

Lydia Monks

Going from Strength to Strength

Lydia Monks is a prolific award-winning illustrator and author, well-known for her quirky, colourful picture books. Over the past twenty years she has worked on well over a hundred children's books – so many she has lost count. She has both written and illustrated many of her own titles including *Aaaarrgghh Spider!*, *Eeeek Mouse!* and the *Mungo Monkey* series. She has also successfully teamed up with many other authors, including Karen McCombie in the *Indie Kidd* series, and poets, including Roger McGough and Carol Ann Duffy. Her most successful collaborative work is with Julia Donaldson in such titles as *Sharing a Shell*, *What the Ladybird Heard* and the *Princess Mirror-Belle* series.

We met up with Lydia in a small coffee shop close to her studio in central Sheffield. Sitting outside in the sunshine, we started off by asking how she had managed to break into the world of children's books.

Upon leaving school, she completed a Foundation Course at art college and then went on to achieve a HND in Graphic Design at Lincoln and, in 1994, a First Class Honours Degree in Illustration at Kingston University, London. "At first, I mainly worked in editorial design and illustration, just freelance, working for different newspapers, including *The Times*, magazines such as *The Tatler* and several teenage publications. But, for my final project at college I'd illustrated some of Roger McGough's poems and Puffin approached me and said would I like to

illustrate his poems for real. That was my first book job... I really wanted to get into picture books, but I found that more of a struggle... I was getting really frustrated and, so, I thought I would write something to show the kind of thing I could do – a sequence of illustrations. After two years of rejections I went into Reed, now Egmont, and they asked if I had thought about writing



anything. I told them I had, but no-one seemed to like it. They suggested that I send it in anyway and agreed to work with me on it.

They loved it and that was the first picture book." *I Wish I Were a Dog*, published in 1998, won the Bronze Award of The Nestlé Smarties Book Prize.

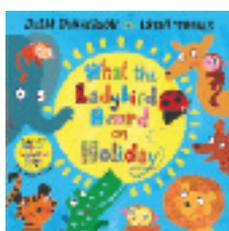
Most days Lydia takes her two daughters to school and then goes into her studio in central Sheffield. She works school hours until it is time to collect the children in the afternoon. She feels she "packs a full-time job into part-time hours" as she believes she "has to be around" for the children. She prefers

to keep work and home separate because, "sometimes, at home, there are a lot of distractions, and, I like to be able to leave everything just as it is. I can put the paintbrush down, come back the next day and it is still there." Lydia leads a rather solitary working life, alone in her studio. Surprisingly, she rarely gets to meet, or even contact, the authors whose books she is illustrating. "I get sent the text and I get on with it... We don't work together at all – the very old-fashioned way." Also, due to her workload, she needs to limit her visits to schools, and her attendance at literary festivals, even though she receives lots of requests.

Lydia is very modest about her unique artwork and illustrative style, even though it has been described as having a, "distinctive use of colour and collage (that) has won her critical acclaim." She scans items such as pieces of material, clothing, leaves, and flowers, together with painted cut-out

shapes of card, sticking them on to a painted, prepared background to create each scene.

The results of all this time-consuming work are stunning illustrations which are very colourful, vibrant and eye-catching. When we asked how she views her own work her reply was very unassuming and self-effacing. "You never really analyse your own work. I just do what I do. The collage is the bane of my life and I slightly





wish I had never started it, because it is always the thing that takes the time... I try and make it colourful with different textures."

We asked Lydia how she felt about working with Julia Donaldson, one of the UK's best-selling authors. She told us, "The 'Julia Phenomena' is amazing. There is nothing else that compares to it really – the amount of attention, the things we are asked to do and the amount of books we sell... (My work) is all a bit skewed by the 'Julia Phenomena' – all her books get so much attention. It is very much Julia getting the attention, but, I don't know, maybe both of us are getting noticed. Nowadays I either do one of my books or one of Julia's. It tends to alternate. I get offers but I haven't done anything with anyone else for a while."

"I tend to only get three or four months to illustrate one of Julia's books. The publisher is very tight on the turn around. I handed in the new one in March and it is published in June." The new title is *What the Ladybird Heard on Holiday*. Like the previous two in the series, it is full of slapstick humour and bounces along with the zany story, told in rhythmic, rhyming couplets, being perfectly complemented by Lydia's bright, vibrant illustrations which burst with colour. Lanky Len and Hefty Hugh are up to their old tricks. They are planning to kidnap a monkey from the zoo and use him to make off with the Queen's crown. But, can you guess who overhears their dastardly scheme and sets about thwarting their plans?

In May, Lydia also published one of her own titles – the first in the *Twit Twoo School* series. "The idea came from my little girl's school. They had a wildlife garden in their grounds and I just thought – wouldn't it be funny if there was a little animal school going on at the same time as in the big school. After a lot of discussion some of my initial animals were rejected and were not allowed to start school. I wasn't allowed to include a badger – too controversial – or a hedgehog, who was going to be the main character." Mole, Frog, Owl and Rabbit are all being taught by Miss Hoot in the tree-top school, but is Mouse brave enough to join them? This fun-filled, gentle title is great for all young children, but ideal for those about to start nursery or school. "There are more in the pipeline. I am working on the



second one now and each one will feature a different character. The next is about Frog, which will be published in May 2018."



Lydia Monks is going from strength to strength, becoming more recognised and more celebrated with every title she writes and/or illustrates. Her wonderfully striking and colourful illustrations and her gentle, hilarious stories are a hit with our younger readers, and so parents and grandparents would be wise to add



Lydia to their shopping list whenever buying books in a bookshop or online.

Martin and Sinead Kromer



Bibliography

Written and illustrated by Lydia Monks

I Wish I Were a Dog Egmont £6.99 ISBN: 978-1405212465

Mouse's Big Day Macmillan £11.99 ISBN: 978-1509828425

Written by Julia Donaldson and illustrated by Lydia Monks

What the Ladybird Heard Macmillan £6.99 ISBN: 978-0230706507

What the Ladybird Heard Next Macmillan £6.99 ISBN: 978-1447275961

What the Ladybird Heard on Holiday Macmillan £11.99 ISBN: 978-1509837328