

Notes on the Making of *MILO: a moving story*

by Tohby Riddle

Milo: a moving story by Tohby Riddle
Published by Allen & Unwin, 2016
ISBN: 9781760111632

Introduction

Milo: a moving story is about friendship. The main protagonists are a group of dogs and a migratory bird who wears sneakers. The setting is in and around a big city. The time could be now or any time in the last century.



The artwork technique

The medium for artwork for *Milo* is pencil with some occasional collage elements. Only four pencils were used: a deep yellow (middle chrome), red (claret) and blue (indigo) – based on the primary colours – and black (used separately for occasional things such as clouds). Once scanned into a digital format there was also some tweaking of the images' colours and textures.



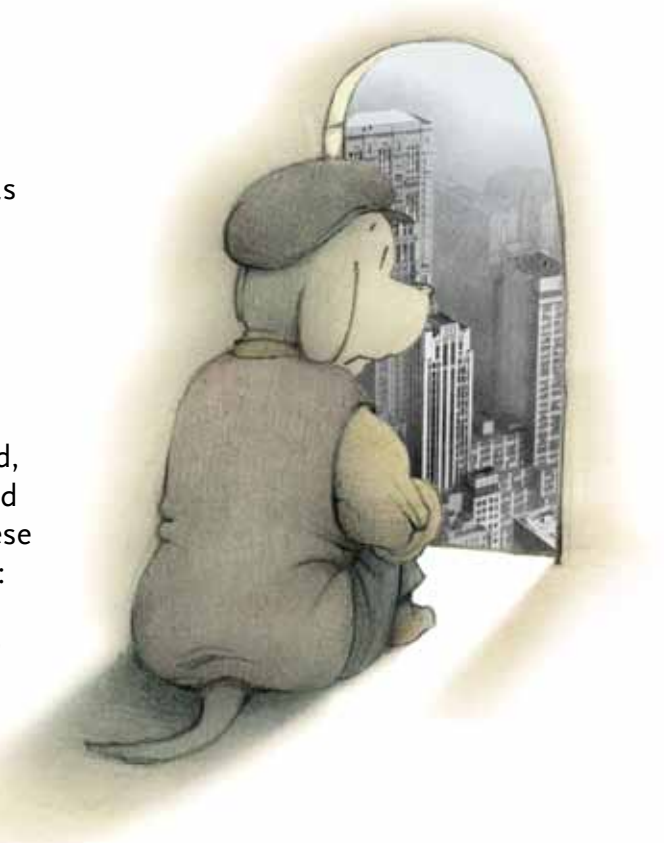
The actual pencils used for the artwork in *Milo*

Collage and reality

Some of the artwork for *Milo* could be called mixed media, because collage elements are added to the pencil drawings – or vice versa (e.g. where a drawn character is placed in a photographic scene). This was done partly because I liked the look of it, but also because it had meanings of its own to bring to the story.

Where collage is used it seems to add another reality to the scene. First, there is the drawn reality of the characters and their immediate surroundings; second, there is the photographic reality of the wider world around them. And the differing ways of rendering these two realities might imply they are somehow separate: the drawn figure and the photographic landscape. Is one just an illusion? Is one more real than the other?

Having said this, while these meanings come to my mind – and I find them interesting – they might not come to a reader's mind, and no one's perception would be correct or incorrect. So it goes. In the end, I can only hope that somehow the artwork works!



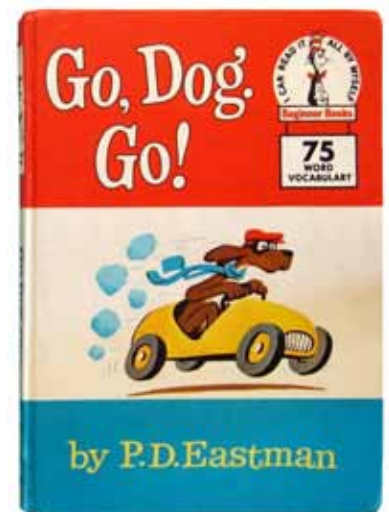
Two realities: the drawn figure and the photographic landscape.

Simplicity of artwork

Most of the artworks in *Milo* are simple, minimal compositions. This is because most scenes are about the interactions between the characters – and that is what is focussed upon. Adding complex or busy backgrounds seemed unnecessary. Only where the location is important to the telling of the story is there a substantial background.

I grew up reading dozens of *Peanuts* books – over and over – and was always impressed with the power of the artwork's economy and simplicity. It seemed that *Peanuts* artwork was so simple because the content was so character-based. The art served to amplify the timeless human interactions of the characters.

Another work that I loved as a kid was *Go, Dog. Go!* It had a random, delightfully pointless narrative, with its own strange, urgent momentum, which conjured all kinds of mesmerising dog-filled scenes. They are simple scenes, simply rendered but to me they are so memorable. Though I was thinking of something else at the time, *Milo's* cap might have unconsciously come from the dog on the cover of that book. It's impressive how indelibly some images from children's literature can be imprinted on a child's mind!



P. D. Eastman's classic *Go, Dog. Go!* (published by Random House Inc., New York, 1961)

Writing the story

For about two weeks preceding the writing of *Milo* I'd been sick with a severe flu. For days, I had no energy to move or even stay awake for long – all I could do was think! So I decided to think up a story.

The story came together almost before I knew it – a result of freely associating a range of ideas and concepts that were capturing my imagination at the time. First, I had an anthropomorphised dog character that lived an independent dog's life, with a part-time job and a few dog friends. I had thoughts of juxtaposing the sheer ordinariness of his life with a mysterious exotic character or event – or both. That's when Carlos, the enigmatic migratory bird, began appearing in sketches.

Later a wind-blown scarecrow, a cloud of butterflies or moths and the arrival of an impactful and transforming storm, embellished and teased out the story.

Shuffling all these ideas around, the story of *Milo* fell into place - almost like making sense of a dream.

And as soon as I could get on my feet I began scribbling the ideas in my notebook (see right), and worked toward a mock up of the book.

Emotional reality of the story

When I reflect on the story of *Milo*, there's an unavoidable connection between Milo's emotions and the turbulent storm that comes and sweeps him away from his usual life. The storm literally delivers to Milo a new, widescreen perspective on his life and the world. And Milo is compelled to reflect on what has happened.

It is as if the unsettling turmoil Milo feels, after his argument with his old friend Snombo, is somehow externalised – becoming a real and powerful storm. It is worth noting, however, that the other characters don't seem to be affected by the storm – as if it is Milo's personal storm.



Pages from my notebook (above and below), showing the 'thinking on paper' that led to the writing of *Milo: a moving story*.



Background to some of the elements in Milo:

Moths

The sudden cloud of moths recalls a real-life experience of entering an old deserted weatherboard house that I stumbled across in a dimly lit rainforest, just north of Coffs Harbour, NSW in the 1990s. As I stepped over the threshold of the back doorway, the dark hallway burst into a cloud of moths! It was scary and enchanting at the same time.

Another more common experience for anyone growing up in Sydney, is the clouds of bogong moths that, if blown off-course, can descend on the city in early spring on their southwards migration to the Snowy Mountains. Perhaps this was in the back of my mind too.



A moth from *Milo*. This was actually drawn from a picture of a bogong moth.

The scarecrow

I find the scarecrow illustration both comical and eerie. The image was sparked by seeing *El Pelele (The Puppet)*, which was painted by Spanish artist Goya around 1791. I saw it in a Robert Hughes documentary on Goya a month or two earlier. It pictures a life-size human effigy being tossed in the air by a group of young women. I found the image perfectly pitched between whimsical fun and something more ominous and dark. Perhaps for that reason the image really stuck with me.

The storm

The story of Milo came together not long after reading vivid accounts of the impact of Hurricane Sandy on New York, especially Staten Island. The awesome power of the storm and its ability bring sweeping change to everything in its path really caught my imagination. Indeed, the rise of extreme weather events around the world is a real-world context for this story. It makes the storm in *Milo* not as outlandish and fanciful as it might have once seemed.



El Pelele (The Puppet) by Goya c. 1791

Dogs

Some time before I wrote Milo, I'd been randomly sketching a ragged old kind of hobo dog called Loveable Spot (see sketch at right), who slouched around his kennel, listening to the radio and not doing much else. I really liked this character and came back to him when I was thinking about a new book. Obviously, Milo isn't that dog but elements of that idea remain.



The hobo dog that I'd found myself randomly sketching a few years earlier

Another thing about the dogs in Milo is that when I was a kid it seemed dogs had a much freer life. They were rarely on a leash, and had the whole neighbourhood as a playground. Kind of like the kids in the area too. So a dog might wander by and play with you for a while then wander off again. Sometimes the dogs might gang together and form a little posse, especially on garbage night – checking out the bins for tasty scraps – like canine dumpster divers! This memory in particular of a little band of neighbourhood dogs roaming around probably informs the story of Milo too. You don't see that kind of thing much these days.

Songs

Two songs are featured in Milo.

I was thinking about how dogs bark across suburbs and towns to each other at night – and how maybe they're not just randomly yelping, but actually taking turns with the lines of a song. At the thought of this, the words to 'Give My Regards to Broadway' immediately popped into my head – because they speak of a gang of old buddies reuniting in the city. And this seemed to capture the cheerful friendship between the dogs. I have an old Al Jolson record where he sings that song and I'd always loved its jaunty style. It was a bonus to find the lyrics were written in 1904 and were therefore in the public domain.



'In the Good Old Summer Time', written in 1902, was another song that seemed to work in the story. If the dogs were to have a raucous ol' singalong – this song seemed to fit the bill, capturing their togetherness and, narratively, the carefree spirit of the moment – before poor old Milo and Snombo become anything but carefree. The song's reprise on Milo's radio near the end of the story is meant as a good sign.

Both these songs can be heard on YouTube.



Milo questions and activities ...

Dogs as characters

Look at a wide range of picture books with dog characters, and identify differences in the way dogs are characterised (how much they are anthropomorphised, their names, their roles in the story, etc.). Consider why they differ and perhaps which ones make the best characters.

Dogs in artwork

There are many ways to draw a dog. Especially in a picture book – but also in comics, and animations. Find as many examples as possible and identify the differences in style and artwork technique. Each illustrator would have made many decisions along the way.

Dogs as metaphors

Do the dogs in *Milo* in any way represent people in society? If so, whom? And how?

Dogs and jobs

Milo has a job as a messenger or courier. In reality, dogs aren't usually employed in this way – but dogs do perform many important jobs in the human world. What are they? Would Milo like them?

Migratory birds and travel

Carlos is a migratory bird. Such birds can travel incredible distances. Unusually for migratory birds, Carlos likes to walk parts of his journey. Research some of the migratory routes of migratory birds. Which parts would be nice to walk and why?

Snombo's poetry

Snombo likes to write poetry, perhaps more than others like to listen to it. What is lofty poetry? Write a really lofty poem! Ideally, it should make the reader or listener groan ...

Beyond oceans azure
I hear thy distant strains ...

Dog poetry (but not doggerel)

Snombo's poems seem human-like in their content and style. But what if a dog wrote poetry like a dog. What would they write about and how would they express themselves (vocabulary, etc.)? Write a poem from the point of view of a dog. (Incidentally, the term *doggerel*, which is a kind of low quality poetry, actually has nothing to do with dogs!)

Dog songs

The dogs in *Milo* love singing songs. Maybe all dogs do! Write a song a dog might sing – what kind of lyrics? What kind of melody?

Dogma

How many phrases can you think of that use the word *dog* or *dogs*? What do they say about dogs? How many words begin or end with the prefix or suffix 'dog'? Do they all refer to dogs? Do they ever refer to dogs like Milo or Snombo?

