



Janet Ahlberg

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If asked to name the Top Ten children's book illustrators who have made the most significant contribution to children's books over the last ten years, then very high up on my list would be Janet Ahlberg.

Exquisitely detailed pictures, busily peopled scenes and visual images which capture both atmosphere and nostalgia to perfection, whilst continuing to appeal to the child's sense of humour and fun, have appeared in more than a dozen memorable and highly original picture books. But in addition, in Janet and Allan Ahlberg we also have that rare combination: an author and artist who perfectly complement each other's talents.

It is no great surprise to find the intimacy so evident in all of their work together, reflected in their working environment. They live with their eight-year-old daughter, Jessica, in a large Victorian house overlooking the Leicestershire countryside. The warmth of the family is obvious from the moment that Jessica, in work apron, opens the front door. Jessica is painting papier mache puppets in the kitchen, where the green walls and large windows blur the division between house and garden, and create a feeling of spaciousness and creativity. Pieces of artwork by Jessica cover the walls. Jessica is a bright, imaginative child who has influenced her parents in their work and in return is greatly stimulated by them.

Janet herself came from an artistic family: her father was a painter and her mother taught art. Janet has always drawn, apart from a period in her teens when she got 'horribly concerned with perspective' and stopped. She went to teacher training college to study English as a main subject, but switched to Art, where she rediscovered drawing and painting and met Allan. She realised that she could never become a teacher, lacking the ability to impose discipline and hating the thought of being exposed in front of a class of children.

Back in her home area of Leicestershire, Janet studied graphics at Leicestershire Polytechnic before moving to London to work as a freelance illustrator, working on advertisements and non-fiction books. The earliest books she remembers, and prefers on the whole to forget, are some books by Felicia Law on craft activities using card and junk. Although she enjoyed these at the time, she really wanted to illustrate stories, preferably fiction and ideally with no people, because she was not terribly confident about drawing people: 'sympathetic faces are very difficult'. She asked Allan, then working as a primary school teacher, to write some stories for her. The Brick Street Boys, a parody of 'Janet and John',

and full of people, was the result. It was accepted by Collins and a further five titles requested.

There followed a lean period. They were not short of ideas: **The Old Joke Book**, **Burglar Bill**, **Jeremiah in the Dark Woods**, **The Vanishment of Thomas Tull**, and **Two Heads** were all in embryo, but publishers were slow to take up these ideas until, finally, three publishers accepted work almost simultaneously, and they were in business. From then onwards, Janet has found enormous pleasure in doing what she likes and counts herself as extremely lucky to do something that she loves and which pays her.

What is the secret of their unique working relationship? Janet feels that it is something to do with their finding the same things funny, having similar attitudes to many things and having the advantage of a close emotional relationship. Working at home together, in a converted hayloft, with Allan carefully insulated from the noise of Janet's radio, they are able constantly to interact and interrelate about their work. They also both have a strong commitment to quality - in their own individual work and in its production. They want to do things well; they do not want to produce second best. They may spend many hours worrying over tiny details in proof copies, being very fussy about colour and register whether it's a new edition, a reprint, a paperback or overseas edition. They feel passionately that if they have worked hard on a book, then they do not want anything less than the very best for the child who will finally read it.

Janet is the quieter half of the partnership, with a tendency to underestimate her own artistic merit. She does not see herself as an innovator. She feels that she has changed gradually and that her drawings of people have improved, now looking less 'as though made of planks of wood'. As a reviewer who has always found her illustrations exquisite, I find it difficult to understand that this quietly spoken, self-deprecating artist does not see herself as being specially talented and is constantly striving to do better.

Where do the ideas come from? Perhaps it is inevitable in such a workable partnership that extricating one person's work from the other's is impossible. Janet claims that most of the original sparks come from Allan. He runs a lot and often arrives back at the house, dripping with sweat, breathless with ideas: 'Just a minute' rings regularly around the house, as he jots things on scraps of paper, before speaking to anyone. The kitchen table is littered with ideas! From his experience of working with children, he can often recognise more easily than she can, what would make a good book. Janet finds she needs something to bounce her own ideas off, although she does claim responsibility for **Funnybones** and for the more recent **Starting School**. Once the idea has taken root, stimulus comes from both of them, normally with Allan writing the text first and then collaborating throughout, continuously checking and double checking. Janet 'would not dream of altering any of Allan's words, unless the book is not working properly.'

Janet loves originating books which children can enjoy and share with others. She wants them to get pleasure from reading and pleasure from looking. She sees detail as being important in the child's imaginative development: 'the more you see, the more information about the world you get.' There are no heavy messages: 'We do books for ourselves. If others like them, that's really good.' Are there any anti-racist or anti-sexist intentions? Janet believes that children learn from example. She hopes that her books express equality in their illustrative detail but not in any heavy-handed way. She *does* believe that it is important to reflect a multi-cultural society: 'Black children need to see themselves as part of society, whilst retaining things culturally of their own, and within a common understanding of society.'

Janet has always worked slowly. For some years, she has suffered from back trouble, which severely limits her output. She is now able to produce only one book per year. This has demonstrated to her very clearly that health is not guaranteed and there is only a certain amount of time left in which she may be able to illustrate. She now thinks hard and chooses very carefully what she wants to do. She and Allan have a fairly strictly controlled priority order for their forthcoming projects, which they largely agree upon.

Their most recent book, **Starting School**, was stimulated by Jessica's starting school. The headteacher prepared a letter in book form to be sent to each child, individually addressed, and a friend suggested that Janet might illustrate it. She liked the idea of working on a book which broke down some of the barriers and alleviated many of the fears that children starting school often display. Janet talks passionately about her experiences in preparing this book and demonstrates forcibly her enormous commitment to children and belief in them. This was the first time that she had felt

she wanted to do a 'useful' book, because starting school was a milestone for all children. She spent time in the local school, taking photographs and observing the infant classes, loving their 'worldly wiseness and their shy innocence'. She wanted to show that school could be fun: it was not all 3 Rs, it was also play. The book had to be entertaining, yet show that the things that worried many children, such as going to the toilet, were possible at school. It took some time before she came up with the idea of having a cast of children and their families appearing throughout the book. Thus in the book 'Gavin and Errol and Sophie and Sushma and David and Kate and Robert and Alison are starting school.' This pattern of names is repeated regularly, as they do everything together, sometimes happily, sometimes nervously, sometimes rather reluctantly, but always perfectly captured in detailed and humorous pictures which will comfort and encourage many children as well as their parents.

Which of their books are Janet's own favourites? **The Clothes Horse, The Baby's Catalogue, Starting School, Each Peach Pear Plum, The Jolly Postman, The Cinderella Show.** They are both delighted by the reception that **The Jolly Postman** received. It has stimulated more letters than any other book to date, some from children with their own inventive ideas for extra 'letters' - an eye appointment, letter to the hairdresser, etc. They are pleased to see how such a simple idea can extend the child's imagination and stimulate, even help, individual children, including less able older readers.

Janet's illustrations have received many accolades. Which awards have meant the most to her? Totally in character with this child-centred person, it is the Federation of Children's Book Groups Award to **The Jolly Postman**, because 'it is an award chosen by children', but also the Emil Award for the same book because the Emil is 'awarded to a book for words and pictures together' - recognising as she does the value and importance of seeing a book as an entity. Whilst it was a great pleasure to receive the Kate Greenaway Award, perhaps the most prestigious, she questions the concept of an award for pictures only, without regard to the text.

The final image of this delightful artist can be captured in her desire to be 'just an ordinary mother'. She hates the idea that anyone at Jessica's school should know that she has famous parents, or ask for autographs, much preferring to keep a low profile and play a normal part in school life. Her work is not allowed to interfere with her pleasure in, and commitment to, the family and her wish to stimulate her bright, active, intelligent daughter. But how lucky are the thousands of other children who have grown up, comforted, succoured, amused and beguiled by some of Janet's wonderful visual inventions. Long may she continue to delight us all.

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