

An Interview with Alison Friend

by Jessie Haas



What got you interested in being an illustrator? Did you like to draw as a child?

I loved to draw as a child! It's all I did. I used to copy animals from encyclopaedias and write facts about them next to the drawings. Sort of making my own version of the books I was copying from. My dad used to paint. His specialty was birds but also horses. Race horses in particular. I always wanted to be as good as him. I dedicated the first Bramble and Maggie book to him.

You create beautiful and funny cards as well as children's books. How are the two kinds of work alike, and how are they different?

I was doing art for the cards a few years before I got to do my first picture book. I think the card work is very similar to working on books. The scenes I paint are very narrative but with the cards I try to tell much more of a story in one single scene, unlike a book where the story is over many pages. I like to paint domestic scenes for the cards usually with a cat or a dog. I usually come up with a title first. Two Bad Mice - the card publishers - love a funny title that is often a play on words. I still do the cards now but my main focus is book work.



You've done four Bramble and Maggie books, capturing the emotions of both Maggie, the girl, and Bramble, the horse. Do you have a special connection with horses?

I don't have a particular connection with horses. I guess just a general love and enjoyment of drawing animals and observing them. I try to inject some human characteristics into the animals I draw for books. In their emotions. A look in their eyes or eyebrows!! Yes! Eyebrows are a great way to inject some character. I know horses don't normally have eyebrows like I draw them but I think these more human expressions help the reader connect more easily with the characters.

What is your process—both in illustrating a book, and working with gouache? Why gouache?

When I receive a manuscript to illustrate, I read it again and again to get a feel for the story and then I work on breaking the story down into page breaks. Often the publishers will do this for me and I can get started drawing little thumbnails on a big sheet of paper so I can see how the whole thing is looking. From here I will make the drawings bigger but still rough and send them to the designer. After getting feedback I do any revisions and do tighter versions of the drawings, adding as many details as possible before painting the colour. I paint with Gouache because the colours are very strong and opaque or can also be used like watercolours. Thinned with water and see through. Bramble and Maggie are the only books I still do in this traditional manner. I colour in Photoshop now. So the good thing about doing traditional paintings is that at the end of a book I end up with a fantastic pile of original work returned to me.



What's your favorite thing about illustrating the Bramble and Maggie books?

All the stories are so funny. It's so much fun capturing that interaction between Maggie and Bramble. I have really grown to love the characters. Also it's fun but also challenging doing several books set in the same place. You have to try to keep things consistent between books because people will notice if it's not!

Do you have a favorite Bramble and Maggie illustration?

Yes I do! It's from Bramble and Maggie-Snow Day and it's the double spread with Bramble stood steady with her back to the storm, snow piling up on her back. I love it!

Which was the most difficult of the four books?

The most difficult was the first. After the first it was like visiting old friends. I think I have become better at drawing horses too!

What were the challenges of working with an American publisher and author?

There weren't any really. I lived in the US for 6 years so I get lots of the cultural stuff in the stories and I hope I manage to capture the feel of the places. I moved back to England just as I got my first book to illustrate for Candlewick Press (What Colour is Caesar?) I guess the time difference if anything. Luckily I work best at night!!

What do you have in the works right now?

The latest book I illustrated that's on the shelves now is a really sweet book called 'My Hand to Hold' featuring the fluffiest bunnies and some lovely English countryside. I just finished a book for Nosey Crow publishers. It's called 'That Bear Can't Babysit' and it's out next year. I just saw the cover of the French version - very exciting!! I'm currently working on illustrating a great story about a Beaver and a Raccoon for Harper US which I'm really enjoying doing.

Do you have any advice for aspiring illustrators?

If it's children's books you want to get into then join the SCBWI! Read hundreds children's books! Look at lots of other illustrators work and get inspired. Draw every day!!!!

What question or questions do you wish I had asked? (Feel free to pose it/them, and give an answer.)

Well I do have an idea! My son Cal and husband Mike are in all the Bramble and Maggie books somewhere. Maybe your blog readers could tell us which page in each book they appear on and we can put the names in a hat and I will give the winner an original painting from one of the books!?!?

My personal question, which may or may not be relevant to this interview—are you familiar with the work of Norman Thelwell? (A Leg At Each Corner) Your cards remind me of his English countryside cartoons—just wondering.

A few people have said that! I am very familiar with his work...especially remember it from my childhood. Maybe it's schlooped into my brain and influences my drawings!

