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**Quentin Blake**

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Page 2: Quentin Blake leaning over the hoardings  
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# *Onto the Wall*

In 2001 I put my name to a book called *Words and Pictures*. The illustrations in it were all examples of my work over the previous fifty years. However, they were not arranged chronologically; I used them to accompany a sequence of observations about various aspects of illustration as I had experienced it, particularly in books: of different techniques of drawing; of the choice and distribution of illustration through a text; of the adaptation of style to the mood of an individual text; the interpretation of characters; the sequence of pages; the use of colour, and so on.

This book is not that sort of survey. It is concerned most of the time with the work that I have carried out (with a few backward glances) since the publication of that earlier book in 2000. It includes work from books, magazines and other similar publications, but its main interest for me, and I hope for the reader, is the move on to the walls of galleries, museums, hospitals and other public spaces.

The simplest way for an illustration to get on to a wall, of course, is for it to be framed and put it into an exhibition. This is what has been happening too many of my illustrations over the past fifteen years or so at the Chris Beetles Gallery in Ryder Street, St James's. I can remember how I first came to find myself there. Roald Dahl's book of reminiscences, *My Year*, needed a different kind of illustration from anything else I had done for his works. Originally written as a series of introductions to the months of the year, in the *Roald Dahl Diary*, these essays about life in the country were subsequently brought together as a book. No call for the familiar caricature or exaggeration here; what was needed was a series of atmospheric pictures that might almost suggest that they were done in front of the subject itself. In finding the suitable views and moments, establishing the right mood of observation and reminiscence, I did many more pictures









*Cover illustration for 'Quentin Blake's ABC'*



than were needed – sometimes several on the same theme. As I had been involved with the Roald Dahl Foundation since its inception, I thought it might be useful to sell these extra works to benefit that charity and so I found myself in the gallery talking to Chris Beetles himself. He immediately accepted the notion but went on to suggest that I might like to extend the venture to include some of my other works for my own benefit. But how many works would he need? ‘About a hundred and fifty.’

Initially I found it hard to regard it as a possibility, but I delved in portfolios and plan-chest drawers until I had amassed a sufficient number of items for a show. I have better information for a subsequent show in 1996, and the substantial catalogue which Chris Beetles produced for the occasion is in front of me now. I can see, turning the pages, that by far the majority of illustrations are alternative versions of pictures which appear in published books. I see also that in a couple of introductory pages I explained how that came about. Unpublished drawings are in effect of two kinds: demonstrable failures, often only a quarter advanced, which go into the wastepaper basket; and works that might be thought of as contenders. When one version is finished, even one that would perfectly well pass muster, I may set about another in the hope of drawing the thing with more panache, or coming upon some minor felicity. Sometimes this works; sometimes the second version tells me what was right about the first. None of this is a matter of policy – it is instinctive and it would take an effort of will not to do it. It incidentally and conveniently supplies work for sale in exhibitions, and it is clear from the 1996 catalogue that most of the works are of this kind or (another consideration) of suitable quality but which didn’t fit into the final layout of the book. And just from time to time seeing an illustration on the gallery wall I have had the suspicion: ‘Did I choose the right one?’





A diagrammatic example is the drawing for the cover of *Quentin Blake's ABC* with its group of rollerskaters, the alternative version of which appeared in the cover of Chris Beetles's catalogue, and you can decide for yourself if I made the right choice.

All these closely book-related drawings were joined by others produced in the studio as small explorations with no particular end in view beyond a general sense that they might appear in an exhibition one day if I liked them enough. Here, for instance, are 'magic pencil' drawings of girls with potted plants, and other energetic young women with their dogs.

But perhaps the most clear-cut demonstration of this effect has just occurred, a week or two before I write these words. As part of a general reissue of picturebooks that I published in the 1970s and 1980s, there was a call from the publishers for scans of the originals of *Jack and Nancy*. We have all of them except, somehow or other, the artwork for the cover itself, which had obviously gone astray before our present system of archiving had been put in place. However, I happened to be able to put my hand on a black-and-white version, which I suppose I had thought better of and not taken into colour at the time, and it solved the problem. So the cover illustration of *Jack and Nancy* now on sale was drawn in 1970 and coloured in 2011, and is almost, I think, indistinguishable from the first.

The Chris Beetles exhibitions have continued, I am pleased to say, as part of his annual major illustration show, but the possibilities of walls were significantly extended by two retrospective shows, one following hard on the heels of the other. The first, *Quentin Blake: Fifty Years of Illustration* (of course, it doesn't seem as long as that) took place in Somerset House in the temporary exhibition spaces of what was then the Gilbert Collection. The visitor entered between





two hangings, enlargements of two facing pages of a book; and among the framed works on show was a black-and-white drawing converted into a mural by being enlarged and transferred to a white wall by the skill of a professional signwriter – a technique that came in very useful later at the Unicorn Theatre.

The exhibition had a second outing, to Aberdeen Art Gallery. The content was as before, though in an arrangement adapted to the gallery spaces. What was striking for me was the level of enthusiasm shown for the event. I confess that to go on the first day and find a red flag bearing my signature flying over the façade of the building was an encouraging start. The plan was also that for the first hour or so I should wander at will through the exhibition, after which I would be available to sign books. However, even before the doors were open the guardians of the front of house were upon us exclaiming that there were already crowds waiting to get in, with the result that I started to sign immediately and went on non-stop till lunchtime. I was taken out then for some relaxed refreshment within sight of the sea, with the reassurance that things would have quietened down by the afternoon. When we returned, however, a handful of minutes late, we found facing us a queue of young and old bearing books and reaching right round the gallery. They *applauded*. I signed for the rest of the afternoon.

The second exhibition was at Dulwich Picture Gallery and to distinguish it from the earlier one and to acknowledge the season it was called *Quentin Blake at Christmas*. I felt I was fortunate on a number of scores, Dulwich being in itself such an interesting gallery and having such an enterprising programme of exhibitions, and that I should follow on from shows of the likes of Arthur Rackham and Beatrix Potter.