

Richard Byrne

Creating hilarious chaos and crime capers



Have you ever considered going freelance and becoming a writer? After working as a graphic designer for well-known brands, Richard Byrne decided to “take the plunge” and started working as a freelance designer, then became a children’s writer and illustrator. Since his debut book, *Millicent and Meer* was published in 2011, he has to date written and illustrated eleven books for younger children, including the *Bella and Ben* series, plus illustrating for other writers.

When I met him at his home in Chichester, Richard recalled how this change in career occurred. “I just fell into it really. I was involved with

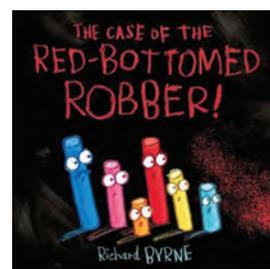
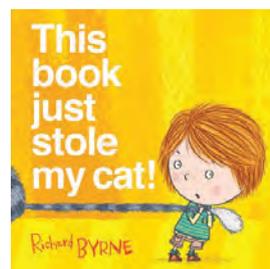
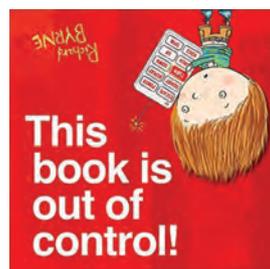
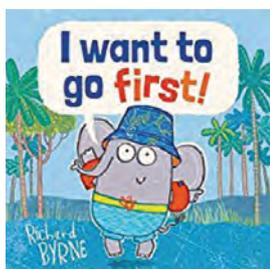
graphic design and I got fed up working for other people. I had been thinking about going freelance for years, so took the plunge. For a while I continued with graphic design and found I had more time to play around with illustrations and ideas. My partner and I had two young children by then, so I just fancied having a go. I did a few ideas for stories and drew various characters, sent them off to an agent, who got me a book deal based on my initial ideas. The characters appealed to my own children, so I fell into that young age group, which suits me because it is a lot more visual and text is minimal.”

Richard believes that his graphic design training helped with his writing and illustrating, as the approach is similar, in that you come up with several ideas, show the client or publisher and then explore ideas until you achieve the finished product. “You might come up with several ideas and see what other people think, which ones are clicking, then go back and develop the ideas. You never know which idea will evolve into a finished product.”

Having changed his career during a ‘midlife crisis’, I was intrigued and asked him to explain the working process he went through and describe further how his previous career had influenced this process. Showing me into his study, immediately I was aware of how neat and tidy it was. On a desk in the corner was a huge pile of papers which Richard thought could be ideas for at least three books. He showed me his “doodle books” in which he sketches characters or writes words and phrases, whatever comes into his head. “The way I work is that I see pictures first and the words come in just to link the story. For the last few books I have worked closely with OUP and we have got into a pattern of working. I usually fill up a couple of these books, when I am due to come up with new ideas. I start with a doodle then try and formulate the idea in my head. I create a general storyline from that character, then I go onto producing thumb nail sketches.”

Having a graphic background has also enabled him to maintain more control over the finished look of his books. Richard explained that the way he works suits the publishers, as he tends to set out the whole book, including the typography, ready to pass to the publishers online, leaving them very little to do. Although most of the work is produced on the computer, Richard makes sure that he maintains the “hand drawn look.” “The way I do this is by drawing the outline in pencil and I might do things over again until I am happy with it. Then I scan and colour on the computer. The advantage of this is that I can change the colour, move things around or delete as I am going.”

Richard’s style of graphic design was very minimal, simple and direct. This has influenced the design of his books and works particularly well for the younger age group. Each page has eye-catching, splatters of colour against a minimalistic background, which ensures the eyes are focused on what is happening without distraction. The characters he creates are comical and quirky. “I didn’t think the children would get the ideas quickly, so decided to keep the background very minimal



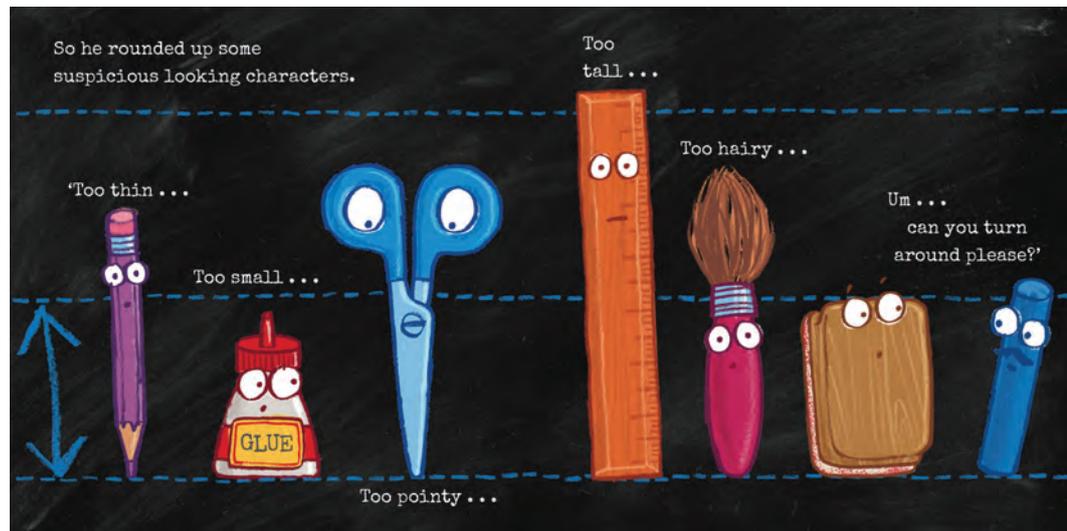
to enable the reader to follow the characters and not get confused by lots of detail."

In his books, especially the *Bella and Ben* series, Richard "stretches the conventions and breaks the rules." They are wonderfully funny and highly inventive, speaking directly to the reader, encouraging them to participate in the reading of the book, whether it is shouting out and hissing in *I Want to Go First*, flipping the book from side to side and shaking it in *This Book Just Ate My Dog*, or pressing buttons to restore normality when a book interferes with what is happening on a page in *This Book Is Out of Control*.

A reoccurring feature that characterises Richard's books, is this interaction that is asked of the reader. "That has been a big hit and that is why I try to stick to it to a certain extent. I like to think that adults enjoy reading my books because of the interaction of the stories built in, almost obvious for the reader to see where they can get the children involved."

When I asked about how he views his work, his reply was very unassuming and self-effacing, and he admitted to being very self critical of his books. Richard found it amusing when the book I really enjoyed, both for the story and illustrations, was the book he admitted immediately came to mind as one he was dissatisfied with when published. "I was disappointed with the illustrations, as they didn't come out as I had imagined. I liked the story, but I didn't focus enough on the characters before I started, so I wasn't happy with the illustrations. There are also little areas in the whole book that I'm not happy with. I think it had potential but didn't quite get there." I wondered if he had a favourite book. "*This Book Just Ate My Dog*. It sums me up basically, and it came very easily which is very nice. A spark of an idea came very quickly so I roughed it out and it hardly changed."

In May, OUP published *The Case of the Red Bottomed Robber*, an engaging and funny story in which someone is stealing the chalk's lovely drawings. Dust is left at the scene and only one suspect has a dusty red bottom! In true Richard Byrne style, it engages the reader to participate in the story, investigating clues, assessing the possible criminals and finally finding the culprit. Initially, Richard said the idea for the story came from doodles of little chalks which evolved while thinking about other characters, as he wanted to move away from the characters Bella and Ben. "I had a chat with the publishers, OUP, who thought the idea was quite good, so I went away and started thinking more about it. I used the same technique I use when developing my ideas. I saw the blackboard as a stage and the characters are going through it and then thought what would happen if ...? I came up with the villain idea. It was drawn with pencil and certainly trial and error. For the background I tried first to download pictures of blackboards, but they looked too photographic, it wasn't illustration enough." The finished images of the characters and the drawings on the blackboard give the effect of being drawn with chalk, but are computer generated.



The Case of the Red Bottomed Robber has been created as a stand-alone, but Richard does have some ideas for stories in a similar vein in terms of the structure, with characters representing innate objects with googly eyes, rather than animals and children. "I'm at the first stage, throwing ideas around. It might involve robots or tools. There is a rough story emerging, but I'm afraid it is too boy focused, although why shouldn't girls like tools and things?" What may never appear in his books are drawings of adults as he admitted he does not enjoy drawing them.

While talking with Richard in his study, I realised that I was privileged to be seeing a preview of his latest book in the series about Bella and Ben, as around the walls were pages for *This Book Just stole My Cat*, due for publication in October and finished only the week before the interview. Richard hinted that he has no immediate plans to create any more in the *Bella and Ben* series, as he admitted that it was becoming harder to think of new ideas. "I have thought about doing something different, perhaps writing for a different age group or using a different vehicle. Also, I'd like to attempt animation, whether as a hobby, or as part of the book thing."

There are many children, and adults, who are pleased that Richard took the plunge and decided to use his talents to create books that are wonderfully inventive and entertaining. We can look forward to his new creative ventures, that will inevitably continue to enthral readers with comical quirky stories and who knows, perhaps Bella and Ben, or characters yet to be created, may appear in the future as animation. Keep watching this space!

Debbie Wiggett

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 Published by OUP:
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