



Tony Flowers

Developing Visual Literacy

Acclaimed illustrator and artist Tony Flowers talks about the importance of visual literacy and helps young readers discover Shakespeare in a fun new way.

What is Visual Literacy and why is it so important?

In its simplest form, it's the ability to read images (which requires active engagement rather than passive observation) and to 'write' in pictures.

Like writing in words, working in images is a skill set that needs to be practiced and developed.

Professional illustrators develop these skills until they build up a library of glyphs that are as easily read as letters of the alphabet. They create facial expressions with the flick of a pen.

The skill to analyse images and encode information in them is based on our ability to think visually. The depth of our visual vocabulary and our ability to access it to read and create images (through visual thinking processes) determines our level of Visual Literacy.

In my world, Visual Literacy is centered on telling stories with pictures. I love both working on my own stories and working in collaboration with other authors. I use my story telling skills to build on a narrative with images or explain complex and ridiculous concepts. For example in my latest book, *How to Stop an Alien Invasion Using Shakespeare* I

had to find a way to visually explain a bunch of scientific theories on time travel.

What does your PhD focus on?

I am looking at illustrators and their approach to building narrative elements into their illustrations. As a practicing illustrator myself, I believe my approach will offer some unique insight into this aspect of Visual Literacy. I also get to travel around talking to other illustrators about their approach to creating images, which I find fascinating.

How can schools help students develop their visual literacy skills?

One simple method is to build on a student's visual vocabulary. This can be done by reading highly illustrated chapter books, graphic novels or comics with them. Then discuss the story as you would other forms of literature. Question the students on what is happening in the story, what they think will happen next and ask what they have learnt about the characters in the story from the illustrations.

Current research shows that passively viewing visual material doesn't increase visual literacy. The viewer has to be engaged in the processes and think about

what they are looking at or watching.

To support visual reading, you can create an illustrator-focused display in the classroom or the library. For example, illustrators like Gus Gordon or Serena Geddes (most of us in fact) work with a variety of authors. It can be interesting to look at all of their works. Personally I would love to see a library organized alphabetically by illustrator (especially picture books). Imagine the joy of going through the Quentin Blake section!

For students who are reluctant to express themselves in written form (like I was at school), encourage them to write a story in pictures only, completely without words. Once they finish they can verbally tell the story, then write it down. If you are lucky enough to have a teacher trained in art education at your school, talk to them about integrating visual and written activities.

Last tip, when organizing your next author visits, think about getting an author/illustrator or an illustrator to talk about their process.

When you are working on a book, do you find the inspiration

for your illustrations within the story or do your illustrations actually help shape the story?

A lot depends on the story. If I am writing, I am always jumping from text to image and back again. This may be why my own stories take so long to develop. When working collaboratively, I love finding the space within the text to expand with illustrations. With close collaborations I can also help shape the concepts in the stories and build in elements that I want to illustrate before it is written. This happened a lot in my *Samurai vs Ninja* series with Nick Falk.

You have worked on quite a few books with Nick Falk, how does your 'partnership' work?

Firstly I should say that my publishers in Random House, Chris Kunz and Holly Toohy have been amazing in allowing me a lot of creative freedom to experiment and play with the illustrations in those books.

The working process between Nick and I depends on the series. We started working together on *Saurus Street* and *Billy is a Dragon*.

With both series Nick had manuscripts for the first books in the series. With *Saurus Street*, Nick and I would discuss concepts for the later books and I read the early drafts. As we collaborated more, I trained Nick to leave space for illustrations to enhance the stories. With *Billy is a Dragon*, we planned the visual structures that would be used in the stories. We included margin images that reflected the main characters' thoughts, 'lore' pages that explain the myths and folk lore in the stories and standard in-text illustrations.

Samurai vs Ninja was a series that we thought up together. We discussed the concept, then Nick wrote a couple of chapters while I drew up concept drawings. We

then met to compare notes and the series grew that way.

The new 'How to' series started in the same way, but with this series, after we discuss the concepts, Nick goes off and writes while I develop drawings in response to the text.

“Current research shows that passively viewing visual material doesn't increase visual literacy.”

Is How to Stop an Alien Invasion Using Shakespeare [HTSAIUS] going to be a standalone story or will we be seeing more of Sidney Bice?

We will be seeing more of Sidney Bice. We are currently working on the next book, in which Sid comes face to face with Genghis Khan. Loads of historical fun, I love doing the historical research needed to create the images. You can expect a few more time travelling adventures for Sidney.

HTSAIUS encourages kids to realise that ideas are easier to find than they may think and that their own lives can be a great starting point. Do you think this is a key to helping children release and develop their own creativity?

I certainly do. Ideas and inspiration are everywhere, you just need to be able to recognise them. When visiting schools, Nick and I both talk about the importance of just 'starting' a project. Write down or draw the first idea that comes into your head and then build on it. Too many people are waiting for the perfect idea. If they do that, they will be waiting forever! There seems to be a false belief that you are either creative or not. Some people may work more naturally in a creative way,

but the creative process can be taught. At University I teach the basics of the creative process to my design students.

It's the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death this month. Was that the inspiration for this particular story or was the timing just fortuitous?

More by good fortune, than design. I remember Nick and I discussed the concepts for books in the series and we ran through about four ideas. Shakespeare just seemed to be the first random idea that we latched onto and developed. It was only afterwards that we realised the anniversary was coming up.

The fun of our Shakespeare story is that we are not looking at the classic or expected version of Shakespeare as the accomplished Bard. We meet Shakespeare when he is just 12-years-old. He has his own insecurities and problems just as the main character Sid does. I was really pleased about pursuing this concept as I think kids might struggle to relate to the adult version of Shakespeare. It also makes him a real person, not just a historic figure.

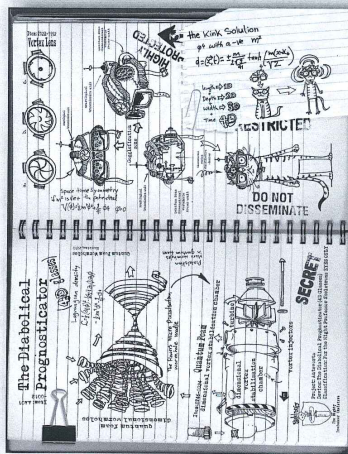
Sidney Bice struggles to think of story ideas, but has no trouble coming up with ideas for pictures, because he loves drawing so much. Are you the inspiration for Sidney?

It is certainly true that when I write a story I write in pictures and add the narrative dot points. I always try to get the visual working well before I worry about the words. But Nick hasn't said that I am the inspiration for Sid's character. Sid's ability to draw was something that developed out of the original concept of the boy who struggles to write. This is one of those fleeting ideas that Nick tried out in the writing and it worked. Funnily, when I first drew the character of Sid, I was

thinking of what Nick would have looked like as an 11-year-old. So I think Sid is a mix of Nick and me. You've included some fabulous steampunk / mad inventory type schematics in HTSAIUS. What do you like the most about creating those more detailed illustrations?

These pages are one of the most fun things to do. I love doing the research and finding ways to visually explain complex scientific concepts. In the book I have to bring to life an invention that allows the Mighty Professor Skeleton's cat to see into the future, "the Diabolical Prognosticator". The obvious answer to how such a device would work is a combination of Stephen Hawkins' Quantum Foam micro wormhole theory on time travel with optical fibre technology. All I had to do was work how to create (and draw) a device that you could strap to your cat's head that concentrated the Hawkings micro wormholes into a single focal point. I have named the

process the 'Flowers micro pixelisation wormhole model', just in case one of my young readers grows up to be a world famous mad scientist and makes one of these. I can at least have naming rights on the new (yet to be developed) time goggles (aka the Diabolical Prognosticator).



What type of school visits do you do, and how can our members contact you? I love going to schools, it is one of the most enriching parts of being an illustrator or author. I normally present about how

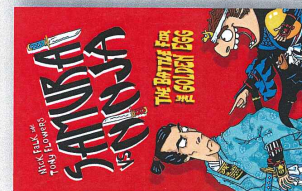
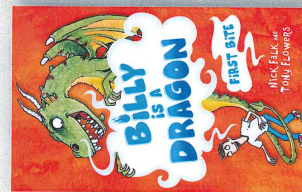
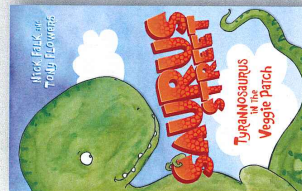
stories are made, and use one of the books I have worked on with Nick as a starting example.

That is followed by some crazy brainstorming to come up with wacky story ideas with the kids. I then bring the concept to life by illustrating it. I have also presented a number of workshops on the visual development of characters or design processes.

There are a few way schools can contact me, in Sydney The Children's Bookshop Speakers' agency handle my bookings, in Queensland you can contact Speakers Ink. I will be in Brisbane for Book Week this year. I can also be contacted via my publisher if you are interested in being part of a book release tour. You can also email me directly through my website flowersink.com.au.

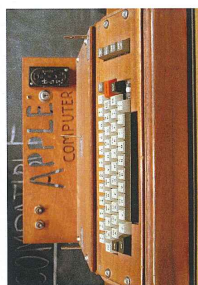
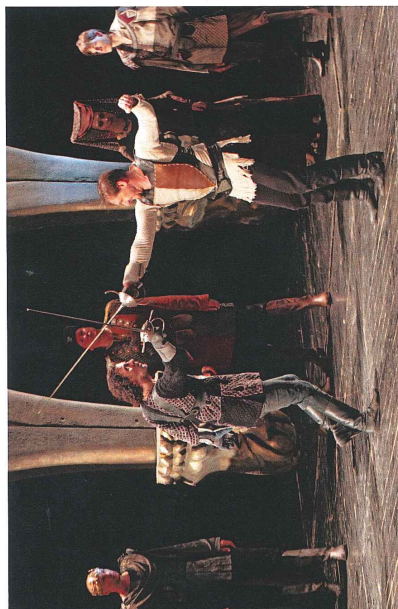
See our review of How To Stop An Alien Invasion Using Shakespeare on page 20.

SPECIAL OFFER: Save 15% off RRP when you order any titles from these Tony Flowers' series by Friday 6th May.



400 years - Shakespeare's death

23 April, 1616
Our most well known author of all time, William Shakespeare, playwright, poet and composer of literature, has entertained and inspired generations. Students of every age continue to recall and quote the timeless words of The Bard. His birthplace of Stratford-upon-Avon continues to be one of the most popular tourist venues in England, and the fabulous Globe Theatre will be even more alive this year commemorating the impact of his works.
www.shakespeare.org.uk



40 years - Apple Computers
1 April, 1976
Apple's original computers (just 200 of the Apple I were made) now sell for more than \$1 million each. In just 40 years, Apple have completely changed the way we work and play.
<http://tinyurl.com/j75m4cw>

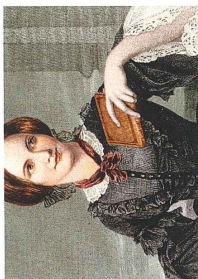
50 years - Luna 10 to the Moon
3 April, 1966
The first spacecraft to reach and orbit the Moon was the Soviet Union's Luna 10. The next day The Internationale was played, the first music broadcast from space to earth.
<http://tinyurl.com/zeomtp9>

175 years - First Detective Story

20 April, 1841
Edgar Allen Poe's short story, The Murders in the Rue Morgue whose main character is the French detective, Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin was published on this date and is thought to be the first modern detective story.
<http://tinyurl.com/gtlogq9>

200 years - Birth of Charlotte Brontë

21 April, 1816
Charlotte and her two sisters contributed many classics to English literature. Charlotte's most renowned novel, Jane Eyre, was written under the pen name of Currer Bell.
<http://tinyurl.com/hnwk63>



400 years - Death of Cervantes

22 April, 1616
Spanish novelist playwright and poet, Miguel de Cervantes was classified as the most important writer in Spanish history. Best known for Don Quixote, his influence on the Spanish language was immense.
<http://tinyurl.com/jm5ts5y>

200 years - Death of Mary Poppins Creator

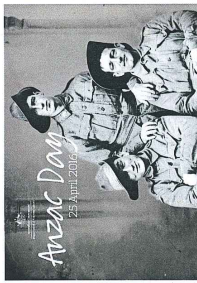
23 April, 1996
Australian-British children's writer, P. L. Travers, was best known for creating the book and later film character Mary Poppins. She died in London, aged 96.
<http://tinyurl.com/hkdvnv7>

100 years - Irish Easter Rising

24 April, 1916
The Easter Rising in Dublin, which inspired W.B. Yeats's poem, Easter, 1916, was the start of the fight by the Irish against England and its dominance over them.
<http://tinyurl.com/z3k4xam>

100 years - Anzac Day & the Somme

25 April, 1916
Anzac Day was named and officially celebrated for the first time by Acting Prime Minister, George Pearce in 1916. This year we also commemorate 100 years since the Battle of the Somme.
<http://tinyurl.com/zpsksz4>



70 years - Pilbara strike, WA
1 May, 1946 - August, 1949
Nearly 800 Aborigines held a 3-year strike over their rights, wages and working conditions, in defiance of the Aborigines Act 1905 (WA).
<http://tinyurl.com/zumy9p4>