



All Aboard with Mo Willems

Article Author:

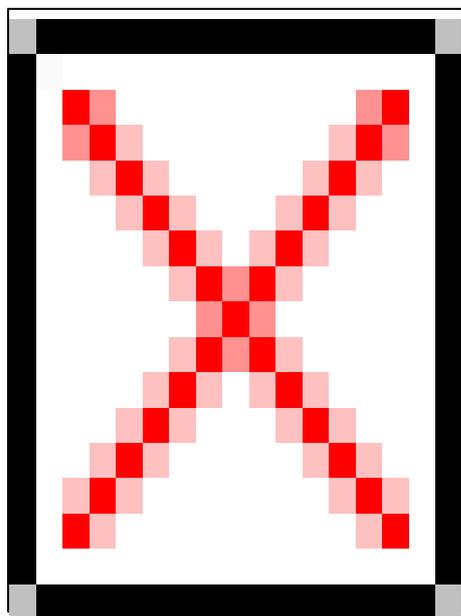
[Julia Eccleshare](#) [1]

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Byline:

Julia Eccleshare interviews the creator of **Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus**

Mo Willems's knowing and comic bus-driving pigeon has captured hearts the world over. So it was especially suitable that **Julia Eccleshare** met up with Mo in London in a double-decker Routemaster, the most iconic bus in the world.



Mo was in London for an energetic tour. That morning he had entertained a schoolful of children before taking the winners of their writing competition out on tour on the bus. Tall, youthful and chatty Mo bubbles with excitement as the bus lurches round St Martin's in the Fields and stop/starts past the theatres of the West End with the two of us clinging on to the front seats upstairs. He loves it that children in the street are looking up and pointing out the pigeon illustrations and waves enthusiastically back at them.

This kind of public acknowledgement is not new to him; indeed in the US, which is currently celebrating 10 years of **Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus**, the recognition factor would be even greater. On publication, Mo achieved immediate critical success with **Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus** and **Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Tale** as both were Caldecott Honor Books. Now, Mo's work is a major brand in the US with a whole range of merchandise and massive exposure on TV and in film. Despite such success in other media, he is passionate about the importance of the books. 'Picture books are the last individual bastion of self-expression. I can't think of another medium that is so diverse,' he says.

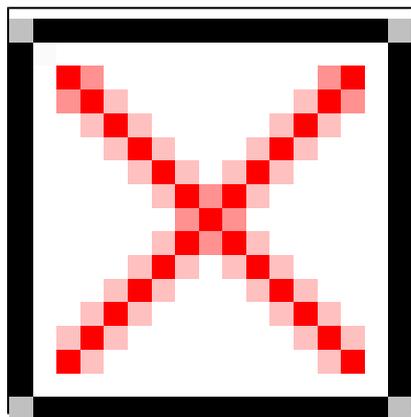
Mo was creative in many ways before he turned to picture books. His original form of engagement with an audience was in stand up comedy in Oxford (although Dutch/ American he spent his teens in Oxford) and then, from there, to London and, inevitably, to Edinburgh. 'I was just a kid doing theatre. I liked the idea of being funny and of being able to tell my own stories,' he says. Even then, he loved breaking the fourth wall - something that has become a key feature of his picture books and which marks them out from so many others. 'I was weaned on **Monty Python, The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, Doctor Who** and a lot of British stuff like **The Good Life**. Playing with language was at the

heart of his shows. ?Philosophically, English is the funniest language. You can put the words wherever you want. It is very flexible.?

From stand up and the UK, Mo went back to the US and to film school which led him swiftly ? aged only 24 - to a job on **Sesame Street**, already the US flagship programme for children. Mo, who had had no previous experience of writing for children, went about writing episodes in just the same way as he had set about writing his comedy sketches. He quickly found that the two had much in common. After all, in his view, ?children are shorter but not simpler?.

But he also recognises that there are differences. ?When you are writing for children, there are no cultural modifiers. No icons that you can quickly draw on for reference. You can only deal with the core emotions as that is what they recognise.? Mo perfected this approach in his years writing scripts for **Sesame Street**, also learning how to work with words and pictures.

Mo knew he could draw on these vital skills when it came to writing a book. Nonetheless, he claims he just didn't know how to set about it. ?I couldn't see how to make a book work. So, I took a month off, rented a cottage and got writing. I wanted to be funny but ways of being funny in a book are different.? For help, Mo looked for inspiration from the very top. ?I used Maurice Sendak's **Where the Wild Things Are** as my touchstone. In it, as the fantasy life grows the images grow and then they shrink back down as Max comes back to reality. The reader shouldn't see the shifts or know that they are there but they shape responses to the story.?



Working on the assumption that ?you have to manipulate the audience without letting them know it,? Mo uses a similar device in **Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus** using the background colours as a subtle mood ring for the story. Sendak apart, he did not delve deep into children's books for inspiration. ?Sometimes wilful ignorance is a very good thing. If you study children's books too much you just do the same thing. It's important to get inspiration from other genres.?

Mo also believes that the ultimate goal of reading is that children create their own images and don't just consume the art passively. For this reason, he believes that ?the lead character should be able to be drawn by a five year old? and he has made his own Pigeon suitably simple for that reason.

But Mo's view of what makes a great picture book was not everyone's. As he describes it, his book was ?immediately un-saleable. All the editors said, ?It's unusual? and it took two years for an agent to sell it.? Luckily, in that time, much changed and a more open minded attitude had begun to prevail. ?Librarians realised that reading the classics wasn't enough. They were willing to let children read anything ? just to get them into the library.? As a result, the ?differences? of **Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus** became strengths. Children liked the fact that the Pigeon asks questions while younger, hip librarians got the point of the speech bubbles and the ways in which they made telling a story more accessible.

Once published, there was no stopping this curious bird. Taking stock on this ten year anniversary, Mo is proud. ?I take great pleasure in the Pigeon and its success. Your muscles have to be fit to write like this. I trained on stand up and it paid off.? And the ten years have seen changes. ?In the last two years, I've come to realise that a good book is a

question that I don't have an answer to. And that's what children like too.?

No wonder London school children stop on the middle of the crossing.

Don't let the Pigeon Drive the Bus Walker Books, Mo Willems, 978-1844285136, £5.99 pbk

Knuffle Bunny Walker Books, Mo Willems, 978-1844280599, £6.99 pbk

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