings a week for four weeks. To get 150 good ideas I'd come up with more than 200 and edit out 25 per cent. Through that improvisation process Andy and I built characters like Mr Scribble that I could improvise a few comic strips around. I have kids come up to me all the time talking about Mr Scribble. Genuinely excited – sending me new ideas we could use.

**Anna: That's a lot of drawing in a short time frame. How do you do it? What goes on in your mind?**

Terry: Panic! Pinot! Persistence! I really don't know. I like working hard and putting myself under pressure. And my brain likes to work that way. Trained from childhood in a home of five boys and a mad mother; humour was our ritual. As a child I read humour, watched humour and listened to humour: Goons, Bugs Bunny Show, Daffy Duck. This was the culture of my childhood. So when I was illustrating these books, I was going into that mindset – a mindset that kids I do workshops with lapse into naturally – and playing, inventing, free association/lateral thinking ... just the way I did as a kid ... taking an idea and running with it. I have been lucky that I found a job that allowed me to use that seemingly useless skill to make a living. And also lucky that I ran into Andy at the right time. The *Just* books were the perfect vehicle for our weird skills. We have just spent five days together improvising a book about Bumosaurs. Again playing! Each of us is part intuitive free thinker and part organised logical thinker. Maybe Andy is more of the latter than me ... and I am probably more of the former. For the first four *Just!* books the working relationship evolved slowly. I pretty much worked on my own, responding to Andy's words, and we talked regularly. But with *Just Disgusting!* we worked much more closely. So there was not so much of the free play as in the earlier books where I was wandering off at my own tangent. In *Just Disgusting!* my drawings were more supportive of Andy's words. Consequently *Just Disgusting!* has quite a different look as the illustrations are illustrating the text in a more traditional way – not so much 'the book within the book'. Gradually we have been moving towards the more traditional layout which you can see in *The Bad Book* and in our new book *The Cat on the Mat is Flat*.

**Anna: Terry, you've illustrated many other books, including your own, *Spooner or Later* with Ted Greenwood and Paul Jennings, *Night Noises* by Mem Fox, *Passing On* by Mike Dumbleton just to name a few. Do you approach each project differently? Do different authors look for different things?**

Terry: A lot of my collaborations have been with minimal input from the author, which I like. There was no author input on *Passing On*. A good writer shouldn't need to talk to the illustrator. All they need to communicate should be in the text. The greatest skill of an illustrator is to read the text and pick up the threads of what the writer is on about. Mem Fox is an interesting example. I worked with her on *Night Noises*. She kept right out of the illustration process. She said she had no ideas on how that book should look. So I worked away with the publisher and we showed Mem the final roughs. She was happy so I drew on. This is the usual process. She and I have just finished a new book called *A Particular Cow* where we worked more as a team, pulling the story apart and rebuilding it over a period of thirteen years. She kept

simplifying the text until it was absolutely minimal. With Paul Jennings and Ted Greenwood we worked as a team. It was great fun! To collaborate you have to be team players. Andy and I work well together without too much ego getting in the way. Sometimes things don't go your way. You get over it. We are not keeping score on who contributed what. We want to set up a creative environment that will allow us to produce the best possible book.

**Anna:** **What about your solo projects. How do they differ?**

Terry: Working on a new book, *Wombat and Fox*, I was collaborating with myself! However the true collaboration is with Erica and Jodie, my publisher and editor. They help set up a framework for me to be able to draw out of myself the best possible work. They give me room to improvise and to make mistakes ... then gently rein me in.

**Anna:** **To go back to the Just! series, how did the process evolve?**

Andy: There has definitely been a progression — some might use the word regression — from the first Just! book to the fifth. The stories certainly became looser, wilder and bolder. Originally I was worried that the story 'Playing Dead' in *Just Tricking!* went too far, but it turned out that it was the one readers particularly loved. So I tried to do more of that type of story in the second and subsequent *Just!* books. By *Just Disgusting!*, they were all pretty out there, both in content and form, and *Just Disgusting!* remains the most popular of the five. You can see also, that the drawings are much larger by book five such as in 'Go To Bed' and 'Deadflyella', and some of the stories, such as in 'Two Brown Blobs', the stories are being told graphically with hardly any text at all.

**Anna:** **And getting back to your and Terry's collaboration, can you tell me about the 'Mice in Black'?**

Andy: I was sitting down with Terry as he was getting to the end of the *Just Stupid!* illustrations. He still had 40 pages to go and asked me if I had any ideas. We had such a fun afternoon — it was just like being back in school mucking around in the back row — we created the 'Three Bad Mice/Mice in Black' poem which to this day satisfies me and makes me laugh more than anything else we've created (see page 109 of *Just Stupid!*). Unfortunately when I read it to other people nobody laughed, but that only makes me love it all the more. Not all jokes have to be funny.

**Anna:** **And how did you get from there to *The Bad Book*?**

Andy: At that meeting I remember saying to Terry that it would be great to collaborate on a book where we reduce the amount of words and bring the marginal humour into the spotlight. That was how *The Bad Book* was born. It was really an excuse to get together on a regular basis, sit in a room and make each other laugh. Terry would draw something silly and then I'd be inspired to write something to match it ... and vice versa. Eventually it settled as a kind of parody of nursery rhymes and the black humour of the cautionary verse I'd found so disturbing — and compelling — as a child. Of course, it wasn't to everybody's taste, but then I don't see that a book has ever had to be. But you know, there's nothing in *The Bad Book* that wasn't already covered in the margins of a *Just!* book — it's just more visible!

Terry: Originally we wanted to illustrate *The Bad Book* with feral stick figures. Then we got a bit nervous and decided because the text was very bad perhaps the drawings needed to soften it a bit. So the illustrations could be visually gentle as a counterpoint to the text. We decided on this more gentle approach, but maybe we made the wrong choice. It would have been an even more startling book with feral stick figures. And maybe the kids would have liked it even more.

**Anna: And where to next?**

Andy: Everybody kept asking me whether there would be a sequel to *The Bad Book*, for example *The REALLY Bad Book* but that seemed too predictable and, after all, how much 'badder' could things get than they were in *The Bad Book* anyway? I figured the most interesting thing we could do would be to write a book where there's no gratuitous violence and no gratuitous yuckiness ... which became our next book, *The Cat on the Mat Is Flat*.

**Anna: No gratuitous violence?**

Andy: Well, there IS a cat that gets flat as a result of chasing a rat. But how was it — or Terry or I — to know that the rat it was chasing was packing a giant baseball bat? A teeny bit painful for the cat, perhaps, but nobody dies and it was completely deserved! (NB: Download the story and judge for yourself at [http://www.andygriffiths.com.au/The\\_Cat\\_on\\_the\\_Mat\\_is\\_Flat.html](http://www.andygriffiths.com.au/The_Cat_on_the_Mat_is_Flat.html)) Interestingly, when we put the book out for some test readings and feedback, kids let us know in no uncertain terms that they were particularly fond of this story. I think it hooks into David and Goliath/Tom and Jerry territory and the satisfaction we all get when the powerless are able to turn the table on their tormentors. And if you look at the reality of a child's world, they are often in a 'powerless' situation so this scenario obviously holds considerable appeal for them. Not that

Terry or I saw this at first! As a result of the test readings we changed the title of the book from *Frog on a Log in a Bog* to *The Cat on the Mat is Flat*.

Terry: *The Cat on the Mat is Flat* is a true collaboration. We worked together in the same room, Andy on computer, me at a drawing desk. I would draw a character, we would both look at it and work out ways to make it work better. Usually we could. We worked the same with the text. We edited each other and created the book together. So each story is something neither of us may have come up with on our own. Andy's wife Jill was our third partner, editing and reacting to what we had written each day. And as Andy said, we did some trialling of the first draft with kids, which also influenced our decision making.

Andy: One of the pieces that I really liked from *The Bad Book* was a 'badly' written poem called 'Ed and Ted and Ted's dog Fred'. It was a ridiculous piece of 'bad' poetry where everything had rhymed with the sound 'ed'. To my surprise it actually made a half-decent story until, of course, following the logic of *The Bad Book's* insistence on everything having to be bad, including the story endings, they all ended up 'dead'. But as I read it back, I thought, what if they didn't have to end up dead? More out of curiosity than anything, Terry and I reworked and extended Ed and Ted into a much longer piece in which they triumph over all sorts of adversity to arrive at a happy ending ... still rhyming with the 'ed' sound. We just kept going from there, choosing a different sound for each story. It hooked into my love of Dr Seuss as well as my love of working within a strict set of parameters. In this case anything is possible, but most of the words have to the same sound rhyme. It was maddening at times having such a limited palette of words to work from, but when you've got one foot nailed to the floor you're forced to be more creative in figuring out ways to get to the door. We also wanted to create a book that would not only capture the mischief and mayhem that our traditional audience is so fond of, but at the same time also be suitable for their younger brothers and sisters. This meant that we couldn't push the 'violence' or 'rude' buttons quite as gleefully and freely as we've done in the past. Combined with the rhyming limitations this requirement meant that we were effectively nailing not one, but TWO feet to the floor, so we ended up forcing ourselves to be extremely creative!

**Anna: So would you say that the role of illustrator and author has now merged?**

Andy & Terry: Absolutely!

**Anna:** Well, thank you both for your time today. To conclude, Andy has written my summarising comments (pulls out crumpled piece of paper and reads) 'You are without doubt the most talented and fascinating author and illustrator team on the planet'. Thank you Andy Griffiths and Terry Denton.

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