

Q&A with Jim Helmore for Paper Planes

Q: How did you come into creating picture books?

I'd always enjoyed writing stories and my partner Karen Wall was (and still is!) a designer and illustrator. I had a story idea that Karen liked, so we decided to make our own cardboard copy of the book and see if anyone would publish it. Over the course of a year, we sent this mock-up to lots of publishers, who all promptly sent it back. And then, to our amazement, somebody commissioned it! The book eventually became LETTERBOX LIL and it went on to win the Sheffield Children's Book Award, way back in 2006. To this day I still can't quite believe this actually happened. We were very persistent and very, very lucky.

Q: What do you enjoy about creating picture books?

For PAPER PLANES especially, I loved watching the illustrations develop. From sketches right through to the final colour versions, Richard's illustrations have a wonderful dream-like quality, which fits the story beautifully.

Q: Your picture books have lovely messages within the story - is this what makes a great picture book for you?

Thank you! An overt, clear message can help, but I also like to get caught up in a good story, where you can find your own meaning. And sometimes picture books just need to amaze me or make me laugh.

Q: Why did you decide to focus on the relationship between two best friends in this story?

I had the original idea for PAPER PLANES when my brother moved to Australia. Growing up, we'd always been quite close and I tried to imagine what this separation would feel like for a child. Hopefully the story might help children come to terms with losing a friend, for whatever reason. Sometimes even a new school just down the road can feel as far away as the other side of the world.

Q: How did Paper Planes develop? Was it a sudden burst of inspiration or did you have to workshop the idea?

Some ideas arrive fully formed. The previous book I worked on with Richard Jones (THE SNOW LION) was like this. Others take a lot of work before things begin to fall into place, and PAPER PLANES followed this pattern. I'm hugely happy with the end result though and can't wait for readers to meet Mia and Ben!

Q: When did you first start to write?

I've always enjoyed writing stories and making physical books. I still have some of the coloured-paper books I tied together with string at primary school.

Q: Where do you work - can you describe your workspace - and your main distractions from working?!

I don't have a particular work place, I write when and where I can: on the bus, on the sofa, on the stairs! Karen and I have a daughter now, and this is the biggest and BEST distraction of all.

Q: What are you working on now and do you have another picture book in the pipeline?

I'm always turning over new story ideas. Sometimes it helps to develop a story in your head and not begin writing it down too quickly. A long, rambling walk, with no planned destination, is my favourite time to think.

Q: For all the budding writers out there, can you give us your top tips for choosing a great theme or central idea for a picture book?

Always pick an idea that means something to you or that you have an interest in. If you are enthusiastic and passionate about something, it will shine through in your writing.

Q: If you weren't creating picture books, what other career would tempt you?

A time-travelling, veg-growing, wild-swimmer. There's got to be call for one of those, surely?