

Interview with Allan Drummond:

The Role of the Classroom in Picturebooks

by Vassiliki Tzomaka

*Allan Drummond is an award-winning British author and illustrator of children's nonfiction picturebooks known for their lively illustrations and creative narratives that bring to life historical stories; popular titles include *The Willow Pattern Story* (1995), *Casey Jones* (2001), and *Tin Lizzie* (2008). He has taught illustration in universities and art schools in the United Kingdom and the United States, holding the position of chair of the Illustration Department at the Savannah College of Art and Design in Georgia, USA, from 2004 to 2014. He has been a senior lecturer in illustration at the Cambridge School of Art since his return to the UK. Allan's more recent books have turned his focus to real-life stories from around the globe that have at their core the subjects of sustainability and renewable sources of energy. *Energy Island* (2015) introduces the concept of energy independence principally through wind power by using the residents of the island of Samsø in Denmark as an example, who over the course of ten years managed to become energy independent and substantially reduce their carbon emissions. *Green City* (2016) addresses the power of community spirit in over-coming devastation and highlights the importance of sustainability using as an example the rebuilding of Greensburg in Kansas, USA, after a catastrophic EF5 tornado destroyed 95 percent of the city in 2007. In a similar way, *Pedal Power* (2016) brings to light the events within the Dutch community that inspired prioritizing the use of bicycles in Amsterdam and led to the city's worldwide recognition as an example of sustainable transportation. The success of Allan's books is reflected not only in large sales and a number of international awards but in their inclusion in a number of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) programs across the United States. As Allan prepares for the publication of the fourth title in his series, he talks to us about the significant role of the classroom, a recurring theme in his books, and explains the art of forming a narrative and telling a story.*

What first inspired you to create children's picturebooks?

I first found my way into picturebooks by writing, illustrating, and, more crucially, designing *The Willow Pattern Story* in 1990. I was very excited about making this book as I wanted to express my fascination for the blue-and-white Chinese-style English decorative pattern known as Willow Pattern, and my aim was to see how far I could stretch my writing, illustration, and design skills. The outcome was a book that literally leads the reader on a journey down into a teacup and from there into a love story.

What brought the classroom setting to your attention?

After *The Willow Pattern Story* was published, I found myself being invited to schools all over the UK, particularly during Book Week. For these special days, I created workshops that included drawing, collage, and performance activities for the children. Being involved in these gave me the opportunity to observe primary school teachers while they were actually teaching, and I noticed how powerful a simple question put to a class could be. This observation stayed with me. Now, if a teacher appears in any of my books, they often ask a big, important question, and often the narrative flows from this question.

How does the narrative of your books evolve?

I don't usually think in terms of a story or narrative first. I think of words and pictures simultaneously, very much like a graphic designer. I envisage them together and I work their relationship out in sketches, while at the same time thinking about scale and composition on the page. Picturebooks are all about immediate communication, so I am always thinking about the reader and excitement of the reveal when a page is turned and the reader sees the words and pictures for the very first time. I only start resolving a narrative once I have created word-picture combinations that intrigue me. From then on, making the narrative is a puzzle that I keep working on until I solve the problem.

Does the way the narrative evolves change from book to book?

Very much so. I like to think that I am now only just getting to grips with what is possible in a picturebook. I still believe that anything is possible and that there is so much more to discover. At the moment, I keep paring down, and then paring down again. I am fascinated at what can be left out. That applies to the words as much as the pictures. I like to ask myself, where do picturebooks begin, and where do they end? The world inside a book is certainly not bounded by the trimmed edges of the pages. The outer limits of a picturebook lie somewhere in the creator's imagination and in the reader's imagination.

Can you tell us about the role of the classroom setting in your books?

My first book on sustainability was based on the Danish island of Samsø. It is about a real community, so there was a strong element of reportage in my research process. In order to build a narrative that would take the reader through all the aspects of the story, I found that I needed to bring some imagination into play. As the Energy Independence project was actually led by a schoolteacher, Soren Hermansen, I decided to include this fact in the story. Having the children asking or answering questions was the best way to make the facts accessible. By combining this idea with other picturebook techniques, I was able to take the reader around the island and discuss sustainable power along the way.

The second book of the series, *Green City*, gave me the opportunity to address the classroom setting from a new perspective. Here, because I wanted to show how the school was rebuilt, I included the temporary trailer classroom and depicted the students walking from this new class-room setting to the site of the new school construction site. It is evident that sustainable building techniques were actually taking place in front of the students. When at the end of the story, in the final pages of the book, I depict the students in the new classrooms, I had the opportunity to show (through text and speech bubbles) that students had gained knowledge in the classroom. This is, I believe, a very powerful message to send to young pupils. As well as the messages of sustainability, it shows that learning can take place even when resources are limited.

In my new book, *Solar Story*, the classroom was chosen as a starting point very deliberately as this is how my research into this story started. When I visited Morocco to see for myself the world's largest solar power plant, which is near Ouazarzate, a very sunny place on the edge of the Sahara, the Moroccan energy agency took me on a tour of the area. On the tour, we stopped to visit a school that was just five kilometers away from the plant. It was tiny and quite impoverished. I was quite astounded that even though the school was situated right next to a multi-billion-dollar infrastructure project, the students in the village school

did not have access to the Internet. For me, this raised lots of questions. And so, for my book, I put these questions into the mouths of the students as the story begins. You use your books in virtual readings with children in classrooms from all over the world. How do the children react to the stories? Skyping across countries and continents is one of the most satisfying things to do, particularly when the subject of my current books is sustain-ability. When you're Skyping with a class, it's hard to tell what impact you are having during the communication. The students get terribly excited and it takes a while for things to calm down. Sometimes things never calm down! However, after my readings I usually get a letter, or even a bunch of letters, some with drawings and plenty with all sorts of comments and ideas. One of the best things that happened was when a school actually turned my Energy Island story into a musical production. It's exciting to see this issue being studied head-on by youngsters all over the world. It's hard for them to grasp the global aspect, so an international approach and communication from a different continent helps students to see that some issues are truly world-scale. Another school built a large Green City model in their classroom.

In the past, you have used a number of techniques for your illustrations. What led you to choose the particular illustration style you have used for these books?

For me, it's all about energy and life. Quentin Blake was my tutor at the Royal College of Art, and I remember him critiquing a drawing I had made of some flowers. I recall him saying that flowers should always be about life and energy. And that is what I am trying to depict all the time. That, essentially, is my subject. The big question is how to keep that energy going from rough sketches to final art. For this, I do two things. First, like Quentin, I use a light box to trace and assemble drawings onto lightweight watercolor paper. This way, I can hold on to the spontaneity of the first marks I make. Second, I trust my first attempts. I have had to learn to do this and not to perfect things too much, so when I apply transparent watercolor and inks with brushes, and more important, with stencils, it allows me to place colored shapes in a slightly misregistered way. I am not worried about keeping within the lines as spontaneity has energy that cannot be imitated. Spontaneity is something that as an educator I find can be difficult to teach because in a final illustration, like in acting or playing music, a lot of rehearsing is necessary before the actual performance takes place. It all has to look effortless.

In your recent books, there is a distinct design element that allows the reader to focus on the story and the scientific information separately. What inspired this layout and how did it help your story?

The idea of using sidebars was arrived at through dialogue with my editors at the time, Frances Foster and Janine O'Malley at Frances Foster Books (now Macmillan). I had proposed sidebars for the back jackets of the books to help differentiate one from the other. In my original dummy book proposal, I had proposed many small vignette images to explain the science instead of sidebars. I wanted the science and other socioeconomic information to be embedded in the story at important moments. I think it shows respect for the reader and offers a deeper read while they are going along. We decided to appoint some environmental science advisors to work with me on producing the quite technical texts for the sidebars. As we perfected these, we realized that the sidebars helped the book to work and that we did not need the illustrations within the sidebars to support the text. The sidebars are now a feature of the books and I think very much appreciated by teachers

and librarians, given the substantial positive feedback I get about them. I think they are key to making an immediately accessible picturebook that also carries a deeper layer of detailed information. Students are able to get on and enjoy the main narrative, and then go back to the sidebars when they are ready to. I am quite excited by sidebars and can see lots of potential in them for my future books. Solar Story has fabulous bright-orange sidebars to support the story that I am thrilled with!

Are there any challenges in using children and the classroom in picturebooks?

Creating a picturebook spread filled with children is quite a challenge. I worked on one of the Solar Story spreads over and over again. I have six iterations that I rejected mainly because the children I drew just didn't look the right age. I felt that for the book to work, the students had to look about eight years old. Eventually I got there, but I don't know how! I think you have to just draw how you feel the kids will look if they are excited, which in turn will stir the same excitement in them about the subject. It's no good turning to reference except perhaps to get details of their clothes right for a subject like this.

What is the key message that you want your readers to take away with them after reading your books?

It is all about curiosity. I want my readers to know that these things are really happening to youngsters around the world. I want them to feel that they could be part of a solution to problems the future generations could face if larger changes in the way we live do not start taking place. All of my books in this series spring from my early recollections of the energy crisis back in the 1970s when oil prices shot up and the UK was forced into fuel rationing. Back then, I recall that we also had a paper shortage and a big drought. I loved the idea of saving energy, and as a child I was curious about seeing people install solar water heaters on their roofs of their houses. I remember seeing on TV that President Carter even put them on the roof of the White House! It seemed like an exciting time to me. I am certainly not an evangelist and I don't want to preach (I myself make mistakes all the time with our recycling bins), but I am still as curious as I was back then. At the moment, I am curious to see what books can achieve in the increasingly more digital world we live in. Let's see!

Do you think you will use the classroom setting in more of your books?

Yes, I most certainly do have plans to begin another book in a classroom setting, and I will soon be heading to South Australia to explore what is happening there. Who knows what I'll find and how the story will develop!

Works Cited

Drummond, Alan.

— Energy Island: How One Community Harnessed the Wind and Changed the World. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2015.

— Green City: How One Community Survived a Tornado and Rebuilt for a Sustainable Future. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2016.

— Pedal Power: How One Community Became the Bicycle Capital of the World. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2017.