Q&A with children’s author Oliver Jeffers

Beloved Irish-born children’s author Oliver Jeffers makes a quick stop in Canada this weekend with an appearance at Small Print Toronto’s sold-out Totsapalooza.

Quillblog spoke to Jeffers about the inspirations behind his art practice and picture books, including his latest, the best-selling *This Moose Belongs to Me* (HarperCollins).

**Does your fine art inform your picture books or vice versa?** My visual vocabulary comes out in both: colour schemes, sense of perspective, and space. Thematically a lot of times they cross over the same territory. For example, when I was working on *The Incredible Book Eating Boy*, I was also involved in an exhibition where I was working with a quantum physicist about the quest for ultimate intelligence. Both the book and the art are really about the search to be the smartest person on earth. They extend from the same starting place, just in slightly different directions.

A lot of the very early art I was doing involved telling stories and mixing words and pictures together. But often what was intended to be one single image turned into several images that I realized would be better suited to a picture book. After that my art changed without really thinking about it. I think my thirst for putting words and pictures together was totally satisfied in the realm of picture books.

**You use a lot of collage and layering in your illustrations. Do you hoard materials?** There’s a difference between a hoarder and a collector. A hoarder keeps everything, whereas a collector curates their hoard. I am very editorial about what gets...
kept and will only keep something I think has potential. Space is limited here.

Where did you find the landscapes for *This Moose Belongs to Me*? I kept finding all these old paintings in trash piles near where I live in Brooklyn. I started painting on top of them and changing the scenes to create different narratives. I had already come up with the basic structure of *This Moose Belongs to Me* and when I was sketching it out, I started thinking about the kind of environment I wanted for these characters. I didn't actually paint any of the backgrounds in *Moose*, which I think thematically is paired brilliantly because one of the themes in the book is that of ownership – I'm using all these old paintings that I didn't make, appropriating them to fit my story.

What are you inspired by most: materials, emotions, or themes? They're all interconnected. It's very difficult to go back and trace the roots of how an idea came to be at a particular point. It probably came from three different things happening at the same time, from working with materials to overheard conversations or snippets of stories. I always have a notebook and I'm always writing things down.

Do you have an affinity toward particular animals? Not really. I think sometimes if you use an animal character it's less specific than a human character. A human's physical characteristics have implications on how people read them, whereas with an animal it's a lot more vague and easier to put yourself into the story. It's more about what the animals are doing than who they are.

Does the little boy in the striped shirt reappear in several of your books because they are a series or because you weren't finished with him as a character? HarperCollins has asked me that, too – I think they'd be quite happy for him to make another appearance. *How to Catch a Star* and *Lost and Found* came quite naturally. I knew I wasn't finished with him at that point. After those books I was done with him because I didn't want to force a series, but then quite naturally the idea for *Up and Down* crept up into my head and unfolded in a very strong way. I suppose I've learned to never say never, but I also won't try to come up with another story with him.

Your hand-lettering is as recognizable as your illustration style. How did it develop? In art college finding your voice is a big thing. It happened to me intuitively about 12 years ago when I was halfway through college. It was just a matter of listening to the way my hand liked to draw rather than forcing a style because I liked it.

As far as my hand-lettering is concerned, that's just the way I write. For the longest time I wanted to include my handwriting in books, but it was always very difficult with co-editions and foreign languages. Before I figured out Photoshop it was really complicated if there were any last-minute text changes. It's only been technically possible for me in the last couple of years.
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