

Q&A

Questions to Narelle Oliver

You have amazing ideas. How do you think up the ideas for your stories?

Narelle: My ideas come from all different places. I think of it a bit like a jigsaw – there are pieces gradually appearing from various places over a period of years and assembling in the back of my mind. Then, one day I will see or read or notice something and the final piece will occur to me – and that’s when the story is ready to be put onto paper as words and pictures.

Some of these jigsaw pieces (ideas) have come from camping and bushwalking and seeing different animals and insects in their habitat and how they catch food or hide from predators or whatever. I also read a lot about various animals and how they adapt to their particular habitat in often quite curious ways.

When we travelled in some of the deserts in central Australia I was amazed how hidden all the wildlife was during the day. When we would get up in the morning, the sand dunes were covered in tracks of every size and shape. That concept became the basis of two of my books: *Sand Swimmers* and *Baby Bilby, where do you Sleep?*

My ideas for *Dancing the Boom-cha-cha Boogie* came from lots of different places – watching a TV documentary about hunting sea slugs on the Galapagos Islands, a strange desert with pointy rocks near the sea which I visited in WA, seeing refugees being washed up on a remote Australian beach in a sinking boat on the TV news and wondering what that would be like.

In creating *The Very Blue Thingamajig* I had always wanted to make a creature which grew various things and could be a kind of counting book animal. I used the structure of *The Ugly Duckling* to help me write that story – so sometimes it is old famous much-loved fairytales and fables which will help supply the plot line for a story.

I was inspired to collect stories for my book *Mermaids Most Amazing* after I read a very old book called *Sea Enchantress* which described sightings of real mermaids over the ages (which often had monkey faces). There were so many interesting and strange descriptions of mermaids and mermen and stories involving them – some living in captivity for a few days before dying – which I had never heard that I asked my publisher if they would let me do some of those stories in a book for children.

How difficult is it being an author? What things are the easiest and hardest, best and worst?

Narelle: Sometimes writing the story in a simple way, giving enough information so that it is not confusing to a young reader, but also not over-explaining can be quite tricky.

Sometimes I have a real mental block with a particular illustration and find it difficult to draw. I find some animals much easier to draw than others. Usually I put that drawing away for a while and come back to it – then I can see what is going wrong.

It is sometimes hard when I am very excited about a story idea, but the publisher is not quite so excited, or sees lots of problems with it. Then I have to do a major re-think of it, and that can be difficult if I have thought about it in a certain way for a long time.

Some of the good bits are:

Doing a drawing or a linoprint which seems to work straight away and looks better than I had imagined.

Finding an editor who is also excited about my story and willing to publish it.

Solving little problems with the words or illustrations along the way – maybe I wake up in the middle of the night with an idea about how I will design a particular page so that everything fits, or a different way to say something that I am not saying quite right at the moment.

Sometimes, with a few of my books, I have had an email from the Australian publisher to say that the book has just been sold to a publisher in another country. That is exciting – to think it will appear – sometimes in a different language – in another country.

Also, it is always nice when a student comes up to me at a school and tells me which book of mine they have enjoyed and what bits and why – without being prompted by a teacher.

Sometimes, my books have helped children to recognise some birds or other animals where they have visited, and they are excited about that. I am always happy when I think that my books might help us to know a bit more about the natural world around us.

Where do you usually sit to write your books?

Narelle: I have a room at home under our house. My family (me, my husband and two children and a dog) live in an old Queensland house in Annerley in Brisbane. The house is built in with rooms underneath. I work in a room downstairs. However, when I am first writing the story I might lie on my bed with a notebook and pencil, first, or write it in a notebook while away on holidays.

Eventually it will get typed at my desk, and the illustrations get done on other tables in my workroom.

How do you decide how you are going to illustrate your stories?

Does anyone help you with the illustrations?

Narelle: I have used the linoprint medium for most of my picture books because I like the effects I can get with it – bold outlines, and strong patterns, textures and shapes. For my book Home, I chose photographic backgrounds because I was concerned that the lino might not capture the buildings and city features as well as I hoped. I did linocut rubbings of the falcons – which are a softer pencil version of a linoprint (like a coin rubbing of a linoblock) so that the birds looked like they were a bit blurry and moving around quickly. Also, I wanted them to contrast a bit with the strong geometric shapes of the city.

A friend helped me manipulate some of the photographic backgrounds using Photoshop so that the colours were more interesting (changed the Brisbane River from brown to blue!) and to put some things in the pictures that were not there in the original photos (eg. The falcon on the hot air balloon.)

Which is your favourite story that you have written and why?

Narelle: I don't really have a favourite. The Best Beak in Boonaroo Bay has certainly sold the most. And I get lots of good feedback from The Very Blue Thingamajig – young children seem to really enjoy that character.

What was your most enjoyable book to write and why?

Narelle: I think I probably enjoyed doing The Very Blue Thingamajig the most. That story seemed to write itself and it was a lot of fun thinking up the different things he could grow and inventing the patterns on the gatefold pages which give a clue to these things.

Why do you use animals in all your stories? Do you like drawing animals?

Narelle: I love watching and drawing birds – their different beak shapes and patterns especially. I also enjoy drawing mammals such as bilbies – featuring their fur – and reptiles such as goannas which have wonderful patterns on them and work well in linocut.

I prefer to write about animals – both real and made-up ones. It was fun to invent Thingamajig and also the Snigs and the Murbels in Dancing the Boom-cha-cha Boogie.

Because I like featuring bold outlines and patterns in my artwork, humans don't work quite so well in this, unless they are a bit mythical or semi-animal such as mermaids.

How did you become an author?

Narelle: I did a lot of artwork – drawing and printmaking when I went to teacher's college after high school. I was interested in illustrating picture books (apart from becoming a teacher). In one of my school holidays (when I was a teacher) I did a short course with another author-illustrator, Irena Sibley, in 1985. I had to bring a story I had written. That forced me to write my first picture book text – which later became my first published book, Leaf Tail. Before that, I had read many many picture books, so had a bit of an idea of how they are written and what was a good plot.

Why did you change from being a teacher to an author?

Narelle: When my first book was published, I decided to try to do both. Then it became too tricky. I had to decide, and I was finding I was becoming more absorbed in writing and illustrating, so that won.

At that time, I was starting to earn some money from book sales, so I could view it as a job and not just a hobby.

How old were you when you started being an author?

Narelle: In my 20's

Were you an artist before you started to write books?

Narelle: I had done a lot of drawing and printmaking – some of my illustrations appeared in magazines. I was always doing courses in various art media – batik, screen-printing, etching.

How long did it take you to draw and write each story?

Narelle: Books in which the illustrations have a lot of detail, such as *The Hunt* and *Sand Swimmers*, take me about 2 years to complete – due to the time it takes me to produce the illustrations. *The Very Blue Thingamajig* took about 6 months because it was just outlines and no backgrounds. However, I would have been thinking and planning these books in my head for many months if not years ahead of those time frames where I am actually working on the words and pictures.

What is your favourite type of food?

Narelle: I love Thai food the best – I love the spices they use – my mouth is watering now just thinking about my favourite Thai Beef Salad.

The Best Beak in Boonaroo Bay

How did you draw the birds in “The Best Beak in Boonaroo Bay? Do you draw from memory? Did you use ink?

Narelle: I draw with pencil. I don't use a rubber much. I do a very rough sketch of the shape of the bird first and then fine-tune this by tracing and retracing it on a light box. (like a light under a sheet of glass which allows you to see through the paper)

I take hundreds of photos of the birds in real life and in captivity before I try to draw them – that is important. Sometimes I go to a wildlife park to do this. Sometimes, I am lucky enough to know someone who is raising an injured one which I can have a close look at. That is how I drew the Tawny Frogmouth in *The Hunt*. I like to see the bird in real life and watch how it moves before I try to draw it. I also borrow Museum specimens and use them to help me look carefully at the patterns on feathers and other details.

Leaf Tail

How do you draw Leaf Tail and why do you only use 2 colours?

Narelle: I drew Leaf Tail with a pencil originally and I worked from photos I took of Leaf Tail geckos at Girraween National Park. (A ranger helped me find them.) I turned the drawings into linocut prints – just black and white ones, as I wanted to emphasize the darkness and strong patterns of light and shade in the rainforest.

The Hunt

Why do they have green tongues?

Narelle: Many frogmouths have orange mouths, and some have green. I chose green so young readers would not be confused when she has an orange moth in her mouth in a picture towards the end. (If I had given her an orange mouth, the bit of moth wing sticking out of her mouth at the end could have looked like her tongue hanging out!)

Mermaids most amazing

How did you draw the map at the front and are they true?

Narelle: I traced the map and used coloured pencils and some watercolour for the sea.

I think, after my research, that there might once have existed an animal with a monkey face and a tail and perhaps this is what people saw and captured. It might be extinct now.

Do you like mermaids?

Narelle: I love the look of mermaids – especially the ones with interesting scales and strange faces. I also like the idea of being able to live under the sea like they can – and having a different world down there.

Home

How did you feel about putting human characters with the drawings?

Narelle: I didn't want to feature humans in "Home" as I thought they would distract from the falcons. So the couple of times they appear, they are very blurred – more like a moving coloured shape or animal – which is how I thought the falcons would see them.

How did you get up so high to see the ground in the aerial shots?

Narelle: I went up on top of Admiralty Towers 1 building beside the river in the city. The manager of the building came with me. This is the building where the falcons nest – on the very top on a balcony. I took photos of their nest there and also photos of the other buildings. The aerial view earlier on in the book where the falcons have not reached the city yet was taken from a plane. I bought that photo from Qld Mapping. Then I hand-coloured over it.

How big are the rowers?

Narelle: They are normal-sized high school girls.

Why did you blur the drawings?

Narelle: To suggest the falcons' speed and achieve a sense of movement.

Why did you choose to use photographs?

Narelle: I thought photos would capture the lines and shapes of the city best and also ensure that the places were recognisable to people who live in Brisbane or know Brisbane. I also wanted the strong city shapes to contrast with the falcons more natural form.

I like the way it's set in the city. Why did you choose Brisbane?

Narelle: The book was commissioned by the Brisbane City Council and part of my brief was to feature Brisbane in the illustrations. Also, because I live in Brisbane City and look at it all the time – and I do enjoy looking at the Story Bridge and all the tall buildings, plus the figtrees of New Farm Park – , I've always been keen to use it as a setting for a picture book.

How much do you know about falcons?

Narelle: I did read quite a few articles about them. And I own a lot of bird books which had quite a lot of information about them. I also spoke to various bird experts and also to some people who watch them every day from their balconies on the highrise buildings in Brisbane.

The Very Blue Thingamajig

Does the blue thingamajig have a mother and a father?

Narelle: I have never thought about him having a mother and father. I guess I have always seen him as an orphan. He seems to have no one at the start. I wonder if you could invent what his mother and father might look like?

What is a thingamajig?

Narelle: I chose the word thingamajig to describe my made-up creature because it is a name you give to something when you don't know or have forgotten the real name of something. I wanted him to not be associated with any other animal. Also I like the sound of the word. My granny used it all the time, especially when she was very old and losing her memory.

Why did you use numbers?

Narelle: I wanted the book to be a kind of counting book with a story to it – so numbers appear in it all different ways.

Why did you choose to use the flaps in your story?

Narelle: I wanted it to be like a guessing game as the thingamajig grew each new thing/s so flaps were a good way of hiding him first and giving a clue through the pattern on the flap. (they are called gatefold pages, actually)

The Boom-Cha-Cha-Boogie

Why don't you put a bigger picture when you have the space?

Narelle: Do you mean the first picture of Murmella? I wanted to suggest a tiny island that is quite vulnerable to storms.

Why do murmels have no worries?

Narelle: I guess they are a generally happy group of creatures – plenty of food and things to do. They naturally share and play together. Perhaps they are born that way, or learn to be like that as they grow up by seeing the older ones be worry-free.

Just like some people are happy-go-lucky and others worry a lot. Sometimes it is just how we are. But I think the Murmels had learnt to love the important things in life, and so they were happy. They were not worried about owning lots of things or having the best things.

Why are they called murmels? How did you come up with the name?

Narelle: I wanted a soft sounding name with no harsh sounds – to suggest a soft friendliness to them. That name seemed to fit. They also look a bit like squishy marshmallows and the name Murmels reminds me of that too.