

Q&A with Naomi Howarth

1. Your earlier picture books *The Crow's Tale* and *Tug of War* were retellings of folk tales and there's a definite folk tale feel to *The Night Dragon*, though it's clearly your own invention. What was its inspiration?

I started with the idea of a rainbow dragon. I had a strong image of her soaring through grey landscapes, and bringing colour into the world. This was my acorn of an idea and from there the story grew. I had a lightbulb moment (spoiler alert!) of her breathing out colour instead of grey clouds, and that lead onto the idea of her creating sunsets. It all seemed to fit into place with my love of folktales and the way in which natural phenomena has been interpreted in such imaginative ways.

2. You moved into picture book illustration from fashion and costume design. Does that influence your picture books (thinking about Maud the dragon's gorgeous multi-coloured wings for example)?

I absolutely think it has influenced my work, from the colour and textures of the artwork, to the character development. When I was studying costume design, we spent a lot of time developing our characters and I still work with this process - knowing them inside out. Research is also something that we focused on in costume and this still really helps my design process - I spent a lot of time looking at medieval dragons at the beginning of developing Maud for example.

3. You were mentored by award-winning illustrator Catherine Rayner on the Picture Hooks scheme. What was the most important thing you learned from her about picture book illustration?

Catherine was such a fantastic and generous mentor. She really emphasised the idea of developing the character first and then the story would lead on naturally. I spent the majority of the process sketching and it really showed me the importance of development - if you put the time into that, the final outcome will definitely be stronger.

4. There are themes of bravery, kindness and being true to oneself in all of your picture books. How important to you is it that your books have a special message for children?

Working with folk tales from the beginning of my career in picture books has inevitably lead me to tell stories with heartfelt messages. I believe that a strong reason as to why folktales have stood the test of time is that parables and folk tales connect with readers without being too preachy or didactic. I think it is great if a story has a deeper level that can give children the chance to consider the underlying message, and I have found working with lots of groups of school children that they have a huge amount of consideration and empathy. At the same time, some of my absolute favourite children's books don't always have deeper messages, and are very funny and entertaining- maybe it's time I work on a story just for the crack!

5. What's your favourite spread in *The Night Dragon*, and why?

I would have to choose the city scape. It is so different from any of my previous work, it was really fun developing my first ever city. I travelled to Hong Kong and Japan when I started working on the book, which totally inspired this scene. I learnt that in Hong Kong some of the sky scrapers have holes built into the middle of them for the Dragon's to fly through, as there is such a strong belief in, and reverence for Dragons. The colours of Hong Kong and Tokyo were so perfectly sherbet, it just all came together in my head. I also had fun with lots of little signs - some of my friends and family have now become shop owners and DJs in my make believe city!