

# Jeanne Willis

## “Knocking off the odd picture book”

Referring to her precocious verse-writing, Jeanne Willis, who is never at a loss for a colourful piece of scene setting, said, “I was tossing off poems in between *Coronation Street* and the News.” Verse comes naturally to her. Take a look at her career-long string of picture books up to and including the recent *Lucinda Belinda McCool* and the very latest, *Troll Stinks*, and her expertise as an adroit and resourceful versifier is plain to see. “I’ve been doing it for years, so by now I know where all the rhymes are.”

The same is true with storytelling, a talent she may have inherited from her grandfather. “He was a good storyteller. He still appears in a lot of my writing.” She’s been writing stories since she was five or six. “I used to make little books and line them up, like in a library, and lend them out to my sister, - and fine her if



she returned them late.” She smiled at the memory of her sister’s annoyance. “I didn’t know then that I would ever be a professional writer. I would have happily carried on writing just for myself.” And presumably for her sister.

It surely can’t be quite as effortless as she makes it seem? All those stories and earthy humour, all the sentences of crisp prose and lines of fluent verse are not there by accident; on the contrary, they’re the result of a finely-tuned talent, which has evolved from experience and intuition and has produced a perfect instrument for judging the potential for capturing the imaginations of readers.

Even though her output has long seemed well-nigh phenomenal, could a recent email saying “Not doing too much work as too hot ... apart from knocking off the odd picture book” really be true? “Yes.”

The response was swift and unequivocal. “Although,” she added as a sort of diplomatic compromise, “it might have taken me forty years to think about it, and then, suddenly, lots of ideas come together - and I write the story.” What, then, about writers who agonise and slave over picture book texts? “Well, they need to get a move on,” she laughed. “After all, I might re-write a picture book over and over again; but I’d do it in a day. I don’t keep office hours; I work when I need to and carry on until I finish.”

Seeing Jeanne in her writing room at the top of her friendly and comfortable north London house, where she lives with her husband, son and daughter, is like eavesdropping on a private domain. This is indisputably *hers*; the place where she’s entirely at home and as confidently in control as a captain on the bridge of a ship. I was familiar with her refreshing and inexhaustible fund of down-to-earth humour, her encyclopaedic knowledge of medical ailments, her unsentimental attachment to all sorts of animals and her deep love and knowledge of



natural history (she swears that she would have liked to have been David Livingstone), but this was a side I'd never seen before. Jeanne, the complete professional.

The twin motors that power her imagination to produce what is an apparently unceasing flow of successful picture books are humour and compassion. The humour, often raw, is always open and honest, never thinks of pulling its punches and results in texts that pulsate with energy. The compassion, all-inclusive, embracing creatures both human and otherwise, is why her books feature so many animals. "[An author] can say things as an animal they can't as a human," she explained. "An elephant having a bad time is a whole different ball game." Even when writing about someone as all-too-human as the eponymous Lucinda Belinda Melinda McCool she can't withhold a generous helping of sympathy for the terrible, horrible HIDEOUS BEAST who is the girl's nemesis. The compassion is robust, empathetic, useful and a far cry from the rent-a-bleeding-heart kind.

Like the earlier *Chicken Clicking*, the just-published *Troll Stinks*, is funny and emotionally compelling enough to guarantee that readers keep on guessing to the end. It is also characteristically provocative. Even that deliberately confrontational 'Stinks' in the title ("the sort of word kids love") draws attention to itself. Just as *Chicken Clicking* was a story of how misuse of the Internet can land meddlers in murky waters, this is a timely cautionary tale about Internet 'trolling'.

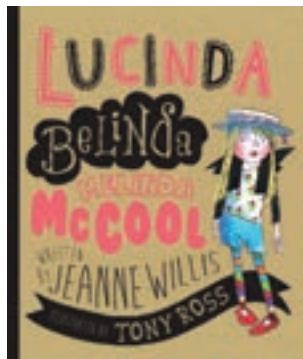
It begins harmlessly enough when a young billy goat finds "a mobile phone / Just like the one the farmer lost / and kept it for his own". Soon, however, he gets a taste for using the pilfered phone for cyber bullying. In cahoots with a friend, he sets out to 'troll' an actual Troll who lives over the "old stone bridge". Before what might have been a disastrous end is reached, a fortuitous and face-saving combination of surprise, contrition and good sense saves both victim and persecutors.

*Troll Stinks* is illustrated by Tony Ross, working with whom, said Jeanne, is like being part of "a 'dream team'." Mutual trust and absolute belief in each other's integrity lies at the core of their astonishingly dynamic professional partnership. "Tony wouldn't dream of interfering with my text, just as I would never interfere with his illustrations. And where some illustrators just draw what you've already said in words, Tony always adds touches of his own. He interprets. We have a similar sense of humour...and darkness."

Jeanne herself subscribes to neither Facebook nor Twitter - "They take up so much time, for one thing" - but is much concerned about the abuse of a facility that, properly handled and respected, can be such an invaluable asset. She mentioned



Above and bottom left: illustrations from *Troll Stinks*.



an American woman who, having been given a bad time by an Internet troll, asked for a face-to-face meeting with her abuser. "When they met, he was absolutely mortified, but he tried to excuse his behaviour by making out that he'd thought it would just be 'a bit of fun'." She paused. "Why are we so nasty to each other? It's like school kids pinning rude notes to the back of their mates' clothes ...Personal attacks."

To meet Jeanne is to be instantly struck by her unmistakable aura of glamour. And you quickly understand that the striking looks, the perfectly coiffured hair, the impeccably-applied gleaming lipstick come from the same source as the compassion. They're like friendly outriders giving early notice of the warmth within.

And they're effective, too. Among a collection of letters from children who, because of her, want to be writers, is one from a five-year-old boy, who wrote: "I'd really like to work with you". More recently, she's been Author in Residence at the Evelina Children's Hospital, where she worked in the hospital classroom and visited children on the wards who were on dialysis or too ill to be moved. Another small boy, very ill, became understandably fixated on her lipstick. "He was charming and brave," she said, obviously deeply moved. "He broke my heart and I'll never forget him."

Chris Stephenson

Select bibliography of titles published by Andersen  
*Troll Stinks* £11.99 ISBN: 978-1783444434  
*Lucinda Belinda Melinda McCool* £11.99 ISBN: 978-1783442027  
*Chicken Clicking* £6.99 ISBN: 978-1783441617