

Not a Cloud in the Sky

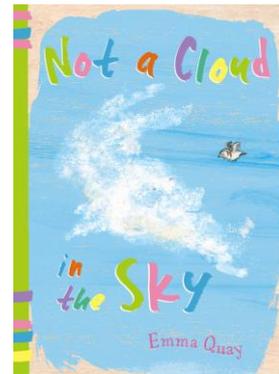
AUTHOR/ILLUSTRATOR NOTES

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SYNOPSIS

A small bird is tired of flying through uniformly blue skies. *Sometimes everything looks the same all over—up, down, this way and that, on and on. Nothing different. Nothing at all—*or at least until a cloud drifts past. The cloud says, ‘Hello’ (Bird hears it) and the two characters begin an enjoyable game, wherein the cloud forms himself into numerous increasingly complex shapes and Bird must guess what he is mimicking. Both find this immensely entertaining, and Bird cries for more and more difficult shapes as the day progresses.

Eventually the cloud begins to fatigue and small wisps of him to drift away, in his efforts to please his new friend. However they continue with the game, which climaxes in a magnificent dragon shape, made fiery with the colours of the setting sun. Now it is dusk; Bird is sleepy and must find a roost for the night, no matter how much he wishes he could remain with his friend. He gives a few more weary flaps, but sinks with the sun and settles in the upper branches of a tree. He continues to talk to Cloud, even when his eyes refuse to stay open, but eventually sleep will overcome him. Cloud must let the night breezes to take him wherever they will. The bird is loath to let go, and calls out, ‘*See you in the morning?*’ to which the cloud replies, reassuringly, that he could be many things tomorrow, but he’ll be there... in one way or another. ‘*Whatever you are tomorrow, I’ll know you Cloud,*’ whispers the bird from under his wing.

Bird doesn’t realise his tree is full of other, similar, birds, and he will find friends in the morning. Cloud may have had to move on, but Bird will not be alone. His life has been intrinsically altered by the friendship of one individual.

The story closes with our bird smiling in his sleep. The light of the moon encircles him and singles him out, giving him an inner glow. Another story is about to begin (and one which is easy to miss on first reading the book): another small bird flies in on page 31 to roost in the tree, looking as weary and as lonely as Bird did in the opening pages of the book. The new bird looks like he has been flying for a long time too. The final image shows this small bird looking up at Bird with an expression of hope—he too will meet a friend, in the morning. The chain of friendship continues.

THEMES

The narrative can stand alone as an enjoyable story for younger children, whom—I hope—will delight in guessing the shapes along with Bird. However, mostly through natural dialogue, the subtext subtly explores themes of loneliness, mental health, love and the difference it can make in our lives, generosity and the giving of oneself, the changing moods and nature of relationships and also of loss and letting go. When Bird and Cloud

must part at the end of the book, Cloud intimates that he will be back, ‘*in one shape or another*’. From this, Bird infers (and most probably the youngest readers will infer too) that Cloud will continue to form different shapes for more guessing games tomorrow. But clouds must some day turn into rain, and the rain in turn becomes streams, rivers, oceans, plants... The elements that make up Cloud will continue to exist, but in different forms, as do all living creatures—physically, and within the frameworks of all spiritual beliefs.

ILLUSTRATIVE APPROACH

In 2008, I spent three months travelling around Australia with my family, camping. Our favourite places were the deserts of Central Australia: the sounds, the colours, the ever-changing landscape. We were fascinated by the great flocks of finches, which would settle on and seemingly clothe a tree. I tried to pour these sights and experiences into the illustrations for this picture book.

I like to try a different approach from one book to another. *Not a Cloud in the Sky* followed on from my early childhood picture book, *Rudie Nudie*, and is very different in its content and setting. Whilst *Rudie Nudie* was set (mostly) indoors, in a suburban home, with cosy fabric textures, patterns and warm colours, *Not a Cloud in the Sky* is set in the Australian Outback (or above it)—“The Great Outdoors”—with sweeping vistas, endless skies and red earth.

Pages 01-07 are intentionally similar to one another, to emphasise fact that Bird has been flying for a long time through an unchanging sky. We move with Bird, from left to right, with him leading us into the story. Any type (title, author name, text) is well out of Bird’s way, so as not to impede his flight. These opening illustrations are open and airy in their composition and spaces. However, as the story progresses and the sky darkens, I built up more layers of colour, texture and pattern, to achieve a rich, layered effect in both the visual and the written text. I enjoyed juxtaposing the two vastly different disciplines of printmaking and computer-generated artwork in my illustrations for this book, to explore the varying textures and colours of earth, dust, rock, air, vapour, thermals and feathers. I used a soft, blunt pencil to outline the birds in the book, and drew them much smaller than they appear on the printed page. I then enlarged my drawings to achieve a grainy, loose line. Bird is solid, with a defined edge, but Cloud is ephemeral and formless, so I used sponging and loose brushwork to render his changing shapes. The blue sky was created with a CMYK 27:2:1:0 fill in Photoshop. Acrylic paint applied with foam rollers produced accidental effects, which resemble rock formations of the Australian desert.

I used found materials in my artworks: the pages of the book behind the illustrations showing natural wood grain rather than flat paper, referencing the work on bark of many indigenous Australian artists. The grain of this wood shows through the colour in parts of the illustrations. In the closing illustrations, I used pencil drawing and acrylic paint (for the birds), ink blown with a plastic straw (for the branches of the tree—exploring the random effects this produced), a toothbrush (for wisps in the sky), photographic processes (for the leaves) and prints from a champagne cork layered as screens in Photoshop (for the moon).

Several spreads are filled with sky almost from edge to edge, but on many pages I wanted to use multiple illustrations to show the different shapes Cloud creates and the changing nature of the two friends’ conversation and moods, or (on page 21) the in-between stages of Cloud’s metamorphoses. Although these pages do use some of the conventions of traditional comic book layout (left-to-right, top-to-bottom reading paths) I decided to

make the vignettes irregular in shape, with loosely-brushed edges. The type was carefully placed to ensure it was read along with each corresponding illustration.

TYPE DESIGN

Natalie Winter was the designer on this project. She used the typeface Aunt Mildred; its twig-like forms remind me of a bird's legs. The editors Tegan Morrison, Chren Byng and I all agreed it was perfectly suited to the illustrations. Natalie's typesetting has structure—it is parallel, straight and horizontal—and yet the intentionally uneven ends of the lines often flow around and echo the irregular edges of the vignettes. When the type is printed over the illustrations, I kept these areas as free from texture and pattern as possible so as not to interfere with the legibility of the text.

COVER

The cover image illustrates a key point of the story, when Cloud forms his first shape for Bird to guess. The title refers to the point when Cloud says, 'I'm not a Cloud today'. (He *is* a cloud of course, but is also a rabbit here and will become many other things too). However, the phrase 'Not a cloud in the sky' is also associated with happiness—a clear mind rather than a clouded one... clearing depression. Bird is in a very different state of mind at the end of the story, compared to the beginning. It is a happy title, and joyful colour was introduced onto the largely blue front cover through its colourful letters. The brush-like strokes of the title font echo the brushwork I used at the edges of the blue vignettes throughout most of the book. The letters are semi-transparent and shiny; the author name seems to float in the sky. The type and spine decoration is picked out in shiny spot UV varnish, contrasting with the matte book jacket and cover.

Because I hoped young children would take pleasure in guessing the shapes Cloud was forming throughout the book, I wanted to continue the game on the back cover of the book and give them more shapes to guess. Here they are unaided by Bird (there are no answers printed), and there are eight pictures to ponder over. The nine blue vignettes form the shape of a question mark, with Bird on the dot at the bottom.

ENDPAPERS

The opening endpaper shows the sun and the closing endpaper the moon, representing the time that has passed in the telling of the story. We meet Bird at midday and leave him in the evening.

I again used a champagne cork to print the shapes of the sun and the moon, and built up layers of chalk pastel, oil pastel, pencil lines and sgraffito in Photoshop to create the final effect. The simple wood grain that appears behind the illustrations on every page fills the endpapers opposite the opening and closing page. There is no busy image to interfere with the impact of the illustrations and the final piece of text.

To see some illustrations in progress, for activities and more information about
Emma Quay and her books visit:

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