

WRITING PICTURES, DRAWING WORDS

Author and Illustrator Fiona McDonald describes her search for the perfect union



'His graphic representations are indeed books: they have the teeming, fruitful, suggestive meanings of words. Other pictures we look at – his prints we read,' said Charles Lamb of William Hogarth. For Lamb, a writer, this almost limitless supply of potential stories was why he enjoyed Hogarth's work so much. Text-based narratives, on the other hand, are much more specific in what they tell us and the imagination is given stricter controls.

Above: Pencil drawing of the wounded seal king for *Two Selkie Stories from Scotland*, retold by Kate Forsyth, published by Christmas Press, 2014
Opposite page top left: *Goblin Market - Eating the Fruit* by Christina Rossetti
Top right: *Goblin Market - Eating the Fruit*
All illustrations Fiona McDonald



but draw just when a writing deadline looms, and when I have illustrations to be done, I want to write. The constant is my desire to tell a story. At the heart of it is narrative.

Many artists find inspiration for a visual piece in a story. The same can be said of the writer. An artwork, a landscape, a vignette can all spark words to be put down on paper or computer.

The ancient Greek word, *ecphrasis*, means a detailed written description of an artwork, landscape or some visual stimulus. Homer's *Iliad*, book 18, contains a detailed description of a magnificent shield and its fashioning by the god Hephaestus for the warrior Achilles. Virgil, the Roman poet, in his epic poem the *Aeneid*, continues the story of what happened after the Trojan War. His piece of *ecphrasis* rivals Homer's, and is an acknowledgment of it, in his description of the temple doors at Carthage. Both works have inspired many visual renditions. The richness of the words supplies ample material for equally rich pictures, but still they tend to be literal, albeit visual, copies of words—pictures generated by words inspired by sculptural objects. With each transformation elements are added or subtracted, changed in time and place but always building on what came before.

My great interest is in the use of words and images to complement and extend each other in the making of meaning without mere duplication of what the other has already told us. (This is certainly not a criticism of traditional



illustration.) With this in mind I have been looking at graphic novels. There are **comic books** where the picture supplies all the information that would have otherwise been written descriptively—like the storyboards used by film-makers. The words are often confined to speech, date and time with a bit of back story but rarely are there words describing the physical world. In most examples, text seems to be secondary to picture.

Then there are **books** such as Brian Selznick's *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* and *The Marvels*, in which all descriptive text is replaced by pictures—there is no text at all on these pages. I think the idea is interesting, large chunks of text replaced by pictures, but in Selznick's work I feel there is



Right: *Bird in the Afternoon*, pencil drawing by Fiona McDonald
Opposite page: *The Junk Shop*

Children tear past him calling for their mother, 'Sarah's cut her knee!' knocking him against the writing desk. 'Damn impudence,' he mutters and turns back to contemplate Lady Westbury's elegant nape while ignoring her monologue.

Children's voices ebb and flow across the grass, moving steadily to the edge of the lawn.

'What's that, hidden in the foliage?' asks Genevieve, small and dark like her Italian father. It's dark and cool in the wood beyond the garden.

'A girl was murdered in the grotto here, years ago by a gentleman,' whispers a knowing voice. 'If he killed her he wasn't a gentleman!' says Julia.

'Was so, ask Mama. At night, her ghost comes about the wood; she's seeking revenge for her death and that of her unborn baby,' insists Tobias from the village.

'And the gentleman, he comes after her with a kitchen knife, ready to slit her throat again to stop her talking.'

The girls squeal and run back to open ground. The sun still has plenty of light and enough warmth to keep away frights like bogey men and wailing ghosts.

The boys sit in their hide, chuckling at their own wickedness. 'What if they tell?' asks Sam, who is small and shy, he has a funny leg and cannot run: children laugh at him but today he is one of them, sharing a joke.

'Genevieve won't say anything; she knows what Ma will say about the good Lord and then she'll get a beating for telling tales.'

'Good, she deserves it. I got a tanning over the dead frog. She shouldn't have screamed. Pa whipped me 'til my bum burned.' The light fades gradually and the wooded hill becomes quite chill, and shadows wash over the little group.

'Time to go home,' says Sam, he's thinking of the dead girl and the angry man with the knife. 'Alright,' the others agree, no reluctance in their voices. Down they all run, except for Sam who hobbles behind and calls for them to wait.

'Hobbledy Sam,' they cry back at him. 'The ghost will get you, hey! What's that shadow behind you?'

Lights welcome them in. The door is closed, bolted top and bottom. On with the



too much of the picture making things easier for the reader—seeing the description rather than reading it. The latest of Selznick's books, *The Marvels*, is divided in two: one half, set two hundred years before the second half of the story, is told exclusively in pictures, the second half is told exclusively in words. It is an attempt to marry the genres while giving each an equal footing. Selznick is getting there but he has not quite made it yet.

Shaun Tan, whose work has always stood apart from the crowd with his unique stylized images, found fame with his wordless picture book, *The Arrival*. The book is much longer than a traditional picture book and, while not unsuitable for young children, is aimed at older children and adults. There are subtle references to wellknown artworks, to architecture and literature. It does not feel in any way that it is a work created for people who don't particularly like reading. The pictures, although they can be enjoyed at face value, offer deeper and more complex meanings, largely through the cultural references they incorporate.

One of the most intriguing books to come out in recent years is **Matt Ottley's** *Requiem for a Beast*. This work has a dual, enigmatic story line, told in word and picture and formatted in such a way that 'comic book' does not spring

to mind when reading it. It has a third component in the form of a musical composition written by the author and supplied as a CD at the back of the book. The work is called multi-modal. It is not for young children and would be a challenge for teenagers. This is an experimental work with subtle and difficult meanings. Ottley is an artist, author and musician so it is a natural development for him to combine his talents in a single work.

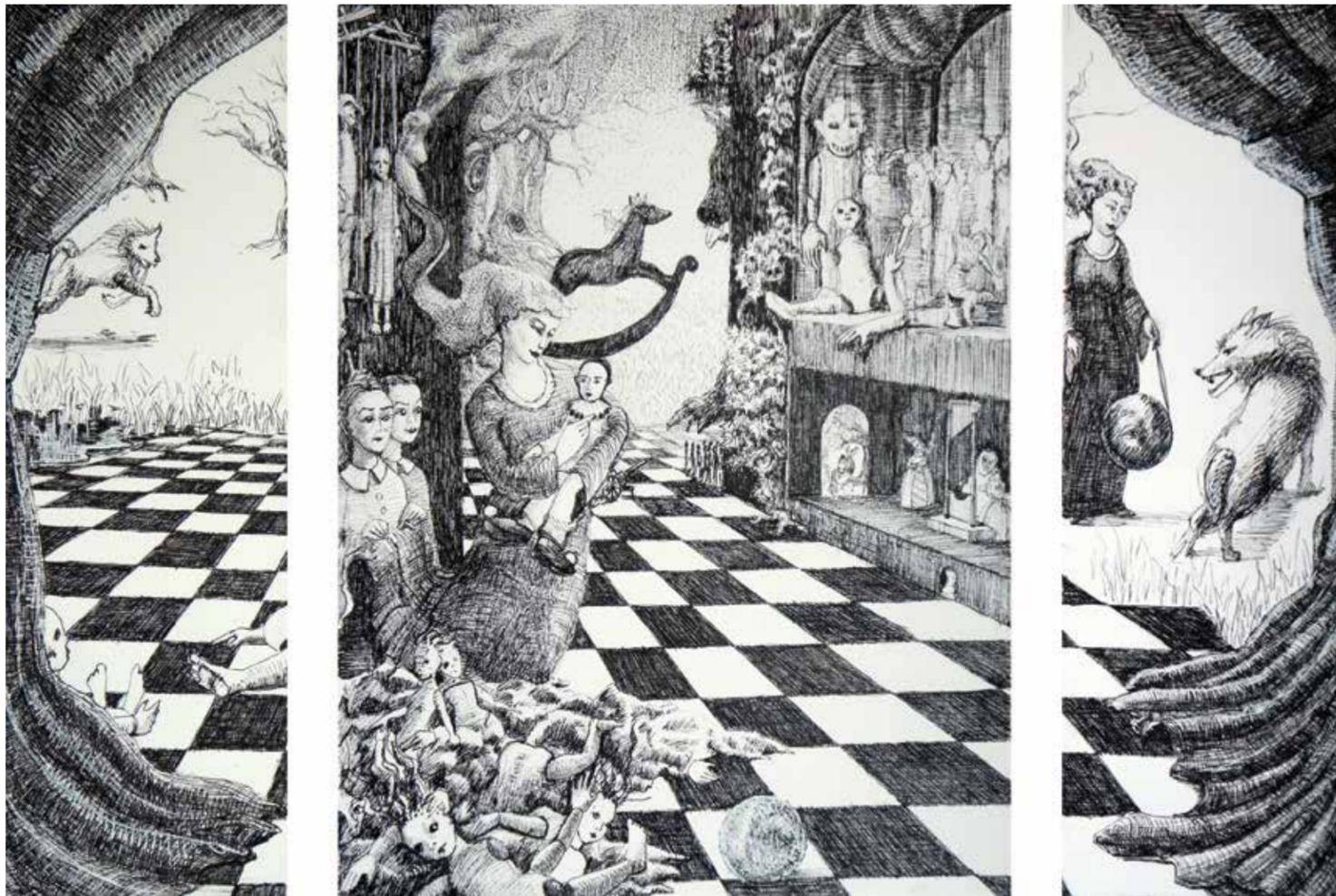
My own experiments started with a piece of flash fiction I wrote in 2010 called *Bird in the Afternoon*:

Golden bars throw shadows among the dust motes of this afternoon tea dance. Children play on the lawn below. Lithe girls in gauzy dresses scream as boys chase and catch them, pulling them over into the verge, smudging frocks and knees with green.

Older sisters sit on wrought iron chairs, gloved hands holding dainty cups. Small breasts, not yet ripe, are waiting, waiting until next spring or the one after. Cake crumbs tickle down their fronts producing giggles and jiggles to dislodge them. How tasty it would be, thinks an old man, gazing at them from the window, to lick cake crumbs from between two softly swelling mounds.

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The Doll Maker's Wedding, pen drawing by Fiona McDonald

nightgown and into the bed. Out goes the candle and off comes your head.

I wrote this in response to listening to Mozart's flute and harp concerto, which brings out strong emotional memories in me as it was the first piece of classical music I had listened to and liked. I was in sixth grade and had just started learning the flute. After I had written my micro fiction I wanted to continue the response with a visual piece and I produced a pencil drawing of the same name.

It would be interesting to hear from readers their thoughts on this juxtaposition of text and image. My next development was to combine work and text into an integral whole. I first attempted this at a workshop for high school students on poetry. Remembering my own days of sitting through turgid poetry classes I thought we'd have more of a hands-on approach and produce some artist books. To begin with we did some writing-without-thinking warm ups, as advocated by Kate Grenville in *The Writing Book*. This helps overcome the fear of the blank page, where the writer sits chewing the end of a pen while trying to think of something to write. It

requires intuition and gives them freedom to write things they'd probably be too self-conscious to write. From this stream of automatic writing the students each chose something they liked and these were then combined with mixed media to form a concertina style artist's book.

I revisited my workshop experiment in Armidale recently with 'If we had but world enough and time...' part of a larger project called 'I wish I had told you...'. Those attending were adults and the automatic writing appeared to elicit fragments of half remembered poetry. The adults, as is often the case, were far more restrained with their visual response. There was certainly a reluctance to break away from the traditional illustrative idea.

My workshop experiments have not as yet produced the results I am searching for. I find that the text, while working in a visual way, is not holding its own intellectually. So the journey will continue: the search for the perfect balance of text and image, either swirling together on the one page (see opposite) or sitting side by side or a combination of the two. Will it be in the form of a graphic novel called *Floriana* in which a girl becomes a



unicorn? Or it might be the outcome of a dream in which I wrote and illustrated a novel which was then hailed as 'Game of Thrones meets the Dark Crystal under the auspices of the Hobbit'. I was so inspired I have begun the pictures already!

But perhaps it should be the autobiographical *The Doll Maker's Wedding*?... (opposite page)...

Fiona McDonald

Reference
 Raymond Lister, *Victorian Narrative Paintings*,
 Publisher C. N. Potter, 1966