



# Gillian McClure

Part from their meticulous painterly qualities, one of the most striking features of a Gillian McClure picture book is the carefully organised correlation between text and illustration. It's a symbiotic relationship reflecting Gillian's conception of the picture book as an entity – words and pictures in a narrative and visual harmony (like Eliot's '*complete consort dancing together*') that allows maximum scope for exploring the verbal and visual imagination. Even squared-up pictures tend to have some feature protruding from the frame – a foot, a branch of blossom, the steps of a ladder – as though reaching out to endorse its spatial affinity with the composition of the page or spread.

A glance through a conveniently placed stack of her artwork – “It’s the stuff I got ready for Bologna,” from where she’d just returned, she explained – corroborated the fact that each piece, whether painted with clearly delineated borders or as a vignette, was a component part of a planned composition. (“Incidentally,” she remarked out of the blue, “a rep told me off and said that, in future, I should use acid-free paper for the overlays for my artwork. He was obviously someone who cared a lot about watercolours.”)

And her artwork has an individual delicacy and particular way with colour that lends it a certain unspecific ‘European’ feel, especially evident in the later books, *Tom Finger*, *Bruna*, *Mario’s Angels* and, most recently, *The Land of the Dragon King and other Korean Tales*. “Yes,” she said, “I’ve heard other people say that. But then, on the other hand, a publisher at Bologna said to me, ‘But of course you’re very English.’ And then there’s Quentin Blake who says I



Gillian McClure in the painting room. Photo by Jill Paton Walsh

remind him of Dicky Doyle [cartoonist and illustrator; Conan Doyle’s uncle]. I don’t really know Dicky Doyle’s work that well. I grew up with Arthur Rackham and Edmund Dulac. Dulac for colour,” she added.

We were in the kitchen of Gillian’s bright and friendly flat-fronted terrace house in Cambridge, preparing to go upstairs to see her drawing room (as opposed to her painting room, which is downstairs), where she keeps her

lightbox. “I’m not wholly dependent on place; I like variety; I can work all over the house,” she said, before setting off. “In the garden. On trains, if I’m working on a text. Though I do covet – it’s wrong to covet your neighbour’s goods, isn’t it? – I do covet the studio next door. It’s owned by a sculptor who’s hardly ever there.”

Upstairs, the small, north-facing room overlooking the narrow street was illuminated by the glow from the lightbox in the corner. A computer occupied another desk at right angles to it. “You need to capture the essence of the story you’re working on in the first dummy roughs. That’s where the lightbox is so good. I do lots and lots of drawings of a single figure, from all angles.” She demonstrated with a small sketch of a horse (“probably taken from a sketchbook”), which she turned and turned about in the translucency of the lightbox, reversing it to view the image through the flimsy paper.

“I can go on doing that – changing the angle, changing the view – re-drawing it until I’m satisfied. Then sometimes I’ll go away and leave it and come back later and decide *that’s* the one; *that’s* how it should be. And it might well be one I’ve done much earlier.” She paused briefly. “When I’m at a hard stage – bogged down with something on the lightbox – I’d sometimes quite like to be working elsewhere. Some days the line comes on to the page just as you want it to. When it doesn’t, I can move on to another piece of artwork that is at a more advanced stage, do some painting.”

Back downstairs and into a small, cosy room (“I keep very warm in here”) next to the kitchen, with a view straight through to the garden: forget-me-nots and tulips sparkling in the sunlight on this particular morning. Even if it wasn’t for the pots of paints, inks and jugfuls of brushes, the colourfully be-splattered floor – like a blurred memory of a Jackson Pollock – would indicate that this was the painting room. “The floor is due to a painting class, a group of children I had in here,” she explained cheerfully.



Illustration from *Bruna*

“During the last decade I used lots of colour. And I’d definitely call myself a colourist.” (Think of those deep, vivid blues in *Selkie*.) “Then I moved from acrylics to watercolour. Acrylic was more gem-like, but too tight on my eyes. I needed to loosen up. I love the balance of watercolour.” Also – although this was implied rather than stated – the combination of freedom and precision it gives to her painting. For Gillian doesn’t paint to an outline; the outline is added later, in ink (“Warm Grey,” she disclosed). It’s a method that allows for the deft treatment of subtleties of feature and expression – as displayed in the framed original, showing Queenie’s delicate profile from *Tom Finger*, on the wall upstairs. “I now feel confident about colour,” she quietly affirmed. “It was line I felt I had to work at. Hence the lightbox upstairs. I think line has become as important as colour now, so I suppose that has changed how I see myself. But I continue to love colour and always will.”

Harking back to the pile of artwork she’d taken to Bologna, “A number of the pieces were left over – not used, that is – from the Korean book,” she went on. “There was a lot of editing of the pictures. By the Koreans. I was always emailing roughs to them.” Her point being the immense care that needs to be taken when dealing with another culture. It’s a matter of going boldly forth yet treading warily. She opened a copy of the Korean tales at the picture of Shim Chong wearing a red skirt and yellow top and lying at the feet of the Dragon King. “Yellow and red clothes signify a poor married girl,” Gillian pointed out. “Should she be wearing those colours in the presence of the Dragon King?” She flicked back to the illustration of the Heavenly Ruler’s daughter at her loom in the story called ‘The Herdsman and the Weaver’: “And she was a weaver. Would she have worn a chignon [as shown] or a plait?”

“At least, that’s how traditional Korean artists would have seen it. There is now a whole generation of young artists – young Korean artists – doing very exciting stuff, who probably wouldn’t see it that way.” She paused briefly. “There’s a possibility that a Korean artist may illustrate the other stories I have written [and weren’t included in *The Land of the Dragon King*]. That will be the first time I have written for another illustrator.”

Asked to state a preference, Gillian would choose to be called an author-illustrator. And, indeed, her discriminating feel for language – inherited perhaps from her father, the poet Paul Colman, her collaborator on a number of books, including *Tinker Jim* and *Tog the Ribber*, both short-listed for the Smarties Award – matches her sensitivity for line and colour. The care she takes with her writing is plainly evident in the crispness of the folk tale retellings in *The Land of the Dragon King*, the metrical repetitions and internal rhymes of *Tom Finger* and

the smooth cadences which echo the ebb and flow of the sea in *Selkie*.

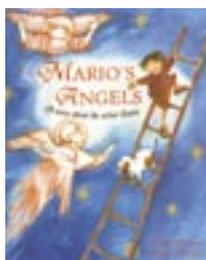
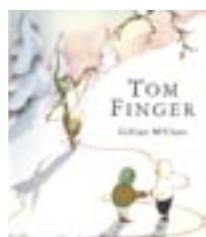
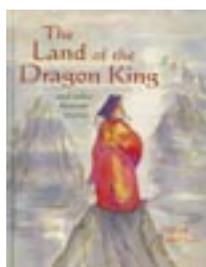
“I had my first rejection when I was fourteen,” she announced with undisguised pride. She went on to reveal a sample of her early commitment to the making of books: the story of a dog who stole the turkey from the family table, written and illustrated by her and painstakingly typed by her sister. But it took a few more years for her luck to change. Working as a teacher in Scotland, she’d made – that is, written and painted – a picture book, *The Emperor’s Singing Bird*, to familiarise her infant class with the Initial Teaching Alphabet. It so impressed a visiting School’s Inspector that, with Gillian’s permission, he sent her book to a London publisher. It was published, in a non-phonetic version, by André Deutsch in 1974.

“I started almost by accident and wasn’t really prepared for the market,” Gillian mused. “It’s been quite a learning curve. And it’s getting increasingly difficult to gauge. When you’re young you just do it; as adults you have to learn how to do it.”

She is currently experimenting with the possibility of graphic novels for young readers, and Frances Lincoln are reported to be “excited” with her drafts. The essential ingredient is “a simple story, image led”, she stressed, demonstrating this with a dummy showing a short sequence of pencil drawings of the head and shoulders of a small girl and her dog seated side by side. The pictures, with their all-important speech balloons, record a verbal and visual exchange that builds to an uncomplicated but dramatic moment. “One thing you must ensure,” Gillian commented, “is that the page turns come at just the right time.” As for the text: “I tend to write it on Post-Its. You can’t get much onto a Post-It. And you can move them around, reposition them.”

After spending time in Gillian’s company, chatting about her work and admiring her skill with brush and pen, it’s something of a surprise to learn that she is wholly self-taught. “I wanted to go to art school. But now I often wonder, if I did, what would I be doing now?” she reasoned. Upon reflection, however, the fact that she’s an autodidact is less surprising. For hand in hand with her naturally gentle manner and open friendliness goes a tenacity, a dogged determination to search, experiment, discover new techniques – whatever is necessary to direct and refine her work so as to “get back close to a child’s mind”.

Chris Stephenson



*The Land of the Dragon King and other Korean Tales*  
Frances Lincoln £14.99 ISBN: 978-1845078058  
*Mario's Angels* (written by Mary Arrigan)  
Frances Lincoln £11.99 ISBN: 978-1845074041  
*Bruna* (written by Anne Cottringer)  
Bloomsbury £4.99 ISBN: 978-0747564959  
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