

Helen on winning the Kate Greenaway Award

It's almost impossible to answer this without using all the usual clichés, and yet there's no getting round the fact that, of course, winning this award is a great honour.

It was my illustrations to Lewis Carroll's ALICE IN WONDERLAND that won me last year's (2000) Kate Greenaway Award. I worked on this for at least two years and, by the time I finished, I'd lost any perspective on the work. Also, knowing that ALICE had been illustrated by some great illustrators of the past, particularly John Tenniel, added to the awesome nature of the task. It became such a long, complex and often worrying process that, come the end, my only wish was to hand it in, breathe a sign of relief and move on.

From conversations I've had with other illustrators, I don't think I'm alone in this reaction. One almost always starts with a vision of how the artwork will best serve the text. Yet, completion is often accompanied by disappointment and a sense of anticlimax. The finished product never lives up to one's expectations.

Taking this into account, you can imagine how genuinely and very pleasantly surprised I was to hear that ALICE had won the award. However despairing I might have felt about the work, it must have struck a chord with someone somewhere! To have it taken out of my hands at last meant the work was no longer hampered by these misgivings. It could now stand alone and be judged objectively. Children today are so visually literate; illustrations help to make words less daunting. Picture books are a child's entrée into the world of books in general. In dealing specifically with children's book illustrations, the Kate Greenaway Award recognises the significance of this medium and so nurtures a love of reading in successive generations.

There is, increasingly, a plethora of children's picture books available. So, it must be a harrowing procedure, drawing up a shortlist of prospective winners for the Award. It is, perhaps, just as well that the judges are all librarians who, as a matter of course, eat, drink and breathe children's books. They must be in a good position to evaluate the range, quality and popularity of material on offer. Being aware of this adds to my delight in winning.

Lastly, I'd just like to say that though this is the second time I have won the Kate Greenaway Award – the first time being years ago and the beginning of my career as an illustrator – it is almost more of an honour to have won it this time round. It's extraordinary how the work never gets any easier. With every project I embark on I try and push out my boundaries by exploring new techniques, approaches etc. One's aim is to make the next book better than the last which is both challenging and endlessly interesting. The more I know, the more there is to know and now, when a drawing isn't quite right, it sticks out like a sore thumb. So, to win again is a great morale booster and a snub to the destructive power of self-criticism.