



Jeanne Ashbé: my next book is like a seagull hopping on wet sand after the tide has gone out...

W+B : Jeanne Ashbé, how do you become a children's book author-illustrator?



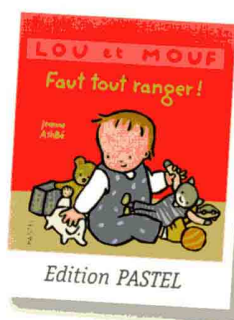
J.A.: In my case, step by step and out of love. I am one of those children who were told: "Drawing? That's not a proper job". So I went to get my academic baggage at university and started working as a psychologist and language therapist. But no one ever managed to put me off drawing and writing. So I taught myself. I became an author and illustrator out of love for words, for lines and for the child that lives on in each of us, despite everything. My books are the work of this child, there's no doubt about it!

Do you need to have a particular sensibility to work in this profession?

Are we aware ourselves that we have a "particular sensibility"? I think that it is more of a question of inclination, that impulse of the soul that carries us spontaneously towards a particular object or emotion. I have an insatiable urge to explore the human adventure. Books are the stage for the big adventure that awaits us from the time we come into the world. Even very young children have this magnificent relationship with the book, which is transmitted from the book to life and from life to the book. That is what I find exciting.

What are your sources of inspiration? Explain your creative process to us.

My inspiration comes from everything that moves, that lives, laughs or cries. And I don't know whether it is the text or the image that engenders the other. The music of the words comes to me as I draw and the pictures come to me when the words are set down on paper. But each book has its own story that can't be induced ... or if so, only to a certain extent. Inspiration is wild and elusive. Even for me...



I often say that my next book is like a seagull hopping on wet sand after the tide has gone out. Each time it touches the sand, it leaves a few footmarks, then it lightly flies away, heads off for new horizons. It will return, heavy with other sights and sounds. Sometime I don't even realise what it is up to. And then suddenly, it triggers an urge in me to write and to draw its story.

How important is the text for you?

Most of my books are written for very small children, and so they have little text. And yet every word is important, as it has to bring about the pleasure that young children feel when they listen to a musical and rhythmic language.

They are worth writing for and even if we do not know what they understand, the very young show us how important the text of a book is to them.

Is there such a thing as an Ashbé style?

Drawing is like your handwriting. Of course we can try to change it but can never succeed completely. It changes a little if the pen is wide or narrow, if the mood is lively or melancholy, but it is always recognisable. The same applies to the drawing. It comes from the inside and bears our stamp. A mother told me how she asked her 18 month old son to bring her one of my books. He dutifully toddled back to her with one of my books, but not the one she had asked for! This means that there must be some telltale signs, a style ...that even a very young child can detect.

Do you transmit messages? In other words, are your creations intentional?

I mostly depend on my intuition to bring out the pictures and words in my books. There is something very sensual about it, almost carnal. The same pleasure that I have when I have a child on my knees and I read a book with him. It is like singing together. It comes naturally, with a kind of festiveness, a voluptuousness almost in the sense that the dictionary gives it, "sensual pleasure by fullness and beauty of form"!

My books are spawned by all of that but also, of course, by the objectives that I pursue, things that are important to me. As, although my books are objects born from the pleasure that I feel as I create them, they are also the fruit of the hide and seek game that I play between the real and the imaginary, between the conscious and the unconscious.

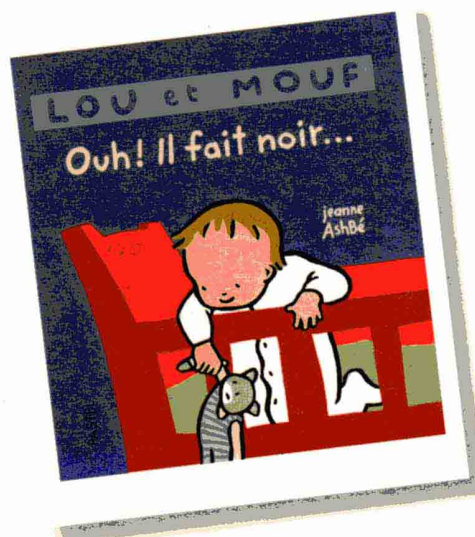
And in my books I always set out to unwind the thread of thought. I say a lot of things, but through images.

This mixture of softness and violence that fills us when a small human arrives in our life is a real mystery, which can cause quite a lot of disarray. What I want to say with my books to those that share the life of a baby is that every day you are witness to a small miracle. Do not miss this opportunity, at any cost, to be enchanted, to accompany this little person in his/her discovery of the world, discretely, softly ...

Beyond your book sales, how do you evaluate the impact on children? Do you ever change track according to their reactions?

Nothing can extinguish in me the huge pleasure I take in drawing small humans, in awakening this empathy that I feel for them and those who care for them. Nothing ever weakens this pleasure that I feel when I draw and write for young children.

They are the ones who guide me. Never the quest to have an "im-



pact" on children. I am sure now that our books come from the child that we were, even more so than from the children that we have or write for. The child that, deep down, most of the time unconsciously, continues to have his say, however old you are!

Books also have an element of mystery, incompressible, unfathomable – even by its author – where the encounter between the book and its reader takes place. It is partly there, in this space that is beyond all control, that the reader is given the freedom to give meaning to what he is reading.

And of course, none of that can be measured, evaluated

That being said, I have drawn lessons from the reaction of a child. Often, my children, who are there day after day, and who some evenings when they come back from school, take a look over my shoulder, make a little comment on the drawing of the day ... and the next day, I start over again ..

But it's rare, very rare ...

Do children's books have a future?

Books are little stages where the theatre of life is played out. A small theatre of emotions that we can take with us to bed, in the car, to the beach .. open and close at leisure, in order to better understand the world. Even very small children have this ability to be, symbolically of course, and freely, accompanied by books along the path that takes them into adulthood.

They grasp this very quickly when we initiate them to the promising content of this curious object, the book.

And they ask for more and more!

And so

Where do you, as a creator, stand in this profusion of new communication technologies, mainly vectored by the Internet?

I am down at grassroots level ...

If it is to be used correctly, the Internet demands very good reading skills, and not the contrary!

And you learn to become a good reader in the arms of those we love, cradled by their musical voice ...

