



MEET TOHBY RIDDLE The Greatest Gatsby

» You have an interesting background that includes all types of jobs from mailing clerk to Sydney Morning Herald cartoonist and much more. Did you ever imagine you would create children's books?

I didn't know that was something you could do. These days authors visit schools and you get to meet adults who have different types of careers. That wasn't the case when I was young. I didn't realise you could have a career as a 'picture book creator', or that I could use my training as an artist or as an architect in that way.

My mum bought me a book on Maurice Sendak's art. There was a lot of paper engineering in it, including a facsimile dummy of *Where the Wild Horses Are* (which later became *Where the Wild Things Are*). When I saw the steps, it demystified the process and I realised it was something I could do.

Around the same time I got a job as a mailing clerk with Pan Books Australia. It was a small office at the time and I just wanted to learn everything—I soaked up whatever I could. By the time I was leaving to go and study architecture, I had a mock up book of my own and showed it to the publisher. That book ended up getting published.

With his passion for visual communication, Tohby Riddle continues to bring amazing books to life. In this latest, he transforms an often dry topic into an engaging and interesting journey.

A few years later a different publisher asked me if I was still doing books. I had another idea laying around which I showed her, and that one was published too. It just evolved from there until eventually I deferred the fifth year of my architecture course because I had some book contracts. I never went back.

» Your books are really diverse, ranging from *My Uncle's Donkey* to *Unforgotten* which is a very thought-provoking picture book for an older audience. How do you decide what to create?

Because I am interested in art in general, I get an idea and then focus on how to make it work as a book. It becomes the book it becomes, and then I work out the target audience based on who it actually appeals to.

I find it's important to work on ideas that you get excited about and are really keen to see on the page. It has to be exciting to help you get through the process, otherwise it could become a really unpleasant drudge. It is very demanding to do something that requires a lot of attention to

detail, so it is the excitement that carries you through.

For that reason I don't show an idea to any publishers until I'm certain I want to see it become a book, and that I am able to see the project through. It's also why I usually only work on my own books and ideas. It means I have a really personal stake in them, which helps stop it from becoming too much of a 'job'.

» How long does it generally take you to complete a book?

I have created 7 or 8 books in the last 8 years since I returned to this full-time. Because I am doing the words and the pictures—and often the book design as well—there is a lot of attention to detail and work involved. My goal is always to ensure that the whole book expresses the idea somehow, whether that's through the typography, end paper design, cover design, or even the paper stock the book will be printed on. There's even greater need in this digital age to make books beautiful. Texture and design are all part of what defines a book against a

digital version. I think that's really important.

Internationally, incredibly beautiful books are being published in Europe and America. There are very high standards to be aware of, and I always keep those in mind when I create a book.

» ***The Greatest Gatsby* is very different to anything else you have done. Where did the inspiration come from?**

The second *Word Spy* book has a section on grammar and I was working on the illustrations. In those books I had always been trying to push how much the pictures could share in delivering the content. We had tried to avoid it just being text with some cartoons and considered it important that the pictures achieved things too.

I found that I was expanding that area, and discovered that I find it very interesting to try and picture verbal ideas, and ideas to do with words. The concept for a visual book of grammar came from that experience. So I actually started working on it 4 years ago—not continuously—but the first forays into it were back then.

In that time I became increasingly interested in visual information and the extent to which you can show any information visually.

I was also reading some books on mnemonics and the way the brain works. It made sense to me to try and present information in ways that engage more of the senses for a start, but also to try and gear it for how our brains actually function.

Our brains usually remember visual images better than words. I know that I tend to remember what pages look like rather than the words I have read. And yet a lot of information looks the same no matter what the subject is – it's just black words on white paper. You don't have that extra mnemonic potential.

If you recall the page on nouns in *The Greatest Gatsby*, it's not just black words on white paper. The page has six elements on it and that helps you remember that there are six types of nouns, so you've got that extra mnemonic function going on. That's also why I worked hard to present each complete idea on one page as much as possible. That makes it easier to take a mental snapshot of the page.

“Language should be fun, so it's not about hitting people over the head with rules. I wanted to create a cheerful book about grammar.”

» **You have taken some really complex facts about grammar and turned them into something that anyone can learn from. Was that the goal?**

I think most of us actually know a lot more grammar than we realise, but we don't necessarily know how to describe our knowledge. A lot of research and a lot of cross-referencing went into making the book. I needed to have a strong understanding of the content in order to present it in the way I did. As I went along I was clarifying and learning extra things too, which was good. There is certainly plenty to learn.

» **How did you determine what would be included?**

I made sure that it included the fundamentals, basic concepts you could then go and build on. The more I researched, the more I realised the 'real rules' of grammar [its laws] are largely to do with word order. We intuitively learn those, but often don't know the how or why behind them. It helps

to learn about word classes, and the way basic sentences work. It's partly to do with the fact that in Latin, when you conjugate a word it has many inflections, but in English the sentence is what gives it context so the word order is far more important.

There are a lot of rules beyond that which might only have been brought in by some persuasive person in the 19th century. They don't have really strong linguistic foundations and are not essential laws. They are more about speaking 'proper' English—a prestige version of the language. Despite that, those things are still very important because of the way the world works. You need to know that prestige version to present well and get jobs and communicate officially. However if you go too much into those rules it can get very prescriptive.

There is a difference between 'good' writing and 'proper' writing. Good writing often breaks rules, while using rules too slavishly and dogmatically doesn't necessarily produce good results.

There is also a need for people to feel more confident about grammar. My goal was to establish the building blocks, the really basic things, and some information on the 'why' behind when to use 'who' or 'whom', 'which' or 'that'.

Language should be fun, so it's not about hitting people over the head with rules. I wanted to create a cheerful book about grammar.

I intentionally limited the scope to be more about structure and establishing the basic things about what a word is, the basic classifications and then how we build with phrases, clauses and sentences. I left out lexical issues as those are about the meanings of words rather than their function in a sentence, and also punctuation. They might end up in future books!

» **The illustrations are a wonderful mix of typography and art. Did you start with that idea in mind?**

I wanted the book to be somehow coherent, to have a certain texture all through it. In a way it is a little showcase of all the fun graphics things I have been mucking around with, but they largely have to do with stamping.

There is a very small amount of proper digital typesetting, just a few lines throughout the book. There are a few more that are done on a typewriter and then scanned, so they became artwork. All the other words were done with old letterpress printing letters. They are literally hand stamped in different inks as individual letters.

The purpose of that was to make the words a more visual element. Our brains are trained to look at a word only to read it, but we still have to look at it. Once you see a word as an image, you can add texture to it, and colour, you can make it wobbly or big or small ... I wanted to present this very conventional information by re-visualising words as well.

» **That technique must have taken you forever!**

It did. The book went way over deadline actually. It was a huge relief to finally finish it. I loved working on it, but you get to a point where you do have deadlines and you have printers waiting, production people, publicists, and at that point it is not something you can just enjoy for the sheer pleasure.

It is possibly the most demanding book I have ever done.

» **I can imagine there will be lots of English teachers and other adults wishing they had a book like this when they were kids.**

I hope so. It is the book I would have liked as a schoolboy. Last year when the book was fairly well developed, I spoke at a series of conferences around Australia to teachers and previewed the book.

Their response was really encouraging, particularly as I was entering the last stages of the book. Some commented on how their younger teachers would really benefit from it to help develop their confidence with grammar. Everyone feels they

could just know a little bit more. I'm the same.

» **How does *The Greatest Gatsby* fit with the National Curriculum?**

It is complementary to the curriculum, particularly with the increased emphasis on grammar, but will be useful for years to come irrespective of whether the curriculum changes.

» **What are you working on at the moment?**

I have a book concept I am really looking forward to working on that is a very dreamy work that draws on the Australian bush and is kind of set in the Blue Mountains.

Then early next year I have a picture book coming out with Allen & Unwin about a gang of dogs that lives on the edge of a city and ... you'll have to wait to find out the rest!

To read our review of *The Greatest Gatsby*, please turn to page 14.

SPECIAL OFFER:

Save 15% off RRP on *The Greatest Gatsby* and 22.5% off class sets of 15 or more when you order before 30 June 2015.

