The artists' artist: Children's illustrators

Five children's illustrators nominate their favourite living artist in their field

Interviews by Emine Saner

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Emily Gravett on Judith Kerr

I read The Tiger Who Came to Tea when I was a child and loved it. I remember being obsessed with the bit where the tiger came and drank all the water in the tap. I think it was the domesticity of it, that this person was at home and that this could actually happen. It was so matter-of-fact. Nothing really happens but it's still somehow magical.
Kerr keeps the text very simple, and the illustrations give you clues as to how you should read it. In her Mog books, you can look at Mog's face to see how shocked or dramatic the action is. He is just a funny cat, with a woebegone expression.

If you mention Mog or The Tiger Who Came to Tea to someone under 40, they just smile – and that's the reaction a children's book should give: it should provoke a gut feeling.

I can think of other illustrators who are technically better, but there's something about the simplicity and the whole package – the way the text and images fit together. It's charming.

*Emily Gravett's books include Wolves and Little Mouse's Big Book of Fears.*

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**Korky Paul on Brian Wildsmith**

Brian Wildsmith's work came out in the 1960s and he *changed picture books.* It was revolutionary stuff. One of his best books is *The Hare and the Tortoise.* He uses his own colours. He plays with scale, and his animals have characters: roosters strut their stuff, chickens are always eating, cats always sleeping.

What I like about his work is his wonderful use of white space; there are raggedy edges and extraordinary detail. He uses a mixture of media: watercolour, wash, then he works on top with chalk or pen. There is a lot of movement there.

My work is more spiky, but I love trying to create a fantasy world and to stylise it. Children's books allow artists of all kinds to explore their own vision, how they see the world, and that's what Wildsmith achieves so well. Exposing children to that teaches them that there are all sorts of ways of viewing the world.

*Korky Paul has created illustrations for books including the Winnie the Witch series.*

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**Helen Cooper on Lane Smith**

I first saw Lane Smith's work when I was a young illustrator at the
Bologna book fair. His book The Stinky Cheese Man and other Fairly Stupid Tales (text by Jon Scieszka) was funny and irreverent. It had a fabulous sense of colour, and what especially appealed was the texture: I have always loved layered, dappled surfaces, and Lane Smith uses collage to create wonderful, grungy effects.

His artwork is constantly innovative. His characters are striking, geometric in shape, and often staged on a flat plane like a theatre set. But it is the glorious design that marks out a Lane Smith book.

His wife, the designer Molly Leach, collaborates on every page. The adventurous type is an integral part of the art work; the appearance of the text shows you how to read the story out loud.

Lately, Smith’s approach has been more minimal. In his recent book, Grandpa Green, the colour is muted, with drawn outlines against white backgrounds. It's hard to say which is my favourite book. Perhaps Math Curse, with Scieszka; or Big Plans, with Bob Shea. Or maybe a book for older readers: The Very Persistent Gappers of Frip, with George Saunders.

Helen Cooper's books include the Baby Who Wouldn't Go to Bed and Pumpkin Soup.

**Lisbeth Zwerger on Klaus Ensikat**

I often feel that illustrators underestimate children. For some reason, pictures for children are supposed to be simple and colourful. Klaus Ensikat's illustrations do not fall into that category. They are very sophisticated.

This man can draw. His line work is absolutely exquisite; the plates are a little like engravings. He covers large areas with the fine, precise lines that give life to shadows, furniture, forests, clothes and soft fur. Those drawings are then washed over with fine watercolour, which gives his pictures a slightly melancholy mood. But his pictures are also very funny and touching, full of feeling and wisdom.

My favourite of his books is a collection of old German children's songs called Jeder Nach Seiner Art (To Each Their Own). The text is handwritten in beautiful old-fashioned calligraphy, and next to them
are tiny, perfect black-and-white drawings. Some of these songs about animals are really well known in the German-speaking world; a less brilliant illustrator would picture those texts as cheerful and superficial. But Ensikat has found totally new, surreal, romantic solutions. I keep buying his books in the hope that I will discover his secret.

*Lisbeth Zwerger's books include several Hans Christian Andersen and Brothers Grimm titles.*

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**David Roberts on John Burningham**

I recently found a book by John Burningham that instantly transported me back to my childhood. I never owned a copy of Mr Gumpy's Outing as a child, but I am sure I would have come across it in the library.

He can create the sense of a scorching hot summer's day simply by using a few yellow dots and dashes to represent the sun; you can really feel the heat.

His work seems so spontaneous – almost haphazard at times, with smudges, scratches and splodges. It doesn't seem to matter whether they were intended or happy mistakes: they all come together in these wonderful, atmospheric images.

You get the impression that he draws with whatever comes to hand. He builds the images with glorious blocks of colour that he then works into, with cross-hatching and scribbles of pencil and crayon. The results are full of movement and life.

In more recent years, he has used photography, worked over with paint and mixed with drawn characters, to make rich landscapes. I love the humour he gets into these pictures, the expressions he conveys with just a few lines.

I've learned a lot from looking at his books. I've definitely experimented more. I suppose they have left me feeling less afraid of that blank expanse of white paper when I start a picture.

*David Roberts is creator of the Dirty Bertie books, and has*
illustrated books for Julia Donaldson and Jacqueline Wilson.

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An illustration from Brian Wildsmith's Animal Gallery