

Lucy Cousins

*Brightens up the
dullest day*



Books created by Lucy Cousins capture the world for very young children. Maisy is a universally recognised character. We were thrilled to meet Lucy recently at her most agreeable home in Hampshire. She now has a recently extended workroom within the house: a light, airy space with a huge table in front of the window. Spread over the surface were the first drafts of her new book. "In pencil first – it has to be right!" she told us before pointing to the painted roughs alongside. They looked spontaneous and witty and easy-on-the-eye, vivid splashes of colour, stylised simplicity and child friendly forms surrounded by thick black lines with the jovial mouse herself. But deceptively simple, really the result of much expertise, work and worry. With a working title of *Maisy Knows a Lot!* children are asked many questions. The answers are all there on the page but the aim is to have children working things out and, at the same time, understanding what they are seeing. There are thirty two spreads in this book and Lucy is intending to finish it by the summer. "I must start the final art work after Easter which gives me about six weeks to complete. The final stage takes the shortest time – all the hard work and worrying is done! There is a fun flap on every page that needs to be checked to ensure they open properly and the whole project, from start to finish, will have taken about nine months."

But how did it all begin?

Lucy gained her degree in Brighton, then followed family footsteps to the Royal College of Art in Chelsea to continue her training in Graphic Art. She began to realise that it was book illustration she preferred so tutorials with Quentin Blake were negotiated. During her final year she came second in the Macmillan Art Competition. Her picture book was published by the company, as was her second book, *The Little Dog Laughed* and so began a lifelong commitment to children's books.

Maisy was initially a little girl but twenty years ago, when Lucy took the idea to Walker Books, she met the late Wendy Boase. "I knew I wanted to do a book with flaps and tabs. The plot was simple – a little girl was wearing a coat and shoes, the coat would open and the shoes would come off." It was Wendy who suggested that it might work better with an animal as the main character. "I returned home encouraged by this meeting and started working out the story line with different animals in the leading role." She tried all the obvious choices – cat, dog, horse, rabbit and then drew a mouse. "I knew instantly that this was perfect. Just what I wanted. Maisy was born."

"I've always wanted her books to be fun. Books that children would want to share what Maisy was getting up to. I wanted them to feel at home with the books and enjoy them like their other toys. At the same time I could be teaching them about their world and reinforcing the knowledge that young children had already absorbed." In the last twenty years books for babies have grown increasingly wonderful and varied and Lucy's books have been published in many formats – hardbacks, paperbacks, board books, cloth books, sticker books, jigsaw books – all of them truly interactive. Lucy believes passionately that books are essential for children's early learning, even more so now after the experiences of bringing up her own four. She's thrilled when babies learn to hold books and giggle at what they see.

"I believe that it is vitally important that all children have the right book for the right stage of their development."

Reading and sharing books with her own children was a lovely, positive experience. The end of the day was especially memorable – children tucked up in bed,



both warm and safe, whilst Mum and Dad could rest and relax peacefully with a book to share. Their favourite stories were about the *Large* family, written and illustrated by Jill Murphy. “We all loved and identified with them, Mum and Dad with four children just like our family – although we weren’t elephants!”

As a child Lucy adored the stories of *Babar*, *Winnie the Pooh* and *Frog and Toad* tales. The *Lucy and Tom* books by Shirley Hughes held a special significance. Her brother is called Tom and she imagined that the stories were all connected with them personally. “I hadn’t looked at those books for over twenty years but when I opened them for my children they had stayed in my mind and I remembered every detail!”

Yummy is a dramatic contrast to the soft and gentle books about Maisy. A collection of her favourite nursery stories, it includes *Little Red Riding Hood*, *The Three Bears* and *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*. “I tried to make it feel like a sketch book – more spontaneous and more loose. When I started I realised that the original stories were very gruesome, and yet I wanted to make them simple for the youngest age group. I cut down the words and let the pictures tell the story.” She succeeded in giving the stories an edge but, with her dry humour and an eye for attractive details, children feel very comfortable with both the stories and illustrations.

She confessed that tension in her family’s usual placid temperament at this time was disconcerting but meeting new challenges in her work was therapeutic. She experimented with very black lines around the images to give a bold look and, as a result, produced the gutsy presentation for which she was searching.

Even further removed from *Maisy is I’m The Best*. Using ink (instead of gouache) for the first time, she felt inspired “...to just have a go and see what would happen. I actually started without any ideas and was stuck for a story.” The solution came when she eventually asked herself what she had been doing over the past few weeks that had been enjoyable.

“I knew it had been playing tennis. I’m not a good player but I was persuaded to partner a gifted fifteen-year-old boy in a village tournament. We won our first match, and then continued to win until we reached the final. I was so excited and I wanted success just like a child!” When they were presented with the winners’ small silver cup she celebrated by painting a picture of Rob the Dog and Lucy Goose. She realised that she had wanted to be the best and her story had emerged.

I’m The Best is bursting with great splodges of bright colours and giant size lettering. It is an exuberant account of a dog showing off to his friends. They retaliate by pointing out what they can do better than him. The last spread gave Lucy real problems but her partner Stephen suggested a less sweet ending. Search out the book and enjoy a smile!

Chatting comfortably with Lucy in the family kitchen, with curly Rosie, the dog, (model for the last book?) slumped on her spacious bed by the window, it is plain to see that she is content with life. “I’ve always loved books, I’ve always associated reading with love and fun,” she told us. And those are the qualities she communicates through her books for babies and young children, a close harmony of love and fun and learning. Just what is needed by children everywhere.

Jenny and David Blanch



Lucy Cousins' latest books, all published by Walker Books.
Maisy Bakes A Cake ISBN: 978-1406314786 £8.99
Maisy Goes to The Museum ISBN: 978-1406319606 £4.99
Yummy ISBN: 978-1406316216 £14.99
I'm the Best ISBN: 978-1406323689 £11.99