

Mo Willems: Making it 'serious in FUNNY'



When he was a young man, Mo Willems wrote a letter to Charles Schulz, the creator of the *Peanuts* comic strip. Mr Schulz, he told the great cartoonist, I want your job when you die.

I met Mo earlier this year when he was on a brief stopover in London before hopping – equally briefly – across to Dublin, and he touched on his early devotion to Schulz’s world. “I’ve drawn ever since I was a little child,” he said. “I lived a lot of my life through making cartoons and telling myself stories. I fell in love with *Peanuts*; couldn’t stop reading the *Peanuts* comic books; read them over and over, until they were falling apart. I drew Charlie Brown and Snoopy endlessly, and, as I got older, I started making up and drawing my own characters.

“*Peanuts* is the only comic strip in which the leading character is not happy. And there’s something very realistic about that. I don’t think that childhood is necessarily a happy time. There are lots of stresses and lots of learning to do. I was not a happy child.” He paused briefly, his timing immaculate. “Oh no. I couldn’t climb where I wanted to. I had to ask to do a pee – !” Another pause. “I wanted to draw and be happy.”

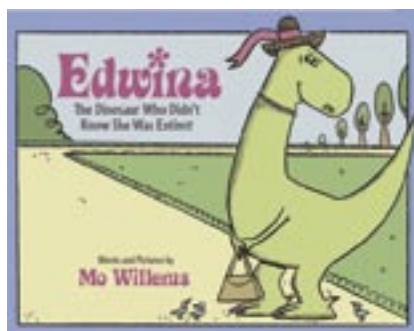
For someone who’d just endured a transatlantic flight that had touched down a mere two or three hours previously he appeared remarkably unfazed and responsive, ever keen to answer questions and generally talk about his work at generous length. He had a phrase – “serious in funny” – to describe the effect he tries (as, too, did Charles Schulz) to achieve in his work. It could also serve to sum up the style and tone of his discourse. An articulate, amusing man, his innate sense of humour is signalled by an apparently omnipresent and barely-suppressed smile that hovers around his features and newly-acquired, crisp beard, frequently spilling over into quiet, contented, wholesale laughter.

Mo was brought up in New Orleans, the son of Dutch immigrants. “I didn’t,” he

pointed out, “grow up with American books”: a fact which maybe accounts for the conspicuously fresh eye he brings to his own picture books. During High School he studied drama, acted in plays and started performing stand-up routines in comedy clubs. He later travelled to London to try his hand as a stand-up comic, an experience that taught him an invaluable lesson – “what an audience expects: timing.” Returning to the US he became a film student at New York University. But, film-making, “it’s a co-operative business,” he mused, the smile gaining increased definition, “and I’m not a co-operative person.” He switched to animation, and began writing and drawing for children’s television.

“I started out as an independent film maker, and then I was asked to submit some material by *Sesame Street*. They weren’t looking for someone who could write for children – they figured that could be taught – they wanted someone who was funny. Fortunately, I had two adult sketches in my filing cabinet, which were the funniest things I’d written.” Mo worked as a writer and animator on *Sesame Street* for nine years, during which time he won six Emmy Awards.

“I’d been doing television for a while and wanted a new challenge. I like the physicality of books, their different shapes and sizes, their portability. I like the restrictions – like learning about the importance of the page-turns.” And here he reflected for a moment on the first appearance of Sam in *Leonardo the Terrible Monster*. “You turn the page ... The eye instinctively goes straightway to the right-hand page, sweeps down ... Nothing; a blank page. Then to the left-hand page ... down ... and there, in the last corner you come to, is Sam,” poor, unsuspecting Sam. “It meant sacrificing the complete control I’d had in making films,” he continued,



“but I like the fact that the reader can interpret books in various ways. I was determined to do books. I even moved to Oxford for a month or so, on the assumption that being there would make me smart.” The smile flickered. “I worked on what I thought would be the Great American Books. But they stank.”

However, “a little character” began to bug him, insistently. “I kept drawing little doodles of him. I included him in a sketchbook I sent to family and friends, which is something I do every year.” The little character was the Pigeon. “I didn’t necessarily see him as a children’s character, just as a funny pigeon,” he confessed. But when he showed the sketchbook to an agent two or three years later, he was told: “I think there’s a book in that.”



Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!, the first in the series about the artful bird’s blatant attempts at reader-coercion, was published in 2003, won a Caldecott Honor and, in the words of the *New York Times Book Review*, entered ‘the pantheon of great children’s book characters’.

“The Pigeon ... he’s just pure *child*,” said Mo with relish. “Kids recognise that in him. And it’s great to be able to yell ‘NO!’ I’ve read this book in libraries and 500 children have screamed ‘NO!’” He smiled with satisfaction. “It’s a great release. As a child you’re always being told ‘No – no – no.’ And the great thing is that kids deny the bird, yet still like him.” The apparent simplicity of the artwork and the open invitation to readers to respond verbally to the demands of the uppity bird make the book an enduring sure-fire hit.

“It’s got to be subtle enough to be felt,” he insisted. Take, for example, the deftly nuanced interaction between the eponymous duo in the *Elephant & Piggie* books: not only are their facial expressions and body language exquisitely delineated but, one would swear, their very thought processes too. The sheer ‘humanity’ and vulnerability of Elephant and Piggie, together with the fact that they too, like the Pigeon, seem to be performing on a stage or screen before an ‘audience’ of readers – thus reminding us of Mo’s maxim that “Books should be played, acted” – elevates them into double-act as funny, affectionate and endearing as Laurel and Hardy.

The backgrounds to Mo’s pictures employ what he termed “a subdued palate” (i.e. pale tones); often, they’re blank. “It’s a relief,” he declared. Because, in reality, “There’s so *much* on view; too many things to see.” So that, when he does use precise, detailed backgrounds – as, say, in *Edwina, The Dinosaur Who Didn’t Know She Was Extinct*



– “they’re necessary because they are a part of her story, her place within the community.”

The same goes for *Knuffle Bunny* and its sequel *Knuffle Bunny Too*; although, in both these cases, bright hand-drawn ink sketches of the characters are superimposed on digitally-enhanced photographic backgrounds of their neighbourhood, the Park Slope area of Brooklyn where Mo and his wife and daughter used to live, until their recent move to Massachusetts. (“In the big city you always feel pressured; to do another book; a book a year. Now – well – maybe I won’t,” he added thoughtfully.)

Mo has described his ideal graphic style as “a single line, simply done.” But no matter how seemingly simple his books appear to be, they deliver a whole raft of insights and wisdom about friendship, relationships and everyday coexistence, the ‘serious in funny,’ with an effortless ease that comes from mastery of a whole panoply of artistic and literary skills.

His constant aim is “encouraging kids”. He is therefore adamant that reading should never be made into a chore, quoting his friend and fellow author Jon Scieszka’s warning about how easy it is to turn books “into *broccoli*”. And while he concedes that “there may be girls’ books and boys’ books,” enthusiastically points out that “boys and girls can *laugh* together.” What’s more, he believes, “the book – the reading – is only part of the experience. All my main characters can be drawn by children. I want my characters to become so alive that kids create their own books using them.”

Just as he did with *Charlie Brown*.



Chris Stephenson

The Pigeon On Stage

BIG WOODEN HORSE theatre company's production of *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* adapted by Adam Bampton-Smith, directed by Juliet Forster, with lyrics by Guy Picot and music by Shock Productions is now joined by their new production of *Don't Let the Pigeon Stay Up Late!*

For information on shows and enquiries email info@bigwoodenhorse.com or telephone on 020 8567 8431

Big Wooden Horse Theatre Company, 30 Northfield Road, London W13 9SY

Mo Willems' most recent publications in the UK

The Pigeon Wants a Puppy!
ISBN: 978-1406315509 £5.99

Edwina: The Dinosaur Who Didn't Know She Was Extinct
ISBN: 978-1406312294 £5.99

Knuffle Bunny Too
ISBN: 978-1406313826 £6.99

Leonardo the Terrible Monster
ISBN: 978-1406312157 £6.99

Elephant & Piggie Books – all £4.99
My Friend Is Sad ISBN: 978-1406314687

There is a Bird on Your Head! ISBN: 978-1406314700

Today I Will Fly! ISBN: 978-1406314670

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