

Serving the story: picture book collaboration

Lisa Shanahan and Emma Quay

The fruit of a marriage

LS: It's a funny life being a picture book creator. Emma and I were especially aware of this a few months ago, when we were discussing the text of the picture book on which we are currently collaborating, *Bear and Chook by the Sea*.

Emma was in the middle of storyboarding and we were discussing the last line of the book, '*Oh Bear,*' said Chook. '*I love you.*' My editor had questioned this ending and Emma herself had wondered how it might be read aloud by parents. The line could be beautiful, she suggested, the perfect summary of Chook's generous affection for Bear. Or it could be a nightmare. What if the line were read like a cliché? Or even worse, what if it were read without any significance at all, like an item on a grocery list, quickly mumbled over?

And so Emma and I had a long conversation over the phone that summer's afternoon, where we recited the hundreds of ways, both beautiful and horrendous, in which this line could be said to one another.

'*I love you.*'
'*I love you.*'
'*I love you.*'
'I LOVE you.'

This went on and on, until the sheer absurdity, the weirdness of what we both do for a living overcame us and sent us into peals of laughter.

Why bother making such a fuss over one simple line in a book? Why worry about how it will be read? Why debate and wrestle over something so seemingly insignificant?

And if you're going to ask those sorts of questions, you might as well ask yourselves why you work so hard as teachers to connect children to great books.

The truth is we probably do both for similar reasons—because we sense that literature has a greater purpose than only teaching children how to read, because we sense that stories have things say to us about this life that can't be captured in statements of fact.

Walter Wangerin, a well-known American author of picture books believes "there ought to be a creative equality between the author and the artist. Neither should serve the other; rather, both the word and the image should serve, each according to its peculiar form and craft, the *story*."¹

¹ Walter Wangerin Jr *Swallowing the Golden Stone* (Authors and Artists) Augsburg Fortress 2001

He believes a picture book is in a real sense the “fruit of a marriage: just as a man and a woman together produce a the child which is *of* both, bearing characteristics of both...so the children’s picture book bears characteristics of its two progenitors, artist and author, but also becomes its own thing, the thing it could *not* have been if the vision of one “parent” absolutely dominated the other.”²

Both Emma and I identify with this idea of the author and the artist, working hard, through word and image, to serve the *story*. Much of our collaborative journey so far has been about exploring more deeply the delicate dance involved in sharing a creative vision, the acute necessity for both bravado and humility.

The beginnings of a collaborative journey—an illustrator’s perspective

EQ: Although *Bear and Chook* was our first book together, it wasn’t until after the book was published that Lisa and I met for the first time. This is not an unusual situation. Mark Macleod, our editor, in his recent paper for the CBCA 8th National Conference said, “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.”³

It wasn’t until our second book together, *Daddy’s Having a Horse* that a true collaboration began. Mark sent me the manuscript and I responded immediately to its honesty. Regardless of whether I know the writer or not, it is important for me to respond instinctively to a text. I want to feel a zing of recognition. After all, in most cases, I will end up spending nine months illustrating a picture book. I am attracted to humour—not necessarily a big belly laugh, but perhaps a wry observation or gentle pun. For me, warm, imperfect, believable characters are a must. They might be cheeky or stubborn—and I’ll love them if they are—but humanity is an essential ingredient. I am also often looking for something that is completely different to the project on which I’m working at the time. I like my books to be different from one project to the next—not to repeat myself—because I am keen to stretch myself as an artist. When I first read the text for *Daddy’s Having a Horse*, I was eager to take a break from animals (much as I love drawing them) and explore family life. I appreciated the gentle humour, warmth and unfolding layers in Lisa’s writing.

The beginnings of a collaborative journey—a writer’s view

LS: It is probably an unusual thing to admit, but my picture books are more likely to be inspired by a snatch of dialogue than by some haunting visual image.

‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’ asked Bear.

‘An old chook,’ said Chook.

‘Oh,’ said Bear, wrinkling his nose.

² Walter Wangerin Jr *Swallowing the Golden Stone* (Authors and Artists) Augsburg Fortress 2001

³ Mark Macleod *Collaborating on Picture Books* (A Paper from the CBCA National Conference May 2006)

I think I am more influenced by the *sound* of a story than in pinning down concrete visual images. I am more concerned with the way words unfold, the way they link, leap, crash, flow and weave, and the silences in between. The impetus for a story may come from a fragment of description I hear in my head or in the case of *Daddy's Having a Horse*, a retelling of a conversation at playgroup.

This reliance on the auditory has been both a blessing and a curse. It has meant that I have rarely been disappointed with the final images created by an illustrator because they don't match exactly my initial imaginings. Strangely, throughout the production process, the way I first imagined my characters grows hazier by the day until I find myself, by the end, adopting the illustrator's visual interpretation as my own.

This ability to forget and to forego my initial vision has been essential to a good functioning creative marriage. But it has also meant that it has taken me longer to understand the significance of the visual text, the way the images should serve to enlighten, deepen and comment on the written text by means that are both subtle and obvious.

Like in any good marriage there must be a high degree of tolerance for each other's peculiarities. Emma is constantly astonished by the fact that I don't think about illustrators at all when I write a picture book. She can't believe that it's not until I finish a text that I start to wonder who will be best for the story. But I can say without hesitation that Emma's illustrative work has played a vital role in helping me understand the crucial ways a visual text extends the written one, without being subservient to it.

Daddy's Having a Horse—a case study

LS: I tend to get the original inspiration for a story from the world around me; from things I hear, see and feel. *Daddy's Having a Horse* was no exception. When I was pregnant with my second son, I can remember going to playgroup, desperately asking other pregnant mothers how their older kids were coping with the idea of having a new baby in the family. One of the mothers told me that her children were so excited about having a new baby that they couldn't wait to tell everyone. In the middle of the deli, hanging over the butcher's counter or in the fruit shop, her daughter would shout out, 'Mummy's having a baby!' and her son would chorus, 'And Daddy's having a horse!'

When I asked my friend whether her little boy seriously believed that his dad had a horse in his belly, my friend simply laughed. For her it was just a cute thing her little boy came out with one day, end of story. But for me, it was the beginning. I couldn't stop thinking about that little boy. What would it be like to be so convinced that your daddy was going to have a horse, that whenever you rested your head against his hairy belly, you were sure you could hear it burp? What would it be like to make plans for where the horse would sleep? What would it be like to turn up at the hospital with your grandparents, expecting and hoping to see the horse? How would you feel when you realised that after all that hoping and expecting there was no horse and never would be?

The most significant page in *Daddy's Having a Horse* for most children is the moment where Lachlan is in the hospital room discovering that there is no horse. Some adults laugh at this point but children rarely do—they are often silent and grief-stricken—they understand all too well Lachlan's disappointment. The deep empathy children feel as this page is read aloud has been a revelation to me as a writer about the unconscious way children are influenced by text and image working seamlessly together.

EQ: Lisa and I are at similar stages in our lives. We both have young children, and often draw from our family lives when we are developing the ideas for our picture books. In illustrating *Daddy's Having a Horse* I especially wanted to convey a realistic and unsentimental view of family, of pregnancy and bringing a new baby home.

The initial ideas and characters for *Daddy's Having a Horse* came quite naturally to both of us, but the actual process of working on the project and developing it into the book it is today was a lengthy and at times arduous one. A very long gestation period, one might say, although of course one always forgets the pain afterwards. However, the twists and turns the story and images took on their journey towards completion only made the book a stronger one.

As I worked on the illustrations, the text was also being refined and reworked by Lisa and Mark—in response to and independently from my developing pencil roughs. Sam the butcher became Sam the handyman renovating the family's kitchen, which allowed me to add an extra dimension to my illustrations. I was able to plant the seeds of the story's resolution throughout the book. The parts of the old kitchen we see Sam ripping out in early illustrations will be recycled to make his gift of the rocking horse in the closing pages.

The endpapers of the hard cover edition hint at the story and its resolution (with bonneted and swaddled foals as we open, and babies as we close the book), but within the internal illustrations of *Daddy's Having a Horse* the horse is never depicted explicitly. And yet it is always present in some form; there is no horse character, but there *are* horse references everywhere. I hope that children will notice more of these references each time they revisit the book: in Lachlan's galloping around the kitchen, in his drawings on paper and in the sandpit at playgroup, in his saddling up the couch, in the clouds...

The impact of the hospital scene on the child reader is heightened by the fact that all these horse references disappear with the birth of (human) baby Jack, when Lachlan's hopes are dashed. His dynamism and movement disappear too. He is motionless, his shoulders drooping and his arms hanging limply by his sides. As the page is turned and Lachlan curls up in the corner of the bathroom (echoing the shape his baby brother might have taken in the womb) the bright colours drain from his world: all is sombre, muted, joyless. However, the pictures don't work alone. It is the characters' previous interactions, dialogue, expectations and enthusiasm—told through both word and image—that have brought the child experiencing the book to this depth of empathy.

LS: Perhaps what I appreciate most about Emma's illustrations for *Daddy's Having a Horse* is the widening of perspective they give the story. The written text quite clearly focuses on Lachlan and the dashing of his expectations, but the illustrations broaden the story out to include the viewpoints of his whole family. Through the illustrations, we gain an understanding of how it feels to be a mother bringing a new baby home. Emma characterises the mother truthfully—from her uncombed hair, the maternity bra slipping out from under her nightdress, to the realistic depiction of the mother's post-natal stomach!

Through the illustrations we also gain a deeper understanding of Caitlin, the older sister. It is clear from the written text that Caitlin too is disappointed in the hospital, because her longed-for sister has not arrived. Caitlin's last lines in the text refer to the new baby in a fairly scornful manner, '*It looks like a possum,*' she said. '*And it smells.*' As far as the written text goes, this is the end of Caitlin's story. It hangs there frustratingly open-ended. But Emma continues Caitlin's story visually. On the wordless final page, we see Caitlin a few months down the track, helping her baby brother Jack have a horsey ride on Lachlan's back. Funnily enough, this tailpiece to the book came as a complete surprise to me. It was Emma's invention alone. But through this picture, Emma brings the story full circle, tying it up with one final, bright, warm horse image. My subconscious intent of telling a story in which it was acceptable for children to feel somewhat ambivalent about the arrival of a new baby is visually balanced by the truth that love for a new sibling can often creep up slowly over time. This unexpected visual treat is one of the reasons why I continue to be delighted by the collaborative process.

Future directions

EQ: Over the years my collaborative relationship with Lisa has evolved. After communicating entirely through an editor during *Bear and Chook*, when it came to *Daddy's Having a Horse* we embarked on the second stage of the creative process—the illustrative part—*together*. Lisa and I were in constant contact whilst I was working on the illustrations—discussing my ideas and her responses. Of course the invaluable editorial input was still there, from Mark Macleod, but the joint creators' experience had changed completely.

Lisa and I enjoy working together very much—our evolving working relationship and friendship means that the creative experience is becoming much closer and more intimate. I am about to embark on the painted artworks for *Bear and Chook by the Sea*, and Lisa has had a very direct input into the visual planning process for this project so far. I am open to this; I want our book to be as good as we can make it. Our working relationship is full of laughter, hard work and sharing—the rewarding experiences and the bits that make us want to tear our hair out. We have many ideas for the future, and feel that we are nearing a stage where the text and the pictures will develop at the same time. The collaborative process will start from the very inception. We find this a most exciting thought.

LS: Although Emma and I have a greater degree of creative intimacy than previously, we are more aware than ever of the importance of protecting and preserving a creative spaciousness between us, to ensure the 'creative equality' that Walter Wangerin emphasises is so important between picture book collaborators. Practically, this means

that any constructive criticism we give each other is done so with sensitivity, with a distinct wonder and awe for the ability of the other, with a certain fear and trembling that we could be wrong.

On that late summer's afternoon, after my session on the phone with Emma about the ending of *Bear and Chook by the Sea*, I changed Chook's last line. Thanks to our conversation, I realised it was important for Chook to dignify Bear in a way that wasn't corny, in a way that subtly danced around Bear's pomposity, in a way that was not too difficult for parents to read aloud, in a way that said all of 'I love you' without saying those words directly.

Working in collaboration means there is always the chance of some fresh, new discovery; some essential element to be unearthed that will help a story live as powerfully as possible in the imagination of our readers.

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For more information about Lisa and Emma's collaborations, visit Emma Quay's website at www.emmaquay.com