

David Elliot

Margaret Mahy lecture 2014:

### When the bowsprit gets mixed with the rudder

I thought I might start off with a problem... A rather cantankerous problem called Jack Lasenby who has been plaguing me for years. This is something from him that was sent to me by Gecko.

*“What’s this about a bull named Hubert? And what’s this about him whistling?”*  
*“Hubert,” Uncle Trev said, looking at me and lowering his voice. “He doesn’t whistle much now.”*  
*“Why not?”*  
*“He can’t.”*  
*“WHISTLE, A BULL?”*  
*Uncle Trev pretended he hadn’t heard Mum. “He’s growing up, Hubert, so his voice is breaking.”*  
*“A bull’s voice – breaking?” Mum demanded.*  
*“Like I said, he’s losing his whistle. Of course, he may get it back in a year or so, but I doubt if he’ll reach those high notes any longer.”*

This is classic Lasenby and he gets away with it because immediately we read those words, our heads fill with vague funny pictures of bulls with pursed lips and we are happy as readers not to fully reconcile the silliness of the images, or try and make them too concrete because that might spoil the magic. The problem is, the book is called *Uncle Trev and his Whistling Bull* and my job is to come up with a cover. The bull is a sitter as an image. How can I make it concrete without spoiling that magic for everyone else?

I remember Margaret at the launch of *The Moon and Farmer McPhee* saying in her speech, “David and I have done our 50% of the book, now it’s your turn, the reader, to bring your half,” and I remember thinking... “Hold on a minute.”

But of course she was right. We had come up with the idea, written the words, done the drawings, but in the end it was up to the reader to pick that book up and interpret what we had done, to bring themselves to the story. The story must inevitably be the reader’s idea of the author’s idea and to a large extent the stage has already been set before they open the first page. What we write and draw, triggers their experiential memories of characters, places and feelings and I suppose the success of the story depends on how skillfully we are able to guide, entice and maneuver the reader’s idea to be close to Margaret’s, or mine, or sometimes even (heaven forbid) the editor’s.

The reality is that the story itself will have as many different interpretations as there are readers that read it, which is all very confusing or liberating, depending on which way you look at it.

The trick in illustration, I think, is to remember that there are many ways of looking at stories and to keep hunting around amongst them until you find an idea or image that strikes a chord – that resonates. That, for me, almost exclusively happens when I, like the reader, am able to locate the story somewhere in my own personal experience. When I'm not just being a servant to the text but am drawing something that has real meaning for me personally. This might be a place or a character, it might simply be some quirky slant that appeals to me, or just something that makes me laugh. Whatever it is, it helps me take ownership, to draw my story about the author's story, and I'm fairly lost without it.

In the early part of my career I think I did this intuitively, but one extended job really helped me get a grip on things and formulate an approach that I still use: Brian Jacques' Redwall series.

This commission really came out of the blue (although I subsequently found out that the wonderful Joy Cowley had a lot to do with it) and it remains one of the most significant and enjoyable experiences of my career. I don't know if you remember those books but they were/are (they have fallen out of favour now, it seems) an animal fantasy series; a sort of cross between *Robin Hood* and *The Wind in the Willows*. They had the usual animal heroes and villains, badgers and otters on one side, foxes and rats on the other and they were set in a world I could immediately identify with.



Back in the early eighties I had the fantastic luck of getting a job as gatekeeper at Edinburgh Zoo. It was fantastic in many ways, not least of which was the fact that I was able to hire the young woman who was eventually to become my wife – as my 'assistant' (and I have to say, she has been assisting me magnificently ever since). Another great thing was that the job came with a stone cottage actually inside the zoo and when I shut the gates at night the whole place was mine.

The two years I spent at the zoo gave me the time to really build a solid foundation for what I hoped might become a career. I had escaped my own art school prejudice against illustration and spent many hours sitting in my ticket office in quiet times, drawing and attempting to write stories. I was constantly reminded of the uniqueness of my situation, waking every morning with a sea-lion barking in my ear and relaxing in the evening to the howls of gibbons and the roaring of lions. My letters home were full of stories about the people and animals I encountered there, and through them I inadvertently provided myself with the beginnings of a cast of characters that have been

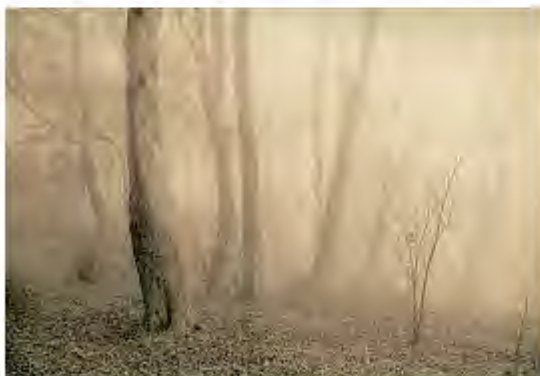


parading around on the stage of my memory ever since – just waiting to be plucked out and recast in new roles.

It's a long time ago now and my selective memory has pared these characters down to caricatures of themselves, in a Gormenghast of jumbled cages and alleys. Many were already half way there, examples of that strange phenomenon when owners begin to look like their dogs. The lion keeper, for example, was large and gruff with a mane-like beard, the primate keeper definitely simian, the head of reptiles, quiet, retiring and distinctly slithery. Others have begun to represent attributes. There is the fat satisfaction of Nan Hutson, the old fish-wife ticket lady I worked with, rubbing her belly after a feed of tripe and onions at the lunchtime canteen. And the feigned innocence of the father from Glasgow, sidling up to the window with what was clearly a 12 stone teenager on his hip saying "Ye dinnae pay fae this wee fella dae ye?" There is the faded military bearing of an elderly Archie McPhee with his watery glass-eye and lurching limp, and the treachery of the gibbon that somehow managed to consistently lure kids over the sign that clearly stated DO NOT GO NEAR THIS GIBBON, IT IS DANGEROUS.

There is no question now that these have blended into my psyche and I'm afraid I now not only habitually see people in animals but also, unfortunately, animals in people. I am no longer certain, when drawing a mouse, that I'm not drawing a little retired bird keeper called Eric Garvie with his sing-song highland accent and his little hands folded in his lap, or if I am drawing a little character like Eric I am, in fact, drawing a mouse.

I could tell you stories all day about that place, the animals, the keepers, the bittersweet madness of it all – but the thing that has the most connection to Redwall was the fact that the zoo was not only a place of caged and fenced-off wild animals, it was a sanctuary for many of the local native British animals: foxes, badgers, squirrels, owls and of course rats, great big ones. They could go about their business nicking stuff from the local suburbs and then drag it back under the fence to relative safety. I say 'relative safety' because there was a rumour that Davey, the old rat-catcher, would sometimes take a badger to make a sporran or two. He certainly knew where they were. One warm night he sent me up the hill and told me where to wait and sure enough a badger came snuffling along through the long grass dragging a bunch of straw it had stolen from the hay shed. The breeze must have been behind it because I can still remember the white stripes on its nose in the moonlight almost touching my shoe before it realised I was there. There was also a dog fox that would do that same bark you hear in every night scene of 'Midsomer Murders' just outside my window before he set off for a night out robbing.

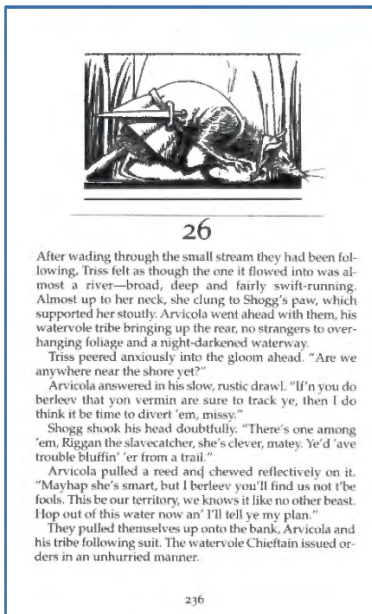


The zoo is located on the side of Corstorphine Hill, about 5 miles west of Edinburgh city centre, and often in the evenings I would wend my way up through the park to the turnstile and out into the wood that covered the hilltop. There was a pub about a mile away through the trees where I'd have a pint

and make my way back. Once I tried a different track and disturbed a rook sentry staked out in the trees. He roused the others and suddenly the tree tops seemed full of rasping, croaking cries and flapping wings. Returning in the daytime, I saw that their nests were huge collections of sticks, like castles in the trees. Corstorphine Hill was always the setting for the Redwall books for me.



So essentially here I am, in exactly the same situation as the reader Margaret talked about. I am bringing myself and my experiences to Brian's books. When he writes *Mossflower Wood*, I think of Corstorphine Wood. When he writes of crows, I think of those castles in the trees. The thing that is different, though, is that in addition to thumbing through my memories of woods and crows I am also (because of my training) thumbing through my knowledge of pictorial conventions and how these might be depicted. I might get a little flash of Dore, or E.H. Shepard. I might think about sinister shadows here and the wriggling perspective and textures of a rambling path there.



This is where the Redwall books gave me the opportunity to put myself through a concentrated course in my craft. They came with such a defined and disciplined structure; they were almost the visual equivalent of practicing your scales on the piano.

By far the majority of the illustrations (around 40 in each book) were the chapter spots; all in black and white, all about one and a half times the size of a matchbox, so they were small.

There were three slightly bigger book starters and a map in each book too. That size was my first challenge and soon had me thinking very carefully about how to crop down into

the essential action of the picture book illustrations I was used to. (The first book, *Triss*, came right in the middle of my own picture book, *Pigtails the Pirate*.)

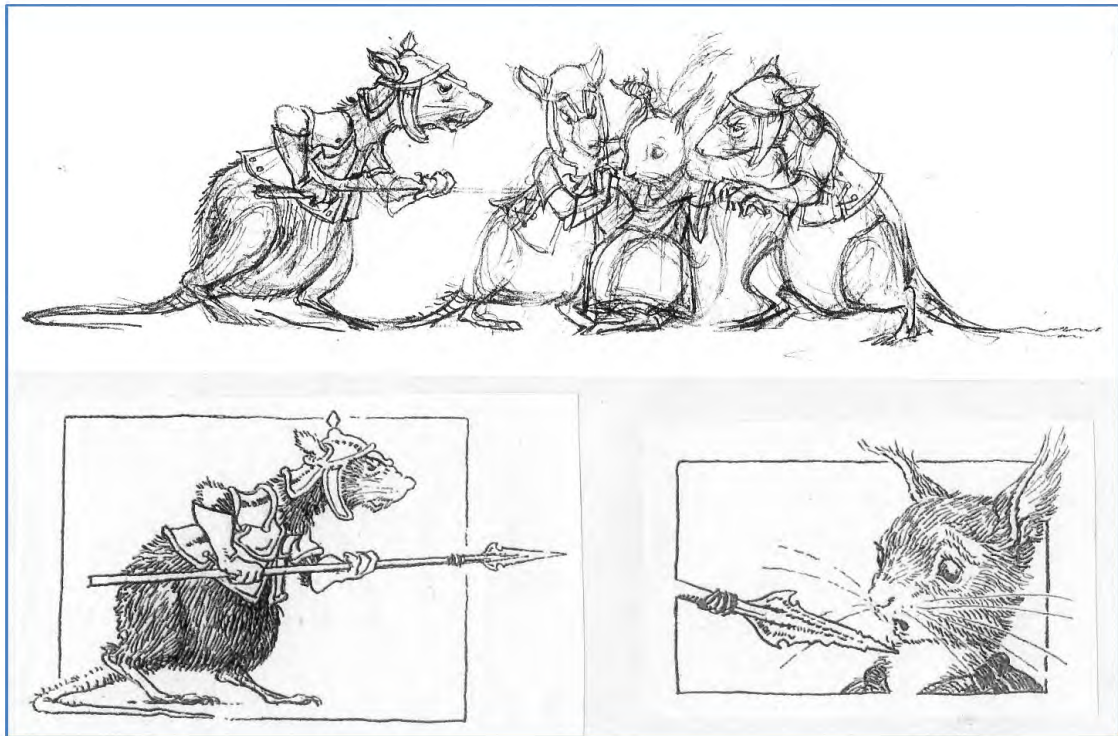
Putting the amount of information I wanted into the drawings and still retaining their clarity at that scale was a challenge and I owe a lot to the gentle guidance of Semadar Megged, the wonderful art director



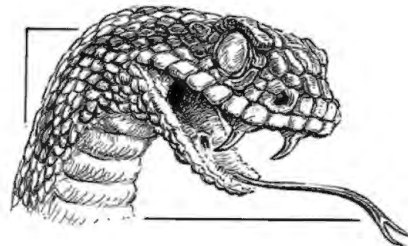
Storylines

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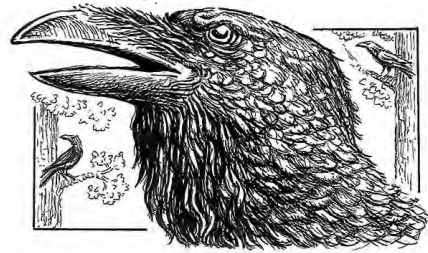
at Philomel, in getting that to work. I decided to use the visual device of broken borders that Gary Chalk, the first illustrator of the series, had initiated and getting the visual machinery working on each page became a delightful puzzle.



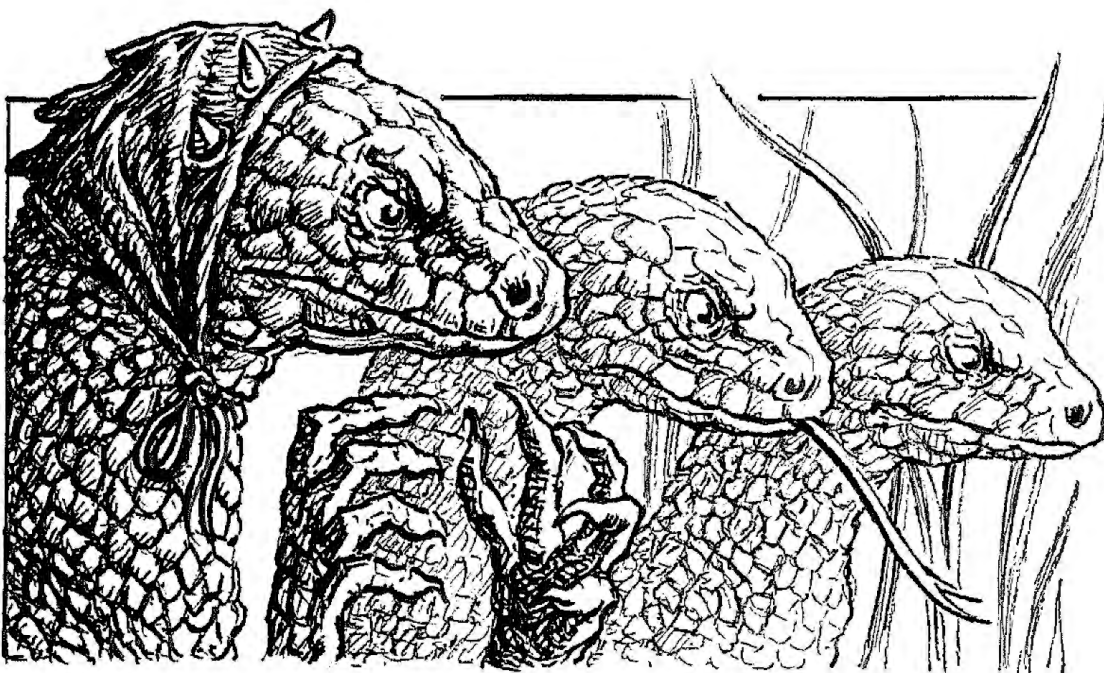
The element that brings us back to Margaret's statement though was that there was a tradition of dividing the subject matter of the spots into three types: characters, landscapes and still-lives. The **characters** were my default setting, of course, and Brian created such great animal characters to draw.



The **places and objects**, though, were a different matter and in searching for them I found that new dimensions of my experiential memory came into play.



New ideas started coming from quite unexpected places. I would scour the texts of each chapter, scribbling ideas for the three subject types and end with a lovely pile of alternatives from which to choose the best, in terms of the story, but – equally importantly for me – something that I could have strong ownership over and could make a good job of. It came as a great surprise how effective **still-lives** were in particular, and how much the 12 year-old boys who read these books liked them.

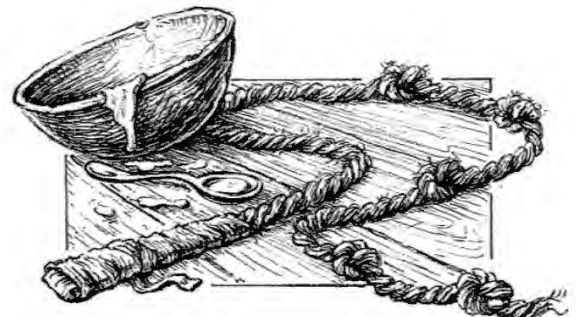
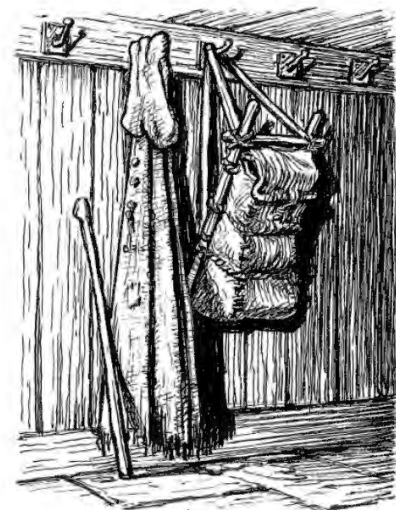


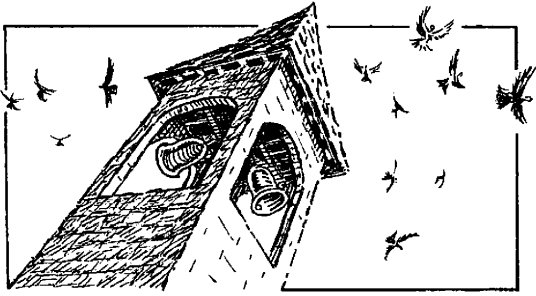


There was I, thinking the snarling face of the wolverine would suit them down to the ground but the thing was he had already been described in the text. It was his broken dagger they liked better. It was a mystery. It asked a question and they would keep reading to answer it.



Having experienced the success of this three-way split I consciously began trying other triggers to access my imagination; thinking of **sounds and textures**, exploring **weather and light**, pushing my use of **black**.



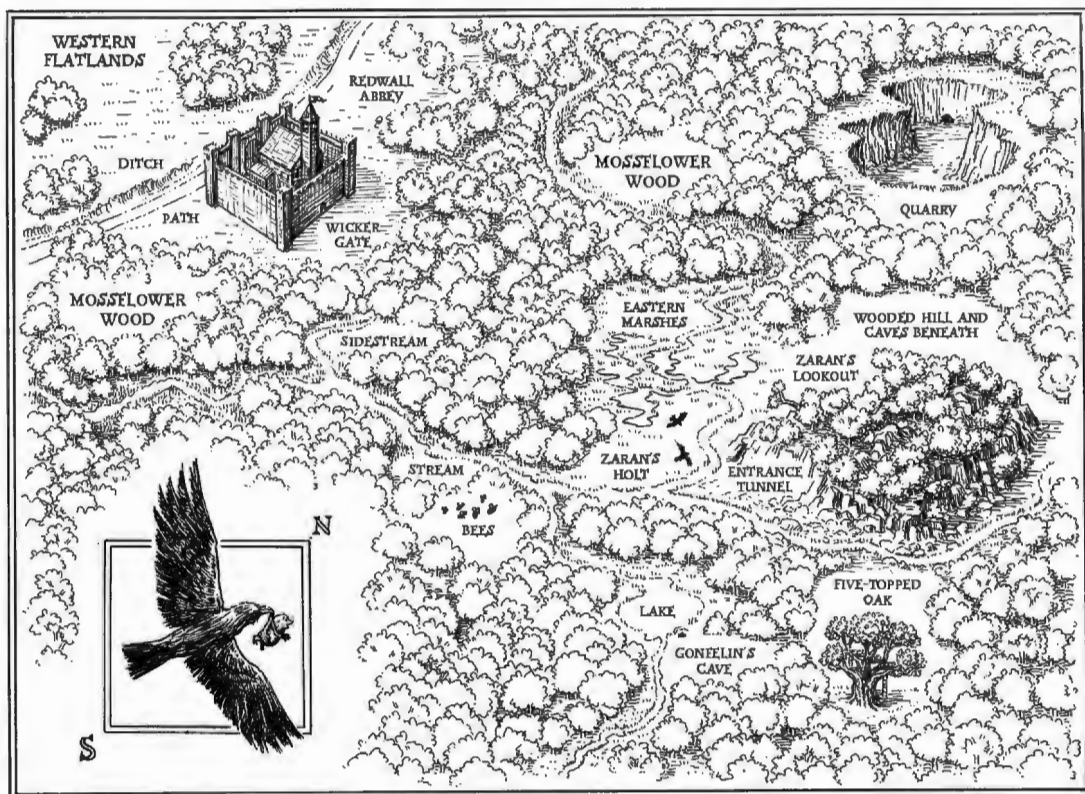


It was great fun and I would end up with even bigger piles of ideas to sort through. I began to understand, more deeply, how Brian constructed his stories and how I could enhance the strategy behind his words. I also began to look much more analytically and with new respect at masters of

black and white, artists like Howard Pyle, C.F. Tunnicliffe and my favorite, Mervyn Peake.



The Redwall series also introduced me to the drawing of maps.

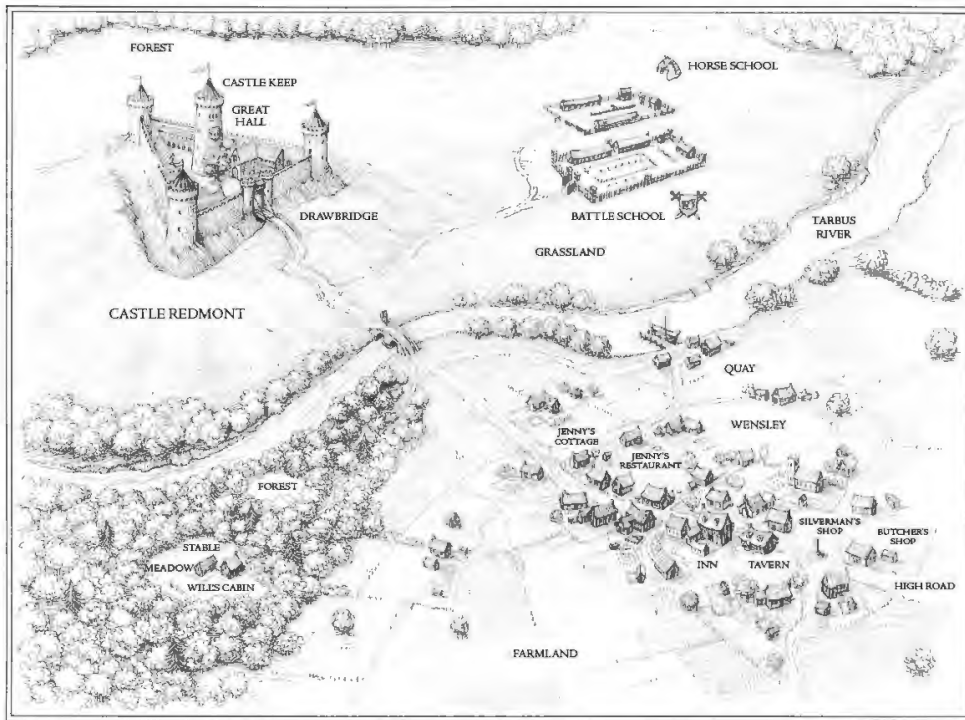


[map of Redwall and surroundings]

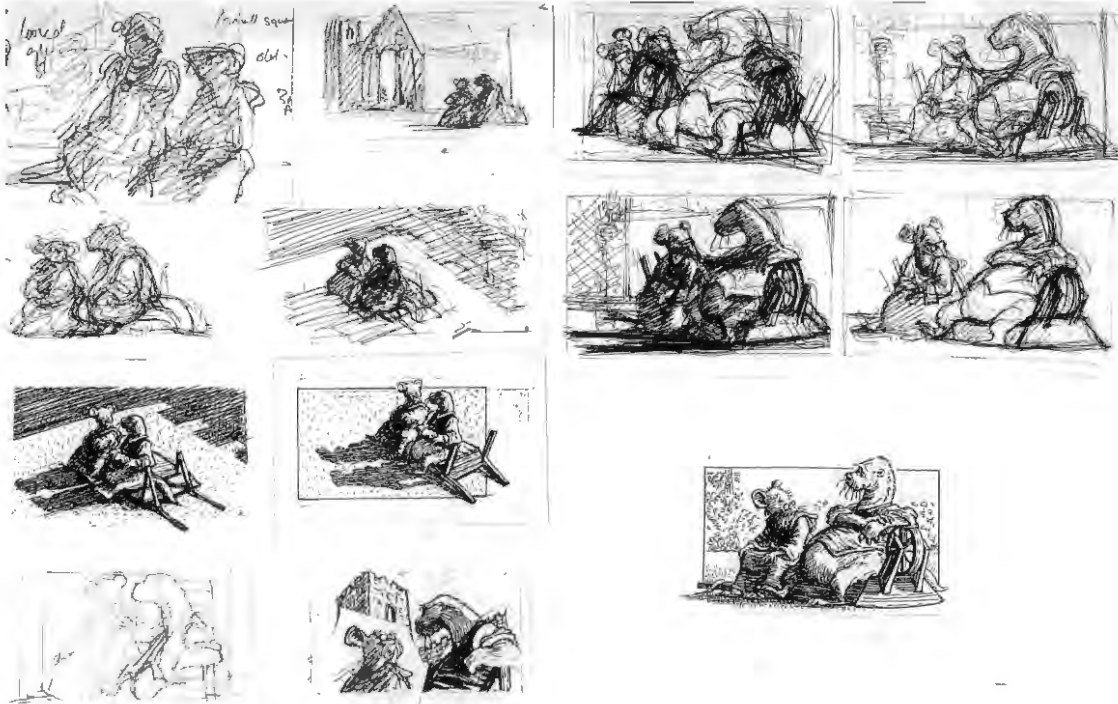


There was one required for each book and Brian provided a scribbled sketch - which was

often impossible to reconcile with his text. I quickly learnt that I needed to follow the movements of each of his, usually numerous, bands of marauders and heroes very carefully, usually with post-its on a blown-up approximation of Brian's sketch, to see that they made sense and make changes where necessary. The most fun, of course, was then teasing Brian's plan-view up into the kind of 3D map that I had always loved as a kid, twisting it this way and that to fit the labels, miss the gutter and making it as enticing a world as I could. I got an excellent apprenticeship with maps on Redwall and it has since become quite a feature of my work.



I once put a scrapbook together of one of these books. It seemed so pathetic to send away such a small package of finished drawings after four or five months of work that I decided to collect up all my roughs so I could get some sort of satisfying closure. I found that I was doing, on average, around a dozen little composition sketches for each drawing – and that was after I had made up my mind what to draw. Over the seven books that amounts to well over 500 drawings! I'm sure it was because it was such a structured, defined and repeated exercise that I was able to (I think) gradually improve my work and develop my understanding of the craft of illustration and indeed writing.



Now, I feel there might be a few authors out there reading this and rolling their eyes because I'm sure this is all old news to you. I have to say though, having flown by the seat of my trousers up until these books it all came as a bit of a revelation to me.

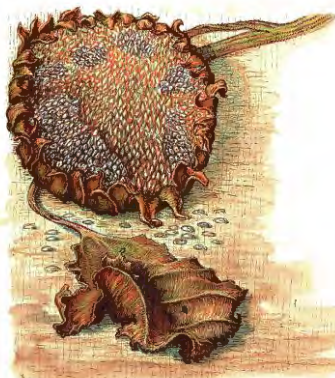
The great danger now, of course, is that the fun of the hunt has superseded the will to actually catch anything and finish it. There is always the chance that if you run off down the road after your characters that you will find a much better setting to frame them against, a more spectacular light, a more dramatic angle. I can completely understand gold prospectors; their addiction, their belief that there is always a nugget under the next rock.

I chose Redwall to talk about because it is the clearest example of my bringing my own story, in the form of my experiences at Edinburgh Zoo, to the story provided by the author. The books also provided me with the opportunity to explore how I could access those experiences more deeply by giving myself specific themes to investigate. Some books, however, aren't quite as easy to find myself in.

*[Mona Minim in red dress]*

Right in the midst of the Redwall books I was given Janet Frame's *Mona Minum and the Smell of the Sun* by the wonderful Jenny Hellen at Random House, in 2004. The idea was to re-issue the book and to try and make it a bit more child-friendly than the 1993 U.S. edition, which was beautifully illustrated by Robin Jacques. The problem was, of course, when you get down to it (I found out, as I'm sure Robin did), ants just aren't that friendly-looking, no matter how much you dress them up in the bonnets and ribbons Janet described, and my hunting got a bit out of hand, as I struggled to find the right 'Mona'. I

remember Jenny saying (rather cruelly, I thought) that one of my prototypes looked like Hilda Ogden from the early days of Coronation Street! In the end any real 'anty-ness' went out the window, I'm afraid, and my sensory tricks came to my rescue. I found myself latching onto Janet's continued reference to Mona's world of chemical scents and decided to translate that into scratchy little ink marks under the drawings. I was also really attracted to Janet's use of her huge god-like sunflowers as symbols of life and death and used them where I could. (Actually, come to think of it, I'm sure no-one else will have picked up on those little ink scratches but I know why I did them and that's what counts.)



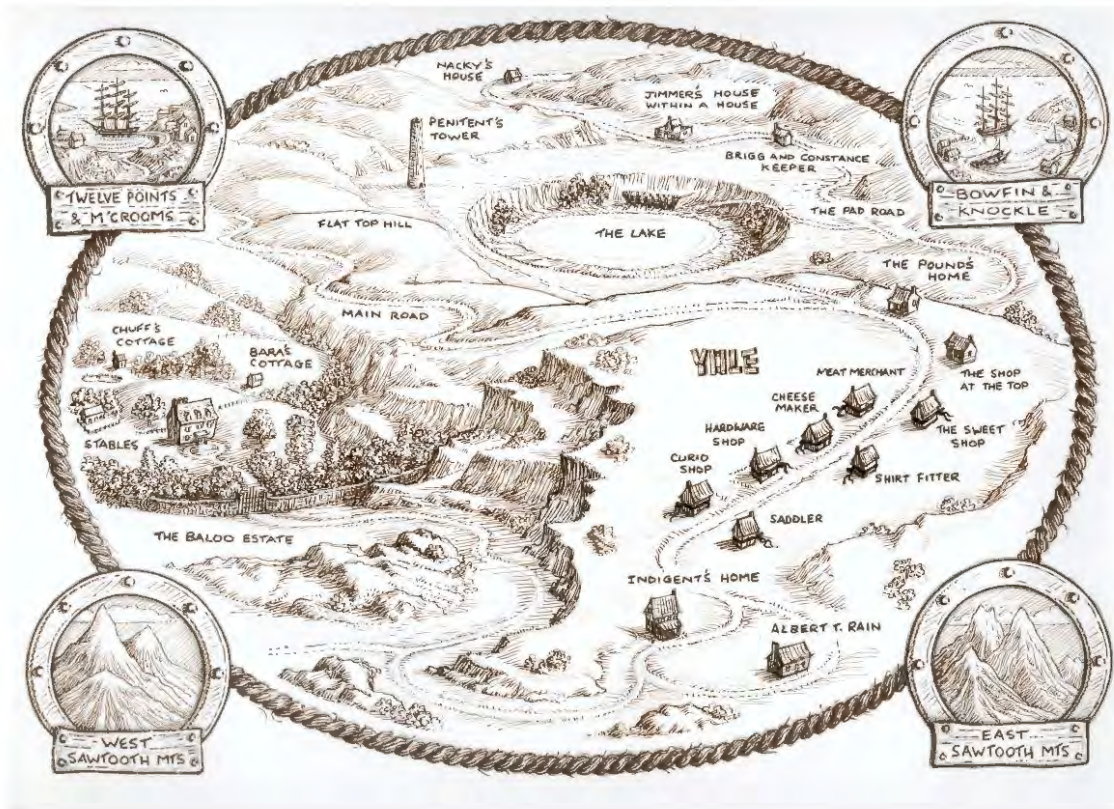


Another really different sort of challenge was *Nacky Patcher and the Curse of the Dry-Land Boats* by Jeffrey Kluger. Jeffrey is well known, not only for his work as science correspondent for *Time Magazine*, but also because he wrote the book that was the basis for the film *Apollo 13*. This book – his first for kids – got passed to me by Philomel in 2007 and I was hooked straight away. Although it has a simple theme (about the redemption of a thief, called Nacky Patcher) it is salted with some quite surreal, incidental characters and events that somehow reminded me of a favourite book of mine, *The Third Policeman* by Irish author, Flann O'Brien. In *The Third Policeman* O'Brien describes a process where a man, riding on the bumpy stony roads of Ireland, gradually exchanges molecules with his bike. Eventually he is found in a daze, leaning with one handlebar-like-elbow against a wall whilst his bike is arrested (and later hung) for molesting young women. I found this book quite by accident and have somehow, irrationally, 'owned' it ever since, as if no one else had ever read it.

In his book, Jeffrey's hero, Nacky (Archie McPhee in another guise perhaps), is lame in one leg and limps through the strangeness of the story, giving the whole thing a kind of bent and distorted feel that immediately made me feel like I was viewing things through my own, personal Flann O'Brien lens. Nacky starts off in a prison called the Penitent's Tower, which has seven levels, one for each week of his imprisonment. Beginning the first week on the top level, after seven weeks he has reached the bottom, whereupon he invariably reoffends and is thrown back into the top level. That is, until he accidentally turns into a hero.



The story is set in a dry hinterland, controlled by a sort of Boss Hogg villain (for those of you who remember the *Dukes of Hazzard*) who is so mean that all the birds have left town. Jeffrey has one of his characters drive a cage of tethered song-birds around the countryside, releasing them through a hatch at intervals so that they can sing in nearby trees and bring some joy to the otherwise silent landscape.



There is also a map which shows a row of cottages from each of which the poor tenants have been evicted, sealed with giant black mourning bows. I think you can see how much I enjoyed this book. My greatest regret is that the budget didn't run to more illustrations. (As it was, I gave them the pig for the back cover for free!)



I suppose it's fitting today to talk a little about my work for Margaret. As you might know, I did two books with Margaret towards the end of her life, *The Word Witch* and *The Moon and Farmer McPhee*. I have to be honest and say that in terms of what we have been talking about, ownership and traction on the text, I feel happiest with *McPhee*, but maybe that's because I had a lot to do with the story and had my own agenda about the 3D stuff in the book. In *The Word Witch*, there was so much of Margaret to deal with I felt I could never quite do her justice.

Maybe it was because I knew Margaret and was very fond of her that I was continually trying to step into her world rather than fall back into mine.



I ended up picking out elements I knew about her; where she lived under the Port Hills and around Birdlings Flat...



...that warm nor'west wind that seems to blow through her words, the rhythm of her voice as she read her poetry and our shared love of Lewis Carroll. But to be frank, I'd love to have another go at some of those drawings.

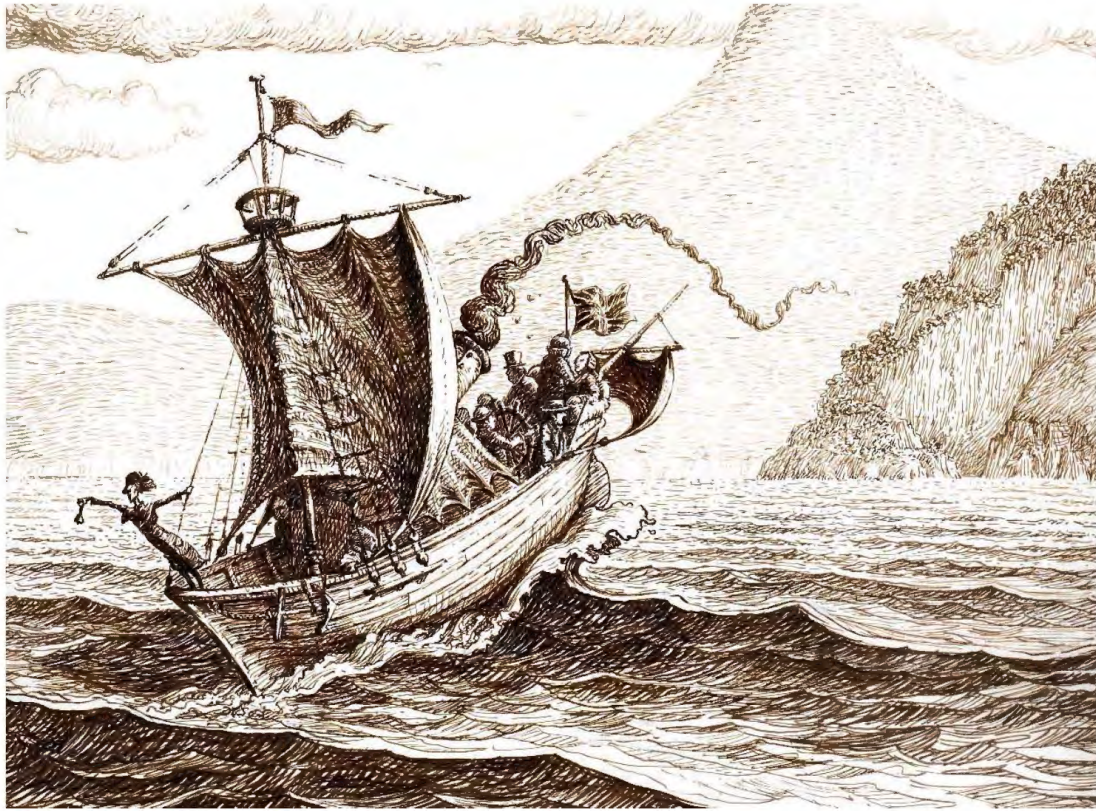


I feel easier with another project over which we had at least a spiritual connection. The landscape surrounding Margaret's home in Lyttleton Harbour played a huge role in her writing, and Otago Harbour has had a similar influence on my own work. Every day my dog and I walk a circuit around the little bays of Port Chalmers and pass the same landscape. The harbour stretches south to Dunedin and north

to Aramoana but Port itself is part of an ancient volcanic crater that has been broken by the sea into a couple of small islands and our little peninsula. Across from us there is a particularly symmetrical hill called Harbour Cone.

The connection with Margaret, in this instance, was through Lewis Carroll's wonderfully manic poem, *The Hunting of the Snark*. In 2006, I got the opportunity to do a limited edition of the poem, with fellow Dunedin printmakers and the University of Otago's Otakau Press.

While Margaret was not directly involved in the project, knowing our shared fascination for *The Snark* (which Margaret could recite at will!) I was determined that, rather than the usual 100 'limited edition copies', 101 copies of *The Snark* would be printed and the one hundred and oneth would be especially for Margaret.



In terms of the project itself, I decided that the whole drama should be played out in my own, local harbour and that the view, that so displeased Carroll's crew, should now be the chasms and crags of Quarantine Island. The project also shifted the poem from a conventional 2D format, to a 3D 'personal theatre' design.



This included a fold-out diorama/ backdrop of the island-seascape (which enclosed the poem booklet) and a series of pop-out 'characters cards' to be placed in front of the backdrop, as each crew member was introduced in the poem. The end result was a kind of visual metaphor of the way I see illustration in general, and it is still one of my favourite works.

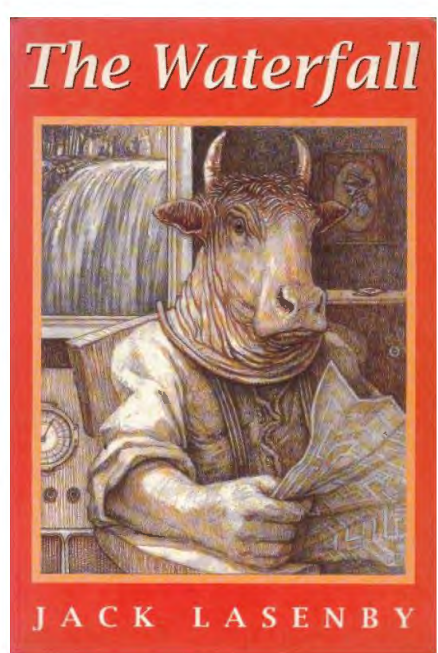


THE JUBJUB BIRD



THE BELLMAN

It seems inevitable now that, in any set of characters I take on, one or two at least will take on something from a person or an animal of my acquaintance. In *The Hunting of the Snark* the Bellman has always reminded me of a good friend who works at the National Library. The strange thing is he turns up as a giraffe in another later drawing. Only I can see the connections but that doesn't matter. What does matter is that recognising him in those characters made me care about drawing them well and I hope it shows. Which brings us back to Jack, and the problem of his whistling bull...



I met Jack in Dunedin in 1995 where he was using the College of Education Writer's Residency to complete his book *The Waterfall*. As I had already done the cover for the first in the trilogy, *Dead Man's Head*, Barbara Larsen at Longacre asked me to do the cover for this second book. Jack has always maintained that the bull is a portrait of him and perhaps it is.

Listening to him talk about his life with books, and then reading his wonderful stories, I have developed a profound respect for Jack. I have had the distinct privilege of doing nine of his covers now, and it is



always a challenge to try and match his sometimes quite surreal humour with an image. His yarns often recreate the impossible, imaginative spaces that I remember from radio serials when I was a kid, particularly the Goon Show (of which I was an addict), in a unique combination with the blokes leaning on trucks of my Mid-Canterbury childhood.

The old bugger keeps winning prizes of course, and I told him it was time they gave him his own leather chair, he was turning up so much.

And his whistling Bull? Perhaps it's yet another portrait of Jack, Jack in his youth maybe, before his voice broke. Then again, Jack still seems to be able to reach the high notes. For me it is the catch at the end of a very enjoyable hunt and in the end all I can do is hope that I haven't spoiled the magic for anyone else.

