

Fishing Boats, the First Fleet, and Animal Architects

Author-illustrator John Nicholson and editor Sarah Brenan talked about the process of creating illustrated non-fiction for children on Wednesday 12 November at the Lanai Bar, Queen Street, City.

A sparkling November meeting of Society of Editors (Victoria) focused on a collaboration of 13 years. Author John Nicholson and editor Sarah Brenan interrupted each other frequently as they explored their working style and the particulars of a steady output of award-winning children's non-fiction.

Nicholson is the author of books for 10-year-olds, each 32 pages and crammed with information in both text and his own finely executed, highly detailed drawings. Brenan of Allen & Unwin, an editor for 35 years, has worked with Nicholson on 16 of his books.

Tall and angular, Nicholson exuded radiance with his white thatch and shirt. Brenan was petite in soft colours that swam in the space like a good editor's changes. Helen Garner's short story 'The dark, the light' came to mind.

'I see my role as taking what's been written about for adults and putting it into a form for children,' Nicholson said.

He works in a binary pattern, alternating a subject commissioned for the educational curriculum (*Gold, The First Fleet*) with something he's interested in (*Building the Sydney Harbour Bridge, A Home Among the Gum Trees*).

Brenan: 'John can take the core information and give it a fresh angle ... he has a gift for distilling complicated information into nuggets.'

A book starts with four days of planning 'before other people invade my private world'. As illustrator, Nicholson tends to take over many elements of the designer's job.

Brenan commented that he's the 'original Luddite', working with paper and fountain pen.

Nicholson researches at the State Library of Victoria's domed reading room. He counts himself fortunate: 'Light filters in from the top ... when there are not many people you can literally hear lovers whispering to each other.' He likes working from books – 'the feel, the smell' – and haunts secondhand bookshops for 'the kind of books modern publishers wouldn't publish.'

'Fishing trips' hone a sense of place, talking to people and getting lots of photos, both for picture ideas and for the details that capture atmosphere: mountains, water, kinds of trees, old buildings and objects.

After the research, Nicholson lists chapters and points, making a storyboard, thumbnail pictures of pages and a summary of text.

This stage is important in breaking up and organising the information: text or drawing? a cross-section here? what sort of cutaways?

Next, Nicholson details where information is to be found among his notes and photographs.

The book's feel dictates whether to write or illustrate first.

Nicholson has a conversational, direct way of writing. It is not dumbed down and he is happy to use abstractions.

Discussion during editing involved the use of 'adult' words such as 'prodigious'. Eventually both agreed some words are simply great words and should be included.

Nicholson: 'There's something glamorous about words you don't quite know the meaning of.'

Much planning goes into the illustrations to make them detailed and accurate. Dozens and dozens of tiny little details will 'make the drawing sing.' Nicholson's most useful trick is perspective.

Educational publishing is a juggling act with the requirements of the school curriculum. 'The books need to come from passion, not the educational department,' Brennan said. 'But we've got to promote a book we know we can sell to schools.' They take a punt sometimes on a topic and see if the curriculum can find a place for it.

Brennan takes 'everything he presents me with and I chew on it – 32-page books don't look like much but the amount of work is always astounding.

'He has an idiosyncratic style that gives the book flavour;' she added. 'I never want to take that out.'

'Authors are very vulnerable,' she said, 'and it's easy to take things for granted.'

She explained later: 'The work is isolated and few people really know what authors are up to or what is invested in their writing. Moreover, they are exposing themselves to the critical scrutiny of others – an act of courage... The publisher and/or editor might be the first person to read the entire work, which could have taken years to produce, and if they seem to be critical, pessimistic or indifferent it could be crushing for the author.'

The author-editor relationship has had its moments. Nicholson quoted Brennan early on: 'A confused and disjointed mix of fact and anecdote'. After the gales of laughter subsided, he added, 'She was certainly right on that occasion.'

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