



Graeme Base

Author Program In-depth Interview Insights Beyond the Slide Shows

Graeme Base, interviewed in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin on October 2, 2004, while on tour from Australia.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Most of the books you've written and illustrated — such as *Animalia*, *The Water Hole*, *The Eleventh Hour*, *The Sign of the Seahorse* and *Jungle Drums* — feature colorful, lush, accurate-looking paintings of wildlife.

GRAEME BASE: I see the world around me, and I want to absorb it. Then I reinterpret it and bring it back. For example, I find out everything to do with a zebra, what it looks like, which way the stripes run, how they change in thickness, all that sort of stuff. But, I always put a twinkle in the eye of my animals, because I really like the interplay of fantasy. I'll put my zebra sitting cross-legged in a chair playing chess with a rhinoceros, which is not actually possible, if you're a zebra. The character is illustrated with a fair bit of detail and knowledge and people say, "Your pictures are so real," and I say, "Really? When is the last time you saw a fish wearing a bomber jacket?" It only looks real because of the layering of detail and texture that I put into my illustrations.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your award-winning alphabet book *Animalia* is a huge success. What, do you suppose, is the book's greatest appeal?

GRAEME BASE: *Animalia* offers something to all readers. The whole nature of *Animalia* was to pack into those pages as many things as possible for each letter. With that book, I began including multiple layers, hidden images and levels of detail in my work. It's important that a young reader can enjoy a book at the very simplest level. But then, the older brother or sister maybe picks it up, and they get it at another level. And the mom, dad or teacher who's reading the book to kids will see something else in it.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Were the alliterations in *Animalia* fun to write?

GRAEME BASE: I had a lot of fun doing the alliterations, which are the backbone of the book, but I can't pretend that I wanted to share those alliterations with the world. What I wanted to do was illustrate. That was the purpose. Early on in my books, it was enough for me just to do text that was purely a vehicle for my artwork. *Animalia* was a classic example of that.

After *Animalia* came *The Eleventh Hour*, which really doesn't say anything about the human condition either. That book was just an excuse to hide a lot of codes and clues.

TEACHINGBOOKS: And yet *Animalia* and *The Eleventh Hour* (another award-winning book) are used for educational purposes.

GRAEME BASE: Yes, I realize that both of those books actually have a lot of educational value, but the point is I didn't intend it. I've been getting letters for 20 years now from people saying how they use *Animalia* and *The Eleventh Hour* to teach kids about clear thinking or observation, deduction, math concepts, geography concepts, all sorts of stuff.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Readers young and old continue to delight in solving the mystery of *The Eleventh Hour*. Where did the idea for a visual crime story come from?

GRAEME BASE: After *Animalia*, I was struck by a mild sense of panic. *Animalia* had been a huge hit — totally unexpectedly — and the term “one-hit wonder” had a real resonance for me. I'd been reading some Agatha Christie books, and I thought, “What if I make a mystery story and hide all my clues in the artwork?” And quite literally moments later, the title, *The Eleventh Hour* fell out of the roof, onto the drawing board. I had no idea what the story was, but I decided it was going to be called *The Eleventh Hour*. So I started thinking, “Okay, a book called *The Eleventh Hour*, clearly it's going to be revolving around the number 11. Eleven animals go to an 11th birthday party on the 11th of November. They play 11 games.”

And then I thought, “At 11:00, we have them all go into one of the rooms, maybe the drawing room or the great library, and there's one of the guests, the dog, dead in a chair. I told my publishers this, and they were absolutely horrified. They said, “Graeme, you cannot have dead dogs in picture books.” It seemed a pity. I thought it was kind of cool. But, I had to go back and think what is it that people really like about parties? And, of course, the answer was food. So, I made it a story about a missing feast.

And *The Eleventh Hour* carried on what had become a tradition by this point of including all these codes and clues and hidden ciphers.

TEACHINGBOOKS: At what point did you begin to include a subtext in your books?

GRAEME BASE: Probably starting with *The Sign of the Seahorse*, I began to want to say things in the book. I don't think it's coincidental that that's also the time when I became a dad. Now we have three kids. Parenting changes one's view of the world.

I suddenly realized that I was in an incredibly fortunate profession — where I could really enjoy myself — and I could do something potentially useful: I could say something about the world.

The Sign of the Seahorse started off for me just as a joy. I'd had my first scuba diving experience, and it was going to be just a simple book about these fishy characters that live under water. But then I discovered in my research for the book's illustrations that we're losing coral reef faster than rainforest. So, underneath the surface of my book, I included this story of the loss of a coral reef.

In *Seahorse*, I tried consciously to make a break from including hidden images, and tried to just tell an adventure story. But in the end, I couldn't help myself — I still had two little shrimp who have their own story that runs through the pages. The book doesn't talk about them at all, but you can track their own little adventure story.

TEACHINGBOOKS: In your next concept book, *The Water Hole*, you included a very clear message along with your hidden animals.

GRAEME BASE: *The Water Hole* is a counting book with similar sorts of layers to *Animalia*. Although it's a concept book, there are other levels within it — little frogs go from ten to one at the dark moment when the water is all gone. Then all the animals come back with the water, so now the reader can count everything back up to ten.

The subtext on that one is about conservation, specifically about water as a global resource. Initially, the water hole is in Africa, but on the next page, it is in India, and then on around the world from there. Finally, with ten kangaroos, we're in Australia. At the very end, all of the animals are drinking at just one water hole. If you look back at the page before, where it says, "It rained and rained and rained," you'll see all the water spreading out in the shape of the world. And just before that, there's a page that has just a big, single raindrop, and if you look really carefully into that raindrop, you can see a hazy image of the world there as well.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Did *The Water Hole* begin as a global book?

GRAEME BASE: *The Water Hole* was initially going to be set totally in Africa and it was going to be about the cycle of seasons; a counting book inspired by the idea of when a water hole shrinks, more and more and more animals drink there. The layers of meaning began to come into it later.

The concepts for my books don't happen instantly. I don't say, "Oh, wow, here's a chance to do a book with this layer and that layer and this hidden meaning, or even the hidden animals." That's often why my books take as long as they do: somewhere between two and three years per book. I don't spend all of that time painting or writing. A lot of it is spent thinking, revising, or just working out how all of these layers can be made to slide in together and give the book a depth that will actually make it worth spending that much time on.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *Jungle Drums* is a book similar to *The Water Hole*, in terms of the hidden animals and the setting.

GRAEME BASE: Yes. At the moment I'm two-thirds of the way through a trilogy, or at least three books that have a loose association through having jungle/forest themes. The first was *The Water Hole*, inspired by Africa, but going all over the world and showing fairly representative versions of animals from each place. *Jungle Drums* is set in just one place and is more of a fable — talking about tolerance.

The next book is called *Uno's Garden*. It is, perhaps, the most interesting or challenging of the three for me. It's set in a forest, and it is about the balance between the natural world and the world of humans. We're part of the natural world. We should never think of ourselves as being some sort of aberration nor a blight on the world. We're a very powerful part of the world and we've got to be very careful about the way that we touch it. When we build a city or when we indulge in farming, it used to be that you'd just cut down all the trees and you put up all the buildings or you just plow them down and put in the seeds. We now know that approach doesn't work. So the third book in this loose jungle trilogy is about achieving that balance between nature and us.

Uno's Garden is really a fantasy; it doesn't spring so directly from my experiences of Africa, which very largely informed *The Water Hole* and *Jungle Drums*. And yet, I sense a natural progression. In *The Water Hole*, the animals were very representative. In *Jungle Drums*, the animals were more stylized and younger, sort of like toy animals. And now in *Uno's Garden*, I've extended that idea — making the creatures very familiar, and yet not quite the same.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please explain more about what *Jungle Drums* is about.

GRAEME BASE: My books usually start out with a simple story line. With *Jungle Drums*, I wanted to write a story about a little warthog, because I had been surrounded by the incredible majesty of nature in Africa: the biggest, the tallest, the stripiest, the spottiest, and I thought, “Being a warthog is a tough gig — these are not pretty animals.” But they’re endearingly cute. So, on the surface, *Jungle Drums* is a sweet little story about this little warthog who thinks he doesn’t want to be small anymore. Then along comes his fairy godmother, Nyumbu. She’s a wildebeest. She tells him that there’s a solution, and he thinks, “I’m going to be bigger.” But, you see, he doesn’t know that there’s nothing wrong with him; he’s okay being small. It’s everyone else who has the problem by not accepting him. And luckily the fairy godmother understands that it’s they who need to change and stop seeing themselves as better and him as worse. And that’s the message of tolerance.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You’ve talked about travel to Africa and scuba diving. How do your travels and adventures impact your work?

GRAEME BASE: Going to Africa is the single most inspirational thing I’ve ever been able to do, and my books reflect this. I’m interested in drawing the things that I’m passionate about, such as nature.

I’m able to travel a lot, and the best kind of travel is when you can get somewhere, stay there for a while and just soak it in. However, I’m not the kind of guy who takes a sketchpad into the outback and draws. I take a lot of photographs, and I find that they’re a good record. The photos remind me of the feeling and the inspiration of being there. When I get back to my studio, I’ll then take out the photographs and that will inspire me afresh. I also find there’s nothing like getting great photographs from people who really know what they’re doing, to see the detail of things like the fur direction on the nose of a leopard. I want to know the subtleties of an animal’s make-up when I’m creating my illustrations. Then, I’ll subvert that knowledge and do my own thing with it.

TEACHINGBOOKS: At what age did you decide you wanted to be an artist?

GRAEME BASE: I wanted to be an artist since I was about 11 years old. All through high school, I was drawing and painting. I went to college for graphic design, because I liked the title of “commercial artist,” and I thought, “Wow, that sounds great — you draw pictures and you get paid for it.” But the reality was that there was nothing creative about a job in commercial art.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did you end up in children’s books?

GRAEME BASE: I was working for advertising companies fresh out of college, and I went through three in about 18 months. I got fired from the third one, and I was actually pretty happy to be let go; I was having a rotten time. I’d come into the office in the morning, and there would be a pile of work for me to do. My boss would say, “Don’t worry about that one, because it doesn’t have to be done until 11:00 this morning. This one has to be done right now; you have 45 minutes to draw this toothpaste packet.” It was just insane.

When I asked why they fired me, they said, “Because you’re incompetent, Graeme.” I couldn’t really argue with that, because I knew I was doing bad work. It’s very hard to do good

work if you don't enjoy it. At that point, I took all the artwork which I had been doing in the evenings (what I considered my *real* art), and took it around to publishers, trying to get work doing book jackets. I did a couple of book jackets, and then they said, "Maybe you could do some illustrations for this story, a book called *Creation Stories*." So I did those. And I thought, "This is a lot better than what I was doing in advertising." It was much more creative, but it wasn't perfect.

Then I thought, "Hey, I used to be okay at English at school; maybe I could have a crack at writing my own text. So I wrote and illustrated a poem called, *My Grandma Lived in Gooligulch*. It was a very Australian story, and bingo! They published it. It was amazing.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Looking back, what are your thoughts about that first book?

GRAEME BASE: I think *My Grandma Lived in Gooligulch* was, in reflection, quite an innocent, almost naïve first go at what a children's book is. I mean, I honestly didn't know what I was doing. The fact that I very quickly gravitated toward a grandma was fairly predictable, including how she talks with the animals. It wasn't terribly original. But, again, it was a vehicle for my artwork, which I so often do. I'll have a beautiful image that I want to draw for its own sake, so I will actually craft a story that allows me to do it.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What artistic challenges did you face in creating your first children's book?

GRAEME BASE: I was sort of left to my own devices. I've kind of made up my own style of painting over a long period of time. At college, I was taught a lot about spatial dynamics, about topography, about deadlines, but not really about painting technique as such. In *My Grandma Lived in Gooligulch*, I drew every second page in black and white, which is I felt very comfortable with. I was quite uncomfortable with color illustration, and I think it's clear in a lot of those pictures that I was struggling to work out what color was all about.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You said you wanted to be an artist since you were a child. Did you ever create your own book back then?

GRAEME BASE: Yes, a book on dragons. When I was only nine or 10, I did a book on lined paper with colored pencils called, *A Field Guide to Monsters of the World*. And it was all the monsters you will find in a trashcan or under the bed or anywhere. I included where they live and who they eat, how big they are, etc. Of course, it was never published. But years later, I did a calendar called *Dragons, Draaks and Beasties*. I illustrated 12 dragons that I made up, plus spurious information about them.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You illustrated Lewis Carroll's *Jabberwocky*. What was that like?

GRAEME BASE: I jumped at the opportunity because the poem, *Jabberwocky* is the only poem I've ever known by heart. My father taught it to me when I was pretty young, maybe 11 or 12. And I just loved the total nonsense of it, and the fact that you could then make up anything you like. The day my dad taught me the poem, after every one of those nonsense verses he said, "So what does that mean?" And we went through each word and I told him what I thought each of those words meant, and he told me what he thought. And I realized that this was fantastically fertile ground for illustrating.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What other books did you enjoy as a child?

GRAEME BASE: The books I sort of read or had read to me when I was little were very much the English fare: Lewis Carroll, A.A. Milne, Kenneth Graham. I've always felt my work has a very strong English influence. I think my interest and love of word play tends to be a more English trait than anything else.

Interestingly, though, my books are generally much better known in America than they are in England. I'm known in my home country of Australia, certainly, but they've tended to gravitate more to the American sort of mind.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Music has also been an important part of your life. How did you come to choose illustration over making music?

GRAEME BASE: Up until *Animalia* was published, it was a real toss-up as to whether I was going to go down an art path or a music path. Music had been, for some years, my primary passion. I was in a rock band — I joined the band because I fancied the lead singer, who later became my wife, Robyn. She was in the band already and I joined as the drummer. We kept losing guitarists. When we lost the fifth guitarist, or so, it just happened to coincide with when *Animalia* was published. I said, "Let's just go overseas for a while and take some time off and then we'll come back and start the band up again." During that time, *Animalia* just went crazy — sales went through the roof, and suddenly this was now my career. I never did put the band back together again.

But, music's always been very, very close to artwork in my heart. In fact, I have on several occasions tried to marry the two things together. If you look at the cover of *The Sign of the Seahorse*, you'll see a little logo that is half seahorse and half treble clef. That's what actually informed the title of the book. When I first wrote that book, it was as a musical, but then I rewrote it in rhyming couplets. I love writing verse because, for me, it's a form of music. With *The Worst Band in the Universe*, the musical link is obvious. There's even a CD of terribly recorded music (which I did all myself) in the back of the book.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *The Worst Band in the Universe* is a divergence from your previous books, both in subject matter and in age level.

GRAEME BASE: *The Worst Band in the Universe* took five years for me to create, which was longer than I've spent on anything else. I really lost the plot with that one and then came back to it and lost it again and then found it again. And I know now what the problem was: it should never have been a picture book. It should have actually been my first middle grade novel, because it really about teenagers or at least aspiring teenagers and it was about rock and roll and freedom of speech, and I was just trying to force this much bigger and older idea into a picture book format. If I had the chance, I would revisit *The Worst Band*. It might be with a graphic novel or it would certainly be in a longer form and probably not written in verse.

Having said that, *The Worst Band* remains a favorite and it remains a concept that I'm very much attached to. It was important to me to be able to say that everybody has their own voice, and every generation plays their own music.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *Truck Dogs*, your first middle grade novel, fills a niche with male youth and reluctant readers.

GRAEME BASE: I think it's true to say that *Truck Dogs* has got a narrower specific potential audience. It's not limited to it, but it quite definitely appeals to middle grade kids, I think especially boys. It has that capacity to resonate with those boys at that age where it's so crucial that we get them reading. And I'm very pleased that *Truck Dogs* is maybe filling that hole.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What caused you to envision creatures that are half dog, half motor vehicle?

GRAEME BASE: I remember seeing trucks hammering down the highway as a kid, and they had a real animal intensity. The long hood was like a snout, the headlights were like flared nostrils, the grill was teeth, and behind the windshield, I was sure there were eyes.

Some years ago, as I was driving through Central Australia, I saw a "road train." A road train is a great big truck with several big trailers attached; they're vast things, and are quite terrifying to see coming down the road toward you. The one that I passed actually had a mascot — some toy dog taped to the front of the grill. I thought, "That's it. This is a truck dog." So, while I was traveling through the Outback, I began drawing up all these ideas for my truck dogs and conceived of an Outback Australian world populated by nothing but truck dogs and associated truck creatures.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did you decide on the format for *Truck Dogs* as a middle grade chapter book?

GRAEME BASE: *Truck Dogs* couldn't be a picture book, because it was about kids (the dogs are actually kids) who were at an older developmental stage. It was speaking to a slightly older, aspiring teen readership.

However, *Truck Dogs* was initially going to be a picture book, and I spent a year working on it in that format, including writing the text in verse. But then, these warning bells rang in the back of my mind telling me that I've been here before. I remember thinking with *The Worst Band in the Universe* that this was something which had the potential to go in another direction. And with *Truck Dogs* I thought, "I'm going to do this — I'm going to take a huge leap, leave a year's work behind and go back and start again."

So I opened up a new page, and wrote, *Truck Dogs, the Movie*. I started writing a screenplay, taking the whole idea to another level, and divorcing myself from the picture book by doing something very, very different. And over about six, eight weeks I wrote the screenplay, which may or may not ever go anywhere, but it very effectively then left the old version of *Truck Dogs*, the picture book, behind and gave me something new to work on.

Then, I rewrote that again, this time as a novel. With the truck dogs being such weird creations, I thought probably it would help to show readers what they looked like as well as describing them in words, because these are very peculiar beasties. I wanted to show the specifications of what each truck dog eats and what sort of petrol to put in it, how often you have to worm it and what kind of capacity the engine is — a real mixture of truck and dog.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Describe a typical workday.

GRAEME BASE: I work from home in a studio upstairs above the kitchen. The day typically starts after I've got the kids off to school. That's my job in the mornings; my wife, Robyn, does it in the afternoons. I get cracking at about 9:00 or earlier. I'll get up into the studio and see what I've been working on. It's not hard to get to work. In fact, I say that the worst thing about working from home is that you never get home from work. It's always around you. And with me it's a real problem because I have this love of my work that it affects the family probably more than I would want it to. We have to go away for the weekends to have a weekend together. We can't just have a weekend at home because I can't discipline myself to stay out of the studio.

The actual program of any day changes in direct proportion to how close the deadline is. Imagine being a kid and being told, "Okay, here's the homework I want you to do and I need this finished in two years." And you think, "Two years from now? Well, I'm sure not going to start that tonight. In fact I'm not even going to think about that until next week." But that's a real rocky road to disaster because a book like mine needs two years to fully gestate and become what I want it to be. So I'll knuckle down and work a pretty full day.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do when you get stuck?

GRAEME BASE: There's a moment in every project when you get stuck, when you think, "I don't know how to finish this or actually I don't even have the energy or the drive anymore to finish this." It's absolutely natural on a project that is long term. Yet, I'm now at a stage, I suppose, where I've done this often enough that I'm ready for it, I know that it's going to happen and I'm absolutely committed to the principle that perseverance in life alone is omnipotent. In the end, it does take hard work.

You've also got to be sensible. Sometimes I come up to the studio and I sit down and I go, "There is no way that I feel like doing this today." Essentially, I find that if I do work under those circumstances — where my mind is elsewhere — the work is going to suffer. It's a balance.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell students?

GRAEME BASE: When I'm talking to students, one of the first things I tell them is that I always wanted to do this. I think it's really important for kids to hear that. Since I was a kid, I said I wanted to be an artist when I grow up. And I got a lot of support. Mom and Dad didn't say, "No, you're going to be a lawyer or a doctor or a dentist or something." They said, "You want to be an artist, great. Follow your dream." And dreams can come true. It actually happened for me.

It was a rocky road at times, but I always believed that it was possible to live out a dream. I like to be able to tell kids if they have a dream, not necessarily to be a writer or an artist, but maybe to be a musician or a scientist or a historian or an astronaut or anything, you can do it. You can know very young and have a real feeling for what you want to do with your life and it can actually work out.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please describe your illustration process.

GRAEME BASE: The process involved in getting a finished picture starts off in a very, very scrappy fashion. I'll do a scribbly piece in pencil — drawing just to instantly get my idea down on paper. And then I slowly begin to develop that into something that I wouldn't be worried about somebody seeing. Then, I get lots of reference around me — lots of books, my own photographs and a big pad of tracing paper.

What I do is I start learning about things, and I'll draw something and think, "Okay, it's close but it's not what I really want." So I'll lay a piece of tracing paper over my own drawing and refine it. When I've got just one image the way I like it to be, I tear that out and just put it to one side. Then I work on another, and put it to one side.

Eventually, I have enough animals that I can put them into a collage, redraw them, together this time onto another sheet of tracing paper and finally develop a master sheet which has got everything in place. Sometimes I'll enlarge them or reduce them on a photocopier and get everything just so, so the design works in a fairly simple black and white way. That becomes fixed and then I'll begin to develop all of the other detail to fit in around that.

I've typically done my pictures in watercolor with ink. But I've found that some very thinned down acrylics offer slightly more vibrant colors, and they're just as nice to work with. I use colored pencils quite often over the top of that to bring out some other colors because everything has got a lot of color.

You think a tree is green, but it's not. It's green and yellow and deep blue in the shadows and even to purple. Every color you can imagine is sort of there. It takes reflections from things. If there's an animal standing nearby that is red, well, the leaves will subtly take on that color. That's the sort of stuff that I've begun to do now as I've become more confident with color.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You seem to enjoy improving and evolving your artwork.

GRAEME BASE: I think my ongoing challenge in my work is that I *almost* succeed all the time in realizing what I wanted to create but never *quite*. It's what drives me forward. There's always going to be the sense of wanting to keep going. I think it's what drives just about every artist.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Are you able to celebrate your small successes, too?

GRAEME BASE: Yes. I get a huge amount of satisfaction out of being able to complete a picture, but I hope that somebody else is going to sense the joy that's in the work, as well. My books are full of joy, and I hope that they're very uplifting. I recognize and am very grateful that what comes so naturally to me has an audience that allows me to do it as a job. I think I've got the best job in the world; I think that anybody who does what they love for their job has the best job in the world. If you love your work, you're blessed.

Books by Graeme Base

- UNO'S GARDEN, Harry N. Abrams, 2006
- JUNGLE DRUMS, Harry N. Abrams, 2004
- TRUCK DOGS: A NOVEL IN FOUR BITES, Harry N. Abrams, 2004
- WATER HOLE, THE, Harry N. Abrams, 2001
- WORST BAND IN THE UNIVERSE, THE, Harry N. Abrams, 1999
- LEWIS CARROLL'S JABBERWOCKY: A BOOK OF BRILLIG DIORAMAS, Harry N. Abrams, 1996
- DISCOVERY OF DRAGONS, THE, Harry N. Abrams, 1996
- SIGN OF THE SEAHORSE, THE: A TALE OF GREED AND HIGH ADVENTURE IN TWO ACTS, Harry N. Abrams, 1992
- MY GRANDMA LIVED IN GOOLIGULCH, Harry N. Abrams, 1990 1990 (Originally published in Australia in 1983 by Thomas Nelson Australia)
- ELEVENTH HOUR: A CURIOUS MYSTERY, THE, Harry N. Abrams, 1989

- JABBERWOCKY: FROM THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS (written by Lewis Carroll), Harry N. Abrams, 1989
- CREATION STORIES (written by Maureen Stewart), Macmillan, 1988
- ANIMALIA, Harry N. Abrams, 1987
- ADVENTURES WITH MY WORST BEST FRIEND (written by Max Dann), Oxford University Press Children's Books, 1984

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