

A Conversation with Eric Carle and Oliver Jeffers

Eric Carle is the creator, author, and illustrator of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* and countless other children's books, including the upcoming *The Artist Who Painted a Blue Horse*. **Oliver Jeffers** is the creator, author and illustrator of *Up and Down*, *Lost and Found*, and many other books including the upcoming *Stuck*. They recently had a conversation about their work writing and illustrating for children.

Oliver Jeffers: It's so wonderful to be speaking with you, Eric. I am not sure if you know this, but I was greatly influenced by your work even as a child. At the age of five, I discovered the secret of scale and perspective from your book, *The Bad Tempered Ladybird* (as *The Grouchy Ladybug* is called in Ireland). I just could not figure out why the whale at the end of the book looked so big when the book was just the same size as all of the other books I had. Then I realized it was because I could see the ladybug so tiny beside it.

Eric Carle: Why, thank you. I like your books too. Your illustrations leave lots of empty spaces and let readers enjoy the pictures. I think on first glance one might say our work is very different, but there's a quality of your stories that captures a child's view of the world. I thought, you must have been entertaining yourself in the same way I try and entertain the child I once was and still am.

Oliver Jeffers: Absolutely, I still think I have the maturity of a four year old, and ultimately make my books to satisfy my own sense of curiosity. Although, that said, for me, the most rewarding part about writing and drawing for children is watching them enjoy the stories. It's easy to forget, when making the books in isolation in my studio, the part they play in real people's lives. I hope they grow up to remember my books the way that so many remember yours. *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, especially, is a favorite of many children and parents. Are you looking forward to The Very Hungry Caterpillar Day on March 20th?

Eric Carle: I have a special place in my heart for *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* and am amazed and delighted that so many people have enjoyed it. I love the idea that it is being celebrated on the first day of spring with The Very Hungry Caterpillar Day.

For a long time I didn't understand why this book was so popular. My editor and publisher and I asked ourselves, "Why is this book appealing to so many people?" I think its hopeful message, that "you, too, little caterpillar, can grow up and spread your wings and fly into the wide world," has struck a chord with many readers. If there's a sense of hope that is taken away from my book, I am very happy with that. How about you; what do you hope children take from your books?

Oliver Jeffers: Simply, enjoyment. Although, I recently had a conversation with a well-known person, who made me think about what I do quite differently. When he found out what my occupation was, he responded "Wow, what a responsibility! You are the first point of contact for these humans and their cultural world, for their interaction with storytelling and relating to pictures." I had never really thought about it that way before.

We have something in common actually . . . we both spent part of our childhood in a different country than where we now live. I'm wondering, how did your experience growing up in Germany influence you as an artist?

Eric Carle: When I was growing up in Germany during the Second World War, it was very gray. In a way I feel the colorful illustrations of my books are a kind of antidote to the grays and browns of my childhood. And my work in general is a response in some way to the lack of color from that time. Among some of my favorite artists are Paul Klee (1879 to 1940), with his colorful, dreamlike paintings; and Pieter Brueghel (1525 to 1569), who painted peasants and landscapes of central Europe that remind me of where I grew up in Germany. How about you; how did growing up in Ireland influence you as an artist?

Oliver Jeffers: Belfast was a very interesting place in the 80s. Because of the nature of the political turmoil, I believe the people of Northern Ireland developed a pretty cynical sense of humor and an ability to laugh at anything, simply because the alternative would have been so much worse. This, coupled with the fact that storytelling is such a rich part of the cultural fabric of Irish people, has completely shaped my outlook, humor, and sense of visual judgment. Perhaps, I have a distinctly Northern Irish style about making my art, no matter which process I use. What is your process when creating your stories and your art?

Eric Carle: My illustrations are collages, which is a technique that has been used by many respected artists including Matisse, Braque and Picasso. Many children have done collages at home or in their classrooms. In fact, some children have said to me, “Oh, I can do that.” I consider that the highest compliment. I make my pictures out of hand-painted tissue papers that I paint with acrylics. Then I cut and tear these painted papers and glue them onto illustration board. My painted papers are like my palette. How about yourself?

Oliver Jeffers: The process for my art changes from book to book. Each book is slightly different in the making. Though generally I begin with a single idea, which usually comes from a drawing, and then tease that out in my sketchbook with hundreds of other drawings and pieces of writing that explore how the narrative can grow and extend into something that is satisfying. Getting the story to fit to the picture book length of 32 pages is probably the most difficult part. Once everyone is agreed on the layout, I make black and white line art of every illustration. I then work with a designer on laying out exactly where the text will go before I go to final art—where I lock myself in my studio for about six weeks, and just get stuck in. Something occurs in the momentum of making the art all in one go, that I enjoy. The materials I use change all the time, from all types of paint, to collage to digitally compositing.

Eric Carle: What inspired the story behind your newest book, *Up and Down*?

Oliver Jeffers: *Up and Down* is the direct sequel to *Lost and Found*. Originally I had not wanted to follow *Lost and Found* up with another book, but an idea grew up organically, four years after the original. Out of nowhere, an image of the Penguin attempting to fly occurred to me. I drew it in my sketchbook, and it wasn't very long before the story basically began to tell itself. That story is one where the penguin gets ideas above his station by becoming determined to fly by whatever means necessary, and the limits of a new friendship are put to the test.

I hear you have a new book coming out in the fall. Is there anything you can share with us about it?

Eric Carle: My new book, *The Artist Who Painted a Blue Horse*, was inspired by the Expressionist painter Franz Marc. In World War II Germany, my high school teacher Herr Krauss introduced me to abstract and Expressionist art during a time when works such as these had been banned. The so-called “degenerate art,” paintings of modern and expressionistic art my teacher showed me were unlike anything I had been exposed to before. I didn't know it at the time, but it was then that the idea for this new book originated inside me. I hope you will enjoy it. You also have a new book this fall. Can you tell us what we can look forward to in *Stuck*?

Oliver Jeffers: *Stuck*, my eighth picture book, is a simple and fun adventure about trying to creatively solve an accumulative problem. When Floyd gets his kite stuck in a tree, he attempts to solve the problem by throwing things at it, an action that generally solves most other problems. However, when these other objects also become lodged in the enigma of a tree that lives in his backyard, Floyd's problem spirals out of control until an unlikely conclusion unfolds. The story was inspired by real-life actual events when my wife got her kite stuck in a tree.