

LEIGH HOBBS

THE EDITORIAL PROCESS

I have written and illustrated seven children's books so far with Erica Wagner as my editor. They are, the four Penguin books about Old Tom, *Horrible Harriet*, *Hooray for Horrible Harriet* and *4F FOR FREAKS*. The last three books were published by Allen & Unwin.

Erica and I work very closely while I construct or 'build' my books, in words and pictures. I never present her with a completed manuscript as such, just to be refined and tweaked. She is there right at the birth of the book and guides its development until it is ready to leave home, so to speak, and be published.

My stories are like complicated jigsaw puzzles that are put together slowly. Being character-based rather than driven by issues, each book tends to be primarily a continuing exploration of a particular character – or characters – and the idiosyncratic world in which they live.

I find that issues and themes such as love, loneliness, difference, exclusion, friendship, relationships, *somehow* develop and grow organically in the books because of the strength, personality and, dare I say it, 'depth' of the characters. Old Tom is real to many children because the kids can identify with him. He is after all a seven-year-old boy and Angela Throgmorton is the archetypal loving but bossy mum, intent on socialising her feral son!

I use the word 'somehow' because with, say, *Horrible Harriet*, all those issues are there as an intuitive subtext. Whether it's Old Tom or *Horrible Harriet*, humour is what dictates the rhythm of the story. I try to keep the text droll and understated, and often allow it to subvert the meaning of the illustration. In the *Old Tom* books the text is in an adult's voice, whereas the pictures often say something quite different. This is the subtext. The combination of the two tells us what is really happening.

And Erica is like a constant guide-rail as I work through this process.

With *Old Tom Goes To Mars*, I thought of the title first and then did a drawing of Old Tom looking out of a porthole, accompanied by one line of text, which read: 'At 9.15 precisely, Old Tom left Earth for Mars.' I faxed it to Erica and this was the beginning of a book.

I have an overall feel for what a story is going to be about, but there are always great gaps in text and illustration, which I just have to leave and move on. I go back and forth.

Erica understands the essence of each of my characters, so during the six-month-long creation of a book, there are maybe five four-hour meetings when we read through the text aloud – it's handwritten on foolscap strips – and look at the drawings, which are stuck above the text.

Erica responds intuitively, 'This is hilarious, but we don't need it'. She reacts as a reader and responds as an editor, and I trust those responses. Of course there are masses of phone conversations, emails, faxing of drawings, and so on, but there is an overall consistent vision that we share – plus a mutual respect and, most importantly, a sense of humour.