An Interview With Vanessa Horn

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

My first memories of books are from when my mum used to read to me at bedtime. She conjured up new and exciting worlds from the words on the page and I was fascinated by the stories and illustrations. Later, when I learnt to read by myself, I spent all of my weekly pocket money on books, usually buying one of Enid Blyton's Famous Five or Secret Seven. I would hide myself away in the garden or bedroom and read avidly and to the exclusion of everything else. As I grew up, I moved onto Agatha Christie stories, those written by Charles Dickens, Maeve Binchy and George Orwell (a varied mix!).

Q2. What inspired you to become an author / illustrator?

In 2013, I decided to have a sabbatical year away from my job as a teacher, in order to write a book. Writing had been an ambition of mine for years, but it had been difficult to find the time before this, as it is for many people. I enjoyed this time so much that, when I returned to work the following year, I cut down my hours so I could combine teaching and writing. This has worked really well for me.

   I originally began writing short stories for adults, culminating in the publication of a collection - Eclectic Moments - in 2015, but then, after completing an online Picture Book course with Pippa Goodhart in 2016, I began writing for children. Waaaaaa is one of the stories I wrote whilst on the course and is my first picture book to be published. This year I also won the Swanwick Children's Fiction Competition (in association with Writing Magazine) with another of my picture books: Olly's Monster Night.

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

I think a successful book is one which stays in your mind long after you've read it and which perhaps makes you think about things in a slightly different way. I particularly like picture books which are quirky and/or humorous – those which don't 'hammer' a message across but rather suggest or hint.

I love the way Alex Willmore has illustrated Waaaaaa, bringing Millie and Rudy to life so cleverly. Millie looks just like my niece Lauren when she was around the same age, even having the same strawberry-blonde hair colour! Alex has picked up on the nuances in the story, for example the importance of the stars shining on the night of Rudy's birth, and the energy Millie shows in trying to find something to pacify her little brother. I'm thrilled with the way the story has been interpreted.

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

Yes, the audience for the picture books I write are children between the ages of 3 to 7. I start by thinking about the sort of experiences a child faces as they go through life, like having a new sibling, starting school, worrying about monsters etc. and base my stories around these issues, trying to look at them from a different, possibly quirky angle.

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

I think – and hope! – that the physical book will never be replaced. There's just something about holding a book and physically turning over the pages, that can't be replicated electronically. Also, having a collection of books on a bookcase, some new and some years old and much-loved, can bring such pleasure. An electronic device can go wrong or need charging, but a book has a physical presence and memory which is hard to beat.

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

In the past I have collected series of books, for example hard-back collections of the classics and all of Agatha Christie's mysteries, but at the moment I just buy books which have been recommended to me or I have read about, so my bookcases are full of differing authors and stories. I have no 'special' books as such, but would love to own a first edition of a Beatrix Potter or Michael Morpurgo!