



Windows into Illustration: Benji Davies

Article Author:

[Benji Davies](#) [1]

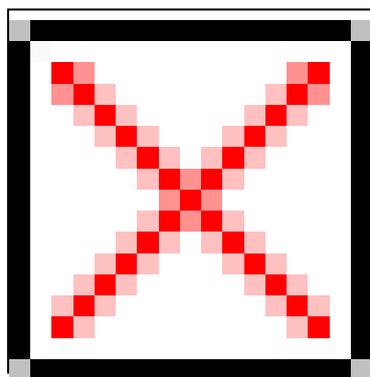
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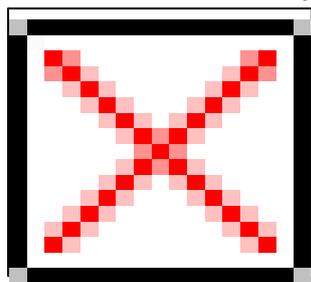
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Benji Davies takes us round **Grandad's Island**



Benji Davies's picture books tell big, emotionally charged stories. His first self-penned picture book **The Storm Whale** won the **Oscar's First Book Prize** in 2014 and was shortlisted for **Booktrust's Best Book Awards**. His second, **Grandad's Island**, won the children's book category of the **AOI World Illustration Awards 2015** and was crowned Best Picture Book and overall Children's Book of the Year at the **Sainsbury's Children's Book Awards 2015**. Here he describes his technique, and how he approaches his books as short films.

Grandad's Island is my second book as author-illustrator, and although I've illustrated over thirty other picture and



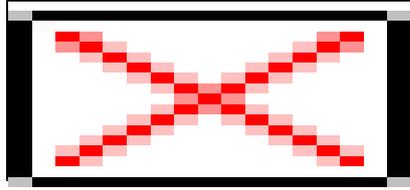
novelty books, my process continues to evolve.

When writing I find a lot of my ideas bubble up, subconsciously. The building blocks of **Grandad's Island** were scattered about ? parakeets flying past my window, an idea for a ship sitting snugly in a row of terrace houses, old letters I had kept from my own granddad. I collected all these elements over time, some without realising, gradually piecing them together. I made notes on my phone, sketches on pieces of paper, each time reworking and tinkering until something coherent started to form.

Once I had the full story mapped out in my head, and then written as a synopsis, I began loosely storyboarding. I made text notes beside each image, sentences and phrases that came into my head; words to compliment the images and drive the story forward.

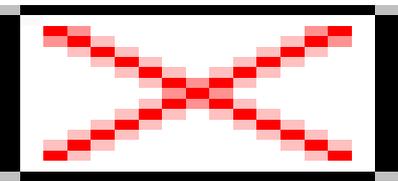
The storyboards are strung together sequences of thumbnail drawings, which are small drawings that suggest the composition and content of the illustration I am planning. I do this with a brush pen of grey ink on cartridge paper. It's fluid, and encourages me to work quickly. It gives a soft tone, unlike black ink, which is solid and definite. It suggests

that I can change it, and it doesn't fight with the text as I lay it down next to the image.



I pay very little attention to the number of drawings at this stage. The most important thing is that I tell the story from beginning to end, or at least that I get all my ideas down into a cohesive narrative. This will all be edited at the next stage ? dummies up. At this point I begin crafting the images into the picture book format.

After much consultation and discussion, with my editor and art director guiding me to seek out the very best way of telling the story, I set about creating the artwork. Whilst some elements of the illustrations are scanned from hand-drawn ink on paper, the final output of the work is always digital. It creates so much flexibility in terms of editing and is no compromise on the final artwork ? used well, the computer is just another tool.



I tend to refer to my illustrations in filmic terms. I make shots wider, lower camera angles, think of endpapers as the opening and closing credit sequences. It reveals a lot about my approach and storytelling style, which stems from a more cinematic root. I worked as an animation director in commercials for several years. It was always great to see my vision moving on the screen, but I'd never really pictured myself working in advertising. All I really wanted to do was to create characters and tell stories. When **The Storm Whale**, my first author-illustrator picture book, was slated for publication, I took it as a cue to change course and haven't looked back. Now I get to make those films, but they're made from paper and ink and glue.

Grandad's Island is published by Simon and Schuster, 978-1-4711-1995-8, £6.99 pbk

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