



Authorgraph No.188: Emily Gravett

By *Richard Hill*

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[Clive Barnes](#) [1]

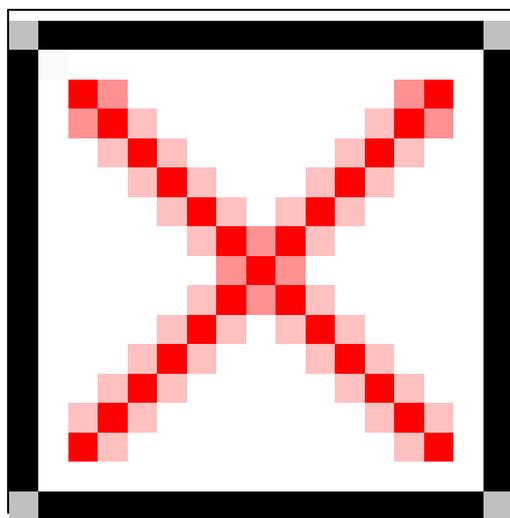
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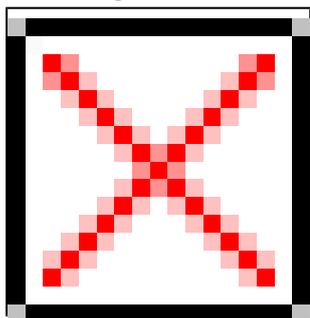
Emily Gravett is interviewed by **Clive Barnes**.



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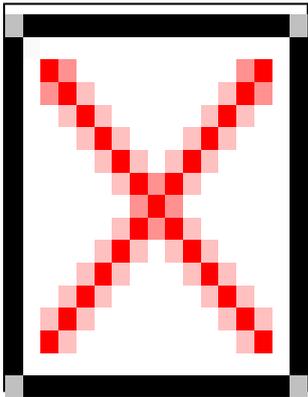
The injunction pinned above Emily Gravett's desk in her small attic studio urges, 'Think harder?'. You might be forgiven for believing that she must be thinking and working quite hard already. When I point out that there have been 12 books in the six years since the publication of her first book **Wolves**, she says, 'I don't feel like I'm producing a lot. It's only when you look back, you think, oh god, there's a big list there.' Not only a big list but a stack of awards, including two Kate Greenaways, which ranks her with some of the foremost picture book creators of the last half century, and no-one has more than two.

The one thing that you are likely to know about Emily's life is that she spent eight years from the age of 16 outside conventional society, travelling in Britain, living first in a bender, then a caravan, then an old army bus. There she met

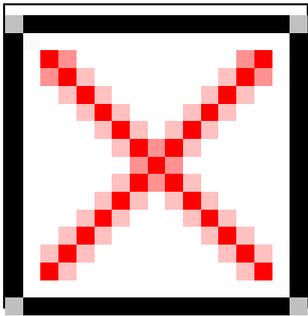


her partner Mik, and became pregnant with Oleander, their daughter. It was Oleander's arrival that changed their lives. They moved into a cottage in West Wales. Mik trained as a plumber and Emily did an Art Foundation Course at the local college. She recorded this time in a remarkable pictorial journal, created partly as her final project for the Foundation year but also as a gift for Oleander: 'It seemed like quite a big turning point in our life

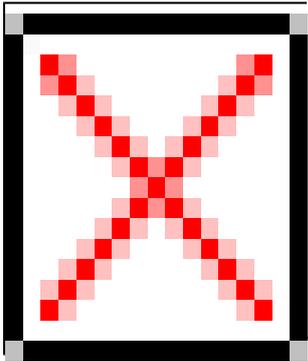
that year. We were changing the way we were living.? The journal?s pages, displayed around the room at her interview, helped her entry into the art degree course at Brighton University. Now loosely bound together, its arrangement of text, significant objects (it begins with Emily?s positive pregnancy test) and narrative drawing, suggest the interests and skills to be found in her subsequent picture books: not least in its touches of humour.



Studying at Brighton University was a homecoming for Emily. She had spent her early years in the city, where her mother was an art teacher and her father a printmaker. ?There was always lots of drawing going on in my house,? she remembers. And she was drawing ?right from when I was little?. Her only good grade at GCSE came in Art, she says, and she continued to draw even on the road: ?Doodling mostly. Lots of drawings of wherever we were. I used to draw out of the window. Drew the dogs a lot.? Although she must have had picture books read to her as a child and, born in 1972, she now realises that ?my generation was the first generation to have a lot of them?, it was only when cooped up in that isolated cottage, reading to Oleander that she began to have an inkling of their potential for her. It was a potential that she realised to a surprising degree even as a student, producing two published books at Brighton: **Orange Pear Apple Bear**, and **Wolves**, which won the Macmillan Prize for Children?s Book Illustration in 2004.

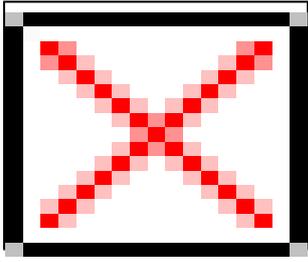


These books show the different sides of her creative personality. **Orange Pear?** is inspired by Lynne Truss?s **Eats, Shoots and Leaves**. It uses only five words, with one watercolour illustration to each page; and introduces a charmingly ingratiating bear who juggles with fruit, and changes shape and colour according to the vagaries of punctuation. It is a small masterpiece, which remains Emily?s own favourite among her books: ?It?s simple and I like that.? **Wolves**, by contrast, is a sophisticated interplay of text and illustration. The book in your hand, complete with its own library card and date label, is exactly the same as the book about wolves which the rabbit borrows in the story and from which a wolf emerges to devour him (or maybe not) on the final pages.



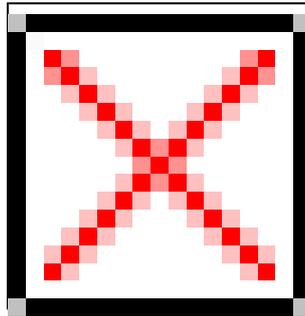
Wolves shows her interest in the book as an object, an interest which extends to different forms of text that appear or are inserted in subsequent books: postcards and newspaper clippings in **Meerkat Mail**; and a ration book, knitting pattern, baby book, seed packet and recipe book in **The Rabbit Problem**, a book which is itself in the form of a calendar of the rabbit year. Alongside this fascination with the book as object is an inclination to mutilate and reform it. Holes and ragged pages feature in several books, often nibbled by her rodent characters; an alternative

happy ending to **Wolves** is made out of scraps of illustration from the book ripped up by the wolf, and **Spells** features a frog who, having torn up a witch's spell book, attempts to put it back together in various ways to turn himself into a prince. All Emily's books are complete acts of creation in which covers, endpapers, title pages, and publishing details are often drawn into the theme. In **Dogs**, for instance, the publishing details are in the form of a bone. Her

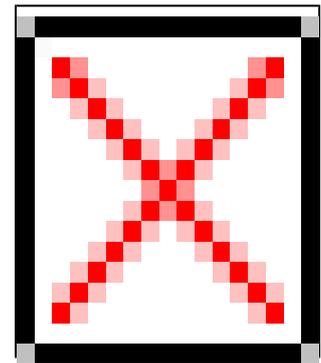


next book, [Again](#) [3], due out in October, is once more a book that looks like the book within it, and has a hole burnt through the book and cover by a little dragon in a temper tantrum.

Many of the texts that form the basis of her stories are information texts. **Wolves** is based on a paragraph about wolf behaviour; **Little Mouse's Big Book of Fears** lists a range of phobias, many with obscure names; and, most ambitious of all, and most troublesome to its creator, **The Rabbit Problem** - it's a maths problem and I'm rubbish at maths?

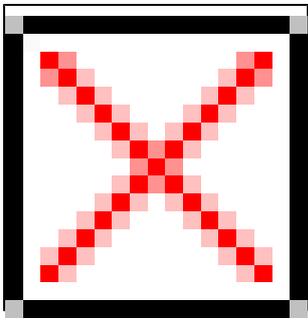


was suggested by a calculation by the medieval thinker, Fibonacci. She says, 'Reference books are a bit scrummy. I really like them. They're the kind of books I keep'; and all of these texts, transformed into something funny and thought provoking in Emily's hands, convey her wonder at the world's variety and nibble away at the distinction between fiction and reality. Talking to Emily, I have the impression of someone who, in the process of drawing her characters, comes to have a personal relationship with them: 'I'm fond of Little Mouse. I like him as a character. That little mouse is appealing to me. Wolves are lovely as well.' As for the pigs in **Wolf Won't Bite**, who exploit a long-suffering wolf beyond endurance: 'They are nasty pieces of work those pigs. I don't like them at all. The wolf looks like my dog. That's Edith.' Sometimes she explicitly identifies herself with her characters: **Wolves** is written



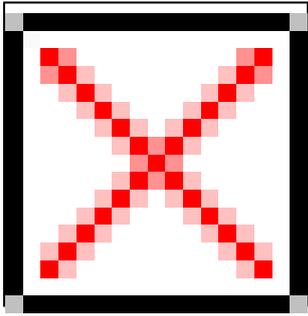
by Emily Grrabbit, who could be both a wolf and a rabbit, and, on the cover of **Little Mouse's Big Book of Fears**, Emily's name is crossed out to be replaced by Little Mouse. If you have this book signed by Emily, Little Mouse's name in turn will be crossed out and your name added. She wants to 'include' the reader: 'I think it is conscious. You want the reader to feel I'm part of this. I can join in. I can affect this.'

The process of creation is as painstaking as it is playful, and each book, as it grows, has to be negotiated by Emily and her designer and editor, within technical and cost constraints. Her interest in the book as a complete creation has meant that she found her one experience of illustrating someone else's text, Julia Donaldson's **Cave Bear**, too constricting: 'I enjoyed it and I'm pleased with the way the book looks but it's not as fulfilling as doing my own thing.' Even here, she played with the form of the book, in a



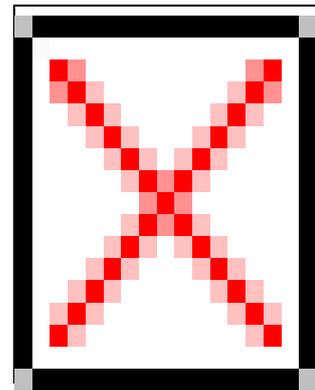
way that very few people would realise unless let into the secret as I was. She drew each double page so that, if extracted from the book, they would fit together and make one long picture.

The form of her books is made possible by Emily's use of the computer, which enables her to scan in and manipulate both found or created objects and her own drawing. She doesn't use it to draw, however; and a sketch book is open on her desk, its double pages covered with drawings of a mouse (perhaps Little Mouse in a new adventure?). Whatever Emily's liking for the cut and paste aspect of book making, in which pastiche and parody are the basis of her humour, equally important to her are observation, line, colour, character and its pathos and comedy.



Her books always feature animals. Only **Monkey and Me** has a central child character, a hyper-active little girl, based on the daughter of one of Emily's friends, and even here she is acting out the shape of the animals she has seen at the zoo. Although Emily's animals are never exactly naturalistic, they are closely observed and it is no surprise to learn that, at a book festival in Berlin, when she found her hotel was next to the zoo, she spent two of her afternoons and evenings there: "I don't really approve of zoos but you can't see animals close up anywhere."

She explores human fears and aspirations through her animals, their stories sometimes emerging from her contemplation



of the character she has created. Originally, the duck in **The Odd Egg** looked as though he might have trouble flying, but, as Emily worked out this idea, an egg appeared in one of her sketches and an entirely different story suggested itself. In **Blue Chameleon**, the eponymous hero's longing for a friend and his capacity to take on different shapes and colours, lead to his surreal and hilarious attempts to emulate and fit in with, for instance, a banana, a cockatoo, a snail and a sock.

Alongside the humour and celebration of life in her books, there's also recognition that life can be hard, scary and sometimes dangerous for a rabbit, a mouse or even a wolf. Before I leave, I ask her if she feels that her years as a traveller have fed into her books at all. She thinks for a moment: "Probably, yes. I think my books are slightly more? I don't even know what the word is, not anarchic, but a bit less staid than they probably would have been. I would have been a bit more scared to be individual, follow my own path. I'm not so worried about what people think of me. I was quite a shy person. I am not so shy any more." For that, all of us should be grateful.

The Books

(published by Macmillan Children's Books in paperback unless otherwise indicated)

Again! [3], 978-0230745360, £10.99

Blue Chameleon, 978 0 330 51875 8, £5.99

Cave Baby, text by Julia Donaldson, 978 0 330 52276 2, £5.99

Dogs, 978 0 230 71248 5, £5.99

Little Mouse's Big Book of Fears, 978 0 230 01619 4, £6.99

Meerkat Mail, 978 1 4050 9075 9, £5.99

Monkey and Me, 978 0 230 01583 8, £5.99

The Odd Egg, 978 0 230 53135 2, £5.99

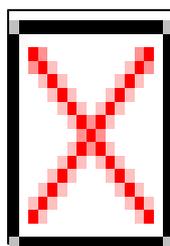
Orange Pear Apple Bear, 978 1 4050 9022 3, £4.99

The Rabbit Problem, 978 0 330 50397 6, £6.99

Spells, 978 0 230 53136 9, £5.99

Wolf Won't Bite!, 978 0 230 70425 1, £10.99 hbk

Wolves, 978 1 4050 5362 4, £5.99



Clive Barnes has retired from Southampton City where he was Principal Children's Librarian and is now a freelance researcher and writer.

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