



The Letterpress Project
Author and Illustrator Interviews

An Interview With Caroline Magerl

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

There were specific images from picture books which I love very much, these stick in my memory to this day.

The books my East German grandmother sent to me were my favourites. In fact, I went to the trouble of marking the pages I loved the most in red pencil, and I was plainly the sort of kid who responded to pictures more than anything. As an example, there is a page from the book 'Vom Wassertropfen Zum Grossen Meer' (*From Waterdrops to the Ocean*) which shows many sea creatures and a tiny diver. I was enchanted by the sharks, stingrays and schools of fish. The sea was plainly the most astounding place and from this one image, a lifelong fascination for the sea was born.

I also had a non-fiction book about the Australian Great Barrier Reef. This was illustrated with photographs and my favourite picture was of the coral, Genus *Mopsella*. What a word! I wanted more than anything to dive down into the Coral Sea and come face to face with *Mopsella*. I did get the chance to snorkel eventually and came face to face with a large and gaping grouper. But that just proved the point ... the picture book was right ... the Grossen Meer is adventure!

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

My family migrated from Germany to Sydney, Australia when I was two years old. This was the post World War II era when many Europeans settled in other parts of the world and we were among that throng. My only real connection to the family we left behind was the letters and picture books my grandmother sent to me. Living in East Germany meant of course, that she was still living behind the Iron Curtain at that time.

Those books my grandmother Anna sent in her parcels had an enormous impact on me, in that I built a picture of who she was from her choice in those picture books. Without understanding it at the time, they were intrinsically linked to my idea of her. They were a conduit to the world and culture that my parents had left behind and gave an insight into her values by the subject matter she chose. Much later, I began to understand how evocative picture books are, and how long they linger in the memory.

These books, five in number also influenced my art style. The illustrators and authors were all living and working in the eastern bloc at that time and they became a benchmark for me in terms of their emotive and sensitive art style.

The fact that someone had plainly made the images with pencil and paint on paper, thus creating a world inside a book, was enormously exciting and intriguing to me. I wanted to do the same, that is to create worlds on paper, and these books were instrumental in leading me into my ambition to become a picture book creator.

The first picture book I ever wrote and illustrated, 'Hasel and Rose' (published by Penguin Books Australia 2014 and DoubleDay USA 2015) was inspired all those years ago by the books my grandmother.

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

What an interesting question.

Having an interest in books from different cultures, I believe books serve so many ends, and express their content in so many ways. So it is best to answer in a broad sense, as to what makes a book or illustration successful. I look for whether a book is engaging. That it covers many things. Does the book or illustration incite curiosity, does it achieve warmth and emotional connection? Does it encourage or educate, console or make me laugh? Books do all these things, in different measures, that is why we need a lot of books! They are our mental tree-houses; places to experience things in our own time and in our own space.

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

All of the books I have written arose from some kind of personal enthusiasm or experience.

Having raised a child who could lift a discerning eye brow from an early age, I realised the only way I was going to get a credible result was if I had some idea of what I was talking about. I needed to do so with a degree of glee, pathos, emotion; anything as long as I had some buy in. I don't know whether I can work any other way. I know I am on the right track when telling a story, if my face goes red and I start to wave my arms like a combine harvester.

So, to answer, I do not have a specific audience in mind, but I am very aware that it is likely an adult will be reading the book, and I make every effort to create a book for reading aloud ... but not necessarily loudly.

I noticed with my own girl how much of a performance reading to a child is, with rhythm, humour, a sense of theatre and interesting language; are all very welcome in the experience of reading to a child.

I try to create books which can be read on different levels, understood in different ways. That is what makes a book stay with the reader, when a conversation starts up between the reader/s and the book.

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

I remember when electronic books first became available and it fleetingly crossed my mind that this might be the end of the world as I knew it... then just as quickly I dismissed the thought. Since that time, I see publishing has become a more complex environment, and yes, there are many books available electronically as well as in print form. This is the new reality, but I do note that picture books, as I suspected, continue to exist as solid objects you can buy in a book store or borrow from a library.

I suppose my attitude back when e-books became a 'thing', was to ask myself if I would still buy books in print form for my child, for friends as gifts, for my own shelves. The answer was yes, I would still buy books in print form and I figured I would not be alone. Time was shown that I am in fact not alone.

We are fortunate to have books available electronically, we are fortunate to have books we can hold in our hands. Long live the book.

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

I do collect books, but not in any way you might admire. I buy books, gather books from second hand stores and, I am often given books accompanied with the phrase, "I found this in a box in the attic/jumble sale/dumpster and thought of you."

There isn't any book I specifically want to own, because I want to own any book and will gladly accept books from an attic/jumble sale/dumpster.

So it is fair to say that my collection, for want of a better word, is eclectic. I have books in languages I don't read, I have books from our daughter's childhood which are more fungus than paper. I still buy books, I swap with other authors and illustrators and I am going to the bookstore today, as it happens.

I am in London at present and very excited about the bookstores. By this evening I expect to own more and I see nothing whatever wrong with that, though the flight home might be a cause for anxiety. But having been in this fix before, I have located the nearest second hand store which will gladly take my coat and shoes. I reason that I won't need them where I am going, anyway!