

Sara Fanelli

Pictorial Literature on Every Page

Alongside the stimulus generated by many different book formats and structures, the enchantment and love for paper ephemera has raced in Sara Fanelli's veins since childhood in Italy. She was surrounded at home by unusual books – all shapes and sizes – which had been collected by her art historian mother and a father who taught the history of architecture. As a young child she was absorbed by the experimental Russian and German artists but, above all, the book creations of Bruno Munari were most influential for their participatory fun and didactic values. "I was always drawing and making little books." This was quoted in the catalogue of the 2002 exhibition, *Magic Pencil*. She went on, "I knew I wanted to be an illustrator."

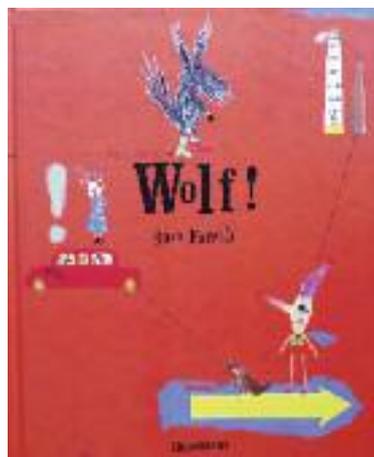
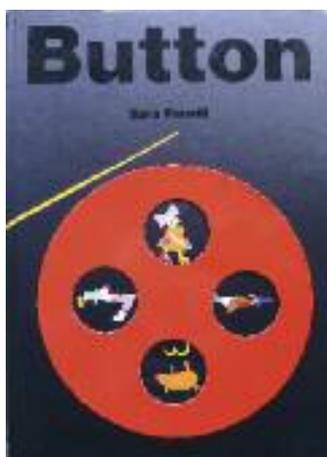
She has a passion for storytelling in a variety of book forms which include her signature illustrations featuring paper ephemera and experimental media. She not only uses drawing but collage, frottage, photograms and any other means at hand to give her work distinctive impact and resonance and thus draw her readers into new worlds of discovery, visual delights and challenges. Each of her fourteen children's titles, published since 1994 and including two innovative picture boxes of *Cinderella* and *Pinocchio*, are fresh new adventures. Full of anticipation and imaginative involvement with both words and pictures, they are unique and their instinctive handmade appeal attracts young readers when imaginatively created characters lure them into unexpected story lines and uncharted experiences.

Whilst not always conventional in her approach, there is usually a challenge for the reader to become involved and curious about the perception of the world 'out there'. She is able to visually enthrall and perplex through the juxtaposition of her



drawn and collaged illustrations but one is always left smiling in acknowledgement of her inherent wit and wisdom which always enhances the body of the text. Taking nothing for granted – to prove this point – just venture into her *Dear Diary* (2000) where you can explore the world through the eyes and minds of animate and inanimate objects such as a chair, a dog, a firefly and a ladybird. Such a valuable vehicle for exciting and nurturing any child's imagination or indeed for thrilling older age groups to wake up, look again and never give up looking and thinking about their situation in life. This book is a compelling mixture of innocent and sophisticated viewing, thinking aloud and, above all, an appeal for us never to give up on curiosity; expressing our thoughts to others using whatever independent verbal or visual means one may possess.

Sara is one of the most visually compelling, thoughtful and thought-provoking bookmakers and storytellers of today. "I try to use the format of the book to create something different that supports the story of the book," she said. Collage is the hallmark quality in many of Sara's images whereby she uses the medium as both a wondrous palette and structural kit of colour and textures to create and fabricate the most exciting characters and atmospheres. It is easy to recall her first title,



Button, published in 1994, whilst still a student at the Royal College of Art. It hit the market place to great acclaim and opened the eyes of everyone practising illustration. Here was a new talent and impetus to visual storytelling: a significant title full of fresh ideas in terms of page layout and the integration of words and imagery, spontaneous use of colour in her instinctive application of mixed media and incorporating drawing and exquisitely crafted collage to create a cast of almost bejewelled characters. Very few book covers had the impact then, or since, of *Button* by the nature of its bold simplicity and being able to revolve the red disc to introduce the characters in the story. The impact and appeal of the red disc is forever imprinted on our memory as it stood out on bookshelves and in bookshop windows even on a wet day. Her publishing journey since has never proved disappointing. Of all the characters in *Button*, Sara was happiest with Wolf who, in 1997, became a star of his own title where each spread is charged with spoken and unspoken drama.

them to marry – an onion and a knife became big opponents in a book consisting only of questions. The result is both amazing and demanding. It is an extraordinary emotional adventure as the reader is required to save the onion from the threat that the big knife will cut it up prior to being cast into a big frying pan. In actuality, the reader is physically saving the onion by easing the perforations to remove more and more of the onion’s many layers until a small, brightly coloured onion book is completely released to freedom and able to have a life of its own. The reader is also invited to respond to a set of challenging, philosophical and ‘meaning of life’ questions by drawing or writing in the pages alongside Sara’s own images and script. “The child will always have the book as a record of their thinking when they are older and look back,” she told us. This is a dynamic, visual treat imbued with drama and anticipation. The book demands to be fully shared to realise its potential for not only reading but nurturing other vital life skills of curiosity and imagination. It is a truly life sustaining experience, underwritten by Sara’s compelling images.



Spread from *Wolf*

Sara’s books are all immensely varied and diverse, ranging from mythological monsters and insects to maps and focusing significantly on topics which are often given little thought such as the story of a button and, more recently, an onion. She has also created two compendiums of informative illustrations related to flight and a dog’s life. A major project in 2003 was to fully illustrate Carlo Collodi’s *Pinocchio* featuring black and white pictures on every page with wonderful colour collages of characters and settings interspersed throughout the book. In particular the sea monster sequence is unmatched and unsurpassed for its graphic interpretation of the narrative to arrest the reader in the emotional tension and horror of the text.

Each of Sara’s books challenges young readers to extend their culture of perception, their visual curiosity and to assist their understanding of the world in a broader context. Her most recent title is no exception. *The Onion’s Great Escape* originated from an idea suggested by her publisher to create a ‘disappearing book’. From her initial ideas she selected two of

The bold, colourful or textural design of each page, with the text in her own handwriting will captivate the reader in the dramatic moment of each spread, particularly as there is little time to save the onion. It is an amazing book experience, not only for 2013, but for future generations to muse over and become a little wiser.

The exuberant, graphic playfulness and humour in all of Sara Fanelli’s books make her a fine, innovative and distinctive illustrator today. Each one is something new, such as you may not have seen before, but search them out and share them with young people today. You will be truly rewarded.

Mike and Theresa Simkin

Spread from *The Onion’s Great Escape*



- Magic Pencil* British Library ISBN: 978-0712347704 (Exhibition catalogue)
- Button* Walker ISBN: 978-1854061860 o/p
- Wolf* Heinemann ISBN: 978-0434976504 o/p
- The Onion’s Great Escape* Phaidon £14.95 ISBN: 978-0714857039
- Pinocchio* Walker Books £9.99 ISBN: 978-0744586321
- Dear Diary* Walker Books ISBN: 978-0744567564 o/p