

I first met Donna I think about ten years ago – through a variety of contacts – and we experienced an instant bonding. Although our friendship has been limited by all the various circumstances of what we can only call life and so we don't see each other that often, each meeting is boon. One of the chief joys we share is our love of children's literature. Donna's gentle, precise and insightful conversation about children's books and the many delights and secrets they contain has been a true pleasure. Donna of course has had a distinguished career in education and literature and has spent all her professional and doubtless her private life writing and reading. She is the author of several books for adults, ranging from a study of Spenser's *Amoretti*, to her charming and wise meditation on retirement "*When I'm 64*". When we met I knew she had also written a large range of non-fiction books for children but she did divulge to me in one of our meetings that she had always wanted, when her life's circumstances permitted, to write a children's picture book, as this was perhaps her deepest literary love. This is a dream she has now achieved several times over. The two most recent of her illustrated books that I have been charmed by are *Bear Wants to Know* and *I Like Poems* – great titles, might I add. But we are here today to celebrate the happy arrival into the world of her most recent picture book, *When the Cat's Away*.

Of course a picture book, by definition, has pictures, and is most commonly the work of both an author and an illustrator. Occasionally a single person miraculously manages both, but more often the author and illustrator are separate human beings and certainly that has been the case with my own illustrated books. To collaborate on a book for the young is a special experience – two minds unique as their fingerprints contributing, consulting, colliding and eventually converging in words and pictures to create something that belongs to them both, and which could not have been born without the presence and unique gifts of the other.

The usual pattern in creating a picture book is the author writes the story, and then goes about finding an illustrator. But not always. Sometimes it can happen back to front, and that's what happened here. I think authors are always on the lookout, eyes wide open, for illustrators whose sensibility they are drawn to, so I was unsurprised when Donna told me how she discovered Lionel King, the eventual illustrator of *When the Cat's Away*. She first spotted his work on Facebook! Lionel's wife Judy is a friend and colleague of Donna's from Macquarie University and from time to time Judy would post her husband's water colours on her page, to quote Donna, "that he'd done while they had a coffee in some attractive place – especially in Paris". Sounds like the perfect life! Sometimes Judy would also post photographs of Lionel

himself, again to quote Donna, “invariably in an unusual shirt” – when I read that, I thought he’s got to be an artist.

Donna loved the look of Lionel’s work, and over time she began to think to herself what a beautiful illustrator for children he might be. Now in addition to being an artist, Lionel King has had an impressive career in science, business and academia. Donna wondered, could she possibly ask him if he would be interested in illustrating a story for children that she would write? Delicately, tentatively, as is her way, she approached him with the idea. In her words, “I asked. I waited. He said: Probably. We thought we’d give it a go.”

And so the collaboration began. Lionel and Donna met. They got to know each other. They discussed ideas. Paris was raised as a possible setting for the book– and what a good looking city it is – and then when Lionel expressed a preference for animal characters, they decided on mice. Donna began to write the story about two little Parisian mice, Gussie and Pierre, and Lionel started on the illustrations, one by one, eventually conjuring up this most delightful visual journey through traditional Paris, from a mouse-eyed perspective, that you see in the finished book.

Now a word about cats and mice and children and children’s books. I won’t enumerate the many many mice that have become legend in children’s literature and entertainment but let us note that stories about mice, and their traditional enemy, the cat, certainly go back as far as Aesop and doubtless much further. The tininess of mice, their daintiness, quickness, cleverness, cheekiness, sweetness, their intense vulnerability and surprising resourcefulness all make them natural heroes for children, who also are small vulnerable clever and courageous, and like mice, ubiquitous and sometimes unwelcome, even when hidden from sight. In this book, though, it is the cat that is hidden from sight - true to the title, there is no cat in the story except in the name of the café in which the family of mice live in secret splendour, Le Café des Chats.

*When the Cat’s Away* is an ancient story of breaking the rules of safety laid down by your parents, and being thrust into the dangers and wonders of the world beyond – to face a series of dramatic trials requiring previously unknown bursts of courage and energy, before returning home at last, wiser and stronger for the journey. A favourite phrase of my mother’s which always used to make me laugh was “we live and learn but none the wiser grow” – and perhaps it’s true that in the case of the two little mice Gussie and Pierre the growth in their wisdom is left at the very end of the story rather an open question!

Donna has written: “Young children take time to learn whether things are living or non-living, real or pretend. In their world these categories are not yet well defined. It may make for a world that is at times bewildering, frightening or threatening but it is also one which has more exciting, even magical, possibilities.”

*When the Cat's Away* is indeed replete with the magic of possibilities. Sincere congratulations Donna and to Lionel, for bringing it to us out of thin air, onto the page, into the hands of children and into our hearts.

I will just finish with a traditional envoi, a wishing of good fortune to a book as it heads out into the wide world. There are many great envois in literature, from Martial to Chaucer to Leonard Cohen, but I have chosen the one I love the best, a short and free translation from an epistle of Horace by the incomparable Robert Louis Stevenson:

*Go, little book, and wish to all*

*Flowers in the garden, meat in the hall,*

*A bin of wine, a spice of wit,*

*A house with lawns enclosing it,*

*A living river by the door,*

*A nightingale in the sycamore*

Go little book and prosper ! congratulations Donna and Lionel.

Down the Rue des Poulets the mice scamper, Rue des Poissons et la rue des Fromages - I must add it all sounds so lovely in French, it would not give quite the same impression if it was in sensible Anglo Saxon: Chicken Street, Fish Street and Cheese Street. If you want a taste of Donna's conversation, I can recommend to you her blog, which, like herself is gentle, insightful and precise - as evoked by the titles of some of her posts, selected at random, "How Young Children see the World" "To Disney or not to Disney" "Read Thyself".