



The Letterpress Project

Author and Illustrator E-Interviews

An Interview With Sarah Brennan

Q1. What are your earliest memories of books and reading? For example, did you have a favourite or inspirational book?

My earliest memories go back to when I was 5 or 6, and fell in love with the books of Dr Seuss. I loved their humour, and especially the fact that the writer was actually *playing* with words, which had previously seemed such serious things to me! *Zigzagazoo* was one of my favourite words! That's when I started writing poetry myself, and my very first poems written at the age of 7, which I've kept, were the start of a lifelong passion for writing in rhyme. In older years, the poems of Dylan Thomas, and his original use of the English language, especially in his poem-novel *Under Milkwood* and the sublime *Fernhill* and *Poem in October* had a similar effect.

Q2. What inspired you to become an author?

Well, really, it was my love for Dr Seuss's rhymes! But for me, throughout my childhood, then student-hood, then for much of my adulthood, being an author was more like a pipe dream. I left school keen to be an actress (I do love being on stage, which is helpful for an author who visits schools!) but my parents very sensibly advised me to get a degree first, one that I could always fall back on. So I studied law, and that inevitably led to becoming a lawyer, first in Brisbane and then in London in the UK, which inevitably led to buying my first house, and having to pay a mortgage – and while I used to sit at my desk fantasising about running away to Ireland and working in a bakery by day and writing by night, I was never courageous enough – or indeed able - to make the leap! It was only when I and my husband moved to Hong Kong, and my two daughters were born, that finally I had time to renew my passion for writing, and met my first

publisher who published *A Dirty Story* – which I hasten to add is a childrens' book in verse!

Q3. For you, what makes a successful book or illustration?

To my mind, a successful book – for any reader – is one that they cannot put down, or that they return to again and again, or that leaves a deep and unforgettable impression. Whenever I discover such a book, it leaves an abiding glow over the period in which I read it, which returns to me whenever I am reminded of the book.

Q4. Do you have a specific audience in mind when you write your books?

I tend to write in two different styles, one being very lyrical (like *Storm Whale*) and the other more witty and informative (like my *Chinese Calendar Tales*). With the latter, I have a clear agenda – to write something appropriate for primary-school aged kids which will educate them about Chinese culture and history, but in a fun way, incorporating some famous historical figures and making sure they're appealingly larger than life, and also incorporating sophisticated words to keep them challenged. So I'm very conscious of my audience, which I know very well, having visited hundreds of primary schools in Hong Kong, China, Singapore and Australia over the last 11 years. So to that extent, writing them is a left-brained exercise. But my lyrical poems come from somewhere else altogether – they simply "happen", almost like a song that's been out there in the ether forever, which I've trapped somehow in my subconscious. I'm sure they come entirely from my right brain, and I'm afraid I really don't think at all about my audience, just what I have to express. For me, lyrical poems like *Storm Whale* are for everybody who loves poetry – and whales - not just children.

Q5. What future do you think the physical book has? For example, do you think the electronic book will replace the physical book?

I'm very optimistic about real children's books and also fiction books. I'm of the same mind as the late, great Maurice Sendak that e-readers aren't books at all – and it seems that the general public is in general agreement. Sales of e-readers have levelled out now, and there are many recent studies which conclude that reading on screens is an inferior experience to reading real books for most people, both in terms of both memory retention and reading pleasure. This is no doubt why on-line real book vendors are booming and why real children's books in particular are enjoying spectacular sales. "Fact" books are not in the same position, as they compete, of course, with online search engines, which provide

the required information at the hit of a button and are far less time-consuming to read. But as the excellent Nicholas Carr writes, this leads inevitably to shallow knowledge and indeed a shallow mind. It is all the incidental information surrounding the desired fact, that one must read in a real book before locating the nugget you need, and by the very act of reading, deeply absorb, that forms what he refers to as a "singular intelligence", and it is this sort of unique intelligence that I believe is threatened by reliance on the internet, rather than specialist books, as the source of all knowledge. I'm also concerned for real bookstores and for libraries. The thought that children in future may grow up never having had the precious, addictive and formative experience of browsing through bookshelves – let alone attending book launches for favourite authors – is very sad, and we need to push back on this as hard as possible. So I do believe it's terribly important to try to buy that book – or order it – through your local bookstore before resorting to an impersonal online vendor, and to support your local library and take your kids too! If we don't use them, we lose them.

Q6. Are you a book collector? Is there a special book you'd love to own?

I do have some very old, leather-bound, first editions of poetry books that I bought in London, when I lived there some time ago, which are very precious to me. I've always bought anything by Virago Press. And I tend to get crushes on, and collect the books of, authors I particularly admire, (Jane Austen, George Eliot, E.M. Forster, Elizabeth Bowen, Iris Murdoch, Italo Calvino, Hilary Mantel, William Boyd, Sebastian Faulks, Annie Dillard, Anita Brookner, William Dalrymple and Kazuo Ishiguro to name just a few). I love short story collections and have recently discovered the wonderful Irish short-story writer Clare Keegan. But sadly in Hong Kong it's not possible to buy collector's editions of European books. And I'd love a signed first edition of *The Cat in the Hat!*