



Authorgraph interview Petr Horacek

Article Author:

[Carol Thompson](#) [1]

[201](#) [2]

Article Category:

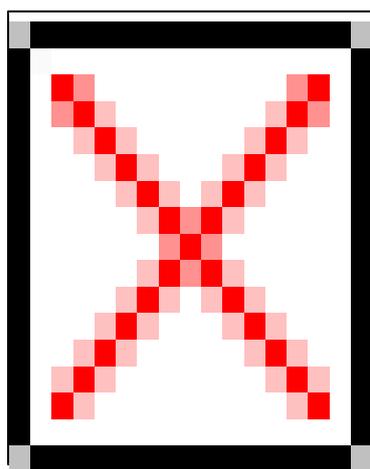
Authorgraph

Byline:

Authorgraph No. 201 illustrator **Petr Horacek** interviewed by **Carol Thompson**.

On the very hottest day of this year I walk slowly along a pretty Victorian terrace overlooking a park, the small front gardens in full flower and arrive at the home of Czech picture book artist Petr Horacek.

Petr lives in Worcester, moving there 19 years ago with Claire, a fine artist and musician.



When arranging our meeting Petr had prepared me for what to expect. ?It may be a little difficult ? I will be just back from London. The house is bursting with Czech visitors, there are preparations for a birthday party, and tomorrow we are all going on holiday together. Oh, and a displaced Baroque orchestra will arrive at some point to practice in the garden ??

We head through the house to the rear garden, sunlight beaming down from the high ceilings through unusually angled windows, a curved wall pierced by coloured glass, the kaleidoscopic effect of both Claire's and Petr's many beautiful paintings and collected treasures. It's a visual treat ? layers of colour, texture and light ? I am inside a Petr Horacek picturebook! Looking back from the garden he proudly describes how he and Claire designed the extension. Their combined creativity is clearly in evidence.

The doorbell rings and yes, the Baroque musicians have arrived. They file through to the garden carrying their instruments swaddled in colourful quilts and cloths.

Petr decides that it's probably a good time to retreat to his studio in the attic, at the top of a very narrow staircase (feet sideways only!).

He was born in Prague, Czechoslovakia in 1967 and describes the outside freedom of his city childhood with enthusiasm, ?.. there were woods just outside our flat, we built bunkers from abandoned builders' stuff, clambered over

soil piles - it was great!?

His decision to study art at the High School of Art in Prague was made unusually early at 15 years of age ?...but quite usual for my country. I had to choose my subject at the age of 14. I chose art. I always preferred looking at the pictures inside books rather than reading them. I would fill up my sketchbooks with images from films and stories. I was extremely lucky, it was a very special school and took only 25 students each year. I was there for 4 years studying absolutely everything you might think of to do with art. It was a good time for me?

He then made a couple of attempts to get into Design School ?They wouldn't take me. There was corruption during Communism and it was difficult for someone like me whose parents had no influence.?

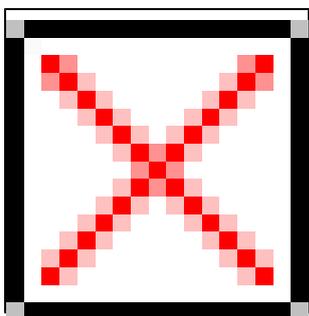
So for the next couple of years, from the age of 19, Petr worked in a state advertising agency and unexpectedly it inspired him. ?I learned a lot about myself from the experience ? not least my commitment to continue as an artist.? He was then accepted to study at the Academy of Fine Art and was there for six years. ?I was painting pictures as big as a double bed! We were driven into the countryside every Autumn and just left for weeks - or months! - to draw and paint the landscape. I still adore the autumn.?

In 1989 while Petr was studying at the Academy, came the Czech revolution, ?the students were on strike and we gained new studios and professors. It was a new and inspirational time?

Also new in Petr's life was Claire who came to Prague to study. They have been together ever since. Moving to England, he continued to paint his large abstract landscapes supplementing his income working as an art technician in a local school. It was here that he offered to illustrate a story written by a colleague ? about a mouse. He shows me the small dummy in a style that I wouldn't have recognised, ?You see, it's almost funny ? but it was a beginning. It went nowhere but I learned so much, and from this I thought Wow! I understand what I have to do ? I should take this more seriously.?

By now Petr's children were on the scene. He was inspired by their arrival, and by sharing their picturebooks. ?**The Very Hungry Caterpillar** was one of the first books given to my children. **Rosie's Walk** by Pat Hutchins is the perfect picture book to me ? pictures and text working beautifully together as a double act, each doing a different job. I love the way the child is in on the joke.?

At this time he wrote his first story, **The Fly**. Petr shows me the original dummy, small, but now in recognisable Horacek style. ?It was so freeing illustrating my own story - it changed my style completely?. Sending it off to publishers he was invited in by Walker Books who loved lots of things about it ? the way he painted the fruits, the colours ? but not the fly! ?Forget about the fly ? nobody likes flies! They only wanted the colours, the fruit??. So away with **The Fly** (for now) and in with **Strawberries are Red** and **What is Black and White**. Two inventive board books about colour ? shaped pages are cut narrower and narrower as you turn them building into a final surprise picture. He won **Best Newcomer 2001 Books for Children** and was on his way. More board books followed: **Honk Honk! Baa Baa!**, **Creepy Crawly, Choo, Choo, Beep, Beep**, but these weren't just a succession of colourful pictures, ?Board books take a special place in my work and are often the child's first contact with a form of visual art. Children deserve more and all of my books have holes, cut outs, shaped pages ? not everything works ? my drawers are full of ideas that haven't yet made it!?



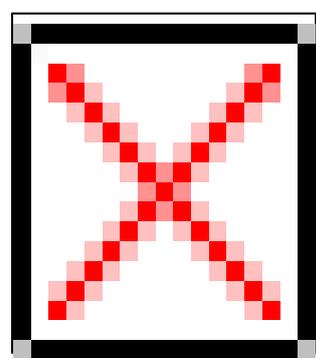
Looking at **Honk Honk! Baa Baa!**, the spare white text on the black backgrounds contrast with the brilliance of the painterly backgrounds onto which each animal has been collaged. There is graphite, wax resist, pastel, ink, acrylic - deliciously rich textures. The illustrations are small distillations of Petr's own large expressive abstract paintings. Importantly, they are clearly child-centred 'there's no room for artist's ego or for being 'arty'?', he laughs.

The book has a wonderfully tactile quality 'smooth board and colour as matt as a Farrow & Ball wall paint; small areas are highlighted with a perfectly placed shiny glaze; miniature works of art that sparkle and sing from the page.

We're sitting in Petr's attic studio either side of an empty large white worktable. In the garden the Baroque orchestra are strike up and music drifts in through the open roof light. It's surprisingly tidy 'no real clue as to his materials and techniques 'how does he paint those wonderfully rich, colour-saturated, textured illustrations? Digitally surely? He quickly pulls out painted and printed coloured sheets of paper, textures, polystyrene tiles, from various drawers and lays them on the table 'No, everything by hand 'I paint and print all my own backgrounds and textures - building up a library - and collage my illustrations together 'Look...? He shows me Lucy from **Butterfly Butterfly** - a painted die-cut figure in red spotted dress, her arms and head are separate. He carefully moves her head to a different angle. 'I can place the same figure onto different backgrounds and quickly change her pose with a slight movement of the head or limb, the process feels more expressive to me than making a new illustration each time.?

The textures he prints from polystyrene tiles 'scratching and cutting into the tile surface with leaf shapes, bark patterns, abstracts 'whatever he needs, layer upon layer. And it really is scissors, scalpel and glue. Usually onto a heavy Bockingford paper and when all is pasted in place he paints, scores and draws into the images with no particularly special paints or art material just whatever is to hand and will give the effect he's looking for. The resulting **Butterfly Butterfly** dazzles with its eye-popping colour. In the garden Lucy searches for her elusive butterfly moving through cut-outs, peep-through holes, encountering creatures that crawl slither, and spin until the final pop-up surprise.

On the cover of board book **Honk Honk! Baa Baa!** a small character waited in the wings for Petr to write her a story of her very own 'step forward Suzy Goose 'soon after to be the award winning book **Silly Suzy Goose**.



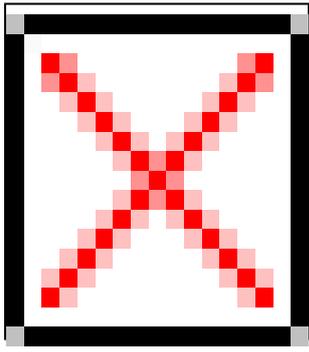
Centre stage in a picture book, Suzy Goose is tired of her goosiness and desires to be different . At the zoo, she waddles through a series of comical animal encounters, until she meets up with the mighty lion - RROARRR HONK! And flees back to the safety of her goose gang. There's a subtlety in the artwork, a shift from the bright painterly board books, the simply drawn pencil outline of the geese collaged in a greyish white against matt white backgrounds elegantly contrasting with the more recognisable Horacek textured animals. The eloquent body-language of geese and animals throughout the book is both funny and crazy. Petr generously credits his publishing team ,

'I'm lucky to work with designers, editors, paper engineers who are passionate about every single detail of the project 'we spend hours discussing ideas...?

The once empty table between us is now strewn with books of all sizes, sheets of textures, drawings, small scrapbooks, sketchbooks, children's drawings. A stray musician joins us briefly, looking for the computer?

I return to the subject of **The Fly** . 'Ah yes 'I finally published **The Fly** nearly ten years after I had first shown it to Walker Books. I really like it, everyone here loves it.?

A much maligned house fly buzzes hilariously through the book narrowly avoiding 'Swish!' and 'Swat!' all the way to the very last page when as the back cover begins to close, 'Hey! Help! Don't squash me!' It's funny and beautifully observed and I love it too. However, 'It's my only book that hasn't sold in the US. - sometimes your publishers are right...'



But the disappointment is quickly followed by the success of **Puffin Peter**, shortlisted for the **Kate Greenaway Medal** in 2012. 'It's strange, I worked on this book on and off over a period of time and felt I'd lost my way a bit, but people really seem to like it?'

It's an enchanting book that tells a simple story of best friends, puffins Peter and Paul. One day, Paul goes missing in a storm and, with the help of a whale, Peter travels to the ends of the Earth to find him. It has a bare-bones simplicity, no tricks, holes, wheels, or die-cutting and a more restricted palette with occasional clashes of acid yellow and chartreuse green. Layers of colour and texture underpin the poignant tale of Paul's loss. The thick cut paper edges of the collaged whale are left bare - dense and heavy against the thin watery transparent washes of the sea - the whole a visual adventure in movement and light, tenderly drawn and beautifully produced.

What next for Petr Horacek? Apart from having completed a full set of illustrations for **Treasure Island**, lunch for the Baroque orchestra, preparing for the birthday party, and a family holiday the following day, he's planning a special trip. 'I haven't done this before but I have a small bag packed and have bought a plane ticket to the Czech republic. I'm planning to go away on my own for two weeks, into a small house in the middle of a wood. I will write and hope to come back with maybe not a whole story, but lots of new ideas.'

Back home I think about Petr in the middle of that wood and recall his account of his student life, being left for weeks in woodland to draw and paint and make, and of how much he'd loved it. I can't wait to see his new ideas.

Carol Thompson ?

The Fly, Walker Books, 32pp, 978-1406330731, £5.99 pbk

Choo Choo, Walker Books, 16pp, 978-1406325065 £4.99

Beep Beep, Walker Books, 16pp, 978-1406325058 £4.99

Strawberries are Red, Walker Books, 16pp, 978-1406325102, £4.99

Puffin Peter, Walker Books, 40pp, 978-1406337761, £5.99 pbk

Silly Suzy Goose, Walker Books, 40pp, 978-1406304589, £5.99 pbk

Honk, Honk! Baa, Baa!, Walker Books, 16pp, 978-1406343755, £4.99 board

Creepy Crawly Walker Books, 16pp, 978-1406329674, £4.99 board

Butterfly Butterfly Walker Books, 32pp, 978-1406340068, £6.99 pbk

Source URL (retrieved on *Jun '20*): <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk-www.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/201/childrens-books/articles/authorgraph/authorgraph-interview-petr-horacek>

Links:

[1] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk-www.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/carol-thompson>

[2] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk-www.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/201>