

A Conversation with Laurie Allen Klein, illustrator of If a Dolphin Were a Fish and Little Skink's Tail



Questions answered throughout this interview:

- How did you get into children's book illustration? **Page 1**
- How did your prior experience prepare you for this career? **Page 2**
- What is the story behind "If a Dolphin Were a Fish"? **Page 3**
- What are the most frequently asked questions you encounter as an author? **Page 4**
- What helps you draw? **Page 4**
- What advice do you have for people who would like to draw? **Page 5**
- What sparks your creativity? **Page 6**
- Do you have a favorite medium? **Page 6**
- What artists influenced you growing up? **Page 6**
- Do you have any art dreams you haven't yet realized? **Page 7**
- Any valuable lessons or tricks you have picked up that you feel have helped or contributed to your artwork? **Page 7**
- What have been the most challenging and rewarding aspects of illustrating for Sylvan Dell? **Page 7**

How did you get into children's book illustration?

This is actually a twofold question, or perhaps more accurately a one-fold question with a two-part answer. I have always *wanted* to be an illustrator from the time I was a little kid drawing pictures and making up stories to go along with them, but technically, I didn't *become* a real, working book illustrator until years after graduating from college. I became a children's book illustrator only two years ago.

The word/picture storytelling link began, literally, at a very young age. I have some of my first sketches, drawn on all sorts of random scratch paper, dating back to the early 60s (when I was 4 or 5), and I can still recall many of the accompanying tales and influences. Disney animated movies, particularly the ones featuring animals, were a major source of inspiration, both as to subject matter and style (things that are still very evident today in my work). But my first informal "training" came from a little local Saturday morning kids' program broadcast in Philadelphia, Pa., where I was born and spent the first eight years of my life. "Cartoon Corners General Store" featured a guy named Gene London, who, between showing Bugs Bunny cartoons (another stylistic influence), would tell stories, usually along the lines of fairy tales, and illustrate them on huge sheets of white paper as he talked. I loved that guy and that is truly one of my first clear memories of how words and pictures could come together.

Of course our house was also full of children's books (I was sick as a child and spent many hours in someone's lap as they read to me or drew pictures for me), and other members of the family – from my parents to my grandparents, to great aunts and uncles – were all creative in one form or another. My maternal great grandfather and grandfather were both amazing carpenters, and Poppop (my grandfather) also painted. My mother was very good at drawing and brilliant with her hands, whether it was sewing, knitting, or crosstitch. She also had a wonderful creative eye when it came to making costumes, designing cakes or wrapping presents (a trait shared with just about all the women on her side of the family). However, this ability to see things in an artistic way was not exclusive to Mom's side of the family tree. My father also had a very strong sense of design, but his creativity came out more in the way he landscaped the yard or fancifully arranged his hardware store. So, all things considered, I think my artistic fate was pretty much sealed by age five.

Once I started school, there was never a moment I didn't have a pencil or crayon in my hand. I simply knew by elementary school that I wanted to draw pictures for books (or work for Disney, which was the other dream). That goal never once wavered and I was the quintessential (or perhaps stereotypic) Art major in high school and college. Interestingly enough, though, I knew I wanted to be an illustrator (and like Norman Rockwell I made that distinction - illustrator as opposed to artist). I never considered going to an art school or fine arts academy. I knew I would be drawing my entire life so I wanted to spend my college years in the company of kids interested in other majors. With the luxury of hindsight, I can say that decision has proved to be the strongest influence to me as an artist – absorbing everything.

After college, my very first job was with a company that did slide show presentations (this was way back before PowerPoint and personal computers), where I learned the mechanical aspects of design, photography and production. I'm so much of a dinosaur in that regard – I still do mechanicals the old fashioned, paste-up by hand/hard copy way (and I often kid that my goal is to become a national treasure and eventually be the only living artist who still does drawing the old way – with a #2 pencil). After seven years doing paste-up and slide animation, I decided to do graphic art/illustration full time on my own and teamed up with a designer to share office space as a freelance illustrator. It was there that I think I truly started learning the *art* of art – drawing every day and taking on a wide variety of design projects that forced me to challenge myself and push the envelope artistically. Every new assignment was a learning experience, and every experience gave me another “tool for my belt” (as my best friend from college likes to say) and the confidence to try the next thing.

How did all that prepare you for book illustration?

Ah, come closer Grasshopper, and I'll explain. Working for myself as a freelance artist meant I had to suck up my courage, pretty much on a daily basis, and go out on cold calls showing my portfolio in order to drum up more work. Obviously not every call was successful, but just about every art director I met would give me the name of someone else to call, so over time, my work started getting around. I started doing promotional pieces and annual Christmas cards, so I created small “travel portfolios” that I would mail to agencies and publishers. One day I got a call to do some work for a local magazine. An illustration for one of those articles led to my first book illustration job – the cover and some black and white pencil interior spot art for a small fiction book called “Out To Pasture” by Effie Leland Wilder (for Peachtree Publishers in Atlanta). I wound up illustrating four of Ms. Wilder's books before my life took another unexpected turn – in Florida.

A little quick history here: Born in Pennsylvania, I grew up in St. Petersburg, Fla., went to col-

lege in Tennessee (Maryville College, just outside Knoxville), and began my art career in (and around) Atlanta, Ga. I met my husband there, and we eventually moved to the quaint and charming little antebellum town of Madison, Ga., where we bought a nearly 100-year-old house and had a baby. Because I worked for myself anyway, it was no great hardship to move my studio to the house, so I continued to do freelance illustration and other creative art projects while raising our little girl.

We liked Madison. It had been our home for seven years, but as our daughter started getting older, I began to miss the beach and suddenly realized I wanted our little girl to have the same childhood experiences I had – growing up a beach kid in Florida. In one of those decisions that either sounds incredibly brave or completely insane, my husband and I sold our house, packed up our stuff, stuck a pin in a map and moved to St. Augustine, Fla. - even though we didn't have any friends or family there, or more importantly, jobs.

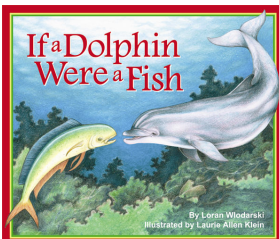
It was scary but the gamble did indeed pay off. My husband wound up with a great job, and I found some amazing freelance work, most notably for a marine park where my daughter had been going for summer camps. A cold call to the park's education department to show my portfolio eventually resulted in a request to produce a 7 feet by 22 feet long mural of Florida plant and animal life – from land to sea – in paint. Something (I can admit now) I was really not very familiar with! It's not that I had never painted before; I had, of course, painted in school, but all my most recent color work was in color pencil, and they were pretty much magazine and book size. By luck, however, I had done a couple wood cutouts of animals in paint for a gift shop in Madison, and a large portion of my portfolio was animal and nature-based, so I felt pretty confident I could pull off the mural's subject matter. I had also just helped design and build a community playground with several other extremely talented artists in St. Augustine, so I had some experience working large-scale and people to go to for advice. I said yes to the mural and embarked on the most amazing artistic and satisfying creative project of my life.

It was also during the course of doing that mural that I met Loran Wlodarski, the author of "If a Dolphin Were a Fish," and the rest, as they say, is history!

What is the story behind "If a Dolphin Were a Fish"?

After seeing my portfolio at that very first meeting, Loran told me he had written a children's story and was looking for an illustrator. Still new to Florida with no full-time job and our daughter in school, I had plenty of time. I loved the story and design potential, so I jumped at the chance to work on Loran's book. I actually came up with the initial rough pencil sketches in fairly quick order, and then did one illustration, the cover, in color so Loran could create a dummy version of the book and send it off to publishers. The next seven years are a testament to Loran's perseverance and patience as the story was sent and rejected time and again (and I have no idea why my life seems chunked in 7-year increments – it just turned out that way).

We did come very close to selling "Dolphin" once, but the publisher wanted to use a different illustrator. I didn't want Loran to give up his dream on account of me and told him to go ahead and take the offer, but Loran insisted we were a team. Before he even had to make any difficult decision one way or the other, however, the publisher decided our book didn't fit their needs and we were back on our own again. After that, Loran decided he'd just publish the book himself – all I needed to do was finish the illustrations.



Now I had originally, and purposely, not taken the drawings to full color all this time because, knowing from experience, if a publisher did buy the book, they would very likely want to make design changes (as had just been recently demonstrated). However, if Loran was going to go ahead with the project on his own, there was no reason to procrastinate any longer. And Loran was eager and ready to make this happen. Unfortunately, I was now busy with many deadline-heavy projects, and there were so many drawings to color, I just didn't have the time to start. Ever the understanding and patient gentleman, Loran waited. The man is a saint!

I don't recall now how many months went by, but the next thing I know, it was May and Loran was calling to say he had recently spoken to an editor who was very excited about "Dolphin" and they would let us know if they were interested in publishing it in a month or two. That worked out perfectly time-wise for me because I had just begun another involved series of paintings that would have me chained to my desk for the next couple of months, so I wasn't mentally able to focus on the book just then anyway. That all changed a day or two later when I got word that Sylvan Dell was going to come to a decision in two weeks. Two days after that, we got confirmation that the contracts were in the mail, and finished art would be needed by early September!

Talk about one's world turning upside down. Suddenly I was swamped with work and in a crazed panic that I was going to fail miserably meeting everyone's deadlines (not to mention my own expectations). There were several times over the course of that summer that I was pulling my hair out, fighting tears and boring anyone who'd listen to me with tales of how I was sure I was never going to be able to pull it all off. Amazingly enough, not only did I not lose any friends or destroy my marriage, I got the illustrations finished, and they were actually done a few days early! But even more importantly – Loran's wonderful story was now finally going to see the light of published day!

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

I would say the question I hear most often is "How do you do that?" (as in draw something to look like something), and I truthfully say, "I don't know." I never took any serious art lessons outside of the ones given at school (pertaining to my major); I just liked to draw and did it for fun. When I was little, I'd sit on my grandparent's patio overlooking the Gulf of Mexico when we'd visit in the summer and fill sheets of typewriter paper with animal drawings (usually horses, dolphins and dogs). Later (in junior high and high school before I got serious about a boy), my best friend and I would wander around her neighborhood with notebooks and sketch out interesting landscape and architectural elements (for the dream homes we designed for our imaginary future husbands and children).

Well, if you're not sure how you do it, do you know what helps?

Later in life, I began to realize that by drawing something I could kind of "keep" it, if that makes any sense – capture a moment, or make a dream or fantasy become real in a manner of speaking (now we're getting into the cosmic weird stuff). But mostly I think it comes down to just continually *looking* at things. Noticing the way light filters, or trees branch, or water reflects, or animals and humans are put together. I picked up one bit of significant advice from a college painting class that has held me in good stead – always use a visual reference.

I was doing a still life at the time, but for some reason it was entirely made up in my head. I wasn't looking at anything while I painted; it was all imaginary. The teacher came up and suggested I go out and actually find the real items I was painting and set them up in the same way

so that I could see how shadow and light played off the different textures. He said (and I'm paraphrasing here), "The human mind isn't nearly capable or creative enough to imagine all the intricacies in nature. You should always use a reference."

Now I recall being rather offended at the time and thinking the guy didn't know what he was talking about because I knew – for a fact – that I had an incredible imagination (and a rich fantasy life, but that's another story) and was extremely creative - *thank you very much*. I didn't need a raggedy old tree branch lying in front of me in order to draw one correctly. Funny thing is – as is so often the way with advice and suggestions – he was right.

I don't know when I realized my drawings were better, richer and more detailed when I started using reference material (maybe when I finished that painting?) – but they are. Even if I'm doing something completely fanciful or anthropomorphic, I find having photos of the real item/ animal makes a world of difference in how the drawing turns out. Try it – without looking at one, draw something simple like a tree or a fish. If you're like most people you wind up drawing the archetype tree image of a vertical pole with a ball on top – the Lollipop Tree (though, if you are somewhat more creative, you might break the top of the pole into a Y-shape and make the ball on top kind of squiggly to indicate leaves). Fish – without a reference – tend to be drawn as teardrops lying on their sides, with a forked tail (unless it's a shark, then it gets an equilateral triangle on its back for a dorsal fin). If you think about it, all the Great Masters used models, and today many painters and artists will set up elaborate still lifes and scenes and take photographs to use as a guide later on – so it's a valid, and easy, tool.

What advice do you have for people who would like to draw?

I personally think anyone can actually draw – they just need to have some references around. Look at the real thing if it's handy or use pictures. I have floor-to-ceiling bookshelves in almost every room crammed with books on just about every subject to use as reference material. And often I look through them not just to see the correct anatomy of a manatee (for example), but also to see the unexpected little things – like an interesting pose or an unusual reflection or an unexpected color – to use when I'm trying to come up with a new design.

The other thing I think too many people do is worry about trying to achieve some impossible realistic standard. The best art is personal and conveys a mood or feeling. It doesn't have to be a faithful reproduction – that's what cameras are for. With that in mind, another trick to try (this blatantly stolen from a made-for-TV-movie) is to take a picture and turn it upside down and copy it freehand. That way, you are less likely to worry about copying the image exactly and you will concentrate instead more on the abstract quality or the lines and shapes. Turn your picture back the right way and quite often it will look more like the original than if you had copied that image straight on. I don't know why it works that way, but I'm sure it has something to do with our brains attempting to fill in details or thinking faster than our hands.

Of course, I say all that and do have to concede that, in many cases, people with an artistic flair do see the world a bit differently. I don't mean they substitute blue for green but rather they have an internal sense of when something is in pleasing proportion. The "Golden Mean" or "Divine Proportion" described by Euclid (and most recently popularized by "The DaVinci Code"). Often, without realizing it or even thinking about it, artists automatically set up their paintings using that pleasing ratio.

Now first let me stress I in no way think I'm a great artist – and I actually don't remember ever even learning about the Ratio in art class (or, if I did, it slipped in and out without taking much hold), but I do know I get almost "twitchy" when something looks out of balance to me. My fam-

ily has long loved to play mind games with me and just slightly move one of my knick-knacks or carefully arranged object d'art an inch or so, and I always notice and push it back – often without even realizing I'm doing it – because I just sense the balance is no longer correct. It's like straightening a picture on the wall that has tilted.

Still, none of that should scare anyone from attempting to sketch or paint. I love rough, primitive styles and often think they have more depth and emotion than a minutely detailed “professional” piece of art.

What sparks your creativity?

Everything. I'm like a big giant walking sponge. I love books and movies and music. I love different types of scenery and travel. I adore history. Fantasy. Philosophy. My interests and tastes jump all over the map, and research into one thing will very often excite interest in something else. That's why my job is so wonderful because I'm not tied to any one style of art or subject. I can be working on a life-size whale mural one minute and a very graphic business-size logo the next. I work in paint or color pencil on canvas, paper or walls.

Recently I designed and made something like 16 life-size 3-D butterflies that looked like the real things when I was finished. It was work on the butterfly job, in fact, that gave me so much reference material for “Little Skink's Tail” (and was why I added that little caterpillar/butterfly to the story).

Do you have a favorite medium?

I guess I kind of already answered that in the previous question. I like different mediums for different projects. I can achieve completely different things (style, mood, detail) with color pencil then I can with paint, and vice versa. I have painted with sponges and feathers. I've drawn with burn match heads and ballpoint pens. I've worked in scratchboard (where you scratch the ink away from the black coated paper working in reverse), Sculptey clay, paper mache, crayon, pastel, and torn paper. But, if I could only have one implement I guess, I'd have to say – my trusty #2 pencil. That's my go-to tool of choice when I'm doing something really personal and want the detail to come out just right. Black and white pencil is probably my all time favorite style.

What artists influenced you growing up?

Just about anyone from the Brandywine River School: Howard Pyle, NC Wyeth and the related styles of Norman Rockwell, Edmund Dulac and Kay Nielsen were and are favorites. M. C. Escher, Edward Gorey and Aubrey Beardsley have influenced me greatly, and I go back to their work again and again. I grew up with Beatrix Potter and Tasha Tudor books, and as mentioned before, all the wonderful Disney movies have made their contribution. I also love Trina Schart Hyman's style. And the art of Alan Lee and John Howe (with their connection to “Lord of the Rings”) and the amazing work of the computer graphic artists at Industrial Light and Magic (who did the Star Wars films) have found their way into my drawing (and onto my bookshelves) even though I am still hopelessly computer impaired.

Do you have any art dreams you haven't yet realized?

I almost hate to say yes because I've had such an extraordinary career so far and feel guilty about wanting more, but I would love to illustrate another children's book (or 2 or 3 or 20). My dream scenario would be to continue working for Sea World til I'm too old and dottery to hold a pen and still have the occasional book to do every year. “If a Dolphin Were a Fish” and “Little

"Skink's Tail" just scratched the surface. Working on those books was amazing (and maddening and scary and challenging), and I don't want to stop there. I'd also love to write and illustrate a book or two, and I'm playing with ideas – but I have that whole procrastination/writer's block problem to contend with, so I'm not holding my breath.

My other pie-in-the-sky, one-chance-in-a-million dream opportunity would be to do something for Disney and George Lucas because, despite my age, I have not yet grown up (and probably won't if I have anything to say about it). I'd love to do atmospheric sketches for another "Bambi" or "Lion King" or contribute some ideas to the Star Wars universe. I did a Christmas card using Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan Kenobi (from "The Phantom Menace") as Good King Wenceslas and his page and could easily see a whole Galaxy far, far away "Christmas Carol" adaptation!

Any valuable lessons or tricks you've picked up that you feel have helped or contributed to your artwork?

The biggest thing is what teachers and parents have told us for years – practice, practice, practice. I know, from experience, no one wants to hear that (and much less do it), but it is the one thing I found that truly has made a difference. Back in college, we had all these sketching and hand-eye gesture drawing exercises we were expected to do, and like most students everywhere, I didn't do them. Or I faked doing them. Or I rushed through them. I thought they were a waste of time and saw no point or benefit in the repetitive nature of the thing – I wanted to just dive right into a real picture and start drawing. There's nothing wrong with that, and I sincerely don't know if doing a million gesture drawings would have seriously improved my skill, but what I have found is that, the more drawing I do on a daily basis, the better and stronger my abilities.

I became aware of the change when I started freelancing and found myself sketching and drawing and researching every day. Unusual projects called for different techniques. So the more I did something, the more comfortable I grew and the better I got. There is a drastic difference between the early pieces in my portfolio (when I just drew sporadically) and the things I do now, and I can only attribute that to constant work. It's like doing exercise, only in this case, it's much more fun (now if only I could find a way to make actual exercise that easy!).

And finally, what have been the most challenging and rewarding parts of illustrating for Sylvan Dell?

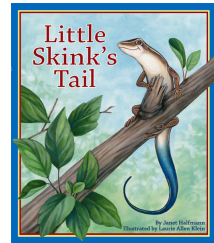
Most challenging – getting the artwork to look the way I envision it in my imagination. I think this is probably true of every "artist" (and I mean that in the broad term of all the arts, whether it's writing, painting, composing and/or making music, dance or acting). The thing you are working on always sounds/looks perfect in your mind. The words flow effortlessly. The leaps are flawless. The colors sing. The notes are clear. The reality is not always so easy. The illustrations for both "Dolphin" and "Skink" looked different in my mind than they wound up looking on paper/canvas. And the finished look was harder to achieve than I expected. I'm pleased with the outcome, but it was a struggle accepting the visual direction the illustrations seemed to take of their own accord.

And really, quite often, the drawings were more in control than I was. I was literally in tears a couple times, on both books, completely convinced I was a dismal failure, wouldn't make the deadline and that everyone at Sylvan Dell would be wondering why they hired me. Again, I'm

sure it's something of a common fear among creative types (so much so, in fact, there's a book "Art & Fear: Observations on the Perils [and Rewards] of Artmaking" about the subject), but knowing that and suffering through the process are two different things.

Still, when all was said and done, when the illustrations were finished and I could look at them with a fresh eye, I was pretty pleased and surprised in many cases that I came closer to my imagined destination than I realized. And of course, I learned things from each project that I used on the next assignment.

That, I guess, is the reward. Accepting a challenge, struggling through it and coming out on the other side - pleased with the result and learning new techniques. That and having the opportunity to meet such great folks – other illustrators and writers, everyone at Sylvan Dell and the people who come to the book signings and conventions. It has all been a wonderful experience and I feel so fortunate that I have been able to be a part of it.



Want to continue this conversation? Schedule an interview!

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