



A Little Character Building

Article Author:

[Shirley Hughes](#) [1]

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Shirley Hughes reflects on the growth of her characters, Alfie and Annie Rose.

Shirley Hughes reflects on the growth of Alfie and Annie Rose

- in her head and at the end of her brush.

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Alfie first made his appearance as a felt pen drawing, done very rapidly. He was running up the street ahead of his mum who came trundling behind with the shopping and the baby in the buggy. A lot had happened, mostly in my head, before I got him to this stage, but it was something of a turning point to see him there on the page. The story **Alfie Gets In First** was already thought out and written. The idea was to tell a simple tale turning on an event which is a common enough experience in family life but is nevertheless of dramatic and memorable importance to a four-year-old - like slamming the door and getting shut in. When I was making that first drawing I was concentrating hard on his concentration - that mighty, breathless, pink-faced, all-out effort with which children of this age give all of themselves to the matter in hand. And the utter dismay which sometimes ensues when things go wrong. Alfie's character crystallised at that moment of my drawing him and developed from there.

The rough dummy is the essence of the book. The pattern, which is made up by disposing the blocks of text and pictures so that they work in conjunction, emerges slowly. I use very smooth thin drawing paper which I can just see through, so that I can place one idea for a spread over another and compare them. At this stage I draw in pencil and go over it with felt pen which gives a good clear photocopy. Unfettered by the tensions which are imposed when you are doing the finished artwork - an altogether slower and more meticulous process - you are drawing very unselfconsciously, concentrating entirely on the storyline and the characters. The resulting sketches, not surprisingly, have a vitality and economy of gesture and expression which it is quite hard to reproduce again when it comes to the finished work.

That stage comes later, sometime after six months or a year. Now colour is one of the main considerations. With **The Big Alfie Out of Doors Storybook** I was aiming to expand the frontiers of Alfie's life, starting with the minutiae of his urban back garden - leaves, bits of grass, seedpods and stones - and working outwards to the wide horizons, the countryside around Grandma's house, the moon, the sea and the sky. This required many shifts of perspective. I wanted the colour range to express sunny autumn days, or spring or high summer. There had to be a high degree of freedom in the brushwork.

With colour I work tonally - that is to try to achieve a three-dimensional quality of depth, to open up the page so that the reader can enter the scene, perhaps fantasise about what is not shown. The colour washes - I use gouache colour which is similar to water colour but with a bit more body - go on in layers, solidifying towards the foreground. The underlying pencil drawing which holds the story and the identification of character, disappears under these layers but is brought back again at the finishing stage with very fine brushes. It is all too easy to overwork this process at any stage and so

lose the freshness and spontaneity.

Most years when I go on holiday I make a sort of picture diary. I am an absolute sucker for a romantic prospect. One of my favourite things in the world is to sit under a tree in an Italian garden with a sketchbook on my lap and perhaps a glass of chianti at hand and attempt to record dappled shade, geraniums rioting in pots, olive trees and glimpse of an ochre-coloured shuttered house beyond. I had just returned from such a trip when, with all the fine-tuning and editorial discussion which happens at the rough dummy stage behind me, I plunged into the **Alfie Out of Doors** artwork. Of course, the English light is quite different, full of subtle nuances, hazier, more diffused. But just as lyrically beautiful, if not more so. I think that the freedom I gained from wallowing and splashing about with colour in my sketchbook fed through into the narrative. I certainly felt a great sense of release.

When I am working on a book I am running on two tracks - controlling the technique (or trying to) and at the same time inhabiting my characters. Even very small readers can develop a strong loyalty to fictional characters once they have taken them to heart. I learned that through reading to my own children. I suppose I knew it already from old favourites like Milly Molly Mandy, Josephine and her Dolls and later the William books. I vastly preferred these homely stories to unnerving and sometimes terrifying fairy tales and legends. I wanted to live in their world, one which was close enough to my own to feel that it might be just around the corner. The illustrations were particularly fascinating and still give me pleasure.

It is up to us authors/illustrators to invent characters who inspire this kind of loyalty ... not quite as easy as it might seem. To rely on merely repeating a formula is the kiss of death. It's important to build on detail, to beguile the reader with reassuring familiarity but at the same time tell him or her something new with each story, to reveal just a little bit more about this imaginary, but, we hope, very 'real' world. I hold a picture of Alfie's life in my head, his house, his street, his friends and relations, a whole visual jigsaw of data which I draw from. I may not have put it all in yet. But I go on adding to it because I know I will use it one day. I wander about with a sketchbook observing real places. But in the end, of course, you go home and make it all up.

One of the nicest things that happened to me recently was when a young Dad told me how strongly he had been affected by the picture of a little back garden in **Alfie Gives a Hand**. I took him right back, he said. He wanted to know where the setting was. Surely Bedford in the old days? South London perhaps? Similar observations from adults give me great joy and encouragement because I sense that they are reviving pleasurable memories of their own early life while reading to their children.

Will Alfie and his little sister Annie Rose ever grow up, become older children, teenagers even? I doubt it. Like all fictional children they will remain perennially fixed in time, give or take a year or so. It is a sobering thought that Lucy and Tom, had they marched with real time, would now be in their mid-thirties. This makes me very much a grandmother in fictional terms as well as in real life - both roles I am enjoying enormously. Alfie and Annie Rose flesh out and develop every time I draw them. Certainly I had no idea that Annie Rose would emerge as quite such a forceful and single-minded character in her own right. No doubt, as one of the rising generation, she will pester me for a book in which she has the starring role. But that, as they say, is another story.

The Big Alfie Out Of Doors Storybook is published on 26th March 1992 by Bodley Head (0 370 31516 2) priced £8.99.

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