

Cool for kidz

Elizabeth Newbery, Rachel Hamdi and Mike Spoor take a look at the secret of good illustration for children.

There are thousands of talented illustrators out there - original, creative and skilful. Many of them regard the chance to illustrate for children as the best commission of all. So how do we make use of this talent? And where to start?

So much choice

A quick trawl through one of the hundreds of websites specialising in illustrators reveals a wide selection of different styles: realism, fantasy, cartoon, humour, graphic, manga and comic strip for starters. Then there is different media: do you want water colour, black and white, line, collage, photographic, woodcut, crayon, inks, line only or computer generated?

As interpreters, here are some factors to consider:

- ❖ *Style*: This will be governed by issues such as subject matter, age range and context - and of course personal preferences
- ❖ *Subject matter*: Has the illustrator got a feel for history/science/art? Can he/she draw animals/figures/action? Is the style suitable for under 5s/primary school children/teenagers?
- ❖ *Context*: what will the illustrations be used for? Posters? Interpretative panels? Children's guides? Family trails? Web-based resources? Mobile devices? Will the illustrations show up from a distance? Will they complement the text? Will they appeal across different generations where the target audience is families? Will they 'fit' new media such as the web?

Image 1

Image 2

Appealing to children

But by far the most important consideration is: will the illustrations appeal to children? The way to find out is to watch what they read. What grabs their attention? What makes them laugh? What comics do they buy? What books do they pick up? Which illustrated stories capture their imagination? If you've got any doubts, test examples with children – they can always be relied upon to give you an honest opinion. Remember it's not about what appealed to you as a child – it's what turn kids on today with their fondness for facebook and computer generated imagery.

Making illustrations work

Consider what you want illustrations to achieve. Don't try to show what words are already telling you – add something fresh perhaps with a new take on the subject, engage with characters giving them an emotional inner life. Pushing the boundaries of style and content is one of most rewarding aspects of commissioning illustration. Here are three illustrators who have all recently illustrated Henry VIII for children each adding another dimension to the text.

Images 2, 3, 4

Working with illustrators

You will also need to consider format. Some illustrators work on computers and deliver their work via email or FTP transfer. Others work on paper and then scan them in and send them electronically. Some post hand coloured drawings and its up to you or the printer/repro house to scan them in. You need to know because it makes a difference to the cost. It's more expensive to get the printer or repro house to scan illustrations, on the other hand they'll probably be better than those scanned in on a home scanner. But not always - if in doubt ask your printer.

(boxed section)

Mike Spoor: working with interpreters

I am an illustrator and believe that illustrators love their work. It's a satisfying creative job and by their nature, creative tasks invite outcomes which are more than the sum of their parts, inevitably contributing different and extra meanings to words.

What I need

To get the most from illustrators we need clear briefs. From my perspective I need to know:

- ❖ Which samples of my work the interpreter/ editor has in mind when they choose me for a particular job. They need to specify whether they want line work, colour, hand or computer generated etc and also whether it should be loose and energetic, detailed and colourful, moody and atmospheric. Additionally there may be 'style' requirements. A conflict occurred recently in which the style for a book series was for bright primary colours but the story took place mostly at night and during World War 11!
- ❖ Whether the pictures need to convey accurate information or to add visual interest for its own sake. This is particularly relevant in educational publications and sometimes in storybooks.
- ❖ If accurate detail is required, interpreters/editors need to provide reference material in the form of photocopies or web links
- ❖ Whether the brief comprises suggestions or requirements. Some illustrators may need ideas supplied. They may be superb draftsmen/women but don't interpret subjects imaginatively. The brief needs to acknowledge this. Equally an illustrator needs to recognise that the interpreter/editor is usually open to discuss a brief
- ❖ What sort of area I'll have to work in. Too many briefs ask for all the world and its mother crammed into an unrealistically small space
- ❖ The deadline. I use a good home scanner and send work via email or FTP transfer. This usually frees time but if deadlines are truly tight then its good to make this clear since most freelance work involves juggling several conflicting commissions.

My response

Given that I've got a good brief, what comes next is the fun part of the job. I do a lot of work for publishers so reading the entire book enables me to give more imaginative 'body' to my response: I want to know about characters, activity, environment, time of day, weather, moods and emotions - all of which help to add meaning. Every element is infinitely variable and it's hugely enjoyable moving things about,

introducing new ideas, making a new visual story. Ideas are then committed to paper starting with a great number of loose sketches and ending with a pencil drawing in the space determined by the designer's layouts.

On the question how to make illustrations appeal to children, I don't think illustrators do or should make this a priority. We do what we do. Its up to you to chose an illustrator you think will appeal to children.

... and process

My preference is to provide quite rough 'roughs' so that I maintain a creative interest in carrying out the final work. Some illustrators provide roughs that they are almost finals. This doesn't work for me because any changes requested in response to the roughs often mean re-drawing the whole thing. Once roughs are approved I look forward to the final artwork which I do on high quality paper with good pens, pencils, paint and brushes. As in any craft, immersion in ideas, techniques and the process of making images, losing oneself in the task, allows the illustration to emerge as if I were a mere observer of something coming into existence. Magical!

End of boxed feature

Useful contacts

www.childrensillustrators.com Does what it says on the tin – it specialises in children's illustrators.

www.wildlife-art.co.uk Good for wildlife illustration.

www.contactcreative.com Represents a wide range of illustrators.

www.thebrightagency.com Another of the many illustrator website available – this one is easy to use.

Elizabeth Newbery specialises in interpretation for children and families

www.newberyandengland.com

Rachel Hamdi is an art director responsible for commissioning illustration

rachel.hamdi@gmail.com

Mike Spoor is an illustrator Mike.spoor@dsl.pipex.com

Images

Image 1

Images to be seen from a distance like this activity post at Caerlaverock Castle, Dumfries, need strong outlines and clear, bright colours..

Illustrations by Alan Rowe for Historic Scotland

Image 2

This image has a strong outline, a sense of movement and humour suited to a children's web- based interactive for Hampton Court.

Clinton Banbury for Historic Royal Palaces

Image 3

Tim Archbold interprets Henry VIII as a mercurial personality with the lively use of pen and watercolour.

© Historic Royal Palaces

Image 4

Sophie Foster's deceptively childlike illustrations have a subversive edge – just like Henry

Sophie Foster for the Mary Rose Trust

Image 5

Mike Spoor demonstrates Henry's forceful personality through sweeping use of line and wash.

© Mike Spoor

soundbites

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'Don't try to show what words are already telling you – add something fresh perhaps with a new take on the subject'