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# Shane McGowan



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Shane McGowan has worked across editorial, design, advertising and more but here we delve deeper into his work for children's books. He explains his love for this artform, "picture book illustration can help to fire kids' imagination and release their inner madness and allow them to dream and wonder. Illustrators and authors implant characters in childrens' brains that may stay with them their whole lives and help shape the kind of person they become. Can't get much cooler than that."

**Outline:** We'd love to hear about your career path and highlights so far. How did your first children's book contract come about?

**Shane:** I was living in London and had been working primarily in the editorial field for quite some time. The work was fast paced and constant and always interesting but after awhile I felt a little jaded and wanted a change. I mocked up some kids' book dummies which were atrocious. Back then I didn't even realise that children's books were 32 pages long. They came to nothing of course and years went by, I shied away from illustrating for awhile and spent time painting in my studio and exhibiting, but eventually turned back to editorial work. Then I listened to Axel Scheffler speak eloquently at a seminar and was encouraged to give kids' books another go, so when my daughter was about 4 I wrote a book inspired by her reluctance to brush her hair in the morning which became *Evie's Mad Hair Day*. I sent the dummy to 4 publishers and the lovely and talented Mike Jolly at Templar rang me the next day to offer a deal. That was 2004.

**Outline:** You've worked with several publishing houses on your children's books. Do you find the different publishing companies quite different to work with?

**Shane:** People who work in the kids publishing sector are generally the most passionate people about their chosen field. Having said that I've found every publisher is unique, every editor has their own way of working. Some are more interventionist whilst others will pretty much let you get on with it. Lately I feel children's publishing has become a lot more conservative and less willing to take risks. I would love to be proven wrong on this.

**Outline:** It was exciting to read that one of your children's books is being turned into a cartoon series. Could you tell us about this process, and the plans for the series?

**Shane:** I always thought book publishing was a slow process but the pace of TV development is glacial. I've known the head animator since I was a kid. He worked for a Sunday newspaper back in the 70's and used to publish my cartoons in the kids' section when I was 11 or 12.

When I returned from living in London he suggested we make a cartoon series around a few characters from my books. We have a great team working on this however... dealing with TV networks has been deeply frustrating and a challenge, that's all I can say at the moment.

**Outline:** Do you find a relationship develops with the characters you draw (or write about)? What is your process to "flesh out" a character and give it a personality, style and look?





*Shane's process*

**Shane:** Yes all the characters become a family whilst I'm working on the books. Last year I illustrated 6 books for MacMillan for The Legends in their own Lunchbox series. The books I was given are very funny and were written by Meredith Costain and centred on a rather self obsessed but well meaning girl called Stella who has delusions of grandeur by the truckload. Working on so many images meant that she and her friends and nemeses really came alive to me. I became quite fond of them in the end. At the beginning of a commission I read the text a number of times until I begin to picture the book. It can either happen immediately or take a number of u-turns till I find the right course. I kind of treat each book like a little film, and each spread like a scene in the film. And gradually the characters develop and take on a life of their own. Of course it's even more pronounced when I've written the characters myself, they ARE my children. But I usually don't have the visuals in mind if I'm writing the text myself, that comes later. I'll sketch out the characters a little. Work out what hairstyle they would have, how they are dressed, whether they wear glasses, have freckles, that sort of thing. That bit is a lot of fun and really helps to define the character in readers' minds. Sometimes it'll change midway through working on the book for some random reason, like a blue shirt gets lost in the predominantly blue backgrounds of the spreads so they end up with a red striped shirt.

**Outline:** You've spoken at the AGIdeas festival (and some other great events!). Could you share with us how you became involved with this festival, and the theme of your talk there? What is it like being a speaker at such a big event?

**Shane:** AGIdeas approached me to speak and initially I was reluctant. Anyone who knows me will attest to my horror at public speaking so the thought of standing in front of 2500 strangers was confronting. But I'm so glad I

was asked because it was an inspiring week. There were so many amazing speakers from around the globe, some of them quite nutty and the whole thing was impeccably run by Ken Cato and his team. My talk was entitled Draw and I just tried to be honest about the profession and my experiences. I actually found it much easier to speak to such a large audience, who are mostly in the dark, compared to a small audience of 100 who are right there before you. Picture book illustration can help to fire kids' imagination and release their inner madness and allow them to dream and wonder. Illustrators and authors implant characters in childrens' brains that may stay with them their whole lives and help shape the kind of person they become. Can't get much cooler than that. I hope I was able to convey some of this to the audience.

**Outline:** We'd love to hear of your process for creating your detailed work.

**Shane:** When I started my career I worked with anything I could get my hands on. Scraperboard was perfect for newsprint jobs and gouache was ideal because it dried quickly and flat and printed well. But eventually I went to the dark side and I've been working with a computer for many years now. I use a Wacom tablet and draw with an electronic pen. For a long while I even sketched directly on to the tablet but I'm turning back to pencil sketches now for their fluidity. I can then chop up the sketches and work out the sizing on the computer. My preferred programme for the finals is Photoshop because it's perfect for drawing. I love the ease of the tools and the quality of the brushes. I add certain filters along the way but not so they overpower the image.

**Outline:** With some history in the illustration world, it would be great to get your perspective on the present, and your vision of the future of the industry. What challenges have you had in your own business, and how do you plan

(and safeguard) for the future?

**Shane:** The illustration world has changed dramatically since I started. No longer can we just call ourselves magazine illustrators or book illustrators or whatever. We have to always evolve and try new avenues. Fees have shrunk, no question, and the competition just gets fiercer. There are so many talented illustrators out there and so we have to market ourselves strategically and constantly. Be prepared to compromise at times. Most jobs are about collaboration, listening and learning and taking advice. We need to work with people who know more than we do. I love all the variations of ebooks and apps for kids these days but I also think traditional books will never fade, parents and kids will always value that quiet time, curled up in a corner, immersed in a good book. What are some of the things I'm doing to safeguard for the future? An L.A based app company is helping to turn some of my books into ebooks which will be available on all platforms so we'll see how that goes. I have a new agent in London called The Organisation. I try to keep up an on-line presence and my work is available from shops like Red Bubble and Society 6. I enter competitions when I can and have my work on certain illustration directories. I send email promotions and postcards to agencies, magazines and publishers. I try to always have some personal projects on the go. And I guess if all else fails I could try being a postie. At least you get some fresh air every day.

**Outline:** Who are your favourite artists?

**Shane:** I have many favourites. I love some of the British painters from the 90's like Fiona Rae, Gary Hume and Ian Davenport. I've always loved Warhol, Rothko and Basquiat. I was very influenced by the illustrators that emerged in the late 70's, early 80's like Anne Howeson, Robert Mason, Anthony Russo and Melbourne's Robert Pearce who was a friend. And in the kids book field I admire Lane Smith, Simon Bartram, Bob Staake and loads of others, the list is endless.

**Outline:** What was the first book that "spoke" to you?

**Shane:** I was obsessed with *Peanuts* when I was a kid. I'd get my mum to buy me those paperback editions and I'd pore over them for hours. I also devoured *Mad* magazines and the poor imitators like *Cracked* and *Crazy*. But the first childrens book that really touched me was *Where The Wild Things Are*. Those beasts fascinated me and the hatched drawings were so beautiful and full of life. To this day that book is still hard to beat. ●

{ **CLICK!** } **Shane McGowan**

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