



Winner of the Younger Children's section in the 2008 Red House Children's Book Award

# Polly Dunbar: Painting & Puppets

When I last spoke to Polly Dunbar about her work, at the time *Shoe Baby*, illustrated by her, written by her mother Joyce, was published, I remember noting her silent reaction when Joyce produced a carefully-hoarded collection of hand-made books written and illustrated by Polly when she was a child. Was her reluctance to comment the result of embarrassment, I wondered, or did it signify a pooh-poohing of those juvenile efforts, a putting-away of childish things?

"I was embarrassed," she replied when I asked her about it, at this, our next meeting. (We were, as before, in Joyce's house in Norwich, drinking coffee from mugs designed by Polly herself.) The answer was prompt, unequivocal, assured. And later, when I made what I considered to be a fairly incontestable point – "It's odd that although a number of illustrators write, few writers illustrate" – she treated it as a loose ball and casually lofted it to the boundary, declaring with a smile, "Well, here's one that does." Her words and demeanour, throughout our conversation, gave the impression of consolidated confidence.

Not surprising, really, when you consider how her career has taken off in such a relatively short time. The first children's book she illustrated, *A Saucepan On His Head And Other Nonsense Poems*, a sure and witty performance hinting at what was ahead, was published in 2001; since then she's won awards including Red House Childrens Book Award, been listed as one of the ten Best New Illustrators in the Big Picture campaign, is on the 2008 Kate Greenaway shortlist and, in a book to be published later this year, takes her place alongside well-established international names to illustrate clauses of the Declaration of Human Rights.\*

In spite of her justifiable claim to be a writer who illustrates – she does, after all, write her own books – she still, when pushed,

*Illustration from Shoe Baby*



thinks of herself first and foremost as an illustrator who writes. "To start with, I sit down and draw the story. I write words to the pictures. I've become a writer accidentally." But a skilled one, adept at the pithy, pared-down text. In *Penguin*, for example, a spread of images depicting the stages of Ben's mounting rage is supported by two brief sentences, 'Ben got upset'; 'Penguin said nothing'.

"I always wanted to paint," she said. "But it was obvious, when I was at art school, that my paintings were very figurative. So the choice [between 'painting' and 'illustrating'] was already made for me." She paused a moment to try to define what it is that polarises the two activities. "I think it involves different parts of the mind," she offered, with a shrug. "I love the constraints of illustration. I love the whole form of making a book. When I'm doing my own books ...the concentration on perhaps just one figure; the pared-down text ...it all needs a lot of *drawing*. I like drawing," she added with a smile.

It's easy to see what she means. There is an undoubted spareness – eloquent and the opposite of frugal – apparent when she's illustrating her own texts; a focusing of all her powers of observation onto one central character, whose story unfolds against a mainly minimalist background – pale pastel shades in *Dog Blue*, plain white in *Penguin*. And although the earlier *Flyaway Katie* may differ to a degree – in that the background, following the Kandinsky-like explosion of colour halfway through, assumes a 'role' of its own that is eventually absorbed into Katie's story (or she into it) – it shares the same characteristic of the other two books: concentration on a single figure, the little girl, close ups, medium and long shots. In Polly's words: 'a lot of *drawing*'.

Her most recent books, *Measuring Angels*, just published, and *Bubble Trouble*, due in September, both second-time collaborations with, respectively, Lesley Ely and Margaret Mahy, are further evidence of her witty exuberance with pen and ink or pencil, watercolour and subtle collage. "Illustrating other people's words is a lovely contrast to doing my own stuff. I can go mad with other people's texts. When I was doing the poetry book, *Here's a Little Poem* [chosen by Jane Yolen and Andrew Fusek Peters], I loved the challenge." So many different poems and themes and moods. "Every morning I'd wake up and think, Oh good, today I must find a way to do this." Her eyes sparkled at the memory.

"At the moment I'm doing a series of six books, *Tilly and Friends*. They're all interrelated, which is something new for me. It takes time to get to know the characters. But it's great fun. The

characters take on lives of their own – just like novelists say they do. Usually, ideas pop into my head unaided. With these, I had to sit down and *work* at it.”

By contrast, “when I did the illustrations for *My Dad’s a Birdman* by David Almond, I didn’t have to re-do the pictures, at all. There’s often a lot of to-ing and fro-ing and heartache.” She laughed at this. “That’s why it’s nice to be able to work on something else, or somebody else’s work. You can relax, to the extent that that side of things – the composition, the story, the predisposition of the characters, all that sort of thing – is already taken care of. And working on something else simultaneously eases the pressure. It gives you time, and space, to breathe.”

Polly was born in a Cotswold village, a few months prior to the family’s move to Stratford-upon-Avon. When she was eleven, they – she; her brother Ben, dedicatee and inspirer of *Penguin*, now a fashion photographer; their parents – moved, eastwards, to Norwich. She took an Art Foundation course at Norwich School of Art and, subsequently, studied for a degree in Illustration at Brighton, where she now lives and works, and from where she graduated in 1999, having had her mind settled about the figurative nature of her work.

She wanted to aim “towards picture books,” and during her second year at college had produced her ‘Hole’ story about Henry VIII. This was the first of three (a true mini-series) compact, simple and funny books about famous lives, the other two being concerned with Cleopatra and Scrooge. The books were concise, clever, brilliantly conceived and executed, with a cut out hole on each page, often revealing “gruesome surprises.” They were published by Scholastic in 2002. By which time Catherine Dewing of Walker Books – representatives of both Walker and Frances Lincoln had had the good sense to see Polly’s degree show for themselves – had given her just the break she was looking for. “It was to illustrate *A Saucepan On His Head*. And while I was doing the pictures for this I took in *Flyaway Katie*, in dummy form, to show them.”

(Although, in fact, Polly’s *first* books – not for children – had been published way before, when she was in her mid-teens. “I’d started doing cartoons, one line, one sentence, which I passed among my friends; and when I found that I’d done twenty or so I sent them to an agent. Silence for a year. Then I heard that Kingfisher wanted to publish them.” *Help! I’ve Forgotten My Brain* and *Help! I’m Out With the In-Crowd* came out in 1996.)

“Illustrating can be a bit of a lonely occupation,” she said. “Working with other people helps to blow the cobwebs away. Getting stuck into other projects allows freedom to roam and expand, suggests



Illustration from Penguin

new paths, frees up the mind. And at the same time, working in collaboration gives you more discipline. You have to make decisions. When you’re working at home alone you have all the time in the world; you can float about, thinking, I’ll be able to do this better after lunch. But not when you’re working with other people.”

“Doing the puppets”, her involvement with Long Nose Puppets, is the “perfect balance between careers”. Shows based on *Shoe Baby* and *Flyaway Katie* become logical extensions of Polly’s work as an author and illustrator. Set up by her and Katherine Morton, who studied Illustration with her at Brighton, and a group of friends “all with different skills”, Long Nose has quickly established itself on the entertainment circuit, with successful seasons in Edinburgh, Brighton and Ipswich, to say nothing of an invitation to appear in Downing Street at Gordon Brown’s Christmas party. “It started as a lark,” she joked; “now we have a manager [Katherine’s husband].”

It takes about six months to put a show together, “We make everything”: puppets, scenery and props. The puppets are constructed out of “anything”, latex, wood, “found objects” – “and all things sparkly.” “We pack it all into the van, drive up to wherever it is we’re performing; get in; set up; perform. We’re performers, but, because it’s with puppets, without exposure; we’re hidden behind the stage and set. It gives you a sense of freedom, like wearing a mask. And you meet children, naturally, not as author and audience.

“We think of the shows like books ... the surprise of turning the pages. And afterwards, kids do look at the books in a different way. The books take on an extra dimension, an extended life. Children and puppets ... it all feeds off each other. And watching children, seeing their reactions and interaction, is teaching me such a lot about character.”



Illustrations from My Dad’s a Birdman

Chris Stephenson



Recent books illustrated by Polly Dunbar:  
 Penguin Walker £10.99 ISBN: 978-1844280650  
*Here’s a Little Poem: A Very First Book of Poetry* (collected by Jane Yolen and Andrew Fusek Peters) Walker ISBN: 978-1844287536  
*Measuring Angels* (written by Lesley Ely) Frances Lincoln £11.99 ISBN: 978-1845076399  
*My Dad’s a Birdman* (written by David Almond) Walker £8.99 ISBN: 978-1406304862  
*Down the Back of the Chair* (written by Margaret Mahy) Frances Lincoln £5.99 ISBN: 978-1845076023  
*Bubble Trouble* (written by Margaret Mahy) Frances Lincoln £11.99 ISBN: 978-1845077587 (September publication)  
 \**We Are All Born Free: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* will be published by Frances Lincoln in October 2008