



# Windows into Illustration: Eric Hill

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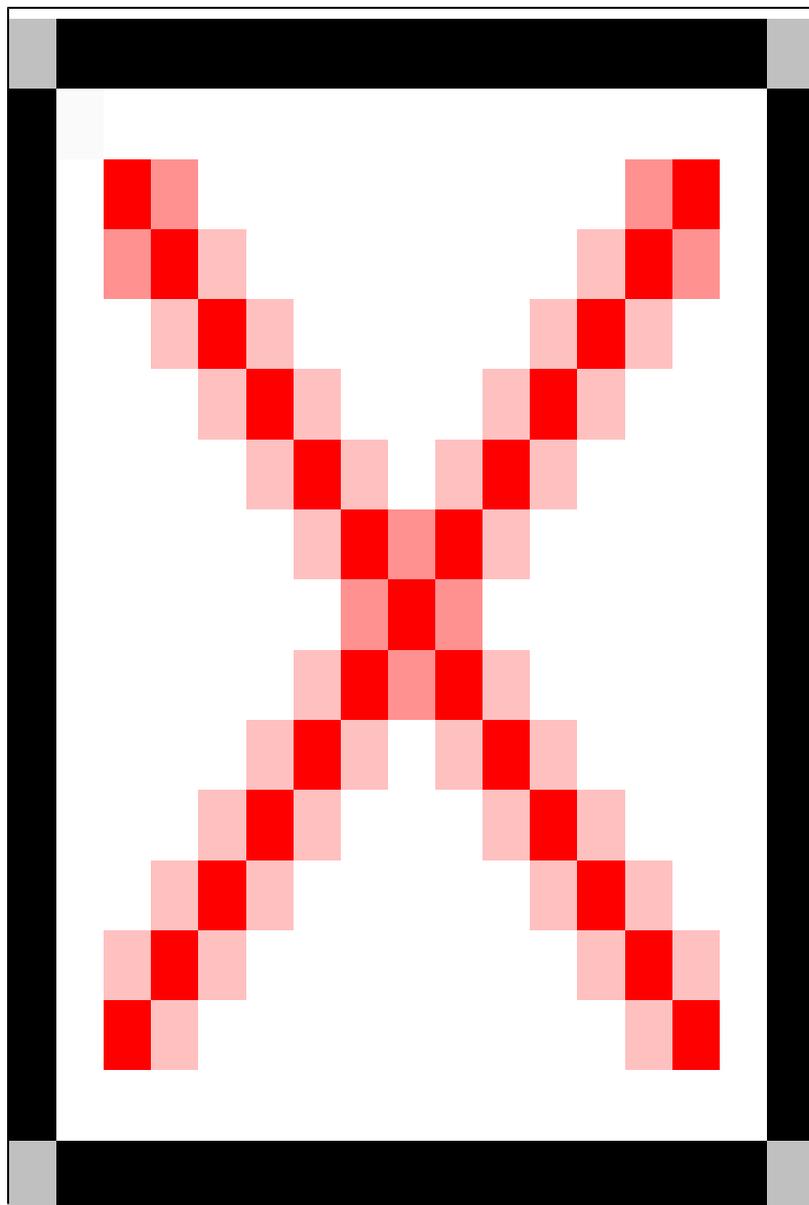
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Windows into Illustration

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**Eric Hill** on his now classic title, **Where's Spot?**



This year sees the 30th anniversary of the publication of

**Where's Spot?**, Eric Hill's innovative lift-the-flap book for very young children. With its white backgrounds against which objects are clearly delineated, large typeface and interactive story, Eric Hill's distinctively minimalist style in which each element is perfectly integrated perhaps owes something to his background as a graphic designer. Here **Eric Hill** explains the genesis of **Where's Spot?** and discusses his technique and approach.

I was lucky. I worked at home as a freelance illustrator and my two-year-old son, Christopher, was a constant visitor to my studio. One day, I showed him some funny drawings I had made using a flap format for an advertising job I was working on. He laughed and that got me thinking.

I must explain that at the time, over 30 years ago, the publishing term 'lift the flap' was not in use, or even known. My idea was to make an amusing story using flaps that I could read to Chris at bedtime. I had no intention to take it any further - it was a game, if you like, played between father and son. I shared the story hour with Chris and my wife Gillian, who was delighted that I had found such a riveting tale to keep Chris happy. So I developed a storyline for using the flaps but first I should explain what was involved.

My idea was to add another dimension to the printed page by attaching a hinged flap that could be lifted to reveal a picture underneath. This obviously presented a problem for the printer because the flap needed to be applied by hand to the printed page. But as I had no plans to publish my story, it wasn't a problem. I just drew out the pages and stuck the cut-out flap onto the page. Voila! The saga of how the book got to be published is another story, and again, luck played its part in no small way. I decided to base my story on a hide-and-seek theme using the flaps to provide humour whilst taking the story to a happy conclusion.

### **No clutter**

I've always had dogs in the family so it was natural for me to choose a canine character for the book. This is where my drawing style came into play. I draw very simple images in clean, bright colours and this enables me to work in a decorative way without clutter and fussiness. This was particularly appropriate for a picture book for children.

Gradually, the form and appearance of the book took shape. By having Spot hide from his mum throughout the house, I could indulge myself in upgrading the appearance of household objects and furniture. I was really having fun. How about a pink piano? How about a nice decorative grandfather clock and a period style chair? How about a crocodile hiding under an overly plumped-up bed? I imagined the owners of the house to be rather eccentric and although never seen (there are no humans in Spot books) their presence should be felt.

### **A surprise under the flap**

The fun was to spring a surprise whenever the flap was lifted. And the ending came after a little visual joke - drawing a hump under the carpet - and so little Spot not only finished the game but also his dinner. Every page, every detail was a joy to do.

Of course, now, lift-the-flap books are common but my drawing style and approach do, I hope, remain individually recognised as does the use of large black type plus lots of white space with the text pared down to a minimum of words. This, incidentally, caused the book to be popular on two fronts - schools found it a key learning tool for teaching children to read, and the simplicity of the story coupled with the white space enabled many foreign publishers to add Spot to their lists. Spot books now are available in over 60 languages and dialects.

The text was very much part of my reading to Chris, as I was aware of the lengthy stories I had been reading to him each night and was determined to keep to a minimum the length and content of the Spot story. A simple question and answer approach seemed to fit in with the style of the visuals. Having the various animals under the flaps shout out a loud 'No?' provided an unexpected effect which apparently caused many children to learn their first spoken word! Fortunately, this singular benefit was quickly overtaken by many schools worldwide using Spot as a regular teaching aid for first readers.

**Where's Spot?** and other Spot titles are published by Warne in hardback and by Puffin in paperback.

Spot is now a global publishing phenomenon with over 50 million copies sold throughout 100 countries and in 60 languages. In 2009 Eric Hill was awarded an OBE for services to Children's Literature.

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