



'The Water Buffalo', oil & acrylic on paper, 2006

Words and Pictures, an Intimate Distance

Lingua Franca, Radio National ABC, 2010

If I happen to mention to someone that I write and illustrate picture books, they will often tell me about a child they know who loves reading, assuming that I am a children's author – which is neither correct nor incorrect. If I show an example of my published work, the question I am often asked is 'who did you do this for?', because the target age group is unclear. It's a difficult question to answer, as it would be for anyone who paints or writes according to their own personal interests. Not surprisingly, my books are simultaneously treated as children's, young adult and adult titles, depending on reader, bookseller, publisher and country of publication – it really seems more of a cultural question than an aesthetic one. As a creator, my main concern is simply to explore a form of visual and written expression which seems ideally suited for certain subjects.

'Picture books' are usually 32-pages long due to the economics of printing, so they tend to feature a

concise narrative, handfuls of words and pictures held between cardboard covers. There is an appealing simplicity in the form, which is not to say that it is necessarily simple: the restrained coupling of text and image can contain any level of poetic sophistication or complexity. 'Art,' as Einstein reminds us, 'is the expression of the most profound thoughts in the simplest way.' Picture books are usually intended for children which, again, is not to say that they need to be: many contemporary picture books are not created with young readers in mind, including my own. If it is thought that picture books are for children, this is merely an observation of conventional publishing culture in most English-speaking countries, not an intrinsic quality of the medium itself.

Even the word illustration is a little misleading, because the best illustrations do not actually illustrate anything, in the sense of describing or illuminating. My own narrative images, and those of my favourite artists, are actually far more concerned with deepening the uncertainty of language, enjoying its ambiguous references, exploiting its slipperiness, and at times, confessing its inadequacy.

My own aspirations as an illustrator – using that term advisedly – is to simply present the reader with ideas that are essentially silent, unexplained, and open to very broad interpretation. A sullen girl walks down a quiet street, in the shadow of an enormous fish that floats above her, open-mouthed; rabbit-like creatures introduce strange machinery into a newly discovered wilderness; an immigrant steps off a ship and into a country that has no name; a foreign exchange student insists on sleeping in a teacup.

Sometimes there are words, but they do not really explain the pictures, and likewise, the pictures aren't there to explain the text. The relationship is more oblique than that, as different parts that together create an interesting synergy. When working I often like to think of words and images as opposite points on a battery, creating a potential voltage through a 'gap' between telling and showing. It requires the reader's imagination to complete the circuit, their thoughts and feelings being the current that fills the silent space, without prescription.

As an artist illustrating a text, I'm always trying to question any assumptions I might have a reader. For instance, in adapting John Marsden's written allegory of colonisation, 'The Rabbits' as a picture book, I was careful to avoid actual rabbits. To do so would only defuse the essential metaphor of the story. I instead began sketching a race of greyish, angular-looking beings who arrive on a vast golden ship, and whose culture is convincing, but incomprehensible. When the text says 'they ate our grass'; there are no rabbits eating grass, only the appearance of strip-mining machines digging or harvesting their way through the landscape. When the text says 'they only know their own country' we see them examining their new environment through strange optical devices; images of rabbits incomprehensible 'talking' involve wires strung over vast distances, the rabbits themselves have no visible mouths.

Neither text nor image explain each other fully, and the reader must fill in the gap of meaning with their own theories, based largely on an emotional reaction – fear, curiosity, amusement, bewilderment. We never really find out who the rabbits are, or why they are building vast cities at the expense of other habitats. Words and images play off each other, producing a single question for the reader each time, and this is the question I am asking myself: 'what is it all about?' I'm very

careful not to draw anything that seem like an answer to this.

In my picture book 'The Lost Thing', a boy tells us a simple story about finding a stray animal on a beach. It's not an unfamiliar tale, and follows a fairly conventional narrative structure: to read the text in isolation, it would be fair to assume it takes place in a typical Australian city, and that the animal in question is a dog, or something like it.

I did begin writing this story with something like that in mind, scribbling a long, meandering draft on my kitchen table, without much in the way of purpose or meaning – I did not know what it was really about. I later returned to this and removed all descriptions of environment, character and action, boiling it down to a fairly prosaic list of statements. Suddenly it seemed that there was an unspoken visual story behind this script, and my task as an illustrator was to find out what that was.

Many revisions later, the final paintings represent a world that is at odds with its original descriptions of green suburban lawns and family beaches, the default landscape of my own childhood. My sketchbooks instead revealed a bureaucratic nightmare of concrete and plumbing, treeless suburbs, bored office workers and sulphurous green skies. The initial inspiration for this came from an odd source; some engineering and physics textbooks that my Dad had kept from his days as a student, uncovered from the roof-space of our family home. These were actually beautifully illustrated in that very literal sense, carefully describing heat engines, vacuum tubes, transistors, light refraction and so on, accompanied by appropriately matter-of-fact captions. I began to imagine a world where this was the only illustrated literature available, where everything was fully explained, clear and functional, including all verbal and visual language, all meaning predefined. What if something playful and absurd suddenly appeared in this world? How would people react? This became the real subject of the story, not so much the problem of a lost creature as outlined by the text. I ended up cutting pieces from those old textbooks and introducing them into paintings of a boy leading a nameless creature through a bleak city. A kind of accidental poetry seemed to emerge when phrases such as 'Indeterminate Equations', 'Taxonomic Exercises', or 'Miscellaneous Differentiation' sat alongside such imagery, having their original meanings subverted, a subtle joke that runs throughout the book.

The visual story of *The Lost Thing* and *The Rabbits* reveals more meaning than the written one, and the real philosophical questions are delivered in silence. The way characters look and react, their environment, the framing of action and the overall design of each book all represent ideas that I could only express visually.

I find it difficult to talk about the 'language' of drawing, of lines, shapes, colours and contrasts, because it does not translate very well into words. However, it is generally guided by a fairly simple question, regardless of whether I am drawing a tree from my window or an imaginary creature; 'does it feel true to experience?' That is, does it have an equivalent balance of clarity and mystery, definition and openness that shapes our experience of the real world: a sense that one grasp some things, but not everything, that there is always something elusive in every honest description.

All storytelling plays on this kind of analogy to some extent. Narrative illustration does so using a series of carefully framed vignettes, which leave out much more than they reveal. They depend upon

the reader recognising that visual experience is intrinsically partial and fragmentary, feeding an intuition of a larger world around us, one that we can't always see or understand.

This idea was particularly important for me when working on 'The Arrival' a book that has no written narrative at all, but tells a story using hundreds of 'silent' pencil drawings. That's not to say that it is wordless, as words often appear throughout the book, on billboards, flags, signs and documents, only they are imaginary languages, impossible to read. The story itself is largely about the experience of migration, about a man travelling alone to a foreign country in order to establish a new home for his family. 'Foreign' is indeed the key concept that guides every landscape, event, and even the manner of reading, where explanation is absent from the outset, and all characters and places have no particular identity or history. They exist only on the page, enigmatically, as hand-drawn traces. Strangeness and silence invite the reader to create meaning where none might otherwise exist.

Originally concepts for this story did have a small amount of text, in the form of a man writing brief postcards home to his family which, very understated comments on an exotic urban landscapes, full of peculiar people, animals, buildings and machines. This again had something to do with the limitations of any language, especially in describing unnameable objects, especially for a newly arrived migrant. It also seemed a good way to examine cultural misunderstanding and feelings of isolation, inspired by my reading of many immigrant stories. It's hard to think of a time outside of childhood where the gap between object and meaning requires so much imaginative negotiation, in lieu of language, but the experience of immigration comes very close, and is an ideal subject for an illustrated story.

The decision to dispense with the written word was therefore a logical one, but also had other advantages. Firstly, the process of reading images seemed to slow down, much more so than would be the case if words were present. 'Slow reading' is a preoccupation of mine, and one reason that I'm inclined to introduce surrealism and detail in my images, to avoid casual and fleeting recognition; a fair concern when you consider that the average gallery goer looks at each painting for about eight seconds.

Words move along at a fairly brisk pace. Right now, for instance, you are keen to hear the next sentence, rather than linger on this one. And here is it, only a seconds or two later! Images generally don't have this forward velocity or meter, they occupy a different temporal space, which can be easily disrupted by the quickening presence of words. Moreover, words exert a great force on our attention. We often defer to them as authorities of meaning when faced with unclear or ambiguous images, whether a caption for a newspaper photograph, or a title on an painting, or a sentence in a picture book.

Once separated from words, images of a man travelling by rail, sea and balloon, walking through strange streets and looking for work seemed to be more like a map of experience than a singular trajectory. It is not difficult stray from the usual left-to-right, top-to-bottom sequence of images, and refer to different sections of the story out of order, picking up on recurring images and patterns. For instance, there is a kind of visual 'rhyme' between key scenes featuring dinner tables, shapes in landscapes and architecture, and the use of 'pictures within pictures' where characters hold drawings or photographs as a form of non-verbal communication.

There are many more incidental, background details that offer a deeper sense of the book's themes for those who care to look and contemplate them. In some ways, this reflects the experience of the immigrant character whose shoes, into whose shoes we are stepping. Having no narrative facility, we learn about the new world according to what we pay attention to, and what we choose to invest objects with meaning. The fact that the book is intended to look like an old photo album, with its simplified layout and sepia-tone naturalism, hopefully adds to this sense of open interpretation.

On reflection, much of my work as an illustrator and writer concerns a kind of 'intimate distance' with subjects, things we feel closely and personally, while conceding that we may never understand them. By the end of the Arrival, the immigrant family has settled comfortably into their new home of peculiar furniture, food and utensils, with a family pet that looks like a giant walking tadpole. Do they understand what all these things mean? Yes and no, there is a personal meaning attached to each thing without the need for a full explanation.

