

And all well-rounded heroes must have an arch-enemy. Dixie's next door neighbour and rival is Lou Ella: glamorous and mean, with a ruthless desire to win. She was wonderful to bring to life on the page; I think of her as Penelope Pitstop, but as if she had gone to The Dark Side. Already she is dividing young readers: some think she is utterly horrid, others think she is really rather gorgeous. She will crop up again in future stories, and all I can say now is that there are many twists and turns along the way.

I wanted to give the stories a retro look, both in setting and style. This has worked out so well, for all sorts of unexpected reasons. I strongly associate the 1950s and 60s with my parents. They were married in 1952, and inspired by the styles of the Festival of Britain in 1951. I unconsciously chose 1962 as a good year to set the story in (the fashions, cars, fabrics and patterns of that era are right up my street), quite forgetting that this was the year of my birth. The suits are inspired by *Mad Men* – Mum and I are huge fans. I also looked at the drawing style of various favourite TV programmes of my childhood, like *Yogi Bear*, *Top Cat* and *Scooby Doo*, a nostalgic treat indeed. Luckily for us, our designer Ness Wood is a connoisseur of this era of design history.

Another serendipitous decision was to add a second colour to the strong black line. What other colour could it possibly be? It HAD to be red. Dashing enough for Dixie's car, and also giving us pink for Lou Ella's. And now we can have pink grass, red trees – it's the fantastical, non-realistic visual equivalent of a dog driving a car: in a story, anything is possible.

It's a lavishly produced little book: small, mostly white but with a stylish splash of red and black – a bit like Percy in fact! And it's full of extra content: games, character interviews, maps... we work closely with our editor Andrea MacDonald, who has marvellous ideas and a magical way with words. We do both love a book with a map: Mum says that when I was small I was so hooked on the map in my *Milly Molly Mandy* book that she just couldn't get me past the endpapers.

At the back of *Dixie O'Day in The Fast Lane* I also included a drawing of Mum and I motoring along in a nippy little open-top. SECRET FACT: if Mum was at the wheel in real life, wild horses wouldn't persuade me into the passenger seat...

The biggest surprise for me was how much I would love drawing the cars. I must confess, cars were not my forte up to

now, looking rather too much like potatoes on wheels. I knew at once that I would have to up my game and try harder – it's very important for illustrators to take on new challenges. I have become wildly keen on vintage vehicles. Dixie's car is a 1961 Ford Zodiac convertible, with a walnut dashboard: to me it oozes personality. Lou Ella drives a pink E-Type Jag, with a matching pink umbrella attached. We have a model of Dixie's car, with felt figures of Dixie and Percy inside, made for us by artist Josie Armand Smith: it goes with us everywhere.

There are crazy cars with a Wacky Races feel, too. Otters in a runaway bathtub, a shark car, a rocket car, a cow riding in a sidecar... I've made this into part of the story-telling workshop I take into schools and book festivals, with the children designing their own 'marvellous motors' – their imaginations are a delight to behold. I've made a sheet of bits and pieces for cutting and sticking, to get the ideas rolling.

I always love to find a hands-on creative activity to enhance and extend the reader's pleasure in the book. It's a lovely thought that out there somewhere, in a sea of small faces intently concentrating, is the next generation of authors and illustrators.

Inspiration comes from the most unlikely of places. I was struggling to draw the double curves of an airstream caravan, which appears in the book as a roadside diner. Then I spotted, right under my very nose, the perfect model, in the form of my round-bottomed guinea pig Delilah....

Mum and I share a purpose with the *Dixie O'Day* series. We have in mind the emergent reader, moving out of the picture book phase but still daunted by a book overly full of dense text. We want them to be captivated and entertained by stories packed to bursting with fast-paced action and jokes, and with lots of pictures on every page. There are seven chapters in each book, one for each night of the week.

We share something far more personal, too. To make a book that pleases other people it must first please its creators. We want to carry on dreaming up stories that make us happy, and make us chortle.

Put your foot down on the accelerator, Dixie – this is a wonderful journey and we are loving the view!

Clara Vulliamy



Above: Taking inspiration from the most unlikely of places.

