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Natalie Marshall



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Natalie Marshall creates sweet, bold graphic illustration that lends itself so well to cards and children's books. Discovered by an editor at a market, her path towards publishing seemed destined for this talented mother/designer/illustrator.

Outline: We'd love to hear of your career path leading up to current work as a children's book illustrator. Did you always want to illustrate children's books?

Natalie: This is going to sound cheesy but when I was little I thought that doing the drawings for a children's book would be the best job in the world. I was obsessed with Little Golden books, Disney and any illustrated fairy tales. Then I got older and my book dream got shunted because I could not see a way to go from being a kid who was pretty good at drawing to being a grown-up who was good at drawing for kids. So when I grew up I went to university to study design. While I was at uni I worked part-time in a bookshop to fund my studies.

I re-discovered my love of children's books and made good use of my staff discount!

When I finished my uni degree I decided to stay at uni for another year to complete an Honours Degree in Graphic Design. I focused on the role of illustration in design and ended the year with the department illustration award.

Then I went to work as a graphic designer.

I worked as a designer in Melbourne, then in New York and in London. These were all very corporate jobs but I loved the challenge of working on annual reports and corporate branding - and I got to travel the world!

When I had my first baby I discovered children's books - again! But this time it was from a different perspective as it was the first time I had seen how a baby interacts with books. Then as my daughter grew we spent a lot of time looking at books and I loved it as much as she did...well, I probably loved it more!

After my second baby I began to REALLY miss the creative aspect of my career so I started drawing at night when the kids were asleep. I naturally started creating on the Mac as that had been my main creative tool for a really long time. I drew every night for a year. Plus, at the end of a day of looking after two small children I did not have the energy to get out paint and brushes etc. The Mac was so easy - turn it on - draw - save - turn it off. No paints to pack away



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and no chance of work getting messed up by two little inquisitive kids.

I did some posters for my girls' room, then I did some prints for friends, then I saw an opportunity to put my prints on greeting cards. After much research I decided to have a go at it. With my design and print background it was easy for me to put them together myself - and Little Red Owl cards was born. I spent a couple of summers having a stall at the Red Hill market selling prints and cards.

It was at Red Hill one day that I met a children's book editor. She asked if I would be interested in illustrating children's books (I don't need to say that I almost passed with shock out on the spot!). A few weeks later I was drawing my first two books and I was in creative HEAVEN. Childhood dream comes true!

Outline: Could you tell us about an average "day in the office" for your illustration business now?

Natalie: Average day goes something like this: drop the girls at school by 9.00am, have a coffee or go for a swim (or both), head home to do emails, do any urgent paperwork, fill card orders if I need to. Then I have a few hours to work on whatever projects I am working on. Then pick the girls up from school at 3.30pm and go back into 'mum mode' until about 8.30pm when I normally go back to my desk and continue drawing until my eyes get tired and I have to go to bed. When I am on a deadline though,

there is no coffee, no swimming and some very late nights working.

Outline: Has having children of your own influenced your work? How do you balance your studio work with the demands of a young family?

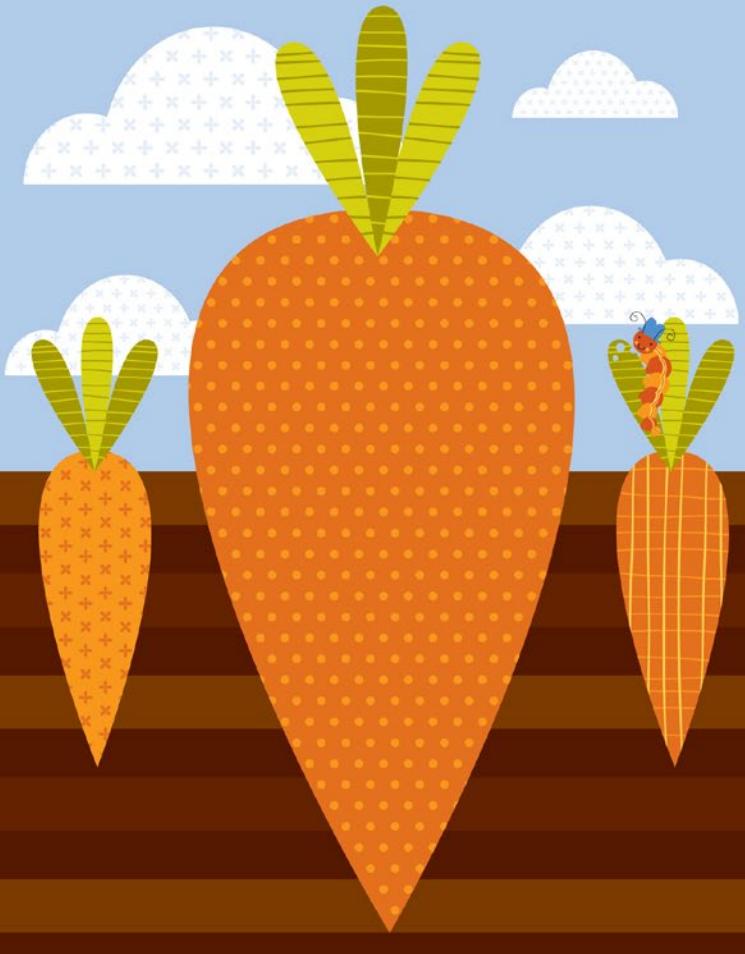
Natalie: Having my own children has influenced my work immensely. I actually credit my girls with the career path that I am now on - if I had not had them to bring me back to illustration and re-discover children's books then I would have continued working in corporate design and my little illustration dream would still be packed away in a box somewhere.

I am not sure if I actually have a work / life balance. My work is a big part of my life and my life is a big part of my work. I will admit to being a bit obsessed with my email - because many of my clients are overseas I often get feedback and jobs via email when I wake up in the morning. I often try to read my email before my eyes are open. We did go away for 6 weeks late last year in a caravan - it was so much fun AND it forced me to deal with my email addiction as we were often out of reception range!

Outline: With such a strong graphic style, your illustrations translate so well to cards. How did you set up your business Little Red Owl cards and how do you develop your



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retail relationships?

Natalie: When I first thought of doing cards I did a ton of research into printers, print costs, recycled stocks, envelopes and cello bags. I spent a lot of time at the shops looking at cards and seeing where my cards would potentially fit in and talking to retailers. I mocked up my first 12 designs and asked my family and friends for feedback. I decided that I wanted to be as eco friendly as possible and also have my cards printed locally in Melbourne. I had quite a few people tell me to print them in China to get a better price but that was not the direction I wanted to go in.

At the time of my first print run, my husband and I were not exactly rolling in money since I had pretty much been home full-time with our girls, so it was a bit of a risk for us to invest the funds into cards, envelopes and cello bags. It was a bit stressful! But my husband was very supportive of me and always has been. After the first print run was delivered to my house I don't think I slept for a week due to worrying about not selling 6000 cards - what would I do with them if they did not sell!

But my first orders came in and I dedicated time to making appointments with retailers that I thought would be most likely to stock my designs. I learnt a lot about keeping in contact with my retailers and getting stock to them quickly if they needed it. I also got very used to invoicing and all the paperwork that goes along with running even a very small business. My first print run sold out in a few months, and I could sleep again. After a couple of years on my own I decided that the 'selling' side of the business was taking

too much time as I was getting more and more book work. I found a wholesaler to work with and that takes the pressure off me a bit. I have now sold over 35,000 Little Red Owl cards and counting! And I still love designing new ranges as much as I did the first time around.

Outline: You have representation by the Bright Agency abroad. Could you tell us a little about this agency, and their work in an international environment? Do you need to adapt your style for different markets?

Natalie: I had just published my first two books with The Five Mile Press when I received an email from Vicki, the head of the Bright Agency in London. Her email was a big surprise to me but she had seen my books and wondered if Bright could represent me internationally. My initial reaction was one of shock and total disbelief. After I signed with Bright I learnt a lot about the world of licensing and working with international clients. Bright has been amazingly supportive and through them I have licensed work to American Greetings, Papyrus, Hallmark US and lots of other card companies. My illustrations have appeared on cards and all kinds of gift stationery and other formats including wall decals and coffee mugs.

Bright has also helped me build a presence in the children's book area and I have worked with lots of international publishers (Blue Apple Books, Simon and Schuster, Scholastic) which has been pretty much totally amazing. Since I signed with Bright I have illustrated over thirty children's books - ranging from small little baby books to large hardcover story books for older kids. I have



also recently branched out into writing and illustrating which has been a challenge. I am super proud of the four Millie-Mae Seasons books I published with The Five Mile Press late in 2013. I wrote and illustrated the four volumes very much based on the things my own girls are interested in. The Five Mile Press was so supportive and gave me free rein to write and illustrate as my heart desired so I am very happy that Millie-Mae has been successful!

I have not found that I need to adapt my style very much at all. I was once asked by a client to make my digital drawings look more like watercolor - but that was a disaster. I could not adapt my natural style and the project bombed. That was a great learning experience. Since then I have decided to be proud that my work is purely digital and in many ways digital is an asset in terms of time management and making client amends. I remain in awe of the illustrators who produce beautiful pen and ink drawings or watercolor illustrations. I am especially in love with the work of my Canadian friend Elly MacKay who creates stunning atmospheric illustrations using her beautiful hand drawings, a custom-made 'theater' lightbox, translucent paper and her camera.

Outline: We'd love to hear of your inspirations and favourite illustrators, both here and abroad.

Natalie: There are so many wonderful illustrators but I am most inspired by illustrators from the 50s, 60s and 70s (I am a retro girl at heart) - I love the work of Mary Blair (doesn't everyone?), Saul Bass, Miroslav Sasek, Charley Harper and Alice and Martin Provensen. I also terribly in love with the work of Jon Klassen, Marc Boutavant, Peter Brown and Isabelle Arsenault.

Inspirations? Mmmm - I always worry that my inspirations will seem terribly boring to other people - but here they are - my kids, the natural world, animals, education as well as pattern and color. I love to think that a small child will look at one of my books and the illustrations will make them giggle (a rabbit wearing gumboots) and they will also learn a little something about the world (what a circle looks like, what the color red is).

Outline: Could you share any upcoming projects you are excited about?

Natalie: Last year I worked on two titles for Simon & Schuster on a book format that was completely new to me and it was very challenging. The format consists of large sliding panels on each spread - as you slide the panels the illustrations change and words appear and disappear. The books aim to teach young children about scale and measurement. They were hard conceptually and difficult mechanically. The designer I worked with in London was so great - we sent proofs back and forth almost every day and had quite a few Skype meetings while we nutted it all out. In the end I am very happy with the books and can't wait to see the finished product. They are called 'Small, Smaller, Smallest' and 'Up, Down, Across' and are due for release in 210 days!

Outline: Is there any final advice you can provide to other illustrators looking to break into the children's book market?

Natalie: Oh that is SUCH a hard question!

Draw, draw, draw in the medium you are most comfortable in. Draw what you love how you love to draw it. Develop a portfolio of 10-12 of your best pieces. Send your portfolio to editors and publishing houses that you think might be interested in your style. Think about interpreting a few pages of a classic story in your own way. Talk to people. Have a decent website. Put yourself out there. Look at kid's books that are successful. Look at the work of illustrators who have won awards in their field. Join Illustrators Australia!

CLICK! **Natalie Marshall**

Website <http://www.nataliemarshall.com.au>