

Picture Books and Creativity: An Interview with Nick Sharratt



Janet Enever

In 2006, Janet Enever interviewed best-selling children's author and illustrator, Nick Sharratt, about books, children and creativity for the *CATS Spring 2006 Issue*. We are delighted to reprint some edited highlights of their talk a decade later, here in our Special Pearl Jubilee Edition.

JE: Perhaps I can begin, Nick, by asking you to explain a little about where you start, when you're creating a new book?

NS: Well, there are two ways that I start a book. One is, if I'm given a problem to solve by a publisher, which might be something like a specific theme, a novelty device or an unusual format to exploit. For example, I was given this book dummy – a book made of tracing paper – and asked, what can you come up with from this? (JE each page comprises a sheet of semi-transparent tracing paper). Instantly, the semi-opaque quality of the paper got me very excited and I thought “fog” – and that was my starting point. Sometimes I'm given a specific requirement. Actually, the more specifics I have, the better really. I find it really helps me. For example, with the book *'Shark in the Park'* I was told it had to be a Big Book, it had to have a novelty aspect, a rhyming text, aimed at 4-5 year olds and it had to have an educational aspect. This was great. It really stimulated me and I came up with the theme of *'Shark in the Park'* which fulfilled all those criteria and is also, I think, quite a successful little story in itself.

JE: It's a superb title, I really like it.

NS: Well, do you know, when I go into schools the children always say triumphantly, “It rhymes!” Unprompted, before I start, they say, “It rhymes!” So, that's such a good start. The rhyming is very important to it. Sometimes the title itself is a starting point – the title *'Shark in the Park'* came before the actual story with this book, I'd wanted to do something about sharks because when I ask children what jobs they'd like to do one day there's always one child who wants to be a marine biologist and they're all very keen on sharks. Sometimes I'm given problems to solve, which is great for me. I find it tougher, though ultimately very satisfying to come up with my

own ideas from scratch. That's much harder for me because, I'll have general themes in my head like 'pirates' or 'treasure' but no sure ways about how to exploit such themes until I've done an awful lot of trying out different approaches, rejecting them one by one until I find the perfect idea. In fact, treasure is one of those ideas floating in my brain at the moment, it's been stored away for a couple of years now but I still haven't come up with a way to really exploit it yet. The stimulus for the treasure theme was going into schools and reading a book called *'Mrs Pirate'*. Whenever we get to the page with the treasure, there's always an intake of breath and the children – they just adore treasure. I just keep noticing this. Here's the story: “When Mrs Pirate goes shopping... she buys an apple pie and a patch for her eye, a bar of soap and a telescope,” and so on. Then, “she buys some knickers and a vest and an old treasure chest”. Whenever I'm working with this book, they're always kind of thrilled by the treasure and they're really interested in it. I usually draw the pictures on a flip pad as it's a really small book and they're always keen that I draw the chest properly, with a lock and a key. This idea is definitely on my list of things that I want to get out of my system.

JE: I was wondering also whether you have in mind any sense of designing particular books for particular age groups when you write?

NS: No, I don't really. I guess what I'm looking for with my picture books is that they will actually work with quite a wide age group. I use the books I've mentioned with children right up to age 11. I think they enjoy them at a different level. For example, *'Shark in the Park'* – it works as a rhyming story, he thinks he sees a shark and every time it turns out to be something benign. Hopefully that kind of surprise thing works. You

don't know what it's going to be, then, the final picture is an image that amuses them (a man with an 'Elvis style' quiff of hair which points upwards - resembling the fin of a shark). They like the Elvis Presley picture. They're 'in' on the joke of the quiff. Hopefully, there's a slightly more grown-up sense of humour that goes through the books if you want it, which helps to interest older children. It's there even in the 'Read Me' books which were originally marketed as Toddler Books for Sainsbury's supermarkets. But, I've

beyond what I'd expected. It kind of ties in with my definition of creativity with a book. It's when it triggers something else and it can be anything. It can be just daydreaming or musing on the lives of the characters outside of the story - which is something I do a lot of the time, or it can be much more specific and ambitious than that. Making up your own rhyming stories and creating your own flap books, which I again see a lot of when I go into schools.



JE: I notice also that with a lot of your books you seem to work collaboratively with someone. I'm interested in how that process operates?

NS: Well, it tends to be that I just get sent texts, then am left to get on with it very freely. The writer usually knows my work already, so they know they're not going to get any pastel shades and - well, the black line is very important. I've almost never done a

book without it. I really am hooked on drawing a black line. It kind of goes back to how I drew as a child. I was a great user of black felt-tipped pens, always drawing with a black felt-tipped pen and then colouring in the drawing, it kind of ties in with doing cartoons and comic strips. Also, the (19)60's graphic images which I really loved as a child - the very kind of clean bold images that tended to have a black line to them.

actually had a lot of feedback from schools. One school in particular, in Leeds - I go goosebumpy in thinking about it - but they got so much work out of it. They were 6-7 year olds with really quite a lot of reading problems, and they did a most fantastic assembly using all these stories. They made up their own versions, continuing the really simple rhymes, like the book: 'Smart Aunties'. In it I had people like, "Aunty Molly had a brolly". The children acted this all out and they added their own aunties and really pushed the story. So, it was really fantastic! In fact, I think that using adult characters was quite good for extending the age range of the books a bit.

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JE: I'd like to ask about creativity. I'm curious to know if you've had any unexpected responses from children?

NS: The example I gave before of the assembly - that's the most exciting thing - when it goes

JE: So you work by doing line drawings in pen first?

NS: I do pencil 'roughs' and I just keep on re-drawing the roughs, re-drawing, re-drawing until I get a pretty finished rough which I send to the publisher. It's the line that I'm hooked on - the process I love most is doing the line drawings. Working on it and getting to my final rough. Then, when it comes to the artwork, I like drawing the black line. Colouring is not my favourite thing.



It tells you precisely, you can decipher it completely, it's very direct, just using the black line – it's so, so expressive.

JE: This links to my next question really. I'm curious as to whether you're conscious of any elements of your work that seem to particularly appeal to boys. Can you pick out anything particularly?

NS: I try to make my books appeal to both genders. I do think about that because a lot of the characters are girl characters, like Daisy in 'Eat your Peas' is a female character. I've just been working on a Daisy book called '006 and a Bit' in which Daisy becomes a spy. In fact, I've had to think a lot about how to make it

JE: I'm astonished at that. I can see so much colour in your work, so I assumed that would be the overriding element for you.

NS: It doesn't give me the same satisfaction as thinking about getting the character and drawing the line. It's also quite arduous getting the colours to balance throughout the book. When I'm drawing I feel I'm having more fun, when it's just me and a pencil, but when it comes to the colour there are so many other decisions that have got to be taken into account, that it can become quite complex. The thing about the drawing is that sometimes you go back to the joy of drawing as a child. You're thinking: "Oh, I wonder what this character will be having for tea or what kind of house they live in". It's that really nice strand of creativity, whereas when I'm colouring I'm being very objective and just thinking this grey has got to be light enough to work with the blue, it is creative still, but there's not the same kind of fantasy element in it. As a child I loved Heath Robinson's drawings. The lines are all just right. Every line is just right.

balanced. She gets involved in James Bond type things. Recently, I've been trying to make some decisions about objects that I'm using on the end papers (the inside front and back covers). In the story she uses a hairdryer as a zap gun, a perfume bottle as invisible ink, a hairbrush as a secret telephone. When you know the story then they all make sense, but I thought, I can't use these on the end papers because it makes it look too feminine, on the other hand, I can't use the helicopter and some of the other James Bond images because then it'll look too masculine. So, in the end, I've just used a repeat silhouette of Daisy that seems to have the right neutrality. That seemed to be mid-way! Similarly with colour, it really does boil down to the pink and blue thing a lot. Pink, rather than the blue thing perhaps. I love pink and I use it a lot, but I do get discouraged by publishers from using too much on covers. Although, *Ketchup on your Cornflakes?* has a bright pink cover, and has been very successful with both genders. As far as I'm aware, it's never put off boys from reading it at all. It's now going to have a blue cover in a new edition, so it'll be interesting to see if it suddenly makes

a noticeable difference. But I think that what balances my use of pink here is the strong black line which I've used. The black line is something which maybe makes it less feminine. I think that using the black line helps my illustrations work for boys. There's definitely a sort of nod to comics and action strips as well, also in the lettering. I nearly always do the lettering on the covers and I think that ties in with comic strips and that kind of thing too. A lot of my work is described as 'cartoony' which I don't mind and I think 'cartoon' is okay with boys, it doesn't put them off.

JE: My next point is related to this. I wanted to ask about your choice of storyline- the risk-taking in your language seems to provoke so many possibilities – do you see this as a part of your style?

NS: You mean, the sort of anarchy?

JE: Yes, in a sense.

NS: Well, I suppose with the flap books that I've done, for example: *Nick Sharratt's Big Book of Crazy Mix-ups* and *Don't Put Your Finger In the Jelly, Nelly!* What is key is the potential anarchy of these books. I loved doing a book called *Once upon a Time*, where you mix up the elements of the pictures so the princess can dream about marrying a prince if you like or she can dream about marrying a clown, a computer, a duck, a caravan etc. I suppose I really like the books where you can be completely crazy if you want to - anarchic. Where you're in control of it and you can do what you like with it. This book, 'Pirate Pete' for example, the child I'd love to share this with would be the one who took a picture from one page and put it at the front - to mix the whole thing up completely! That's what you're supposed to do, to take all the objects and really mix them up. The risk-taking books are risky in that the risk is that the children might not actually 'get it'. The risk is really that they will just understand it conventionally. But, in my experience, they seem to be quickly 'in' on the joke and that seems to give them a certain pleasure in that they're in control of it and can play around with it. With these books you don't even have to read them from the front of the book only. You can work from the back to the front if you want- there's no restriction at all and that helps create a feeling of being in control.

JE: Time (and space!) seems to be disappearing I'm afraid. So, can I ask you one final question, which really you've already touched on a number of times in our talk and I'd like to return to now. Can I ask what creativity means to you? Can you possibly sum it up?

NS: For me, I think it's when a book is a catalyst for the child thinking and discovering other things beyond the straightforward reading of the book, where the child's imagination or curiosity is really worked.

JE: Thank you Nick for talking about your work so – creatively! ■

Picture Books in the interview

Gray, Kes & Sharratt, Nick (2000) *Eat Your Peas* London, UK: Red Fox, Random House.

Gray, Kes & Sharratt, Nick (2004) *You Do!* UK: Red Fox.

Sharratt, Nick (1993) *Don't put your finger in the jelly, Nelly!* London: André Deutsch.

Sharratt, Nick (1996) *Nick Sharratt's Big Book of Crazy Mix-ups* London, UK: Scholastic

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Sharratt, Nick (2000) *Smart Aunties* London, UK: Read Me Series, Walker Books.

Sharratt, Nick (2000) *Mrs Pirate* London, UK: Read Me Series, Walker Books.

Sharratt, Nick (2002) *Once upon a Time* London, UK: Walker Books.

Sharratt, Nick (2002) *Shark in the Park* London, UK: Random House.

Sharratt, Nick (2003) *Pirate Pete* London, UK: Walker Books.

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