

Sarah McIntyre

The author and illustrator begins a bumper year of publishing with a new picture book that promises colour, collusion and chaos

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BY FIONA NOBLE

In Sarah McIntyre's picture book *The New Neighbours*, a tower block forms the focal point for a clever story about prejudice. "I filled in who lived on each floor and literally mixed them. You get really interesting stories when people mix, especially in a tower block, which gives you so many plot lines." When a rat moves into Pickle Rye, rumours and judgements fly among the animal residents. Addressing prejudice was a deliberate move, and feels particularly apt against the backdrop of Brexit Britain. "Kids are like the bunnies in the story: they're not prejudiced originally, they just see someone to play with. It's the adults who are adding things, building the suspicion."

We meet at the studio she shares with illustrator Elissa Elwick—a veritable Aladdin's cave of colour, art and inspiration—and finished copies are just in. It's extremely effective, created with the light touch and humour you'd expect from McIntyre. The pages are a riot of colour and character, crammed with details to spot on repeat reads, including mementos from her childhood: her parents' linoleum and the duck wall ornaments from her granny's wall. There's rich read-aloud potential too, as the animals hop, trot, totter, pad and clatter down the stairs. McIntyre worked hard with editor Alice Corrie to get the rhythm right, using the motif of the stairwell on each spread to guide the animals and readers down the building and through the story. Characters Vern and Lettuce, who first appeared in an eponymous comic, have stayed with McIntyre. "Vern was based on my husband and I'm a little bit like Lettuce," she says.

McIntyre wrote and illustrated *The New Neighbours*. "Sometimes I write so I can illustrate it but this one came together so easily. It doesn't feel like writing, more like making." Her illustrative process differs for each project: the David Fickling and OUP titles are largely digital, a black pencil or ink layer scanned in, with colour added in PhotoShop, but her Scholastic work is painted in watercolour. "In some ways it's a lot more fun to paint but I also like the texture that digital allows." McIntyre has seen the illustrated market polarise, roughly split into the sophisticated style typified by Flying Eye Books imprint

METADATA



Imprint David Fickling Books

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Rights World rights with David Fickling Books

Editor Alice Corrie

Agent Jodie Hodges, United Agents

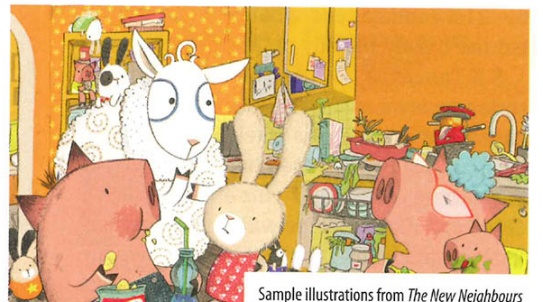
Nobrow and bold, bright commercial titles. "It's just not enough to appeal to the kids, you have to appeal to the parents and the buyers. I'm trying to find a third way." *The New Neighbours*, she hopes, "may cross the divide more".

She grew up in Seattle with a Scottish father and American mother. Books and films were hugely influential. "I was a little bit clueless, a bit of a nerd, so books were really a place I could go and have an amazing time outside of real life." A degree in Russian and Art History led to a sojourn in Moscow before a move to London. There, she began to pursue her interest in art more seriously, taking classes, joining the Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators, and eventually enrolling for a Masters degree in illustration in 2005. She puts her success down to hard work rather than innate talent. "When kids ask if I was an amazing artist at school, I tell

them I was okay, but I just kept going. It's about practice, really. I wasn't a genius."

Her passion for comics led her to David Fickling, who at the time was looking to start a children's comic. "I went to Oxford with my portfolio and David said: 'How many pages can you take a week?' I crossed my fingers and took a page to pace myself... which was good, because it took me a long time." Her comic strip Vern and Lettuce ran for 42 issues and was "really good training". Fickling commissioned her first picture book, *Morris the Mankiest Monster* with writer Giles Andreae, which won the Sheffield Children's Book Award. Scholastic snapped up her next picture books and "has pretty much given me a book a year since".

And it was through Scholastic that McIntyre met Philip Reeve at the Edinburgh Festival in 2010. The two bonded over drawing, and Reeve and his wife invited McIntyre and her husband for a sketching holiday at his Dartmoor home. "We just really hit it off... They adopt us for Christmas now." McIntyre illustrated a *Mortal Engines* Christmas story on Reeve's blog, then the pair wrote a comic. "I challenged him that I would write it, he would draw it. So I wrote it, he did the inks and I did the colouring. It was companionable, and it worked really well." Their first book was *Oliver and the Seawigs*, the



Sample illustrations from *The New Neighbours*

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first of four highly illustrated chapter books for OUP. The books are co-authored. "It isn't that Philip is the writer and I come in after. We think up the ideas together; it's very much a co-creative thing. Philip does do the writing in the end, I might tinker a bit, but he's so much better at crafting a longer book. And he might sometimes help me with the art when we're running a bit slow." The pair, along with Alex T Smith's Claude series, have been widely credited with driving the explosion of colourful young fiction. Beyond the books, the duo has worked hard to build its Reeve and McIntyre brand to encompass live events and the *Pug-a-Doodle-Do!* activity book.

Events have become a key part of life for many children's writers and illustrators. I've seen McIntyre perform several times and she sets the bar high, but confesses that it doesn't come naturally. "I went into this career because I'm quite shy... and like to be at my desk in my pyjamas. The events have made me more forward, because you have to be." She says it's all about creating a stage persona: cue the hats, dresses and flamboyant personality. McIntyre also blogs regularly and is an active voice on social media, where she has spearheaded the Pictures Mean Business campaign. Born out of the industry's persistent failure to credit illustrators on book covers, on awards shortlists and in books journalism,

the campaign quickly gained traction. "So many direct messages," she admits. "People are too scared to speak out. A lot of surprisingly prominent illustrators said they don't know if they can keep on doing it. Crediting costs nothing. Illustrator loyalty is worth something. It can be the difference between them getting the next job or not." The campaign could also foster inclusivity. "Being able to get your name out should hopefully help people from different backgrounds rise quicker, so illustrators wouldn't have to have a working husband or family money."

McIntyre clearly relishes the challenge and variety of working with different publishers and writers, and the future is looking busy. In May, Scholastic publishes *Dinosaur Firefighters*, a follow-up to her bestselling *Dinosaur Police*, and in the autumn there's a fifth Reeve and McIntyre chapter book. *The Legend of Kevin* follows the friendship that evolves when a biscuit-loving pony flies into Max's room. The project started life as a comic published in instalments on their blogs, and opens a four-book series with the overarching name Roly-Poly Flying Pony. It promises to combine wish-fulfilment and escapism in their unique style, which is, McIntyre says, what it's all about. "You want to give kids somewhere to go, so that they can get away and realise that the world's a bigger place."