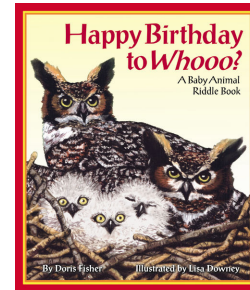
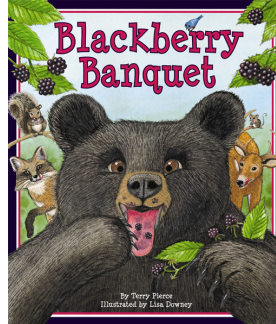
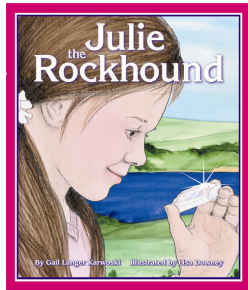


A Conversation with Lisa Downey, illustrator of Blackberry Banquet, Happy Birthday to Whooo? and Julie the Rockhound



How did you get into children's book illustrations?

I spent over fifteen years doing packaging design, graphic design and illustration before doing children's book illustration. When Sylvan Dell Publishing was starting up and looking for a graphic designer through a local SCBWI (Society of Childrens Book Writers and Illustrators) group, I responded. Illustration opportunities then grew out of that position.



What are the most frequently asked questions you encounter as an illustrator?

'What medium do you work in?' Pastels, which use the same pigments as oil paints, but are manufactured with much less oil and rolled into a stick. They look similar to a piece of chalk, but are usually much softer and are available in a wide variety of colors. I also work in watercolor.

And 'Is it fun?' I enjoy it very much, even the research. Many people are unaware of the amount of research involved in illustration. I could spend a month just gathering visual reference, and then go on a field trip to gain firsthand experience. The sketching stage is also fun, which is when you figure out how the illustrations work with the text. I like figuring out how the story unfolds with all its changes in pace and perspective, among other things.

What sparks your creativity?

Problem solving is one thing that sparks creativity for me, at least in the illustration of children's books. I love taking a seemingly un-resolvable situation and then finding an answer. Creativity, ironically, often works better with criteria or guidelines. That goes for any of the arts.

Do you have a favorite color?

Yes, all of them! I feel there is no such thing as an "ugly" color. An "ugly" color can be quite beautiful; it depends upon what you put around it.

What are the most rewarding and challenging parts of illustrating for Sylvan Dell?

Hmmm. The most challenging part of illustrating children's books is finding good reference material. Because Sylvan Dell's books strive to be technically accurate, it's very important for the animals and objects or places to be true-to-life. There is no amount of visual reference that can make up for the real thing. For instance, I needed reference for an illustration of a fox. The only live fox I could find in captivity is a 4 hour drive away!

The most rewarding part is knowing that the finished book will be a way for parents and children to spend quality time together, a way to re-connect in an on-line world where there is precious little time spent with each other. It's nice to know that a book I worked on can be the choice made for human interaction over the "glowing boxes" in our living rooms or on our desktops.

It's also a thrill to know that picture books I have illustrated are helping teach young children how to read – yay!

Want to continue this conversation? Schedule an interview!

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