

Shrieking Violet

AUTHOR/ILLUSTRATOR NOTES

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Written and illustrated by Emma Quay
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A NOTE FROM EMMA

By their very nature, picture books are sensory experiences, especially when shared aloud—an author and illustrator will have considered very carefully every element of sound, rhythm, meaning, colour, light, dark, shape and line that together will transfer the intended feeling and mood to the reader. Not all of these elements will necessarily be consciously noticed by the reader as he or she journeys through the pages but, combined, they will make the experience of reading each book a very different one. Most readers are not likely to break down and analyse the elements that a creating the different moods of the book, but they will have subconsciously absorbed many of them, if not all.

I sometimes feel a little reluctant to spell out so many of the nuances in the illustrations and text of a picture book in author and illustrator notes. A part of me would be happy for my readers to become absorbed in my books while they are reading and looking at them, and not to think too much about what I've done to take them there: to keep things intuitive. However, I am assured by teachers, librarians and students that there is a demand for author and illustrator notes. So, I have prepared notes for Shrieking Violet here. Much of my inspiration for the book was drawn from my childhood, and my friends' and my experiences of parenthood. It is a very personal book, and the notes reflect this in their informality. In the text and the artworks for Shrieking Violet, my choices reflect my studies of Art, colour theory, Art History, symbolism, figure drawing and children's literature, but just as importantly my experiences of family. I am one of two daughters—I'm the elder sister—and I have two daughters myself. My younger sister, Lucy, now has two daughters, too. We know all about sisters! Therefore these familial influences sit alongside the more formal analyses in these notes.

I did enjoy revisiting my thought processes and remembering the decisions I made as each different stage of the project progressed.

THE IDEA

The idea for the book came several years ago, when I was having a discussion with my husband, David, in our kitchen. He misheard me when I said someone wasn't exactly a shrinking violet, instead hearing “shrieking violet”. David said it would be a good title for a book. I immediately pictured a screaming toddler dressed in purple, and the whole idea for the struggle for attention between two siblings came flooding into my head.

I have dedicated the book to David.

In 2004, while I was on a residential fellowship at Varuna, Eleanor Dark’s house in the Blue Mountains, NSW, I played around with a soft brush and a bottle of black India ink. I drew the screaming toddler, Violet, wearing a short dress, woollen tights, and stumpy pigtails held with large bobbles in her hair. I drew the letters of the title of the book coming out of her mouth.

Mark Macleod, my editor, came to visit me in the studio at Varuna to discuss the roughs I was working on for *Good Night, Me* and saw my Violet sketches pinned to the wall. He loved them, and was really excited about the title of the book. However, there were a few other picture books to finish before I could begin this one, so we had to wait a while. In the end we worked with publisher Ana Vivas at Scholastic Press, who took on the project with great enthusiasm, and whose input was invaluable.

The final cover contains the same elements as those first brush and ink sketches but, at Mark’s suggestion, I added the sister’s wincing, yet smiling face to balance out the negativity of Violet’s angry tantrum. On the back cover I’ve drawn a happy, joyful picture of the two sisters playing together. Violet is shrieking with glee rather than frustration here.

THEMES

The double page spreads throughout the book contain vignettes of everyday life at home with young children (two girls, aged around two and a half and five years old)—glimpses of moments in time in the day of the pre-school child. Violet, in the throes of the “Terrible Twos”, asserts her presence at every stage—she makes endless noise, she puts on odd, mismatched clothes, all her hair clips in her hair at once (with the odd clothes peg thrown in too). She turns each household chore into a drama, making everything take longer than it needs to. When the family go out, she refuses to ride in her pushchair, wanting to push instead, and when they reach their destination she insists on sitting in a puddle. She wonders what it would be like if she pulled all the tissues out of the tissue box... so she tries it. And meanwhile her exasperated and exhausted mum tries to get through the day, keeping another eye on her elder daughter whose constant narrative demands her (and our) attention to watch her jumping, her rolling, her helping, her painting.

Mum loves her daughters, and she copes with her demanding day. Okay, perhaps it might have been a better idea to put Violet in her bedroom for her afternoon nap, rather than letting her collapse and doze on top of a pile of soft toys in the middle of playing with them—but nobody’s perfect!

STORYTELLING

The story is told entirely through dialogue. It is the (unnamed) older sister’s voice throughout, trying to draw our attention to her achievements as she leaps and rolls across the left side of each spread, always looking out at and addressing the reader. However she is invariably upstaged by her noisy little sister, as our eye is invariably drawn to Violet and what she is getting up to on the right hand page. The older sister

uses an offhand, deadpan voice when reluctantly referring to Violet’s latest exploit. The humour is in the illustrations rather than in the text—the understatement in the sister’s commentary contrasting with the depiction of Violet’s “Terrible Twos” behaviour.

COLOUR

I used a distinctly different main colour for the clothing of each of the three characters. Each colour reflects their different personalities, and helps to identify the characters on the page. Violet has shades of slightly mis-matched purple, mauve and violet in her pyjamas, tights, dresses, swimsuits, wellies, hair bobbles and push-chair. The sister wears stripy green tights and a cool green top, with just a dash of its complimentary from the opposite side of the colour wheel—a vibrant cherry red (a hint that she isn’t always completely calm after all). At craft time, the two sisters choose to paint using their own colours: purple and green, although their methods are very different! Mum wears a shirt patterned with squares of burnt orange (and a touch of both her daughters’ colours in her hair).

The backgrounds to the illustrations hint at the house interior, backyard, pavement and garden centre settings of the story, but my focus was on the characters and their interactions, so I deliberately kept any additional information to a minimum. I used large halftone-inspired dots in yellows and oranges to roughly mark out the general shapes of floor and wall in the interior scenes. The sunny yellows and oranges of the decor reflect the mum’s colour choices and taste. I sought the grainy effect achieved by printing out the half-finished digitally-coloured artworks on an inkjet printer, then painting into the resulting artworks. Rather than the background dots and other areas of colour fill being slick, flat and uniform, the resulting graininess harks back to the printing qualities of some of the vintage books in my collection. I worked on a smaller scale than the printed book—my artworks were enlarged at the scanning stage, so the brushstrokes and texture of the paint are visible, and the idiosyncracies of the black brush and ink lines are accentuated. The Production department at Scholastic enclosed a note when they sent my artworks off to be scanned, instructing the technicians not to correct this graininess.

On the imprint page we see a child’s collage of a large orange flower (representing the mum), with two butterflies fluttering around it: one green and one purple (the sister and Violet). This sets the scene for the story, in which the two sisters vie for the attention of their mother. There are green scribbles over Violet’s name on the title page, and the sister assures us the book is really all about her.

At the beginning of the story, Violet dominates—demanding her mum’s and our attention. Her great purple scribbled and splattered shrieks zigzag and curl across the opening pages. I used purples and violets in pictorial representations of the variously angry and sing-song sounds uttering from Violet’s mouth, as well as on her clothing. She is only quiet when she is asleep.

Violet wreaks havoc with her tantrums and unreasonableness, and the tension builds. When the sister finally loses her cool, her cry of frustration is green. The yellow dots of the background have grown large

and vibrate with a mis-registered effect. The sister seeks comfort from her mother, and the following (wordless) spread shows the sister cocooned in the warm oranges of her mum’s clothes and soft cushions. Violet is isolated on the almost empty facing page: a small, compact purple shape, clearing up her mess.

When Violet makes a kind gesture of reconciliation, a violet heart shape hovers above her makeshift peace offering.

The sister suggests they put on a show, but it is obviously a ruse to steal a little more of the limelight for herself. When the sister flings off her green cloak to reveal that indeed she is star of the show (and therefore the book), the cloak falls over Violet’s head, obscuring some of her ‘purpleness’. At last, green is the dominant colour on the page. The sister will assure Violet she is a much more convincing tree with a green cloak draped over her head, and perhaps Violet will believe her!

The endpapers open the book with green dots on a mauve background, and plain mauve faces page one of the book: Violet’s colour is dominant as we begin the story. But when we leave the characters taking their bows at the end of the book, a soft green faces page thirty-two and we close with mauve dots on a green endpaper: the sister has gained our attention at last. These polka dot patterns continue the theme of the dots in the backgrounds of the internal illustrations. They are decorative, but perhaps not that easy to look at for any length of time. The coloured dots compete visually on the page, much like Violet and her sister. Sometimes the green dots will stand out against the purple; sometimes the purple will come forward and dominate.

In much the same way as the endpapers opened with purple dominating and closed with green, the front cover of the book is purple and the back cover a shade of fresh green.

When Mum takes the two girls to the garden centre, there is a hint of our looking ahead to the future as the sister cups a small, scruffy violet-tinged bulb in her hand and a great purple flower seems to emerge from it. The sister says, “If we plant it carefully, and water it, and let the sun warm it, and wait, and wait, this little bulb will grow into a BIG, bright flower”. I wanted to leave the reader with the suggestion that if her family is patient, difficult little toddler Violet will grow into a vibrant and wonderful person. A message of hope for all the exasperated and exhausted parents reading the book!

The colour scheme of the book is reminiscent of the colours of my childhood in the 1970s. Burnt orange and Thames Green featured heavily in our home decor, and the jumbled pile of soft toys on which Violet falls asleep is also a nod to the handmade toys of that era. My own mum was uninspired by the white, baby blue and pale pink romper suits available in the shops, so she dyed my sister’s and my baby clothes orange. Later, my sister and I wore Clothkits clothes, often in the same design but different colourways.

I was always in blues and purples and my sister in reds and browns. It took a long time for my sister to choose to wear red or brown as an adult, and she has never been able to bring herself to wear orange.

DESIGN

The design, by Nicole Leary at Scholastic Australia, added another dimension to the finished book. I had roughly mapped out my suggested positioning of the type from as early as storyboard stage, but Nicole’s creative yet restrained use of different fonts, varying type sizes and fun typesetting perfectly matches the style and content of illustrations. Her typographic choices are in balance with the weight of my black brush and ink lines.

COLLAGE

It suited the theme of the book and also the personal nature of the inspiration for the story, to use some of my two daughters’ artwork in the illustrations for *Shrieking Violet*. I scanned some of the paintings, collages, prints, rubbings and drawings from their early years, and manipulated the resulting patterns and colours in Photoshop to decorate the characters’ clothes in the book. I also used some paint splashes and lines from my daughters’ pre-school paintings to represent the sounds of Violet’s shrieking.

Shrieking Violet really is a family affair! I hope you enjoy it.

ILLUSTRATIVE METHOD

Brush and ink, acrylic paints, children’s artwork, inkjet printing and Photoshop.

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

www.emmaquay.com

