

MARK MACLEOD

COLLABORATING ON PICTURE BOOKS

When I was starting out as a publisher, one of the prospects that excited me most was being able to work on picture books. At the age of fifteen my parents were lying in bed one Saturday morning and asked me what I wanted to do when I left school, and I can see myself now standing at the end of their bed and telling them that I couldn't decide between being an English teacher or going to art school.

My mother breathed in deeply and said, 'Well, I suppose if you *have* to be an English teacher...' The response surprised me, because she had always made space for my decisions and supported them. And the late 60s – early 70s was a better time than most for artists. So, unkindly, I tossed this back at her years later and she said that she had watched so many young people trying to live on their dreams of being fulltime artists and didn't want to see me join them. (I don't think I ever showed her my first pay cheque after all the years of studying English.)

Working with so many wonderful artists, then, was a chance to look a bit further down one of the many roads not taken. But I don't see my work with someone like Emma as vicarious. I've heard disgruntled writers say that editors are just frustrated writers – 'who can't wait to get their grubby little fingers on my work', as one said to me, hoping for sympathy. And I've heard equally disgruntled illustrators say that working with this art director or that editor is okay as long as you act as their pencil.

I'm quite clear that there is no way I could even begin to approach Emma's talent. My imagination might have matured, but my drawing hand is still 17 years old – and might have regressed even further. I don't dare to test it out!

But what I do seem to have is an eye that can identify her best work and use that as a guide for the rest. My favourite game in all those bumper annuals grandparents used to give you at Christmas was 'What is wrong with this picture?' I loved noticing that in the two apparently identical pictures of a steam train, the smoke on one was blowing the wrong way. Or that an image was either a black urn or two white faces moving in for a kiss, depending on your point of view.

And I'm happy to say that, although I'm a better writer than a draftsman, I have no illusions about being able to write wonderful texts like Lisa Shanahan's *Bear and Chook*. Lisa judges that Laurel and Hardy pair just perfectly. She knows that we'll never get anywhere if we sit back with Chook and comfort ourselves with yet another lucky escape, but she also knows what a pain Bear is with all his irrepressible energy for the next exciting adventure.

I think the editor's role is a bit like listening to your favourite piece of music played by many different people. You are so familiar with its nuances that you can appreciate any performance that adds to the piece with a new interpretation, but you can also hear the moments when it is being played badly. The English language is my favourite piece of music, and writers like Lisa play it beautifully.

No doubt Lisa's training as an actor has helped her. The book we did with wonderful Bettina Guthridge, *My Mum Tarzan*, is about a mother whose whole day is taken up with acting. Boys surprised us with their love of this book, partly because the narrator is a girl. They seem to love Mum's outrageousness. Girls admire it too, although like Saffy in *Absolutely Fabulous*, the narrator covers her enjoyment with embarrassment. So acting has given Lisa subject matter for some books (*Gordon's Got a Snookie* is about the acting that men and boys do), but it has honed her craft as a writer.

For a start, her dialogue is great and rarely needs any suggestions from me. I don't know whether she says it out loud when she is writing, or whether she has a sharp monitor on the voice in her head, but it always has a quiet authority.

I often find that the editor's ear can be useful to a funny writer. I was surprised when one illustrator swapped the lines of a picture book text around to make the roughs work more effectively and was indifferent, if not indignant, when I said that this spoiled the rhythm. 'Well, everything's up for grabs in collaboration, isn't it? I thought that only mattered in poetry,' was the answer.

I wouldn't have thought I needed to point out that prose has its good and bad rhythms too. Timing is, as always, the key to successful comedy, and when I'm working with a funny writer, I often suggest reading a line aloud to see why it's going wrong. The effect is immediate. Frequently the writer is trying to pack in so many comic layers that the reader gets the gag before the line stumbles over itself to reach the end.

I never have to do the read-aloud test with Lisa. With so many writers supplementing their meagre royalties by appearing in schools and at literary festivals, performance has become more important than ever. And although I love stories that make children laugh, I occasionally worry that the performance circuit favours writers who are funny or dramatic. So I watch writers who are great performers with interest and wonder whether they are tempted to add one too many synonyms or metaphors, or load up the onomatopoeia because the response of a live audience is so gratifying. Self-indulgence is not forgiven as readily on the page. Lisa and I have never needed to discuss this.

Occasionally she has asked whether she should cut the lines that will appeal mostly to parents and teachers. I loved the title 'Daddy's Having a Horse' immediately. And I laughed at Uncle Tone's reaction, 'A horse! ... Yee-ouch!' Why this has upset a few teachers who have spoken to Lisa I wouldn't know. I have heard so many women describe childbirth publicly with frightening metaphors from hairbrushes to watermelons that I expected the sisterly grimace in the line to be appealing.

Lisa also asked me whether we had made a mistake with the conversation between Sam the handyman and Mum. Caitlin and Lachlan suggest names for the baby, and Sam chips in too:

'You might like to think about Hot to Trot or Walk and Squawk,' said Sam. 'Or Belubula Prince or Barney Boy. They've been good to me.'

'Thanks for your help, Sam,' said Mum.

I love this exchange because, as so many authors for young people have shown, a lot of Anglo-Saxon anxiety about sex and childbirth can be ameliorated by frankness and humour. Here in the first two names Sam suggests is another wink from this writer who has also given birth, but to young readers the names are simply farcical. I suspect the adults who have queried the joke feel guilty about having understood and enjoyed it. But if they want to express concern and anger about the world their children are growing up in, they've chosen the wrong target.

Robert Cormier spoke in Australia years ago about his fear that writers would censor themselves even before they started writing. *Daddy's Having a Horse* needs these jokes and I feel it's my job as an editor to protect and nourish Lisa's exuberant love of life and her sense of humour.

In the process of working on *Bear and Chook*, Lisa and Emma became close friends, and have enjoyed working on other books and performing together in schools and at conferences and festivals. Publishers including Anne Ingram and Donna Rawlins taught me very early on that bringing a writer and illustrator together was as risky as marriage broking. To be successful, I might at first have to keep them apart.

In 1996 Emma and I had worked on a Jonathan Harlen text, *Champions*, and because Jonathan lived on the north coast of New South Wales, distance kept them apart for me. I was in awe of Emma's drawing and the energy in her compositions, but I felt that the high energy of the pictures occasionally needed a more intense palette than she was using at the time. I couldn't wait to do another book with her when we'd finished, though, and I remember saying to her somewhat nervously that this time I'd like her to try punching up the colour.

'Just because I have a soft voice,' she said, 'it doesn't mean that I don't have strong opinions.'

It was a directness that I valued and came to love. And, making the point without a single word, she could hardly have used more colour than in *Thank You for My Yucky Present*, the first book she did with Meredith Hooper.

When Meredith told me the title of her new book, I said immediately, 'I'll publish it.' She said, 'But you haven't read it yet.' I said, somewhat recklessly, 'I don't care. With a title like that it has to be good.' I was right. However, Meredith, Emma and I spent a year trying to accommodate the ridiculous feedback of some powerful adults. The book modelled undesirable behaviour because it implied that a child might not like the present his grandma gave him. (Never mind that by the end of the book Charlie tells his gran the rainbow-striped jumper is his best present ever.) The title should be changed to the less cheeky 'The Birthday Present'.

Also Emma's picture of Charlie flying out the bedroom window with his jumper tied round his shoulders like a cape could be actionable, because children might copy it. Eminently reasonable, since a picture book looks like a guide-book to life and any child might think that if you put a jumper round your neck you could fly across the

paddocks at night. Any child on too much medication. Or any adult with the LSD still buzzing for them from the 60s.

Emma laughed patiently through so much of this; poor Meredith on the other side of the world was, naturally enough, not as amused. But we were all thrilled when Hodder's head of publishing, Lisa Highton, backed us and we decided to put all this feedback aside and revert to the book's original text and illustrations. It has been a steady seller ever since and I was particularly pleased with the early review that said, 'Buy this book for the title alone.'

After the experience of working with Emma on texts by writers who lived at the other end of the state and the other end of the world, it was probably inevitable that she would end up working closely with a writer who lived only a few suburbs away. When a book goes right, it does so from day one (the converse is also true), and that's how it was with *Bear and Chook*. Lisa sent me a lovely postcard after a chat we had at some book launch, saying that I was one of the people she could always have a good belly laugh with. What I didn't realise until the three of us started working together was that Emma has a wicked sense of humour, and one day will do a very funny book with quite a dark edge.

Adults loved *Bear and Chook* just as much as the children did, right from the start, and there's one picture in the book that always gets a communal 'Ahhhhhhhhhh!' from them. It's when the two friends are reunited after (they hope) their final disaster, and almost the whole page is occupied by the huge figure of Bear enfolding Chook in a soft white hug. But if you look closely at the tiny head of Chook, you'll see that his eyes are popping because he is almost being choked or smothered by Bear's affection. I love this mischievous note of realism that runs right through Emma's work and is getting louder with each book.

When Emma said that, while she still wanted to work with Lisa, she needed to start illustrating her own texts, I knew that there would be even less of the sweetness that the adults seemed to focus on, and that was clear in the subtitle of her first solo book, *Reggie and Lu (And the Same to You!)* I wondered whether that subtitle should be kept off the front cover, in case this book was seen to be modelling cheek or argumentativeness, but Hodder Headline backed Emma's honesty. So from the cover, you know what you're in for.

Like Lisa, Emma has a good ear for children's conversation, and I enjoyed her understanding of the way an argument can escalate with such inventive language and images and then suddenly subside. And she even included an adult 'Ahh! Look at that. Reggie and Lu are best friends again.' Just before the raucous climax. I don't think either of us will ever forget the hours of debating what a pig should look like in certain positions. Craig Smith once told me that the great thing about dumping realism was that you could get your characters to do physically anything you could imagine. But how should a pig look kneeling, sitting on a fence and dancing? I couldn't have drawn the right angles for the limbs to save myself, but I thought I knew when I was seeing the wrong ones. And for all the feistiness that came out in the plot, Emma was so patient while I tried to define my intuitions.

Just as well, because in *Good Night, Me* with Andrew Daddo, we decided to strip away almost all background and focus on the character. Emma did hundreds of drawings of the baby orang-utan. I think Andrew probably imagined the child and parent in this story as human, but I thought an animal would allow everyone to find a space in the book. We wouldn't have to worry about race or gender. It probably needed to be a primate, given the body parts cited in the text, but Anthony Browne had made gorillas and chimps his own. And I myself have never stood at the monkey enclosure in the zoo with the other onlookers and thought that monkeys were cute. (I think it's the noise and the restless speed – though, given the cage, who can blame them?)

When Emma came up with an orang-utan, I was surprised, but knew that she was right. Its roughness was the perfect foil for the sweet lavender shades of evening and the softness of the text. And I liked her saying that since orang-utans were endangered, any little contribution she could make to humans caring about them would be personally satisfying. That's not present in the book for readers young or old, but it is for Emma and me. And you now.

I look at the last picture in *Good Night, Me* and I know that this is an illustrator who has watched children sleeping, just as the words tell me that this is a writer who knows how young children think and speak. As she does with Lisa, Emma talks to Andrew quite often now, and there are future books in the works for both pairs of collaborators. I won't be working on some of them, but more than any occasional pang of regret, it's immensely rewarding to think that I'm no longer needed for those books to happen.

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