



Spotlight on Matt Griffin

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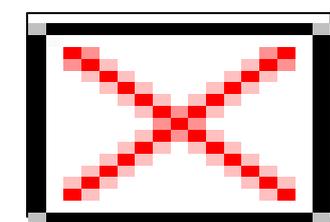
[Matt Griffin](#) [1]

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In the Spotlight: **Matt Griffin**

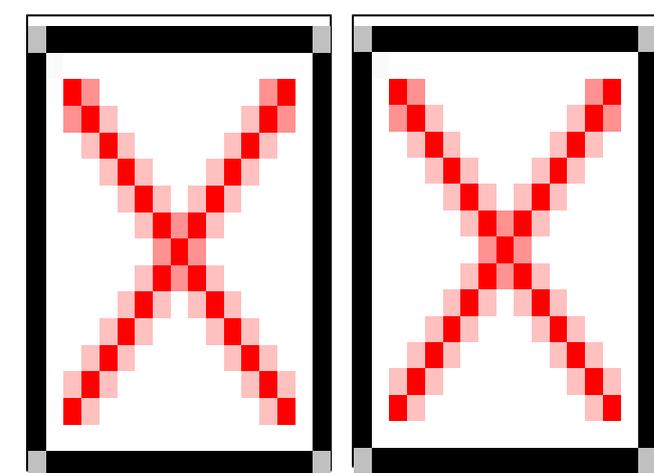
The author of the **Ayla** trilogy describes the Virtual Reality of his creation process.



My job title for the last nine years has been 'illustrator'. It was always a dream of mine to have that title, and it was a long, oscillating, road to get it. The other title I craved, practically from infancy, was 'author', but rather than take the long, oscillating road to that, I filed it away in the 'pipe dreams' section of my brain, and kept drawing.

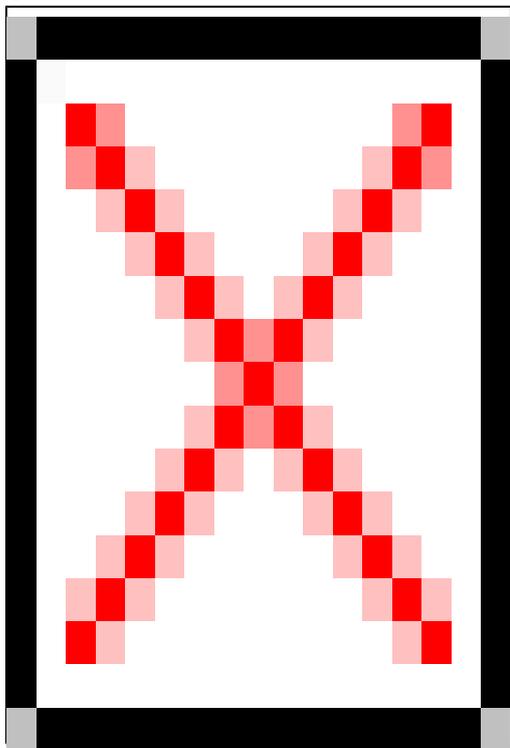
In fact the real dream was to combine the two - to create worlds in words and pictures, just as Tolkien had done in **The Hobbit**, infecting me with an overwhelming desire to do the same. Then, out of nowhere, that opportunity presented itself and I grabbed it.

In 2015, the **O'Brien Press** agreed to publish my debut novel, [A Cage of Roots](#) [3], and allowed me to contribute all of the artwork, from cover to interior illustrations to chapter headings to those little things that separate sections within chapters (technical term unknown at time of writing). They then agreed to publish the sequel, [Storm Weaver](#) [4], and only then, with two books to my name, did I allow myself the double handle of author/illustrator, and it still feels strange to say it. Here is a little bit about the process of combining my two passions.



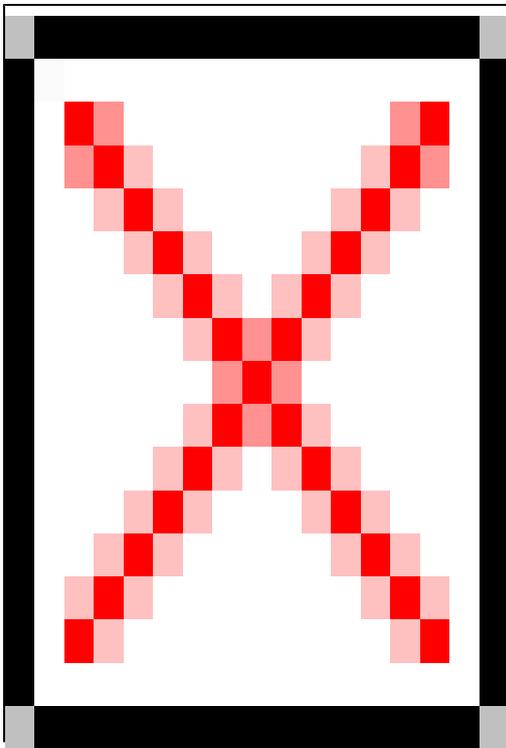
The story presents itself to me in pictures - not still images for me to illustrate, but moving ones for me to describe in the best language possible. When I talk to schools I tell the kids that it's a bit like watching a movie, but really more like using Virtual Reality. I walk (in the real world) but I 'see' the story unfolding in front of me and I can pause it, rewind, look around, explore. Then I replay it so that I don't forget, and when I get back from my walk I feverishly scribble down notes about what I saw. Then I write - that comes first.

As a professional illustrator, I'm used to working to briefs - clients give me an idea of what they'd like to see based on



my previous work and the subject of their commission, and I respond to that. Sometimes the brief is very precise, and sometimes it's vague - these days I'm trusted to be able to come up with something on my own without too much direction (although I like working in both situations). For book interiors, I might be given an idea of what should be shown, and I then use my own intuition about how to compose that into a good picture. This intuition has been honed over the last nine years (and I'll continue to hone it until they drag me screaming from my studio). For my own books, Emma Byrne, art director at O'Brien, and Susan Houlden, my editor/mentor/wrangler, are very open to my own ideas and I'm lucky to be allowed almost-free reign. 'Almost' because sometimes I might make an image that would scare the life out of an adult, let alone a young reader. So occasionally my initial ideas have to be contested. This is all done, as with every illustration commission, with roughs - loose sketches done in a notebook, or these days on an iPad. So I won't have done too much work only to find that an image is deemed unsuitable.

While I'm writing, I might have an idea for an illustration creep into my head. But really, for the most part, I leave it until the end when the final draft is done. I'll then go through the story with my notebook and scribble ideas for the images. I might work the sketches up a little bit from scrawl to something resembling a picture, and I send them in for approval. At this point it's very likely that I'll have had to start on the same process for the cover, as it is usually the first piece of art to get done (so it can be used to promote the book.) Once feedback is received, I get on with the final images.



There are technical things to consider - like not making the images too black-heavy as they print darker than the screen image and the ink might rub off on the opposite page (this is tough as I love black). Then you have to consider (carefully) what you think should be shown, and what should be left up to the imagination of the reader. In the examples here you can see how I've used wind or mist or trees to bring more white in, using the black only where necessary. I love working in grayscale, and I love the challenge that limiting the darker hues gives me. After composition, light and shadow are all-important. The samples also show the images I really want to be clear on - how the ogre looks, or the chaos of Ayla's power, or how strong Fergus really is. The rest is up to the reader.

I am lucky with my job titles, not because I have achieved my dream, but because they are so harmonious with each other - practically the very same thing - and that makes it easy for me to get lost in either, or both. And I'm happiest when I'm lost in a story.

[A Cage of Roots](#) [3] (978-1847176813) and [Storm Weaver](#) [4] by Matt Griffin, books one and two in the **Ayla** trilogy, are published by the O'Brien Press, price £7.99 each.

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