

Emma Chichester Clark

The 'Literary' Illustrator and the Dictionary

There's nothing particularly new about illustrated – or sometimes, if they're for the very young, 'picture' – dictionaries: lexicons in which certain words are given visual backup. Something as relatively simple as, say, 'ball' accompanied by a picture of a multicoloured spherical object; or – with older readers in mind – the definition of 'mansard' (as in roof), a tricky one, exemplified by an architectural diagram of its configuration. What a word needs to figure in this way is pictorial potential, verbal cheese-cake – it's difficult to imagine a verb like 'might', for example, lending itself to visual representation. Or is it?

The Oxford First Illustrated Dictionary establishes a whole new take on the practice of looking-it-up, viewing its function as something other than just (admittedly a large 'just') a tool to define meanings and extend vocabulary. (Not, obviously, a precedent for every dictionary, but what the doctor ordered for this.) Using pictures and pictorial narrative, it widens and extends its scope to forge clear and vital links between the meaning and significance of individual words and the known, visible and palpable world already – or on the verge of being – experienced by its young readers. Rather than regarding itself as an adjunct – a tool to consult, then set aside until next time – the dictionary becomes part of a narrative process that stimulates and explores the imagination.

A bold notion, which, in order to work successfully, required the services of an illustrator with sufficient skill and experience, and with enough verve and imaginative boldness to complement Andrew Delahunty's [see Pat Thomson's article, opposite] inspired and creative lexicography. Therefore, the choice of Emma Chichester Clark – with her unique, stylised take on the natural world (human and otherwise) and the fabulous landscapes of myth, legend and fairy tale and the enchantments of poetry and theatre, and with her proven flair for pictorial narrative – seems more than mere happenstance. In fact, said Emma, "I wasn't the first choice."

Difficult, initially, to tell whether it was her being modestly reticent, or the unsullied truth. She saw "previous attempts" at illustrating the dictionary – thereby confirming what she'd said – and they "were dull. *Boring* layout, *boring* typography. They had been done by" –

and here it veers towards the esoteric – "technical" illustrators. Whereas what they [OUP] really wanted was a 'literary' illustrator, someone interpretative ... imaginative." Emma allowed time for the gist of that to sink in. "As a 'literary' illustrator," she resumed, "I thought they would want a 'technical' illustrator. It took me some time to get the point. You see I couldn't get away from that word *dictionary*."

"I imagined it would be a long, boring job but – I was seven months working on the dictionary – and once I'd sorted out how to do it – it was great fun."

And although for a busy illustrator like Emma – more books subsequently completed, others (a version of Aesop's fables for one) being worked on – the dictionary, though special, was 'another job', it was nonetheless a memorable one. "It became like a game, working out a jigsaw puzzle. I went to lots of meetings in Oxford with Vineeta Gupta, whose 'burning ambition' the dictionary was. We would discuss each word and, with an eye to the illustrations, I would choose my favourite words on each spread. We were on the phone nearly every day, passing ideas back and forth. The family of children [who figure throughout] is a nice idea. They've all been given names," she said delightedly.

As, somewhat reluctantly, she turned the pages of a finished copy of the dictionary, Emma was unable to restrain the occasional disgruntled though quiet mutter. "Just as bad as I thought" – referring to one illustration; "I enjoyed doing this [girl in water, under 'S']. I liked her" – referring to another. "I think I had some monkeys – yes, here they are. I made them up. But the quetzal I got from the Web." She turned to a picture of a rhino. "Oh dear, I expect someone will think

I've got it wrong," she concluded with a broad smile.

In spite of Emma's strictures, what she achieves in her illustrations is a visual close equivalent to those responses Pat Thomson describes Andrew Delahunty coaxing from primary school pupils: free-wheeling definitions of words and the links between words – leading on 'to rhymes, opposites, anagrams and the history of words'. "The dictionary," said Emma, "turns into something else: you can play with it, see how many things you can spot."

Which brings us back to 'or is it?' and that verb 'might' – there on page 97. Study the illustration on the spread (chosen because my copy tends to fall at that point). There are many obvious 'M' candidates: mend, mess, messy, metal, mice ... but *might*? Well, how about: the bike *might* topple; Mum *might* be angry; the toddler *might* find the spanner; the mice *might* climb into the glass.... Rather speculative, a little too fanciful perhaps? Well, no, actually, because that's what the *Oxford First Illustrated Dictionary* is about, to encourage that extra step: through words, into the unbounded territory of the imagination.

Which is why the illustrations do not figure in the 'How to use' section of the dictionary. No guidance is needed. Linguistic curiosity whetted, readers will be off, following their leads into Emma's imaginative worlds with all the dogged persistence of a column of worker ants – just like the one she portrays on page 8.

Chris Stephenson

