

The Brilliant World of Liz Pichon



“I didn’t set out to be a children’s illustrator although I did illustrations for magazines and greeting cards.” This was the opening statement when meeting up with one of our most enjoyed illustrators working into today’s crowded field. Looking for further explanation she said that initially she was dependent upon people providing her with commissions. This early experience of the workplace allowed her to slowly develop her own unique style and format. As time went by she began to feel inspired to write and illustrate a book for children.

However, I wanted to know how it all began. Liz studied graphic design at Middlesex Polytechnic and Camberwell School of Art. Having trained as a graphic designer she realised that she was competent but felt her work lacked distinction. She was fortunate to obtain a job at Jive records as a designer and art director. She had to organise photo shoots for the bands and singers, arrange hairdressing appointments and design record sleeves and CD covers. “Although it sounds grand I worked in a portacabin. There were only two in the art department and we covered everything!”

Eventually she decided to go freelance again and work became extremely varied – beach towels for Marks and Spencer’s, calendars, mugs, games. She also worked with Camden Graphics on greeting cards – many of which are still available to-day.

It was a culmination of those experiences that gave her the confidence to create her own picture books. *My Big Brother Boris* centred on a humorous family theme – something she knew about. Experimenting with mixed media including digital, acrylic and paint, she road-tested it on local children which she enjoyed and found most rewarding. *Bored Bill* and *The Three Horrid Pigs* followed and she worked hard on her audience ‘presentation’ format because she realised her success reflected the children’s response. “They made me think about my approach in order to achieve the reactions I wanted.” It certainly worked as *The Three Horrid Pigs* was shortlisted for the 2009 RH Children’s Book Award chosen only by children.

Her latest venture is in a completely different format – *The Brilliant World of Tom Gates*. How did this come about? “I

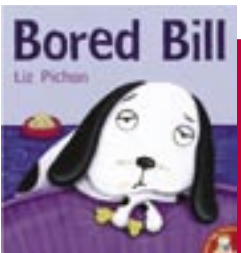
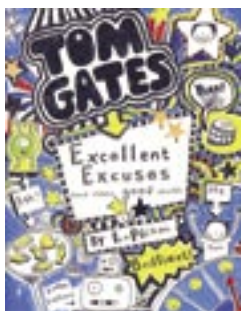
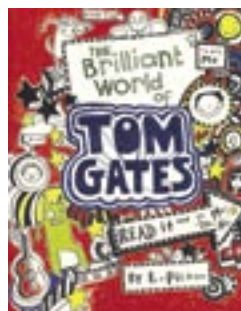
was wondering what I could do for slightly older children. When I talked to them, as with a picture book, you have a very visible product. I knew that if I just read it they wouldn’t share the real feel of the story.”

Liz now uses a power-point so that they can see the text and pictures when she is presenting. The idea for *Tom Gates* came from her own life and many of the incidents are those which happened in her own family. One example is when Tom sends a birthday card to his mum and, having forgotten to buy one, finds a Christmas card and crosses out the words Happy Christmas, substituting Happy Birthday! “I use stories that are straight forward and detail something with which the children will readily identify.” (In Liz’s real life family, her daughter found a card and wrote Happy Mother’s Day, crossing out the real message of Happy Memories!)

Liz decided to make the change from pictures books because she felt that it would be fun. Originally she had the idea of presenting it as a scrapbook – a sort of all about ME which many children are familiar with when they first start school, but the publishers were unsure how to market it. They liked the voice but felt the theme wasn’t strong enough. She put it on the back burner. When she looked at it again she decided to present it in an exercise book. She rejigged the plot and made the central character a little older than Reception age. She considered how Tom might react in school. Excuses for homework? What he thought about his teacher? How he dealt with other children in his class? With his doodles and comments on each page she discovered that it worked and it was snapped up. “The right style and the right voice came together at the right time.” Liz added that this was the first project she had completed where she was determined to write about what really appealed to her – what she found funny and made her laugh and it all came naturally. A second book about *Tom Gates, Excellent Excuses (and other good stuff)* has been published, a third is in the pipeline.

If the incredible reaction to the first two stories is repeated as the series grows, we might just have our own Wimpy Kid!

David Blanch



My Big Brother Boris Scholastic £6.99 ISBN: 978-1407107066
Three Horrid Pigs Little Tiger £5.99 ISBN: 978-1845066284
Bored Bill Little Tiger £5.99 ISBN: 978-1845061890
The Brilliant World of Tom Gates Scholastic £6.99 ISBN: 978-1407120690 (Shortlisted for this year’s Funny Prize and RH Children’s Book Award)
Tom Gates, Excellent Excuses Scholastic £6.99 ISBN: 978-1407124407