



Windows into Illustration: Meg McLaren

Article Author:

[Meg McLaren](#) [1]

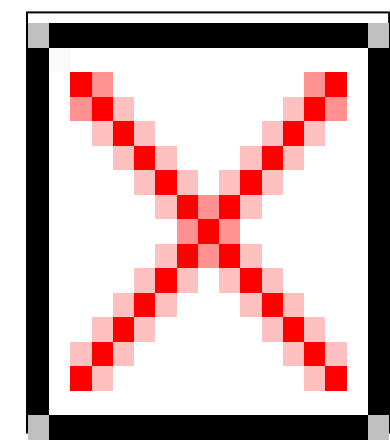
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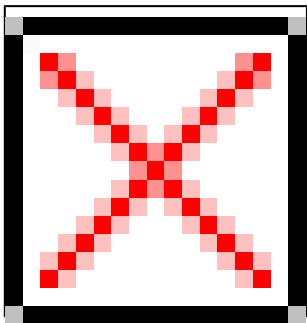
Meg McLaren on Pigeon P.I.



Meg McLaren graduated from the MA course in Children's Book Illustration at the Cambridge School of Art and published her debut picture book [Life is Magic](#) [3] last year. Her new book **Pigeon P.I.** is just out, another comic strip inspired story taking place on a big stage. Here she explains her thinking and technique.

The first things I ever wrote and illustrated were comic strips. I love the structure of them, how you can learn so much about the characters while an entire satisfying joke is set up and executed, all in three little frames. To me that was magical, and an art. I still marvel at people who make comics. I love how you can show time and really take a moment to focus on an action or an expression, and I like to do it in my books.

My writing process begins with a sketch and an inkling of who that character is. For Pigeon P.I. I had the idea for a film

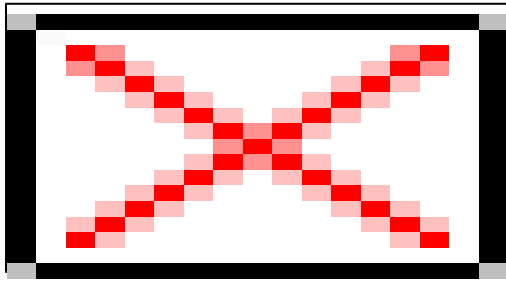


noir, a title and a drawing of Murray (my pigeon detective.) One of my sketchbook notes reads '?P.I.'s always have a sidekick,?' and so Vee (a canary in a beret) was born.

My artwork is drawn in pencil, scanned and coloured digitally. This lets me tidy and rearrange compositions. I try to make my illustrations look handmade by keeping as much of the original pencil line as possible and colouring with textures rather than flat colours.

Whether it's using background details to enhance my world, colours to suggest mood, or the layout itself, I try to use the whole page to tell my story. This spread was the hardest to get right but it's become my favourite because it uses all of these things. My editor and I reworked it numerous times trying to focus on exactly what we wanted to say. I like my

images to do as much work, if not more, than the text, and I wanted to communicate as much as I could about each character through their first meeting.



Vee is young and full of goodness. I wanted her to be intruding in Murray's world hence her head is popping around the frame and into it. She's an unwanted interruption to him and to the neat structure of the page. She's clearly out of place, but her colour implies that she will bring optimism. She's a bright spot amongst the grey.

Murray is stubborn, and his wordless dismissal of her shows his lackadaisical nature. By switching from day to night and back I can show a passage of time to prove to the reader that he will not budge. At the same time it also reveals that Vee is as relentless and willful as he is.

Ultimately, we see that Murray is not as heartless as he seems. The sight of Vee in the rain gives readers time to pause and to let Murray's heart melt a little. His problem isn't that he doesn't care but that he can often care too much. Against his better judgement he decides to help, and I love how displeased he looks, meanwhile the advert behind him shows us a glimpse of his true heroic self.

There are many moments like this throughout the book where I try to round my characters as fully as possible, and I find that using comic panels gives me the time and space to do it. If I'm doing my job right then you might not notice all of this, but hopefully you'll get a sense of who these two really are.

Pigeon P.I. is published by Andersen Press, 978-1-7834-4483-0, £12.99 hbk. **Life is Magic** is also published by Andersen Press, 978-1-7834-4486-1, £6.99 pbk.

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