

Lauren Child:

One Thing at a time

Since *Carousel* last spoke to Lauren Child, she has taken on new writing ventures, begun working on fabrics and merchandise and added a new member to her family! But it's her partnership with UNESCO we first talk about when we meet at her comfortable London home.

"UNESCO had never worked with a children's writer before and thought it would be a good way of communicating with children of different backgrounds." Lauren spent time in Mexico working with street children. She tells me about their terrible home life – many experiencing solvent and drug abuse. "This wonderful school teacher managed to beg a building from the government and UNESCO supported him. He realised that the only way people can get out of this hole is with education." Lauren's publisher, Hachette, donated all the monies from sales of her picture book, *That Pesky Rat*, to the project. She also worked on a government initiative in Mongolia. "It was run by an amazing policeman. His job was to locate and bring in street children. It's very upsetting seeing these little people coming in, grubby and very scared. They'd clean them up, clothe them, and a psychotherapist would encourage them to come together with their parents and sort out what had gone wrong." It was whilst working in Mongolia that Lauren met and adopted her daughter, Tuesday.

I wondered if having a child of her own provides Lauren with ideas for new 'Charlie and Lola' stories, her award winning picture book series about siblings, where Charlie is a patient and loyal older brother, and Lola, his sometimes exasperating, but loveable, younger sister. "I already have a whole stock of 'Charlie and Lola' stories that I have never illustrated as we had to think of so many for the television series. I have a pretty good memory of childhood and am very interested in children. I love the way they think and talk; what makes them tick, their speech patterns, and their movements, just watching how they

sit and stand. That hasn't really changed, but now I get a more intense glimpse. I see the patterns of how my daughter, as an individual, speaks for example, rather than somebody else. Real children speak in a much more exaggerated form than Charlie or Lola do."

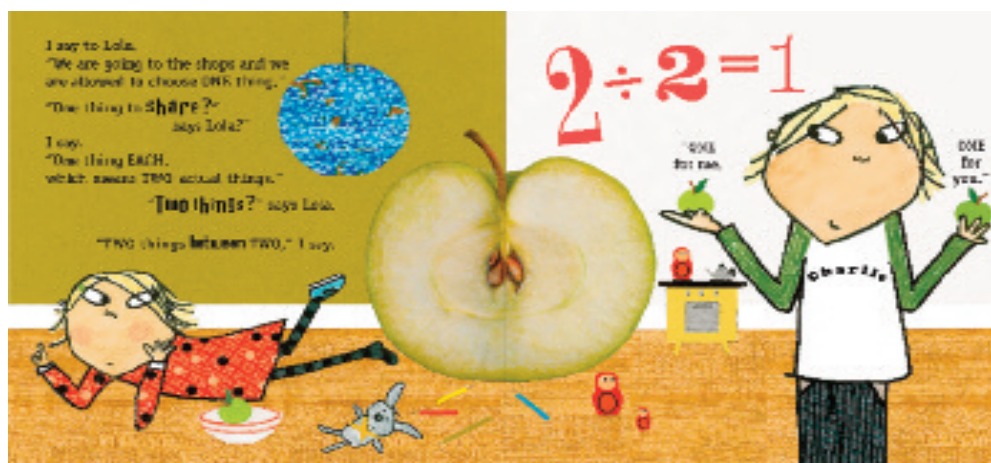
'Charlie and Lola' books are being re-jacketed for a special 15th anniversary edition. Although Lauren feels the original covers haven't dated, she understands that booksellers welcome a fresh look. "We decided to go with something a bit radical this time and allowed ourselves to mess about with the font, and have used lovely colours trying to give them a punchy modern feel."

Lauren's distinctive style is a rich composite of cartoon-like figures, infused with textiles, collage, photography and paint. I was interested to know how the design process for the final product works. "Normally I will do a thumbnail sketch of the general composition, scribbling in where I think the characters will go. Then I'll indicate how I want the words to look, whether they are stacked or moving. It's very much back and forth with my designer, David McIntosh. Inevitably he will come up with a better construction of what I'm doing. We try it all kinds of different ways which takes time." She readily shares the techniques she uses to produce the striking collages which make her picture books so dynamic. Taking her example from a spread in *Slightly Invisible*, she explains, "Everything is first drawn, and then if Lola's going to wear a patterned dress I will photocopy an image. For this table I used a roll of sticky-back plastic, and the wallpaper was made from a tiny piece of

fabric I had. I photocopied it over and over again and patched it. The rabbit was from a commercial for a bank, and the floor that looks like lino was from a magazine. I took all the photographs of the food." Every part of the book works for the reader, from the quirky inner sleeves, to a photo of the person to whom the book is dedicated.



Lauren Child and One Thing book illustration © National Trust, christonicolle.com



Inner spread from One Thing



Inner spread from *One Thing*

The New Small Person is a recent title from Lauren about an everyday problem most families will recognise: Elmore finds having a new brother can be a right pain! It's a situation Lauren remembers from her own childhood and she was keen to do a new take on it. "Charlie and Lola show one side of what it's like to be a sibling – in a way they are showing the perfect twenty minutes of the day when everything's going really well. With Elmore, I was trying to show something else, which is the internal feeling of a child and how this can affect them. You can see how Elmore is using all the objects in his room to encircle himself, standing as a sort of barrier between him and his brother. They also stand for love and him wanting to own these things and not wanting to share. I don't think I've ever enjoyed doing a book as much as I did that one." It is the first time Lauren has written a story about a black family; an issue that had bothered her for sometime. She is dismayed by the under representation of black or ethnically different children in the arts and media. "How must it be to not see yourself reflected in the arts and culture? It's depressing that in this century it's still so difficult to find."

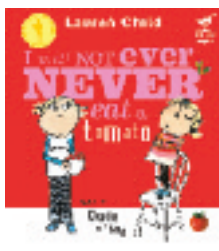
Over the last five years, Lauren has been writing 'Ruby Redfort' stories; a series of six novels for young teenagers, which has meant there have been no new 'Charlie and Lola' or 'Clarice Bean', her other major character book series, for some time. "I'm just finishing a 'Ruby Redfort' book at the moment. It takes up your whole brain and more, just holding the plot in your head. I only have a year to write each of them and it's really not long enough when there are other things going on as well. I used to do three picture books a year, but life gets more complicated and the book world has got harder. There's a lot of promotion and talks – that didn't used to be a part of the job. I still do school visits but not as many as I used to. I love meeting the children and it's terribly inspiring, but it's hard to keep your head in books when you've got to then go and perform. It's one very big reason why I haven't done another 'Charlie and Lola', plus I've been working so intensely on the television series that I almost couldn't see them anymore." A little while ago

Lauren started a new 'Clarice Bean' story which fizzled out. There's surely more to come though, as she tells me that Clarice Bean is her favourite character.

A distinct area of Lauren's work, which she integrates with writing children's books, is creating textile designs. Several years ago, along with several other illustrators, she was approached by Liberty to come up with a collection of fabrics inspired by stories. "I was asked to design for the *Alice in Wonderland*

150th anniversary and I based my design on water meadows." She recently designed a unique Lola dress for a friend who runs a small business which was sold this summer at Mottisfont House to accompany the National Trust hosted exhibition, *The Art of Lauren Child: Adventures with Charlie and Lola and Friends*. Her current projects include mugs, tea towels, bags and notebooks.

Despite the many calls on her time, fans of 'Charlie and Lola' will be pleased to know, this autumn sees the long awaited return of the siblings with *One Thing*. This engaging and inventive new title deploys creative ways to enjoy counting, including having fun with very large numbers. "Counting is the first thing you do with a child when they are little. All those games that adults generally play with children; you walk them upstairs and you count them, how long it takes them to clean their teeth. It's about the joy and the sound of the numbers, and that visually, numbers look beautiful. Plus the idea that you say to a child, 'you can choose just one thing'. They always start haggling with you, and so you do this game of going back and forth."



Daughter, Tuesday, who during our interview has been quietly drawing in the background, now decides in a very 'Lola-like' way it's time for us to finish and be on our way to the Puffin Party. So the interview closes and off we all go!

David Chant

Charlie and Lola: One Thing
Orchard £11.99 ISBN: 978-1408339008

Charlie and Lola: I Am Too Absolutely Small for School
Orchard £6.99 ISBN: 9781846168857

Charlie and Lola: I Will Not Ever Never Eat A Tomato.
Orchard £6.99 ISBN: 978-1846168864

Charlie and Lola: I Am Not Sleepy And I Will Not Go To Bed.
Orchard £6.99 ISBN: 978-1846168840

The New Small Person
Puffin £6.99 ISBN: 978-0723293613

Feel the Fear: Ruby Redford book 4
HarperCollins £6.99 ISBN: 978-0007334131