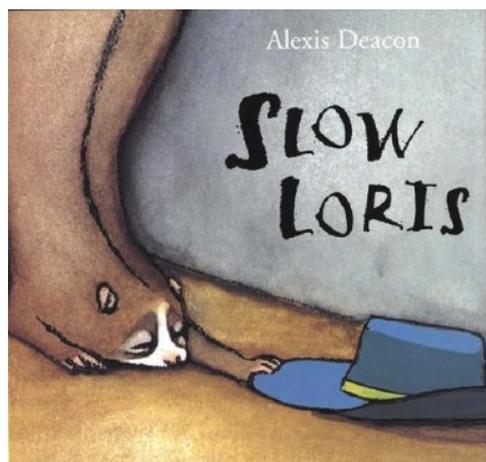
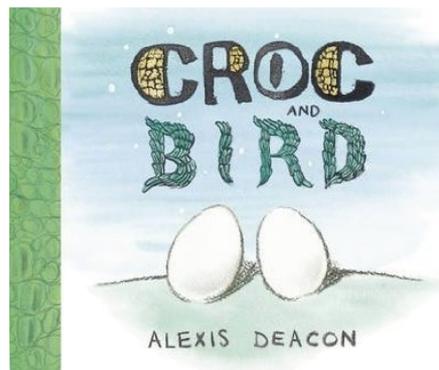


Author Interview with writer and illustrator Alexis Deacon

Jo Bowers, Senior Lecturer in Primary Education, Cardiff Metropolitan University.

I first came across Alexis Deacon as a picture book author and illustrator when I set up a book discussion with a group of my PGCE primary trainee teachers to discuss the United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA) shortlisted category of book for 3-6 year olds as part of the student shadowing scheme that UKLA run. The book was *Croc and Bird*, which is a beautifully illustrated book and a very lovely story about a bird and a crocodile growing up together, teaching each other how to sing, how to build a nest, how to lie like logs in the water, and climb and dance. Until they meet other crocodiles and birds they think they are brothers. This then sees them saying goodbye to each other to join the other crocodiles and birds. The book ends with the two creatures seeking each other out again when they find they don't fit in with the groups they left each other for. We all loved the book in the discussion group not just for the story but for the potential to talk about all sorts of things: differences, similarities, learning from each other and others to name but a few.



I have since acquainted myself with as many of Alexis Deacon's books as I can and I have loved *everyone* I have read. Although each book is different, sometimes in illustration technique and story, many of Alexis' picture books explore similar themes of friendships, feeling like an outsider and being different. This appeals to me as a teacher who loves to use picture books to prompt discussion and questions with children. I love *Beegu* which is a story about a little creature in a spacecraft left stranded on earth and so is lost and trying to find friends. *Slow Loris* is about an animal in the Zoo that everyone finds boring until they get to know about his secret and *While You Are Sleeping* is about a new toy being accepted within the group of existing toys who show him how they take care of the child who they live with while he is sleeping. I can also highly recommend Alexis latest

publications, *Soonchild*, in collaboration with Russell Hoban and his beautifully retelling and illustration of Oscar Wilde's, *The Selfish Giant*.

Quite rightly so, since graduating from the University of Brighton in 2001 where he studied Illustration, Alexis had been shortlisted for many awards. He was chosen for the Blue Peter Award for *Slow Loris*, the Kate Greenaway Medal for *Beegu*, Best Illustrated Children's Books Award in *The New York Times* and in 2008 was chosen by Booktrust as one of the ten Best New Illustrators. You only have to read his blog <http://alexisdeacon.blogspot.co.uk/> to see that illustration is something Alexis loves to do, with sketchbooks kept since he was a small child. I had quite a few questions to ask Alexis so having requested an interview he has replied below which I am sure you will enjoy as much as I have. You can also find out what Alexis' favourite five children's books on the English Association website.

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Where did your love of drawing start?

Along with many, many other children I have drawn since before I can remember. My love of drawing really also began when I was very small. I was captivated by the power that drawing has to give a physical form to the imagination. I don't feel in any way unique for loving drawing like this. In fact, as I visit schools now, I am struck by how many children love to draw. It is often the majority of the class with only one or two who don't want to. Perhaps the question ought to be, 'why didn't you stop drawing?' That is certainly harder to answer and I'm not sure that I altogether understand myself. Perhaps a clue can be found in the way I hear children talk about drawing when they don't want to do it. They will say one of two things: 'I'm not good at it,' or, 'I don't know what to draw.' I find both of these answers really sad because to my eye they are almost invariably false. For some reason the child will have gotten it into their heads that they just can't do it. I can relate to this because when I was small it is exactly how I felt about learning the recorder! I'll bet my strangled squeaking sounded no worse than any of the others but for some reason I felt totally at sea with it.

Rightly or wrongly however, I believed that drawing was something I was good at and I never lacked for nonsense in my head to pour out onto the page.

Who or what provided you with inspiration when you were young?

My mum and Dad played an excellent version of good cop, bad cop with my drawings. My mum thought that everything was great; my dad thought that there was always room for improvement!

But they were both up for looking at things whenever I wanted to show them my pictures and very encouraging towards me.

My real inspiration was and still is all the fantastic stories and characters that make up the world of human imagination. I love stories! The stranger and more fantastic the better! One of my favourite films when I was a boy was David Lynch's 'Dune'. The projectionist got the reels muddled and we watched it in the wrong order. It was one of the most confusing, intense and dream-like experiences of my six year old life.

How did you end up becoming a children's illustrator?

I love to draw and tell stories. I have done it compulsively throughout my life as I have said. I was looking for some role in life that would let me carry on doing these things. When I got into a correspondence with a publisher at art college (after I'd sent them a story called, 'The Monster Zoo', which they found interesting though they described it as horrifying and Kafka-esque!) I kept sending them story after story. Eventually I sent them one called, 'Slow Loris', which they liked enough to offer me a contract. I like to think that adults still secretly want to be able to read stories with pictures but the market is mostly aimed at children. So far that is where I have worked the most.

Also I think I didn't grow up so much myself.

Did the writing come before the illustration or vice versa?

I began as an illustrator. That's what I did my degree in and that is where my passion is. I don't like picture making for its own sake though. I like it for its capacity to tell stories. Whilst drawing is my first language I get a similar joy from writing stories, speaking them, acting them out or even playing narrative games. When I am creating a new story I will switch between writing and drawing throughout.

What books did you particularly love as a child? And why?

I especially loved comic books when I was growing up. Tintin, Asterix, The Beano, The Dandy, Dick Tracy, Judge Dredd and Rogue Trooper from 2000AD, I could go on... I would get totally lost in all of them. They are a like a super-concentrated version of everything I am interested in. If you are a story junkie who loves drawing then it shouldn't be much of a surprise that you find comics fascinating.

What was your dream as a child?

Oh, I didn't just have one dream! No-one does. I wanted to do all of these amazing things that were happening in the stories I loved. Failing that I wanted to make stories about amazing things for other people to love!

Croc and Bird was recently shortlisted by the United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA) for their 3-6 years picture book award category. I loved it as did my student book award discussion group. It

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explores the lovely friendship between a very young bird and equally young crocodile and story explores the feelings and friendships of these two characters. Are feelings and friendships themes that you are drawn to as a writer or do you see the themes of your work as different ones to this? No, it is true that friendship and family are central themes in my work. I believe that for a story to work well the author needs to be emotionally invested in it. I find that these themes really resonate with me. I also tend to prefer stories where the character's emotional responses drive the plot.

One of your most recent projects is illustrating a retelling of The Selfish Giant. Can you tell us a little about how that came about and what it was like working on this?

I was offered a choice of classic texts by Random House a few years back and 'The Selfish Giant' jumped out because of all the great images that were implied by the text. Some of the others, such as 'The Little Fir Tree' and 'The Happy Prince', whilst being great stories, had very static central characters and little action to draw. 'The Selfish Giant' presented a huge challenge because of the different scales involved and also because of the need to show the changing seasons clearly. The text itself was a challenge too. I had to fit it into a thirty two page picture book format. In order to tell the story well I felt I had to omit the original ending with the death of the Giant and the infant Christ. I knew this might upset people but I felt that in order to tell that story well in this format I just couldn't keep it in. I recently talked about his dilemma on my blog and I'll repeat some of what I said there. Even without the ending I found I had to leave out several spreads I would have liked to include were there more room. The story of the Giant's quest to find the boy again, of the boy's eventual return and the Giant's death and ascent to Paradise felt like a whole new tale and I thought it would have needed many more pages to do it justice. In my abridgement and illustration of this story I focus on the character of the Giant. I felt his journey toward redemption was complete when he gave up his garden to the children. It seemed to me that being able to share the garden is a reward in itself and he doesn't need the further reward of Paradise later on. In fact it has always bothered me that it is possible to see right action in this life as merely an investment in hope of getting something back in the future. Last and not least, I found the explicitly Christian nature of the original ending made it more difficult for me to understand what is in fact an excellent text on one of the great strengths of Christian morality, namely faith in the possibility of redemption. I feel that this is a story that has relevance to all faiths as well as to no faith at all. It is about death and rebirth, about empathy and love, prejudice and fear, about holding on and letting go and about learning to trust in one another. I feel that those are themes which have meaning for all of us and are not the exclusive province of a single doctrine.

Can you share with us what are you working on at the moment?

I have just finished a comic book version of 'Jim's Lion' by Russell Hoban. It was huge fun to do and I think that, with the help of Ben Norland, my designer at Walker Books, we have made something really special. I hope people will agree when it comes out next year!

Right now I am writing a graphic novel about Mr Punch's second family. It is already over a hundred pages long so it will be quite a different beast from anything I have done before.

I have also just made another picture book with my friend Viviane Schwarz (we previously collaborated on 'A Place to Call Home' and 'Cheese Belongs to You'). Once again, I am writing and she is illustrating. It is called 'I am Henry Finch' and is about a finch who becomes self-aware. That might make it out by next year too. We shall see!

As far as my own picture books go, the next one will probably be 'The Children of Babooda' but that is in its early stages so we won't see that on shelves for a while...

When starting a new picture book do you follow a similar process each time? And if so, can you give a brief outline?

Not initially I didn't. Nowadays I will spend a long time working on the dummy, keeping the drawings as rough and ready as possible so I am still looking forward to making them into artwork when the time comes but making sure that the narrative is clear and all the important information is coming across. Also I don't waste time on stories that don't have an ending yet! As soon as I think I know the ending I will invest time developing the story. I learned that one the hard way!

I've noticed that in the last year or so you are a very committed blogger. Your blog is beautiful and very detailed, sharing your creative process both visually and in your narrative/ story. Can

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you share how the experience of blogging supports you as a writer and illustrator? Engages with your audience?

Having a blog has been brilliant. The process of making books has so much to it that no-one ever sees. Do you know that feeling you get when you are watching or reading something really funny but you are on your own so there is no-one to share the joke with? A lot of life as an author or illustrator can feel that way. Having a blog is a really great way of sharing those moments without having to go through the firewall of a million publishing meetings. It is also a great way of finding like minded people the world over. Being a children's book nerd is kind of a niche interest so you have to cast your net quite wide to find many of us.

What is the best thing about being a writer and illustrator for children?

Being the master of your own time. Sharing the things that you love with others.

What is the hardest thing about being a writer and illustrator for children?

Being alone in a box for days on end.

If you had not become an author/illustrator, what other career might you have chosen?

I would like to do anything that involves telling stories. Film director? Actor? Tour Guide? Used car salesman?

Oh, and I love toys so perhaps I could have been a toy maker? Or ran a toy shop?

If they're still looking for volunteers for the one-way trip to Mars I'll put my hand up.

Ah yes, and for that matter if anyone is reading this and would like to give me a job on the new Star Wars films then do get in touch!

Can you think of any questions you'd like to be asked as an author and illustrator? If yes, what are they and how would you answer?

I strongly share the belief expressed in Bruno Bettelheim's 'The Uses of Enchantment', that stories for children should be a safe space for them to explore the challenges and fears that they might face in life. I feel there is a tendency to try and sanitise children's stories at the moment by taking out the dangerous and the frightening things. In my view not only does this make the stories themselves poorer but it robs children of something that can really help them. Bruno Bettelheim himself was a survivor of Dachau and Buchenwald so he knew what he was talking about when he spoke of facing fears. I also believe very strongly that stories can teach us empathy and have the power to prevent some of these terrible things from happening in the first place. How many awful things have happened throughout our history because people had no conception of the horror they were inflicting on others?

References:

Slow Loris (Red Fox)

Beegu (Red Fox)

While You Are Sleeping (Red Fox)

Jitterbug Jam: A Monster Tale by Barbara Jean Hicks (Red Fox)

A Place to Call Home by Viviane Schwarz (Walker Books)

Croc and Bird (Random House Children's Books)

Soonchild by Russell Hoban (Walker Books)

Websites:

<http://alexisdeacon.blogspot.co.uk/>