

A. How did you become interested in children's book illustration?

The dream when I was growing up was to have a career that involved art in some way. I've always been interested in all art mediums and along the way I was also interested in Graphic Design and Fashion. To say I struggled with these choices would not be wrong. However, I became drawn to children's book illustration whilst doing my degree in visual communication when an illustrator came to lecture. After the lecture I began to think about illustration as a career. I found my local library to be a wonderful resource for researching for a picture book project and never looked back. I was that reader who would visit the library and take out the maximum allowed in the children's books section. I would study them to see how illustrators worked. I realised that what I really wanted was to create illustrations for picture books too.

B. What materials do you use when creating your artwork?

I use a combination of ways to create my illustration artwork. Firstly, as you would imagine, everything starts with the humble pencil and paper. I use my sketchbook to sketch out ideas and sometimes I sketch and draw directly onto an iPad with a pen or onto my Mac computer screen—it all depends on what I'm feeling that day about what I'm drawing. Once I'm happy with what I've drawn, eventually everything is uploaded onto the Mac and then I manipulate my sketches to make up a spread.

Then during the "colouring in" stage of the artwork, I will sometimes use mixed media to create textures and patterns. I work with watercolours, with coloured pencils, and with inks. I then scan those textures and patterns into the image that I'm creating. I feel that I'm a little bit of a collage artist as well as an illustrator because I like to experiment with media and usually, I'm not happy if there isn't a little bit of everything included in there.



C. What inspired your work in the "Never" books?

My inspiration when creating artwork comes from all around me. From things I have seen in nature, from artwork that's inspired me. For the "Never" books I did a bit of internet research into the subject area of Dinosaurs. It all helped to develop my version of the dinosaurs in the books. Because I knew I would be working on more than one "Never" book, I bought a book on dinosaurs and read up about how they moved, what they ate, and what their role in the dinosaur world was. For instance, in *Never Show a T. rex a Book* I wanted T. rex to have security guards when she became "the prime minister" so the dinosaur I looked at for that role was the fast and agile Velociraptor.

D. Which of the "Never" books was your favorite to work on?

I am so proud of our "Never" books. Rashmi is a brilliant writer. I love all of the books so to pick my favourite is hard. All of the books were very exciting to work on and I love each one for different reasons. *Never Show a T. rex a Book* was our first picture book together and I think that makes it very special.



I was flicking through the 3rd book, *Never Let a Diplodocus Draw*, recently and I just had to take a moment and marvel at the amount of artwork contained in it. Looking at them makes me proud at what both Rashmi and I have achieved in these books.

As an illustrator, these are the kinds of books that you can totally enjoy creating.

E. Would you describe your typical workday and workspace for us?

A typical workday is getting up and already knowing what I want to do that day. I usually get up really early, when everyone is still in bed and the world has yet to wake up. When it's all quiet, that's when I fire up my Mac computer.

After breakfast I'm usually in the midst of working on a book project so I will jump on the computer to see what I did yesterday and continue onwards. It's work then for most of the day with a lunch break and I watch a bit of telly if anything is on – but I like to watch something I've prerecorded during my lunch time. Sometimes I'll go for a short walk if I'm not too busy and it's dry outside. Then it's back to work until late afternoon. If I'm really busy with work, I'll draw on my iPad into the evening, but I try not to do this regularly.

My workspace is so small. It consists of my desk covered in a lot of mess most times. (I look at it sometimes and say I must clean up, but this rarely happens as I'm so busy.) I have a copy of nearly all the books I've illustrated on a shelf in front of me along with other books by illustrators that I love. I have my radio blaring out tunes all day as that keeps me upbeat. Sometimes I listen to classical music, but it's mainly modern like R'n'B, Latin, Pop, and Afrobeat music as this makes me feel positive and energised.



The main things I have on my desk that I can't do without are my Mac computer, printer/scanner, a selection of pens and pencils, my iPad, a sketchbook, lightbox, paints, brushes, etc. I know, it all sounds cluttered. I really need a whole room for all the stuff I need but I do make it work somehow.

F. What's the most rewarding thing about being a children's book illustrator?

The most amazing thing for me as an illustrator is when I hear that children are enjoying the stories and illustrations in the books I illustrate. I have the privilege of working in a field of work I never thought was a possibility for me. I am in a situation where I am able to drive forward inclusion of POC in picture books, making them visible where they haven't been before. In the "Never" books our protagonist is a Black girl alongside her dinosaurs. I love to see her out in the world, on bookshelves, because it's important for little Black children to be included.

It is also very rewarding to see my latest illustrated book up on the shelf for the first time.

G. What's the most challenging thing about being a children's book illustrator?

A challenging part of being an illustrator is an illustrator's block. I didn't think this was a thing—running out of ideas for a spread—but sometimes as an illustrator you get to the point where you think you've exhausted all of your ideas and it's very worrying. But the scary moment

always disappears, and something always happens to get around this, so although it's challenging, there's always a way.

I think another challenging aspect of the job of illustrator is when multiple project opportunities come in at once which are all fantastic. I always want to do all of them but due to time, decisions have to be made and projects turned down, sadly.

H. You've received a number of awards and accolades. Which has meant the most to you?

I've been so lucky to have received some really amazing awards. I can't really pick one out. They are all so special. Winning awards is a great and unexpected plus in this world of publishing. I had never really won anything prior to winning these awards with my co-creators. They make you feel so blessed to be doing what you love to do.

I. Have you ever met Rashmi Sirdeshpande or Kaye Baillie?

It's still not very common for illustrators to meet their authors but I have been very lucky to have met Rashmi on a few occasions where we have done school events. She is absolutely what you would imagine an author to be. She is so knowledgeable and enthusiastic about writing books and seeing them in the hands of children. It's always been a pleasure to work with her.



Unfortunately, I haven't met Kaye yet; I believe she lives in Australia. Her books are hilarious, I loved creating all the characters. It would be great to meet her one day too.

J. What words of advice could you share with aspiring young artists?

Children's book illustration is not an easy field to get into, or as easy as some people might imagine. It's a struggle to get noticed and gain representation let alone to find a publisher who is interested in you creating illustrations for their books. So, I never take anything for granted.

I would advise any aspiring illustrator to never give up on your dream. It may take time, sometimes a lot of time, but even if you need to do something else in the meantime, keep going. Keep refreshing your portfolio. Keep watching the market to see which illustrators are current, watch what they are doing and how successful their books are. Knowledge is everything, it informs choices.

