



# Windows into Illustration: Mick Inkpen

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**Mick Inkpen** explains the thinking behind his illustrations.

One of the top-selling picture book artists and writers (**Kipper** and **Wibbly Pig** stories have sold millions worldwide) Mick Inkpen is also the winner of the British Book Award for the best illustrated book for **Lullabyhullabaloo** and the Children's Book Award for **Threadbear**. **Kipper** won a BAFTA for best animated children's film in 1998. He has created a minimalist yet expressive style characterised by his assured line and confident use of colour and shade. Here Mick Inkpen explains the thinking and techniques behind his illustration for **The Blue Balloon**.

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[image:Kipper + Balloon.jpg:left]

I admire naturally gifted draughtsmen hugely but I've never been one of them. I'm not the kind of illustrator who carries a pen at all times in order to satisfy the urge to draw. I have always chosen to illustrate what I know I will enjoy drawing, preferring to keep it simple. That, and finding a technique that allows the slow building of an image, enabled me early on to satisfy a fairly perfectionist streak and produce work that I could feel comfortable with in the public domain. Inevitably confidence, technique and range grew.

It wasn't long before I realised that keeping it simple was an art in itself, exposing as it does the uncluttered image. More importantly keeping it simple allowed me to focus on what does interest me, and that is how best to stage the small drama involved in a picture book. How best to furnish the idea, to tell the story.

I think of making picture books as a kind of play activity in which all of the elements that go to stage the drama interact. In a short text for example, a decision about whether a sentence has a satisfying cadence might depend on a line break, and that in turn may be determined by the positioning of an illustration. Where to place a page turn in the story may be at least as important as the illustration it reveals. An extending folded page may be exactly what is needed to bring a story to a satisfying conclusion.

The more playfully I approach the process the better I am able to access good intuitive decisions. At best there's a kind of relaxed concentration, which allows me to be confident about breaking rules. It's great fun, both for me and for the readers to subvert the conventions by playing with physical format, or by stepping through the proscenium arch to interact with the reader directly, or by blurring the boundary between words and pictures.

## Messing about with the format

At the moment I'm working on a story where the words themselves become a direct part of the illustration. In it a naughty Snapdragon plays havoc with the story, by biting off bits of words and changing their meaning. The other characters in the story find a way to make the words bite back.

In the latest Kipper story, **Me, Kipper!**, a mouse, desperately hiding from a cat, dashes across the prelim page before the

book officially starts, [image:Kipper on Armchair.jpg:left]breathlessly pokes fun at the small print: 'those bits are boring?', and continues into the first spread where he ignores Kipper and disappears into the gutter, a hiding place that Kipper later tries himself ? unsuccessfully.

This kind of gentle messing about with the format began in the very first book in which Kipper appeared, albeit in a non-speaking role and on all fours. At the end of **The Blue Balloon** the boy narrator sagely advises us not to throw away a balloon, especially if it's a blue one. Unbeknown to him but not to the reader, the balloon is contrarily turning itself into rainbow colours behind him.

[image:Blue Balloon.jpg:left]

The dramatic irony is enhanced by the fact that the balloon changes colour only as the reader opens a concertina fold. So in a satisfying twist at the end, the control of the story passes from the boy to the reader ? which is quite empowering if you are four and not used to being in charge.

**The Blue Balloon** is published by Hodder Children's Books (978 0 340 91819 7, £6.99 pbk).

**Hide Me, Kipper!** (978 0 340 97045 4, £10.99 hbk) is featured on our cover.

Postscript: **Kipper** was one of eight popular children's characters chosen for Royal Mail's 'Animal Tales' special issue stamps in January 2006, and in February 2006 Mick Inkpen was declared the second most-borrowed children's author from libraries and was number four in the Top Ten most-borrowed authors. Kipper was a guest of the Queen at the Party at the Palace held in 2006. As part of Kipper's 18th birthday celebrations, Hodder Children's Books are re-launching six Kipper picture storybooks.

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