



Authorgraph No.128: Lauren Child

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Lauren Child interviewed by **Joanna Carey**.

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Illustrators have certain basic requirements ? such as access to well lit studio space, and a regular income to keep the wolf from the door. But what about the isolation? It can be a lonely job. Lauren Child has found the ideal solution to all this ? she does two jobs at once: working as a receptionist for a friend?s design company, the desk at which she creates her picture books is the same as that from which she answers the company telephone. I arrange to meet her at the premises in a converted warehouse by the river at Chelsea. A clanky iron-age lift takes me up to the studio, a vast space where Lauren (a tall, immaculately made-up blonde in T shirt and jeans who manages to be both impossibly glamorous and reassuringly funny and unpretentious) has a corner all to herself; a sort of designer Wendy-house with a pinboard full of cards and drawings, a work top with computer and telephone, and shelves bristling with pens, pencils and brushes, and bulging with copies of her books in several different languages.

She now has six titles to her name and her distinctive style is an entertaining mix of unruly, cartoony drawing, witty observation and bold page design that borrows more than a little from the advertising world and incorporates lots of retro ?50s styling and licorice allsorts colours. Along with her adventurous typography and inventive, often weirdly disorientating photographic collage, the abundance of surface pattern and jokey detail creates a wonky childlike sense of perspective where everything on the page clamours for attention.

She made an early impact with the wonderfully funny **Clarice Bean That?s Me** which chronicles the comical ups and downs of family life ? with a stressed-out father, a confused grandpa, an angst-ridden teenage brother, a boy-crazy sister, an annoying little brother and a new age mother who likes to relax in the bath listening to whale music. The drawing has a rash, impulsive feel and it is no surprise to hear that as a child she loved Quentin Blake?s work. ?I remember buying books simply because they had his drawings on the cover ? I loved the expressive quality of his scribbly images. And I loved the Madeline books by Bemelmans; they have such mood and atmosphere. I loved E H Shepard too and Carl Larssen but it wasn?t just books, I was obsessed with the whole Holly Hobbie thing at one point. But my greatest source of inspiration was ? and is ? Snoopy. I?ve always been fascinated by the way Snoopy appeals across the generations. I found when I?d outgrown the ?tweeness? I appreciated it in a different way. I?m intrigued by that ?crossover? and the way those very strong characters live on, and generate all that merchandise! I?ve still got all my Snoopy stationery ? all in its packaging, untouched. I?d like to see my characters take on a life of their own in film, TV and, yes! merchandise! She smiles a serene, angelic smile and her diamanté hair slide twinkles.

She went to art school to study illustration but this was a huge disappointment. It simply did not live up to her expectations. Educated at a comprehensive school in Marlborough, Lauren did her sixth form at Marlborough College where her father was the art teacher. ?He ran a truly amazing art department, he was a really inspiring teacher who really made you want to draw, made you understand things, whether it was through drawing in a straightforward classical way, or learning about cubism, or Matisse or whatever. Anyway, after that, at art school in Manchester, there was almost no

teaching. I had a very chippy tutor who continually put me down for being a posh girl from the south who, in his view, probably just wanted to do flower paintings. It was all very negative, no input. Other students were more resourceful. They were used to being left to their own devices, they weren't waiting to be taught. It was awful. Life drawing for example – until I went to art school, I'd never understood how people could have thought life drawing was boring. There was no feeling of excitement or discovery about it. I was totally disillusioned. There *were* some good teachers but generally speaking you were ignored. I was away for two weeks at one point and nobody noticed. I left after a year. Really, I should have made a stand, and left after two weeks.?

She reapplied for places elsewhere and ended up taking the next year off travelling, waitressing, learning to drive and eventually taking a place at City and Guilds (an independent art school in London) to study decorative arts. After this she embarked on a series of jobs making furniture, decorating china – taking commissions to paint curtains and murals, window dressing for Harvey Nichols, and, with a friend, painting the spots on Damien Hirst's spot paintings: 'Paid by the hour' rather than by the spot – which was a shame as I was really quick. No, I wasn't involved in his pickled sharks or the sawn-in-half cows, but I saw them – and smelt them? she says. And with another friend, an actor, she held regular 'activity days' with the idea of learning new skills, like making lamps. This involved welding and making lampshades out of sari silks and led to the formation of a company called Chandeliers for the People: 'No, I didn't think up that name, it was a witty friend.' But their Blue-Peterish zeal failed them when it came to hawking the stuff round expensive shops like Liberty's, so another friend (friends play a vital role in this saga) organized sales in fashionable watering-holes like the Groucho and the Cobden club.

Eventually though, I realized I had to get my act together, get back to what I'd always intended, and write a book. I had actually written a book when I was 18 (with a friend) and it was accepted by Macmillan but they wanted too many changes. It was all too complicated. It was exciting for a few minutes, but we were too young for that kind of commitment, really. I think we were just in it for the lunch and then it was all over, so in the early '90s I decided to have another go. I applied for the Royal College of Art to do an MA but I didn't get in? (she's clearly still a bit miffed about that) – and then a friend sent my portfolio off to someone who worked in a design studio, whose advice was to stop flitting about and write a book. So, with a bit of help and encouragement (from a friend, of course) she set about writing a book: 'I really had no idea how to start. I remember saying to my friend, 'do you think it's all right to do it like this, in this sort of conversational style??' And it is that 'conversational style' that makes Clarice Bean such a real and engaging character. And it is all those odd jobs and experiences that give these books their dotty charm and their kaleidoscopic visual diversity – the sari-silk left over from lampshade days is recycled as wall paper in **Clarice Bean**, and the clouds round Clarice's Dad's skyscraper office were inspired by photographic prints on Harvey Nichols carrier bags – 'though naturally I took my own photos so as not to infringe copyright' Lauren assures me hastily. And then there is her ability to remember what it was like to be a child. 'I can see it all more clearly now – life gets easier after 30 (she's 35 now) and I can remember what it was like to be Clarice Bean's age, round about 7, when you have no control over your life: even when you gain a little independence, you're still so *vulnerable*. It's a feeling I still get when I walk down Oxford Street – you're all on your own amongst so many people. My boyfriend laughs at me because I always feel so sad when I see people queueing up to buy their sandwiches – it reminds me of packed lunches and how, at school, your packed lunch was your one connection with your mum at home. And restaurants make me sad, it's the thought of all those people in need of a bit of mothering.'

Right from the start, Lauren Child seems to have mastered the art of integrating text and illustrations. In the Clarice Bean stories, with their cheerfully chaotic sock-strewn domestic interiors, each of the characters has its own distinctive typeface so you can always see who is talking – and when Frank Sinatra is singing on Clarice's Dad's stereo, his words twirl seductively round the turntable – to give the idea of music?. Against colourful backgrounds composed of cunning photographic montages, swishy watercolour washes, fabric collages featuring sari silks, chintzy floral prints and abstract '50s motifs, she superimposes cut-out figures drawn with a bold black line – 'No it's not ink. I just can't use pen and ink. I know that's meant to be the most spontaneous medium, but people using pen and ink always draw over a pencil line, don't they? So I just use pencil – it's much less inhibiting, and I can rub it out if I go wrong. Then I scan the pencil drawing into the computer and print it out in black onto cartridge paper which I can then continue to work on with paints, collage or whatever. I love the computer because it keeps the whole thing fluid – you can juggle things around.

Sometimes a drawing might be just right, but the scale might be wrong, in which case I can keep the spontaneity of the drawing by resizing it rather than having to draw it all again.?

She demonstrates: resized and rearranged, her characters sit patiently on the screen, waiting to be printed out, but, it seems it will not be long before Lauren's dreams of seeing them step off the page and take on a life of their own are realized ? Clarice Bean has already been optioned for film/TV adaptation and as for **I Will Not Ever Never Eat a Tomato** , featuring Charlie and Lola, Lauren is planning to cut out the middleman and learn how to do her own animation and get them up and running herself ... ?and see if I can be involved in the licensing and the merchandise too?, she says gleefully.

Photographs by Joanna Carey.

Lauren Child's books in order of appearance

I Want a Pet , Frances Lincoln, 0 7112 1212 0, £9.99 hbk, 0 7112 1339 9, £4.99 pbk

Clarice Bean That's Me , Orchard, 1 84121 029 3, £10.99 hbk, 1 84121 583 X, £4.99 pbk

I Will Not Ever Never Eat a Tomato , Orchard, 1 84121 397 7, £10.99 hbk, 1 84121 602 X, £4.99 pbk

My Uncle is a Hunkle Says Clarice Bean , Orchard, 1 84121 399 3, £10.99 hbk (1 84121 624 0, £4.99 pbk, Sept. 2001)

Beware of the Storybook Wolves , Hodder, 0 340 77915 2, £9.99 hbk (0 340 77916 0, £5.99 pbk, June 2001)

I Am NOT Sleepy and I WILL NOT Go to Bed , Orchard, 1 84121 821 9, £10.99 hbk

What Planet Are You From, Clarice Bean? , Orchard, 1 84121 819 7, £10.99 hbk (Sept. 2001)

Joanna Carey is a writer and illustrator and the former Children's Book Editor of *The Guardian* .



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