



## Q & A with Patricia Mullins

Well-known children's book illustrator Patricia Mullins reflects on her practice as an artist-in-residence at Learmonth and Windermere Primary Schools.

### When did you first become aware of your talents in illustration?

I became aware when I was a child at kindergarten and in my early years of school. My sister and I were encouraged by my mother to draw and paint from a very early age and 'practice' was never seen as such. There was just an enjoyment in being totally transfixed in creating 'something' and being given the freedom to do it.

### What do you find to be the most challenging aspect of creating a piece of work?

The most challenging thing is getting the drawing and design right, that is, to my satisfaction, and being totally honest with myself about what works and what doesn't. I reflect constantly and ask myself, 'Is this the best I can do?' and 'Is it what I want to say?'

Illustrating a book also takes hard work and persistence as it can take around nine months to complete, with at least four months of development and planning. This work involves endless sketching and designing pages; getting to know the story thoroughly; researching what I need to depict often down to the most minute detail; working through the parts I'm unsure of; experimenting with new materials; and gaining the confidence through this process to be able to tackle the final illustrations. A final illustration can take from a few days to up to three weeks depending on the level of detail and complexity.

### When have you struggled with an illustration?

The whale illustration in *V for Vanishing* is an example of a work that I could not 'get right'. After working on it for over two weeks, and nearly completing it, I was still not happy with the outcome despite my efforts to patch it up. I realised this was because I did not adequately understand the subject I was portraying. So this prompted me to rethink the illustration and I went back to do more research. Making art is so often a process of solving problems: if one thing doesn't work, try something else.



## How much of being an artist is natural talent and how much is hard work and perseverance?

In my mother's words as she watched me persevere: 'Genius is 99 per cent perspiration and 1 per cent inspiration!' In other words, talent is only the beginning; hard work is a given and being able to recognise what 'works' at the end of this can be brutal!

## Do you think learning in the arts can help students understand the value of perseverance?

Unfortunately the notion of being able to produce good artwork through perseverance is not helped by television programs where results requiring effort and skill are shown simplistically from start to finish, with much editing! Conveying to students that artistic pursuits of value require time to develop and perseverance to bring to completion is challenging. It's also hard to convey the fact that being able to draw, dance, act, sculpt, paint or write convincingly is an acquired skill, made to look easy because one has spent years practising!

## What have you been able to share with the students?

I've been able to share the gift of experience – drawing, making pictures, designing books and observing, and sharing my mistakes and failures! Since I have been working with the students, I think they have been able to approach their own work with more confidence and enjoyment, despite the hurdles of perceived failure and 'not being able to draw'.

They have also looked at several picture books from the illustrator's viewpoint and hopefully will continue to read this genre of book both in a literary and visual way. I think they will also take away some idea of what it is to be a practising artist and what skills are required.

I've noticed changes in the students' confidence in their own skills, confidence in moving away from things they are comfortable with doing in art, and confidence in making mistakes which, while annoying, are part of learning.

## What do you think schools can do to encourage students to further develop their interests and talents?

Recognise and nurture students who demonstrate talent and have particular interests and motivation, and provide a safe and stimulating environment where failure is understood and allowed as a valid part of learning and development. Making use of 'failure' is often what perseverance is about. Encourage students to be patient to allow time for this development. Bringing people from industry into schools to demonstrate different skills and approaches and to be role models is another way for schools to develop students' interests and talents.

The Artists in Schools program is a partnership between the Department and Arts Victoria and provides annual grants to schools to engage a professional artist. For more information, visit [www.arts.vic.gov.au](http://www.arts.vic.gov.au)

### Patricia's tips for budding artists

- Keep looking, practising, and try to understand the things you want to draw well – they'll always surprise you!
- Things rarely go right the first time. When they do, think yourself lucky!
- When something doesn't work out, I take another sheet and do it again. If I were to rub out or destroy what went wrong I'd lose a sense of progression, or maybe later it might not look so bad!
- Always experiment with ideas and materials – see where they lead you. Be prepared for things to go wrong before they go right, it's just part of the whole process of making art.
- Be original, use your own ideas.
- Put fear aside, be bold and enjoy the process!

This interview was conducted by the Research Branch, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

Further information about the Research Branch is available at: <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/researchinnovation/default.htm>

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