

Interview to Quentin Blake

By Carolina D'angelo

How did you come to illustrate and then to write books for children?

I started like Collodi, I drew for humorous magazines.

I drew for Punch and I drew for other magazines starting in the 50s, but in the 60s mainly.

Then, I trained as a teacher and I read English literature at university. And as I trained to be a teacher I was interested in children from that point of view.

The main attraction for me was to have a book all on your own, without other things as you get in a newspaper. So, I thought... I wonder if I could do a children's book...

So I asked a good friend of mine, called John Yeoman who had done some books with me, and I said: "*Could you write a children's book?*" And he did.

And that's how I started.

It was partly because I wanted a book all to myself and also I like humour. But the kind of humour that I like is humour that is in the drawings and not in the words underneath. So I didn't want to do jokes, I wanted to do pictures that were humorous. And I thought perhaps children will like this sense of humour, so I did some books. And children did like them!

Then I gradually did more and more... I mean, the first year I did one. And next year I did two and so on... until I got going.

That's how I started.

And to write?

The first book I wrote, I mean, I only write for picture books, that means I write very short books. I did it because nobody would ask me to do colour pictures!

Because the first books I did were black and white. And people said "*Oh you only do black and white books*". But I can do colour as well! I first did it for magazines but they didn't believe me!

So I thought I must do a book which has to be in colour. And I'll write the words myself.

It was called Patrick. It was about a young who has a magic violin and plays with things change colour. So it has to be in colour. And then I did one or two more.

Actually I did one called Angelo, which was place in Italy, published in 1970. It is about the Commedia Dell' Arte. And it takes place in Italy, and I hadn't been to Italy, I have been since, but I hadn't been then.

Did you buy some tourist guides or something?

Oh yes, and I got it from paintings by Tiepolo. And people like that.

I thought "*What do the trees look like in Italy?*" And I copied the paintings and photos of Italy. And when I went to Italy later and it wasn't quite like that!

So then I slowly started doing things.

And then in 1976 or something like that, because I was doing picture books and the publisher who was publishing my picture books wanted to do a picture books by Roald Dahl. And I did that.

That was my introduction to him.

What did you draw first, The Enormous Crocodile, right?

Yeah, that's right.

That was the first one I did, and it was because he had never done a picture book before, he had done a sort of novels.

They wanted a book with a lot of pictures and so I did that.

So your collaboration with Dahl started more because of an editor's choice...

Yes that's right. He is a very good editor, he's a man called Tom Maschler, who was publishing Dahl and he was publishing me.

But I think they tried other people as well. Because they asked for some sample drawings. And, of course, I did it. But I didn't know I was going to do all the rest of his books!

So after that, I just thought...I was doing that one! And then, they did The Twits...

And then, we sort of became a habit...

We got to know each other and became proper collaborators!

When you illustrate a story, do you have to stick to the written text, or can you express freely your own art?

Well, it's hard to describe.

I think I don't want to disagree with the story. I want to maybe expand it a little bit, to open it up a bit. So if it's a simple thing like in The Enormous Crocodile, you want to see what that crocodile looks like, and you want it to look not just funny. I mean no crocodile looks friendly. But Dahl wanted it to be to really look evil and, so I tried to draw it in that way.

So that when you are reading about it and it says that it played nasty tricks, you want to be able to look at the picture at the same time and see that there really is that kind of person.

What happens if you draw a character different from how the writer had previously imagined it?

What I do is I try and do drawings. And I do rough drawings, I do some drawings of the characters and then I like to speak to the author about it if I can.

I always did that with Roald Dahl. We would say, "*I didn't imagine it quite like that*".

I really read it very carefully so that I try to get that kind of thing, but I can remember doing one book where it didn't...which was...Matilda.

When I showed Dahl my drawings, he said "*Oh I imagined her much thinner than that not quite like that, but it works!*".

I always tried to show my pictures to the author. I think it's important. In a sense that the text is the guidebook really for the drawings.

So you didn't work independently from the author, was it more or less a sort of collaboration?

Yes, what I do it is.

I think would be right, maybe it's a rough version of it and then I ask the author about it.

And if you try to respect the words, than generally it's all right. Sometimes you have to change things a little.

So you should be very easy-going in order to adapt your pictures to the author's will...

Well, I prefer that really. And there are still plenty of things which you can do...

And if you have someone who is good at writing books like that, it's always full of things to draw.

It's not a problem.

And sometimes there are too many almost.

And how did you find yourself in drawing evil characters? Because I think it's a hard task...

I think so too!

Well that is interesting to me, because in my own books when I'm writing a picture book I probably wouldn't make somebody as horrible as that. But in a way that is so what's interesting because, I thought, I wouldn't do this.

So you have to make an effort to be these people. Because it's like being a character in a play, I think. And if you have to act the part of someone who is horrible, you have to find something horrible in yourself. Somewhere...

Do you think of someone you know, you've met or...

Oh no it's an invented person.

They are not based on real people. You just have to imagine them.

I asked you this, because although your characters look incredibly horrible, they conserve at the same time human features. And I think, that's why the story could take place in real life...

Yes that's right!

And that's what happened with that horrible teacher in Matilda. She was too horrible.

We both agreed that she was. Roald Dahl said, "*It's too horrible, it couldn't exist a kind of creature like her!*" And it's just become a caricature whereas it won't be a caricature; but a caricature of someone who could exist.

Like Polissena del Porcello for example.

How did you choose to work with the Italian author Bianca Pitzorno?

I didn't; they chose me. It was the editor of Mondadori...I think, they published Roald Dahl or they published books from Gallimard, in France.

I think Mondadori knew me from Dahl translation by Gallimard, so the editor wrote me and asked, "*Would you like to do illustration for Bianca Pitzorno's book?*"

The first book I illustrated was about The Tree House (La casa sull'albero).

Did you read the whole story or did you have abstracts translated into English?

I couldn't read any of them.

They sent me a sort of synopsis. A sort of short version about what was happening.

And then the editor, I'm not sure whether the editor or the author it self, sent a list of pictures that they would like me to illustrate.

Why didn't they give you a translation of the books?

Well, that's the problem.

I would much rather have the translation and find if I did a good job!

Because what I do, if I'm doing a book in English, is to look through it and find the good bits.

For readers used to Dahl's books that are full of illustrations, in Pitzorno's books we fell something missing...

It was the same for Roald Dahl.

He liked to have drawings, because his books are really for children of age 8 or 9.

He liked pictures. And when I did The BFG, it was Dahl's first long book that I have done, the publisher said "*Can you do a dozen pictures or something like that?*".

Because Dahl wasn't used to it either, and I did a dozen pictures, the book was at the printers. And when Dahl saw this, (I mean he saw some pictures which he said were all right but they were just samples...) he was enraged!

"I want a lot of pictures!" he screamed. They had to stop printing it, and put the whole thing back by 6 months. And I started again. I did a lot of pictures.

In Matilda, I think, there are 100 pictures! And he really liked that. Dahl said *"100!!"* Because he thought it was getting a good value.

When you drew the character of *BFG* were you inspired by Dahl figure? I find it resembles him a lot?

It does rather, yes.

Some people said I modelled BFG on Dahl, but I didn't quite. No BFG didn't actually look quite like Dahl. I mean there is something in common, but his face is not the same of Dahl.

It's the fact that he is tall and he's got that way of walking, more than anything.

In my opinion when Dahl wrote The BFG he thought of himself. The BFG seems to behave as Dahl behaves regarding childhood... Maybe Dahl saw himself like a BFG: what do you think?

I think that's right.

I didn't realise that to begin with, and because I had to do more work, I sort of come to realise that it was very close. And the little girl Sophie, she was his granddaughter.

Talking about your works for Dahl and for Pitzorno: do you find Italian childhood different from English childhood?

Of course it's different because I was imagining Italy. I think that first book The House Tree (La casa sull'albero) is quite exaggerated; but not as much as Roald Dahl's.

When I drew Italian books (Pitzorno's) I found they were extraordinary adventures, but more like real life. They are very rich in characters like Dahl's but are rather a special version of real life.

What do you think children like most about illustrations?

I don't know really, but I know it's a hard question.

It's a hard question because I am not them. But if you ask children, they can't tell you either, because they haven't got that kind of control of language.

With my pictures, I think children like the fact that it looks like something happening. I mean, it is a moment when something is happening and it's not fixed.

Now there are other kind of pictures, which I think they also like, where there are lots of details: you could see the furniture, what the trees look like... That's a different kind of reward. Because one picture is very different from another. Whereas in mine I don't put very much about the background in. I just put the bits that you need, I put details in, that you need.

But it's like... It's a moment when something is just happening so that, it says: the girl on a bike, a guy rushing down the street or somebody just opening the door. It's dramatic, I think, I don't put in more drawing that is needed to tell the story. And it's very like rather acting in a way, so that you dramatize it.

And the other thing about it is that, because it looks simple, it's not threatening you. And you feel you could do it almost. Children can't actually do, but they feel as they could almost do the same illustrations of mine; or as though that they have already done it someday. That's becomes very close to them in both ways.

I didn't do that on purpose, that's the way I draw. And I think I was lucky, that children felt like that about it. Because when I started to do it, people thought it looked careless, so it wasn't quite suitable for children. Whereas of course it looks careless, but it isn't careless.

I mean it's quite carefully done! There is a lot of planning that goes into making it! You have to learn first of all what those characters are like, so each time you draw them they look like the same person. So that's one thing you have to sort of rehearse that part of it, before you actually do.

I think it must be difficult to bring humour to the story with the use of illustrations, that's the thing I personally enjoy most about your pictures: the great sense of humour!

I don't know how I do it...

I think it has something to do about the way you see things.

I think all these books without your drawings wouldn't have been the same.

I hope that's true.

People say to me that, when they read them as a child they remembered the drawings as much as the writing, and in that way it's a good collaboration (with Dahl).

I wouldn't have thought of a lot of those things, but I can draw them if I read the writer's books – Roald Dahl's books, or somebody else's books, Bianca Pitzorno's books. I like drawing, I never thought of that.

It's in that Polissena del Porcello, there are lovely things there, because I like Commedia Dell'Arte, but there are things there I wouldn't have thought of. So it's a pleasure, a pleasure, to draw.

Do you personally agree with the idea that children need to take revenge against grown-ups?

No. Sometimes maybe. But not really...

So did you have a nice childhood?

Yes.

So far what is your favourite book you have illustrated?

It's hard to say because I like them all.

But I like The Clown.

Because there are no words in there. I think it's very interesting to have a book with only illustrations.