



The Letterpress Project

An Interview With Piet Grobler

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

My mother used to read us a bed-time story at night when I was little. Very often in English (Afrikaans is my mother tongue), since she believed that was a good way to get us to know English well too! In Afrikaans, most children grew up with Liewe Heksie (Dear little witch) brilliantly written by Verna Vels. Many brilliant European children's books were also translated into Afrikaans in the 60's; 70's and 80's. I remember a specific book of animal stories and fables with illustrations by Janusz Grabiński, a Polish illustrator. That definitely sparked an interest in the illustration of stories as well.

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

I always loved drawing and was pretty good at it. My brother, Diek (artist, animator and illustrator) and I, would draw for hours on end. When our drawing books were full, we would draw pictures in the white margins in my mother's old women's magazines or my father's Farmers' Weekly. I think growing up on a farm in South Africa, being exposed to animals from an early age and our sincere love for the mobile library bus, all sparked an interest in the magic of characters and books.

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

Good illustration will always be more than merely an echo of the written text. It adds an additional meaningful layer to the understanding of the narrative. It extends, enlightens (and even challenge!) the text. In order for illustration to be really successful, I think it would honour the spirit and feel of the written words and also adds additional life to it. It needs not be populist, but good and successful illustration is in essence democratic art. It is art for everyone.

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

Children are not a homogenous group. Some are sophisticated readers, some less so. Some are visually literate, others not. I do not really buy into the claim of some illustrators that they put themselves in the position of a child and then illustrate the story. It is not possible. With our experiences and lived lives, we have also lost our innocence. I think it is more correct to illustrate for the text. I therefore ask myself: What does this text require – in terms of subject matter, technique, design and medium. And I aim to illustrate according to that. The illustrations will evidently amuse and enthrall some little readers and others not.

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

Not for one moment do I think the paper book would disappear. Unless humans destroy the last living tree. Staring at an electronic device for hours, has been proven to be unhealthy, in any case. The book is also a tactile object and its design and illustrations are best appreciated in two dimensions in a book in the hand. Lifestyle during lockdowns worldwide has demonstrated again how people turned to books to comfort them. Publishing of children's books has not really diminished, I think. Times and circumstances have changed radically and fast though. I am not sure marketing of books have changed along speedily enough.

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

I am an avid collector of picture books from all over the world. I have no idea how many I have. Possibly around two thousand. And then there are other books too. But as I grow older I give away more and more books. I would love to own some of the old mid-century picture books. For example, some illustrated by the Provencens or by Janusz Stanny. Regarding contemporary illustrators, I am in awe of everything that the German illustrator, Wolf Erlbruch does. I have many of his books ...but wouldn't mind having them all!