There’s a transformation that occurs whenever Oliver Jeffers, something of a rock star in the world of picture books, meets his
young fans.

“Whenever I get up and say who I am, it doesn’t really have much of an effect,” he admits. “But as soon as I start drawing, then they get it. That’s always really cool to see — the change of expression when they realize that they’re the same drawings that are in the books.”

It’s possible there are just as many adults who count themselves as fans of the 35-year-old Jeffers, who is in Toronto on Saturday as part of the fifth annual and sold-out Totsapalooza. Jeffers appreciates that his audience isn’t restricted to kids.

“I wanted to write books that everybody could enjoy,” he says on the phone from Brooklyn, where he lives and works. “I don’t try to dissect what I think it is that kids want to see in books, and then write my stories based on that. Rather, I just try to satisfy my own sense of curiosity. Through that there’s sort of an honesty and a natural flow that I think is appealing across all demographics.”

Ever since Jeffers published his first book, *How to Catch a Star*, in 2004, he’s been at the forefront of a new generation of children’s illustrators (Canada’s own Isabelle Arsenault and Jon Klassen among them) who meld childhood innocence and wonder with adult frankness and humour in much the same way as, say, Pixar. Jeffers has created a universe entirely his own, with its own laws and sensibilities and way of being. His work is often poignant — read the heartbreaking *The Heart and the Bottle* (2010), about a young girl protecting herself from hurt — or whimsical — see *Stuck* (2011), in which a boy’s kite, among other objects, gets stuck in a tree. Most of all, it’s beautiful. *The Incredible Book Eating Boy* (2006) was illustrated on the pages and covers of old textbooks and dictionaries, while *This Moose Belongs to Me* (2012) contrasts cartoonish characters with stunning landscapes.

“They’re an excellent platform,” he says of picture books. “With novels, things are spelled out for you. And films, things are spelled out for you a lot more. Whereas picture books, it’s up to you how much you sit on a page, sit on an image, move at your own pace. And then you’ve got two distinct and varying sets of tools at your disposal, that weave in and out of each other to create this middle ground.

“That’s the secret ingredient, I think,” he says. “That’s what makes them such a fantastic vehicle for storytelling.”

Jeffers is particularly aware of the importance of storytelling. Though he was born in Australia and now lives in the United States, Jeffers grew up in Belfast, Northern Ireland, a city and a country that not only shaped his odd sense of humour, but sharpened his storytelling talents, as well.

“There’s a sense of humour that’s pretty unique to Northern Ireland,” he says. “There’s a lot of undertones in my work where you can’t really take anything too seriously. But, also, everybody’s a storyteller there. In the pub everybody’s got a story, and the next one is as good as the last, if not better. Uncles, grandparents, family, friends — everybody’s at it, constantly. It’s just the cultural clockwork.”
He continues: “You’re sitting around the dinner table, or you’re down at the pub, or just waiting on the bus with a friend [and] it’s just, ‘Did you hear about this?’ or something that happened a long time ago, ‘Oh, I remember this time when ...’ There’s a saying, as well: Never let the truth get in the way of a good story. The story comes first. It’s fine to embellish and elaborate. It’s just sort of expected.”

Jeffers doesn’t just tell stories. He’s an artist — paintings, printmaking, collage — and a commercial and editorial illustrator, with clients ranging from Anthropologie and Weight Watchers to the Guardian and Newsweek. His monograph Neither Here Nor There, which was published last summer, is a collection of his non-children’s work — a bust of Darth Vader; a satellite crash-landed in a cornfield; a hammer nailed to a wall — though it still feels like part of the same universe. Jeffers prefers it this way.

“My books are all about telling stories, and a lot of my art is about asking questions,” he says. “But they’re equally extensions of the same curious brain.”

Because of his commercial and editorial commissions, Jeffers is working on multiple new projects, including a new book starring The Hueys — the egg-shaped race of creatures introduced in The New Sweater (2012) — as well as an alphabetical collection of short stories.

“My ideals and styles and tastes change book-to-book, so each one I do I think is the best one,” he says. “I think each one is a reflection of where I was — and who I was — at the time I was making it. And I don’t think that any of them are perfect. That’s why I keep going. I think that if I made the perfect picture book I might just stop.”