

“Led creatively by the book...”

When I chatted to Gillian McClure just over two years ago (issue no. 40) I was struck by what I called the carefully organised correlation between text and illustration in her work. This, she explained, was the result of her efforts to ensure that each of her picture books – or, at the very least, those aspects she, as writer and illustrator, was responsible for – should be an “entity”. I fancied even then that her ideal would have been to have had the responsibility for producing the book – the whole shooting match, that is: writing, illustration, typography, layout, design, printing even – in her own hands. No vain wish-fulfilment this but, rather, the aspiration of a hands-on craftsperson to maximise that aforesaid entity.

So it seemed a natural and logical step when, last year (2010), Gillian told me she had formed her own publishing company, Plaister Press, and that it was up and running and about to re-issue her picture book *Selkie*, a haunting, watery tale so imbued with the ebb and flow of the sea it’s like holding a shell to the ear. And now, not quite a year on, a second and entirely new title, *The Little White Sprite*, has been published.

Gillian set up Plaister Press in professional partnership with Lisa Kirkham, who she met at an evening for illustrators hosted by Heffers in Cambridge, where they both live. (Lisa was there with her children, who were doing their version of networking, armed with autograph books.) Gillian had been searching for a typographer to work with and help her create picture books. She discovered in Lisa someone with over twenty years experience in the publishing business, a designer and typographer who had designed her own typeface (named Nara, but as yet not registered as such) and whose “special liking” was for picture books.

At an earlier stage, Gillian had been given a sum of money by an old friend of the family to help her to proceed with her next book. It was when publishing was beginning to be inflicted with a gridlock and commissions being stillborn. “I was getting so far, then having to stop,” she explained. Her benefactor, Michael Plaister, had been an actor, was married to a potter, and knew all about the often precarious nature of professional life. Initially, Gillian told me, muttering the word “charity”, she had been a little uneasy about accepting the benefaction. Her dilemma was resolved when she conceived the notion of starting her own publishing company and naming it after her benefactor.

She outlined the reasons for embarking on the enterprise. “I’ve been writing and illustrating for thirty-six years. For nineteen of them I was published by Deutsch, a small, independent publisher, who took risks.” With all that experience she could have kept on “hanging in” but she sensed a change in the air. Decisions were deferred;

projects lapsed; any response to original ideas, let alone positive ones, harder to come by. Publishing nowadays “is either all hiatuses or a terrible rush,” she said.

“I felt people wanted to package me. And I had known what it [publishing] could be like, but recent experience had a bit of a negative effect on the creative process.” She pointed towards her painting room. “There is a stack of dummies in there,” and many of the texts have been edited ready for publication – done before “another hiatus set in.” Now, however, she feels “very free”. Plaister Press has brought her and Lisa the longed-for “wholeness”.

The three of us, Gillian, Lisa and me, were sitting at Gillian’s dining table, far friendlier, less pompous and more business-like than many a boardroom equivalent. Lisa: “We were both up for a challenge.” Gillian: “You have to go with it, like a surfer on a wave.” Lisa (as though testing the concept): “It’s ... pioneering.” Gillian: “The idea became more formally stressed the more we talked about it.” Lisa: “We have a very similar vision.” Gillian: “And we’re very tolerant of each other’s mistakes.”

One of the things they really enjoy about their creative partnership is the free exchange of ideas. “We’re very tough with each other,” they both insisted. “We hold strong opinions.” The exchange of ideas is wholly democratic, so that Lisa is free to make suggestions about Gillian’s work and Gillian about Lisa’s. “And we always give our reasons,” they agreed. Realistically (and everything they do is feet-on-the-ground realistic), they reckon to be able to produce one new book a year. “A year seems to have the right feel about it,” said Gillian. Lisa nodded. She, after all, has her other publishing commitments to fulfil; and Gillian likes to work on colour artwork over the summer months. “Also,” she added, “that seems to work for the business side of things.”

Listening to what they had to say I got an insight into a business partnership of strength, resolution, level-headedness, united in its conviction that the body and soul of a picture book – illustration,



Cover and illustration from *The Little White Sprite*.

text, type, design – should all evolve together. Gillian: “That is the crux of it all.” Lisa: “They shouldn’t be put into separate boxes, when they want to be whole.” Gillian: “It puts the focus back on the book. We want to be led creatively by the book. And to have control until the last moment. We must aim to do what the market needs ... but be as flexible as we like.”

The Little White Sprite is a story for young children (it’s dedicated to Gillian’s small grandson) about a toddler, out walking in the park with Mum and Dad, who finds himself drawn to the old Warty Tree ... *Something lives deep inside the tree. I’ve seen small, bright eyes looking at me ...* The eyes are those of the Little White Sprite the toddler meets when he clammers into the hollow tree. It’s a gently exciting tale, told by Gillian with simple rhythmical clarity and illustrated by her with a delicately muted palette, and perfectly complemented by Lisa’s clear-cut, immaculate design and elegant, lucid typeface.

“Publishing a book means that you’re taking on a whole trade.” said Gillian. “It’s a very tried and tested profession.” She sounded calm and utterly unfazed in the face of her new responsibilities. “I have a very disciplined day,” devoting the morning to purely creative work, writing, painting, and studiously avoiding things like the computer until lunchtime. “Switching on the computer brings you into touch with the real world, and I need to be in

touch with the creative world for as long as possible.”

The rest of the day is taken up with the actual business of publishing – distribution (though Bertrams and Gardners now handle a slice of that), marketing, sales, publicity, costs, pricing. (Selling occupies a considerable amount of her time, including, of course, her school visits. “That’s one of the good knock-on effects – keeping alive my relationship with schools.”) “Business ... is the side I want to succeed in.”

Fortunately both are encountering “incredibly helpful people” along the way; from Chris Kubicki, Gillian’s “business mentor” at UK Trade and Investment, East of England, to Lisa’s specific territory, a friendly and obliging firm of printers in Lavenham. “It’s like a lot of loose ends, and you have to be attending to them all,” Gillian said. “We have to maintain a standard or everything might crumble.”

It sounds – is – hard work. “But then comes the excitement of the next book.” Gillian’s smile was beatific. “I’m so looking forward to working on it. And no one can create a hiatus.”

Chris Stephenson

Selkie Plaister Press £5.99 ISBN: 978-0956510808
The Little White Sprite Plaister Press £5.99 ISBN: 978-0956510815
 Plaister Press website: www.plaisterpress.com



NOW DON'T GET ME WRONG... Chris Powling

Number 33: Scholarship

...is a thoroughly good thing. Well, some of the time it is. It can also be inconvenient and humiliating. I had an early experience of the latter when reading an essay to my crusty old tutor at the sort of crusty old establishment where scholarly virtues still counted. Okay, so maybe the essay had been written a little hastily ie cobbled together at the last minute. Even so, I was a bit taken aback when he halted me in mid-flow, crossed to his bookshelf, and took down the very tome – utterly obscure, I’d thought – from which I’d done most of the cobbling. After riffling through it, he ran his finger down the page he’d been looking for then peered at me over his spectacles. “Why didn’t you *finish* the unacknowledged quotation, Mr Powling?” he asked.

Two important lessons can be learned from this. Firstly, not to underestimate crusty old tutors. Secondly, failing that, at least make sure the tomes from which you lift unacknowledged quotations really *are* obscure.

Another of my COT’s little foibles about quotations was that their source must always be checked. Recently, I had an apt reminder of this. In response to an article in my Newspaper of Choice about yet more changes to the school curriculum, a letter offered the following extract:

“We trained very hard, but it seemed that every time we were beginning to form up into teams, we were reorganised. I was to learn later in life that we tend to meet any new situation by reorganising, and a wonderful method it can be for creating the illusion of progress, while producing confusion, inefficiency and demoralisation.”

The remarks were attributed to Caius Petronius, 66AD, commenting on the reorganisation of the Roman legions.

“Wow!” I thought. “One in the eye for Michael Gove and other ministerial meddlers!” I even clipped the letter out for future use. So it’s lucky I saw another letter on this subject printed the very next day:

“The (just) sentiments about reorganisations that..... attributes to a ‘Caius Petronius’, AD66, actually first appeared in Harpers Magazine in 1957.”

Not conclusive in itself, of course...though I couldn’t help noticing that the second contributor was writing from the same city in which my aforementioned crusty old tutor plied his trade. All I’ve got to do now is track down the relevant copy of Harpers Magazine in 1957.

Chris Powling