Steve Jenkins

Author Program In-depth Interview
Insights Beyond the Slide Shows

Steve Jenkins, interviewed from Boulder, Colorado on November 3, 2005.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your books are all nonfiction and vibrantly filled with cut paper collage — what do you suppose makes these pictures so enjoyable to look at?

STEVE JENKINS: I think children look at cut-paper collage as different kinds of paper, but they can also read it as a representation of a scene or an animal. There's some kind of sense of participation that maybe you wouldn't get looking at just an absolutely true, pictorial representation.

I've wondered a lot about how a collage works and why a collage is an interesting medium for creating realistic representations of animals or the natural world. Collage requires some knowledge or some input on the viewer's part; there is some information that has to be filled in.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Many of your books address the concept of "scale," including *Actual Size; Prehistoric Actual Size; Big & Little; Biggest, Strongest, Fastest; Hottest, Coldest, Highest, Deepest* and so forth. What compelled you to make these?

STEVE JENKINS: I've focused on scale in a lot of books because that's one of the simplest and most immediate ways that a child can evaluate the world. From my experience with my own kids, one of the first things that they're interested in whenever they're introduced to something new, whether it's an animal, or a geological feature, or something astronomical is they want to have some sense of scale.

It's easy to explain scale if it is within the range of their normal experience, say, if it's not too small to see, and it's not too big to walk around or to walk across. Once you get beyond those directly experiential qualities, I think even adults have a problem grasping it.

I've also come back many times to scale in books because the book, as a medium, lends itself to representing scale visually.

TEACHINGBOOKS: In *Big & Little*, you took the idea of scale and added the concept of familiar and unfamiliar, making it astonishing and fun to learn about animals.

STEVE JENKINS: The idea in *Big and Little* was to take something like a house cat, that is familiar in the sense that we experience it directly, and visually pair it with an animal that may or may not be familiar, like a capybara that's shown with a mouse to show the extremes of the rodent family. Sometimes, it was surprising to see the difference in size between a supposedly familiar tiger and a house cat as I was making the book.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your books are engaging nonfiction picture books with spare and clear narrative accompanying the pictures. Is it a challenge to create text that is accurate and accessible for a picture book audience?

STEVE JENKINS: I'm still experimenting with the best way to come up with text. In explaining a process, often there are concepts involved in the normal explanation of something that my audience (I usually think of my audience as second graders) wouldn't have any reference for. I think second graders can actually understand just about as much as adults when it comes to making sense of how one thing leads to another in interpreting a natural process. But, what they don't have is a vocabulary of references they can use to define new terms and new concepts. So the difficulty often lies in making a decision: Do I stop and define kind of a new set of terms or a new idea here, so that then it's available as a tool to explain further what I'm talking about? Or, is that going to derail the whole explanation too much? It's possible to keep going off on tangents until I've kind of lost sight of what I was originally trying to explain.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your companion books, *Biggest, Strongest, Fastest* and *Hottest, Coldest, Highest, Deepest* seem like picture book versions of World Records books.

STEVE JENKINS: Those books extend that idea of using scale as a tool to understand the world. Kids seem to be fascinated with the size, and speed, and strength, and so on in animals; they're also fascinated with how tall mountains are and how deep oceans are.

The books were a challenge, because wind speed or depth of the ocean in miles are hard to imagine or relate to anything that we've experienced directly, so sidebars became important. In *Biggest, Strongest, Fastest*, there were little diagrams that compared the size of a man or a hand with the animal that was being discussed.

Of course, this kind of sidebar didn't always work in *Hottest, Coldest, Highest, Deepest* — a book of geographical superlatives. Often the human figure would have just disappeared when comparing scale. So I chose the Empire State Building.

Incidentally, it was interesting that publishers in other countries substituted their own landmarks for the Empire State Building. For instance, they substituted the Eiffel Tower in the French version and in Seoul, South Korea the publisher used one of their skyscrapers, so that there was a familiar reference. I enjoyed this, because it showed me that the publishers understood how I was trying to use something familiar to explain the size of something that otherwise would have been hard to comprehend.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *Actual Size* is a particularly dramatic book in its presentation.

STEVE JENKINS: *Actual Size* was the next extension of exploring scale — having looked at little diagrammatic comparisons in *Biggest, Strongest, Fastest*, and then presenting everything at the same in scale in *Big and Little*, it just seemed like an obvious next step.

And there was a specific inspiration for *Actual Size* —a metal cast of a gorilla's hand at the San Diego Zoo. It was outside the gorilla area, and all the children would put their hands up to it and a lot of the adults would, too. The book was born at that moment, because it immediately seemed like a great book concept. And that's why the gorilla hand is on the cover of *Actual Size*. It's kind of an homage to that moment when I saw the cast.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Did some of your other books begin because of a question?

STEVE JENKINS: My third book, *Looking Down,* came directly from a question or an observation of my daughter's when she was probably two. We had just taken off in an airplane, and we were looking out the window and talking about the houses and cars that we could see, and I realized she thought they were small. She hadn't realized what was going on outside the plane, and we were just up in the air.

That experience immediately suggested a book to me. I started where the Earth was still a visible globe out in space and got closer and closer, and ended up on a ladybug filling the page. I didn't exceed those scale limits that I'd mentioned. You could argue it would be hard for a child to see the Earth as a globe hanging in space, but I think they can imagine themselves in a spacecraft and seeing it.

That idea of connecting new ideas or new perceptions of things to preexisting ones led to the concept of zooming in on the same spot so that each picture is kind of explained by the one before it and the one after it. So, coming in gradually step by step helps explain why things look the way they do, and why you see different kinds of patterns at different distances.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your 2004 Caldecott Honor book, *What Do You Do with a Tail Like This?* one of the many collaborations with your wife, Robin Page, literally starts with a question.

STEVE JENKINS: A lot of the books, perhaps all of them, start with questions; some of them are questions that I am asking myself, or that Robin's asking me, but often they're questions that one of our kids has asked. We've learned to recognize that when a question's been asked over and over again it's indicating a topic of particular interest.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What does it take to create one of your animal illustrations?

STEVE JENKINS: I use multiple sources for my initial research — I have a lot of books, I have a library of photographs. I have other illustrations. I use images on the Internet. And, I use my own observations. Sometimes I go to museums and take photos or draw. But, I'd say books are probably the single source that I rely on the most.

I will trace an animal for use in the early stages of a project, just to have something representational, but I don't trace for final illustrations. Tracing somehow maintains too much of the sense of the photograph that it's traced from, and I find it sort of kills the energy of the illustration. In my sketches, invariably there are some distortions that creep in and some inaccuracies, and those things, I think, are quite important in giving the illustration a kind of life that it wouldn't have if it were a literal tracing.

A final illustration is several layers of paper. It may be three or four, it may be 15 or 20, depending on the illustration, but there is no drawing, or painting, or shading of any kind. All of the forms are defined by either variations within a sheet of paper or by the edge of one piece of paper showing against another piece of paper that I've cut out.

If I want to differentiate between an animal's arm and its body, sometimes that's two different pieces of paper. Sometimes it's two different greens, if it's a green animal, or maybe it's the same green paper that has light and dark patches in it, and I can position the light and dark patches in such a way that the one part of the animal becomes visually separated from the other and is understandable. So, choosing the paper is an important step.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please describe your step-by-step process of creating a cut-paper illustration. For example, in *Prehistoric Actual Size*, how many layers or pieces went into making the baby Protoceratops?

STEVE JENKINS: The baby Protoceratops is relatively simple in terms of layers, because the modeled green paper that I used allowed me to let the paper express shadow and highlight itself. I didn't always have to create multiple edges to accomplish that like I do sometimes. There are 11 layers on his head, starting with his beak and then kind of building up. It took four layers just for the eye. I think there are about 20 or 21 pieces to make that dinosaur.

In illustrating the baby protoceratops coming out of its egg, it's perhaps a little different than if I were illustrating an animal that had been more widely photographed and represented. That illustration was really the combination of probably four or five other interpretations of what a hatching protoceratops might have looked like. I had found some representations of the babies out of the egg and I combined two or three sources and sort of reinserted the dinosaur back into its egg.

The illustration was begun as a pencil sketch on tracing paper. I'll trace it again, sometimes three, four or five times. Sometimes I'll end up cutting those tracings up and taping them together. If I like part of one better than part of another, I'll combine them.

From my tight sketch, I choose the paper that I'm going to use and make decisions about how many different layers I'm going to need. So once I've chosen the paper that I want to use, I take my pencil sketch and I do one more tracing of it, and this time, I'm thinking about where I'm actually going to be cutting.

One thing about pencil is you can kind of fudge things. I can kind of do a line and kind of smudge it, and kind of shade a little, and it looks good as a pencil drawing. It shows light and shadow. But when it comes down to taking my knife and cutting the piece of paper, I have to really know where that line's actually going to be. I don't make that decision usually on the fly as I'm cutting; I try to do it in the drawing.

Then, after drawing on a piece of tracing paper the edges of the pieces of paper that I want to cut out, I make photocopies of the tracing paper. Then, I'll use the photocopy to determine the order of the layers, which requires some thought because it's hard to decide what's going to be on the bottom and then what's going to be on top of that. Sometimes that can be kind of tricky.

Before cutting out the colored paper, I've adhered to the back of it a thin sheet of adhesive that has a backing paper on it. So once I cut out my bottom layer of colored paper, I cut through this adhesive backing, and I can peel the protective layer off, and then I have my first layer of, for example, the baby protoceratops, and it's very sticky on the back, and I'll put it on a piece of illustration board.

And then I'll cut another shape for a piece that's going to go on top of my first piece and, again, move it around and just keep repeating that process until I've built up the layers.

TEACHINGBOOKS: I understand you have thousands of sheets of paper to choose from for your illustrations.

STEVE JENKINS: Some of the paper I use in my collages is quite exotic and expensive, like exquisite Japanese rice papers that have probably been made the same way for a thousand years. But some of the paper I use is butcher paper from the grocery store, or maybe a paper bag that has an unusual cast to it, sometimes even wrapping paper or the back of something that's decorative on one side, and it's just leaked through a little. So my paper supply ranges from very functional paper that's been repurposed to make these illustrations to paper that's probably been made just for its own sake as an expression of papermaking art.

TEACHINGBOOKS: In *I See a Kookaburra!* readers are challenged to find the animals in each natural habitat — a game within these incredibly intricate environments. What was your challenge in creating this book?

STEVE JENKINS: The process of creating the environments in *I See a Kookaburra!* was quite different than the process that I normally go through. The environments had to be sort of reverse-engineered. Robin and I had to start with a spread that had a certain number of animals on it that had enough space between them that it would work in a design sense, had space for the typography, and had forms and colors that would complement each other. And then, we had to build an environment on top of that.

The illustrations were done first as individual animals, and then Robin scanned the animals into the computer, made a layout and arranged the type around them, so that we were sure that the second spread would work. Then, I took a printout of that spread and did a quick tracing and used that as a basis for creating the environment. I knew just where the animals were going to be on the next page, but the animals were recreated. They weren't picked up from a computerized image and dropped into the environment. They were done twice.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Was *I See a Kookaburra!* inspired by personal experience like several of your other books?

STEVE JENKINS: Yes. Jamie, my son who's seven now, was probably five when we started working on that book. And he particularly enjoyed books that involved finding things or puzzling things, like the Where's Waldo? books and a number of books with little windows that opened and showed pieces of animals, and eventually gave enough information for the reader to guess what the animal was. So our starting point for *I See a Kookaburra!* was that we wanted to do a book that was a game.

In the text, I tried to explain wherever possible why or how that particular animal adapted to that environment, or what about the environment made the animal the way it was, rather than just saying this animal lives in the trees, and this animal lives in the water. The nature of an environment shapes the animals that live there, and that was the bigger concept that we hoped that children would take away. It's not just learning eight animals that live in the rainforest and the eight that live in the desert, but to start being able to understand how environment shapes animals' habits, forms, colors and so on.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *The Top of the World: Climbing Mount Everest* was a bit of a divergence from your typical work, including making illustrations of people! Please explain how you came to create this picture book depiction of extreme adventure.

STEVE JENKINS: *The Top of the World* was my editor's idea. We had both read *Into Thin Air*, the John Krakauer account of the disaster on Mt. Everest, when a lot of climbers died in a storm. And Margaret Raymo, my editor at Houghton Mifflin, got it in her head that there was a great children's book there.

So, I took a step back and started thinking about it from the perspective of someone who undertakes this trip, flying into Nepal and ascending through these different levels of climate, and vegetation, and so on, I realized there were a lot of interesting pieces of science that I could talk about, held together by the concept of this expedition. Normally, it would be hard to talk about

frostbite, altitude, Continental drift and how the Himalayas were formed without it just being a disparate collection of facts. But a trip narrative holds it all together.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You and your wife Robin Page have collaborated on several books and won a Caldecott Honor for *What Do You Do with a Tail Like This?*. What is that collaboration like for you?

STEVE JENKINS: Long before I did any children's books, we were working together. We've been working professionally together as graphic designers for almost 25 years. It's been kind of an easy working relationship — there's a lot that we don't have to say because we've worked together so long that we can use shorthand or just skip over a lot of stuff.

But the fact is that all of these books are a lot of work. There are piles of sketches, and notes, and layouts that actually never end up in the book. So, part of the satisfaction of the collaboration is that it's not just to distribute labor, it's that having two brains at work means that we spend a lot less time going down blind alleys.

When I do a book by myself, I may spend days on a particular illustration or a particular idea and finally have to admit that I can't make it work. With the books that we collaborate on, often Robin catches something 15 minutes into it, because she's seeing it from a fresh perspective. And I can do the same for her.

TEACHINGBOOKS: When you were young, did you know what you wanted to be when you grew up?

STEVE JENKINS: I always thought I was going to be a scientist when I was a kid — right up until high school. I collected fossils and rocks. I had a chemistry set in the basement, and I had notebooks with the names of all the geological eras, and epochs. And I had a periodic table of the elements on my bedroom wall.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your father is a scientist. Did his career have an influence on you?

STEVE JENKINS: Yeah, he's a physicist and an astronomer. I'm sure that he was responsible for a lot of my interest in science. I think he kind of subtly reinforced whatever I was interested in. For example, he'd haul home the scope from the closet at the Physics Department so it would end up in my bedroom, and I could play with it.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Outside of natural history and scientific information, what do you hope your readers take away from your books?

STEVE JENKINS: When I started creating these books, I was interested in doing things that I thought my kids would like, and by extension, other kids. And, I was interested in doing illustrations of animals. But I've changed, and the world is changing.

On the one hand, science is getting increasingly abstract and is either at a scale that's impossibly small or one that's impossibly large — like cosmology — or over an impossibly long period of time. It's something that has become very hard to connect to for nonscientists. And at the same time, there are a lot of issues that science raises that are going to have a very direct

impact on us, such as stem cell research, and the possibility of cloning, and manipulation of DNA, and proliferation of nuclear weapons, and that sort of thing.

Adults in this country are going to be asked to make decisions about scientific issues that few of us really understand. It's not that kids can or need to be educated about those specific issues, but if they understand that there's a process, and that anyone can follow that process and basically evaluate information to determine whether it's good information or bad information, or whether it's motivated by political concerns or by scientific concerns, then, hopefully, they'll be able to make more informed decisions.

I guess that's what I see, in a really big picture way, as the importance of nonfiction: If children can see science not as a process of memorizing facts, or learning names, and dates, and locations, and so on, but see it as a way of investigating the world, and asking questions and demanding evidence to support what people are telling them, then they'll be much more prepared for what's going to be thrown at them.

Books by Steve Jenkins

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- BIRD SONGS: A BACKWARDS COUTING BOOK (written by Betsy Franco), Margaret K. McElderry Books / Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing, 2006.
- MOVE! (created with Robin Page), Houghton Mifflin, 2006
- I SEE A KOOKABURRA! DISCOVERING ANIMAL HABITATS AROUND THE WORLD (created with Robin Page), Houghton Mifflin, 2005
- PREHISTORIC ACTUAL SIZE, Houghton Mifflin, 2005
- ACTUAL SIZE, Houghton Mifflin, 2004
- NEXT STOP NEPTUNE: EXPERIENCING THE SOLAR SYSTEM (written by Alvin Jenkins), Houghton Mifflin, 2004
- RAIN, RAIN, RAINFOREST (written by Brenda Z. Guiberson), Henry Holt, 2004
- WIGGLING WORMS AT WORK (written by Wendy Pfeffer), HarperCollins Publishers, 2004
- ONE NIGHTTIME SEA (written by Deborah Lee Rose), Scholastic Press, 2003
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Robinson), Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1993

Note: *Bibliography created in November 2005.*