



New Picture Book Talents

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Martin Salisbury on debut picture books.

Standards in the illustration of children's books have never been so high and in a demanding field, young illustrators compete to have publishers recognise their talents. How successful are they? **Martin Salisbury** assesses three first picture books from debut illustrators.<!--break-->

Three new debut picture books from Random House come from artists who have all studied at the University of Brighton's Illustration Department, at either Degree or MA level.

Egg Drop by Mini Grey is a surreal tale of the egg that wanted to fly. The egg's premature flirtation with aviation, and failure to demonstrate an understanding of aerodynamics (it didn't know anything about Bernoulli's Principle), lead to the inevitable conclusion. The artwork employs an interesting mix of old and new processes ? hand rendered ink and wash alongside collaged and scanned textures, including liberal use of distressed and cracked paint surfaces, brickwork, tablecloths, and even chewing gum. All of it is held together by a strong, unifying sense of design. I cannot say that I grasp the moral of this story but in visual terms this a fine debut by an artist who apparently acquired the name Mini as a result of being born in one in a Welsh car park.

Adria Meserve's **Smog the City Dog** describes the eponymous canine's decision to quit the urban chaos and head for a quiet canal towpath. 'I'm out of here!' he says. The subsequent journey is described in a meandering swirl of colour across the double-page spreads. The illustrations are lively and contemporary, but with stylistic references to the nineteen twenties pochoir techniques of another Anglo American, E McNight Kauffer. The typography is sympathetically integrated with the dynamics of the page and the happy ending gently reminds us of the benefits of co-operation and sharing over competition.

The process of observation

By far the best of the bunch for me, though, is Alexis Deacon's wonderful **Slow Loris**. This book is a joy. It is particularly pleasing to see a book that grows from the process of observation, from a period of intensive drawing in the sketchbook. As an art student, Deacon spent many hours at the zoo drawing the animals, studying movement and clearly coming to know and be fascinated by these creatures. The freshness of line that comes from this first-hand intimacy brings the animals to life without resorting to Disneyesque anthropomorphism. Sometimes the drawings appear to have been 'knitted together' from the sketchbook, some clearly enlarged from smaller drawings and put through photocopying processes with the consequent break-up of the line. This sits surprisingly comfortably alongside the occasional bit of digital tweaking to show, for example, a sudden burst of movement. The unchanging expression on the face of the Loris as we are let in on the secret of its other (not so slow) life becomes increasingly hilarious (it eventually

transpires that the Loris is not inherently slow, simply tired out from its extravagant nocturnal activities). The relationship of text to image, on both a visual and conceptual level, is faultless. The double page spread that follows the opening page gives us a six-frame time sequence that cleverly sets the pace with regard to the slowness of Loris's movement. We see him manage to move his arm an inch or two in the direction of his food while, in the meantime, various people come and go, in and out of frame across the pages. The accompanying text introduces us to our hero? ?Slow Loris wasn't his real name but that was what everyone called him. / A slow loris is just a type of animal. / Slow Loris was a slow loris. / He really was? / very? / slow.? The artist's excellent sense of visual pace is perhaps partly explained by his involvement with animation as an art student, always a good option for anyone interested in exploiting the medium of the picture book.

One of the many visual highlights here for me is the drawing of the Loris in his cage, viewed from inside, looking out to a group of bored school children with their harassed teacher. The lovely characterisation shows an all round artistic sensitivity that suggests more good things to come from Alexis Deacon.

This book, like Loris, is the coolest thing around.

Egg Drop, Mini Grey, Jonathan Cape, 0 224 06458 4, £10.99 (June 2002)

Smog the City Dog, Adria Meserve, The Bodley Head, 0 370 32555 9, £9.99

Slow Loris, Alexis Deacon, Hutchinson, 0 09 176799 7, £9.99

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