



Meg McLaren

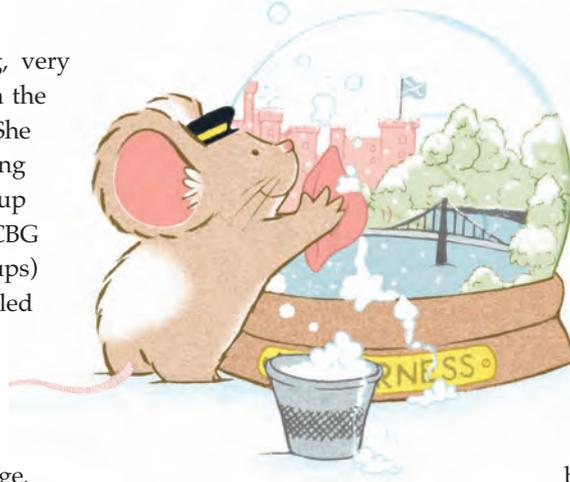


... sees herself as a storyteller!

Meg McLaren is a new, young, very talented author/illustrator on the children's picture book scene. She is certainly making a mark, becoming well known and admired. We met up with Meg in the Green Room at the FCBG (Federation of Children's Book Groups) annual conference. She had travelled from Inverness where she lives with "my better half, Jon, our corgi, Wilson, and our impressive, yet childish, Lego collection." She was waiting, rather anxiously, to go on stage.

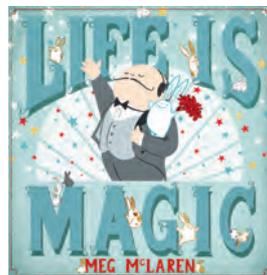
Meg began by recounting the story of why she made the decision to become a picture book writer/illustrator and how it took nine years before she saw her debut book, *Life is Magic*, published in March 2016. At the start of the story she wasn't writing or drawing anything, despite being very creative both at school, where she won an award for being artistic, and at university "doing lots of painting, sewing and model-making" as part of a degree in Theatre Design and Production.

"Working as a model-maker in a little shed in the middle of the Welsh countryside, everyone would sit and read books during lunchtime. I began devouring books and spent a lot of time in the library, until, eventually, I could afford to go to our tiny Waterstones ... I had no interest in children's books, and I have no memory of reading picture books. At some point, there was a display of Oliver Jeffers' books. I don't remember buying it, but I just know that when I arrived home I had this book. It was *Lost and Found*, and I just loved everything about it. It made sense to



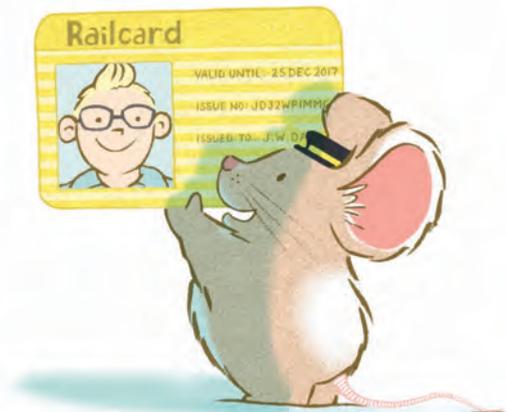
me and I thought, 'I know what a picture book is! I understand why people would want to make it and why people would want to read it.' I just fell in love with picture books. I bought and read as many as I could, and I decided, 'This is what I want to do!' That's when I started sketching again, only I hadn't drawn in years. I started writing and illustrating books,

but I didn't understand enough about them. I didn't understand how the words and pictures should work together. I didn't know what mediums I could use and what suited me best. I took a long time to write and illustrate a lot of really bad books and got a lot of rejections before I discovered the M.A. in Children's Illustration in Cambridge ... That was the turning point, when



I started to focus and work out how I would make a picture book ... But no-one was knocking down my door, so I kept on sending my books to slush piles. I waited for rejections and wrote another book and waited for rejections and wrote another book. Then someone at Andersen picked up *Life is Magic*. It took a really long time!"

Life is Magic tells the tale of the famous magician, Monsieur Lapin, who needs a new assistant. The experienced Houdini the rabbit is an obvious choice. But, during a performance, things go awry, and Monsieur Lapin is magically transformed. Inside the dust jacket are step-by-step instructions for drawing rabbits as well and performing The Topsy-Turvy Bunny Transformation Trick.



A book full of humour and magic, nominated for the 2017 Kate Greenaway Award.

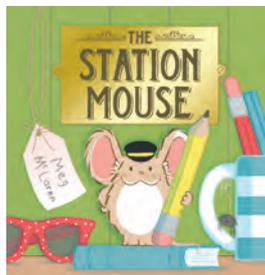
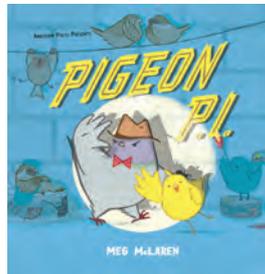
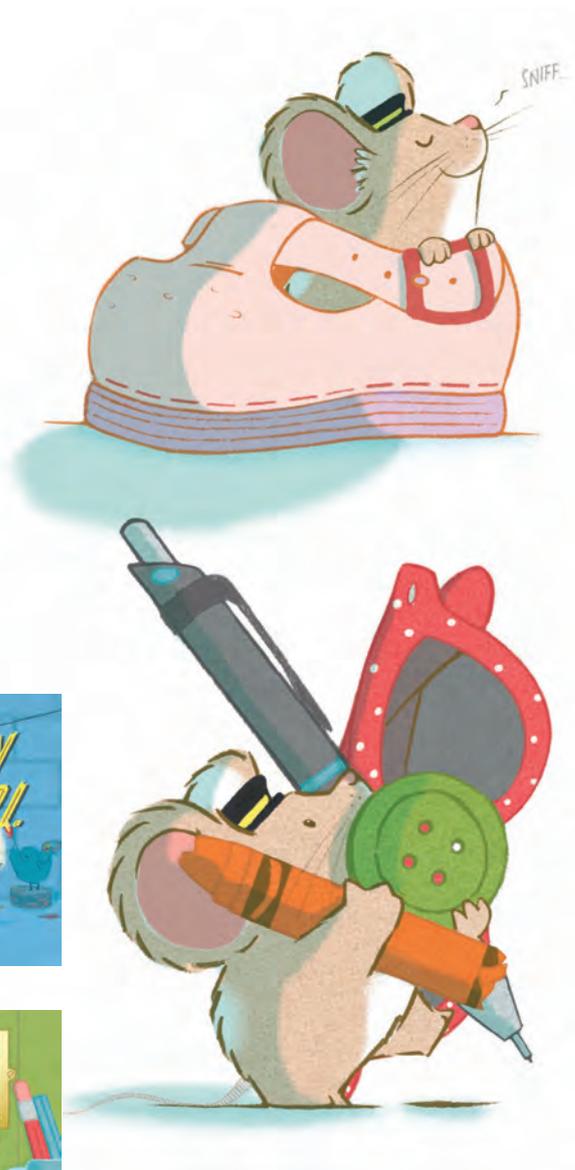
Pigeon P. I. followed in March 2017. Private Investigator, Murray, is hoping for a quiet life, but then a sweet little canary called Vee tells him that the caged birds in the city are disappearing. Have they been kidnapped? ... A brilliant book, very well written, complete with both a beginner's and an advanced guide to becoming a P.I.

The Station Mouse is Meg's latest title, published in June 2018. Maurice is in charge of lost property at the station, but he must follow strict rules. He must remain unseen. However, when a little boy loses something very, very important Maurice has no choice but to break the rules. Will he lose his job? A delightful tale, with a message for all *job's worth* employees.

"All my picture books are entirely me!" Meg explained. "Through my books you will know a lot about me." The text in each of these three, very refreshing, forty-page picture books is a mixture of prose and speech bubbles, with highly amusing captions, asides and clever puns. The comic-book/cartoon illustrations are engaging, detailed and expressive, blending expertly with the text to carry the stories along. The very busy pages are all quite different, but each is original and quirky. "I want all my pages to be as interesting as possible and unpredictable, giving my readers a lot to look at and a lot to explore again and again." Gaining confidence with each new title, more and more detail increases the complexity on each page.

Meg sees herself as a storyteller, "with every element of the book being part of the story - the cover, the dust-jacket, the endpapers. The whole book should be an experience in itself ... I'd like to think that my books bridge the gap between picture books and graphic novels. I like to play between the two. Kids are great visual readers. They read images so well, far better than adults." When asked how her ideas took form, Meg told us that she worked digitally. "I draw the outlines in pencil and scan them in. I can move everything around because it is on the computer. I have the layout set out, but all the detail is added as, and when, I think of it. That is the beauty of working digitally. I can go work on another page and then come back and fill in detail later, again and again."

The Wizard of Oz is to be published in September. "Having done some Wizard of Oz drawings on my blog, a daily doodle, I got a call inviting me to illustrate a new version of the story. It's an adaptation using the original story, but Sam Hay has written for a younger audience. It's not Oz as you know it - lighter, but still with the heart of the original." Clearly, Meg does not like being confined - she insists on complete artistic freedom. "Sam got to see my sketches before she wrote the text. I had already designed *my* Dorothy, and she was the Dorothy I would have liked as a kid, a bit like the kid I was ... so I put her in trainers. She has got little shorts, the sort of little character you would see running around a farm getting dirty climbing fences."



The organisers invited Meg to conference looking for new, upcoming talent. They found it! Meg now wants to return to creating her own titles but would also like to illustrate other texts providing they don't come with preconceived notions of characters and setting - she wants the freedom to illustrate them in her own distinctive style. We will just have to contain our enthusiasm and wait patiently to see what appears in 2019!

Sinead and Martin Kromer

Bibliography

Written and illustrated by Meg McLaren and published by Andersen:

Life is Magic ISBN: 978-1783444861 £6.99

Pigeon P.I. ISBN: 978-1783445981 £6.99

The Station Mouse ISBN: 978-1783445639 £11.99

The Wizard of Oz written by Sam Hay, illustrated by Meg McLaren Egmont
£6.99 ISBN: 978-1405286299