



The Letterpress Project

Author and Illustrator E-Interviews

An Interview With Jana Novotny Hunter

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

My earliest memories of books were of quite scary ones – a torn film edition of “The Wizard of Oz” with that grotesque green witch and a copy of Grimm’s fairy tales with weird art nouveau illustrations. (It was the eyes in the swirls that both scared and captivated me.) I also pored over a huge album with Dickens characters illustrated by Boz, which I found on my Grandfather’s bookshelf. There weren’t many books at home, and I was hungry for them. I borrowed from friends and the library, both local and at school, devouring series like “Anne of Green Gables” and authors too numerous to mention. As I became involved in children’s books I was entranced by “Where the Wild Things Are” - such a ground breaking and powerful book, dealing with that all-encompassing and intensity of emotions we experience in childhood. I’ve given whole lectures on that book alone. There is so much to say about its multi-layered genius.

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

Books provided me with such an escape and wonder from a dreary 1950s council estate and chaotic home life that I determined to illustrate them from a young age. I was forever drawing – another escape. But on finding out I had to do lettering on the Graphic Design Course at art school I transferred to Textile Design. Lettering with pen and ink was far too restrictive for me. It was only after my son was born that I went back to art school, this time in America, to try illustration and discovered the love of writing took over. I still illustrate my toddler books but I’ve yet to see them in print.

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

If we are talking about a picture book, the most successful are those where the images and text are so seamlessly interwoven you cannot imagine one without the other. The illustrations must tell the story as much as the words – not merely decorating, but showing

aspects of the story the words have not addressed. This can work well when the illustrator is also the writer but something magical happens with the combustion of two creative minds approach the same story. In my lectures I always liken it to the creation of a new being by two disparate others. So many forces come to play to create a really good picture book, the editors, designers and printers as well as the publishers. When I hold in my hands a good picture book I can see the different thought processes that went behind its development. The collaboration of so many excellent minds at work is inspiring. A case in point is my latest book "My Tail's Not Tired". It is such a terrific amalgamation of illustration, text and design that Childsplay has brought together, with the result that it works on many levels.

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

Absolutely. I write for different age groups so it is imperative that I know roughly how old my audience will be. This is complicated by those books, which will be read aloud to children. They must appeal to the adult reading them too, so a witty viewpoint is always a bonus. Take a look at the Jeanne Willis books about aliens visiting earth. They are hilarious for any age group.

Age group aside, I try not to visualise a particular type of child. I want to reach all cultures and classes of children, so the more universal the theme the better. I worked at *Sure start* in Acton for a time, and we had every Nationality there you can imagine. It was a wonderful grounding for me, seeing how words, games and music can draw little ones together. So, if a book of mine can appeal to a baby in the Andes, a celebrity offspring in Hollywood and a minority kid in London, I feel I've done my work. As for the type of child – character, personality development etc. I do sometimes think 'this will appeal to the more quiet, thoughtful child or here's one for the overactive bunch'. I believe it's a mistake to aim for only the well-read, intelligent child. Reading and enjoying stories is too important to miss for any child. Ursula Le Guin was writing beautiful stories of magic and wizardry long before JK Rowling but the Harry Potter books appeal to a wide range of children because they can recognise their own lives in there somewhere – and so the books have had worldwide success.

I like to appeal to both boys and girls when I can, and in some picture books I am careful not to give away the gender of the main character, though it is hard to maintain without sounding clumsy. This is often different in a chapter book that will have more of a specific focus. Girls read books for boys, but seldom is it the other way around.

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

I am pleased to say that at this point the battle appears to be won by proper physical books. A few years ago everyone at both the London and Bologna book fair was tense and gloomy – not knowing what was going to happen. Well, sales of books have continued to rise and e-books cannot compete with them. There is nothing like sitting with a book that has pages to turn and ink to smell. I think computers and IPADS can entertain a child, with all the

whirring sounds, flashing lights and movement, but I do believe deeper transports of imagination can be furrowed with an ordinary paper book.

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

I collect children's books that I love – not for their monetary value, but for what pleasure they can bring. I use them a lot in teaching and lecturing. Added to that, I review for "Books for Keeps" so I get a steady stream of good new picture books coming my way. Apart from bookshops, I love charity shops and library sales. Books should be used and reused. My home is a paradise for little kids, because of all the books, so I'm lucky to have a lot in my life. It's important to keep up with little ones, and you always learn something new from them.

There isn't anything special I'd love to own, although I do have a very valuable book that was treasured by my late husband, an American activist. It is a copy of "Hollywood on Trial" and it is signed by every one of the Hollywood Ten whose careers were halted by the Communist witch-hunts of the fifties. I cherish that book.