



# AN INTERVIEW WITH THE 2017 KATE GREENAWAY MEDAL WINNER LANE SMITH

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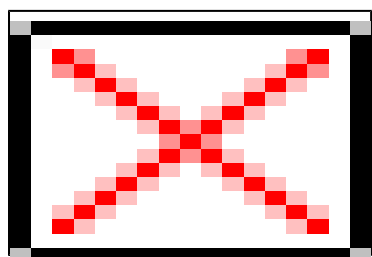
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Exclusive **Books for Keeps** interview



57-year-old Lane Smith, acclaimed US artist and author, is the winner of the **2017 CILIP Kate Greenaway Medal** for his illustrations in [There is a Tribe of Kids](#) [3] (Two Hoots), a picture book exploring the power of collective nouns and the importance of play and exploration. In his speech, Smith credited leading British illustrators, including Brian Wildsmith, Quentin Blake and Helen Oxenbury as his inspiration as a young illustrator starting out. **Clive Barnes** interviewed Lane about his win for **Books for Keeps**.

**Congratulations on winning the Kate Greenaway. You've won one or two awards in the USA already. You were named an Eric Carle Honor Artist in 2012 and in 2014 you received the Society of Illustrators Lifetime Achievement award. What does winning the Greenaway mean to you?**

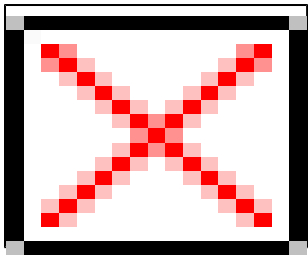
It means so much to win this. Thinking back, many, many of my illustration influences were from the UK so to win this is a real thrill.

**Congratulations, too, on *There Is a Tribe of Kids* itself. Such a joyous, funny, playful and even profound book. Where did the idea come from?**

Thank you. I wanted to do a multi-panelled book, I wanted to do a journey story and I wanted to do something with animal groups. It just all came together in one book.

**How did you get started as an illustrator of children's books? Was it something you wanted to do from a young age?**

I always doodled and thought maybe one day I would grow up to be a balloonist. No, that's not right. I thought I would grow up



be a cartoonist. Yes, that's it. But about midway through college I discovered the world of children's books and knew I had found my calling. I spent my early years in New York City working as a freelance editorial illustrator for magazines like **Rolling Stone**, **Time**, **Sports Illustrated**, etc. illustrating stories on the economy and pollution and other very adult topics when all I really wanted to be drawing were ducks and gingerbread men. Then one day I got my first children's book published (**Halloween ABC**, 1987). I couldn't believe it.

**Until recently, you were probably best-known in the UK for your illustrations to Jon Scieszka's *Stinky Cheese Man* and the *True Story of the Three Little Pigs*, which came early in your career. You went on to do other books with Jon. How did the association come about and is he a writer with whom you have a particular affinity?**

My wife introduced us. Jon was trying, unsuccessfully, to break into kid's books and I had a couple of books out by then, so had my foot in the door. Molly said, "You should read my friend Jon's stories." I thought, uh-oh. Whenever you hear that your dentist or second cousin has written a children's story it's usually pretty wonky but Jon's stuff was really funny and unusual. I instantly said, "Yes!" and started shopping his stories around to publishers. It took me a while but I eventually got them published.

**It seems to me that Jon set you some very tough assignments as an illustrator. I'm thinking of *Maths Curse* and *Science Verse* in particular. What did you think of his texts for those when you first saw them?**

Even though my father was an accountant I was NOT a maths fan. But once I decided **Maths Curse** could be illustrated like an actual curse I was on my way. I made it very wacky. I like science MUCH better than maths so that one was fun from the get-go. And my wife Molly did an innovative design on both, so that helped a lot.

**You write and illustrate your own books and also illustrate other writer's books, including titles by Roald Dahl and Florence Parry Heide. How do you balance these two aspects of your career and what different demands do these two kinds of work make on you as an illustrator? Do they provide different types of challenges and achievements?**

It's fun to interpret other writers' works. It takes me back to my days as a freelance illustrator. It's all about solving problems visually. Florence had been a pen-pal of mine for many, many years so it was great to finally illustrate something by her and I had designed the characters for the feature film of **James and the Giant Peach** so when Roald's wife Licky asked if I would like to re-illustrate the original novel I did not need to be asked twice. It was always a favourite of mine.

But illustrating my own work is obviously the most fulfilling because you are like the director of your own movie: you cast it, art direct it, write it, create the worlds and characters. It's really fun.

**How did you feel when you were asked to work with Jack Prelutsky to complete the illustrations to Dr Seuss's last, uncompleted title, *Hooray for Diffendoofer Day*? Was that an intimidating prospect**

Well, Jack finished the text, I did the illustrations. It was very daunting. But once I seized on the idea to add collages of Seuss's work into my own work? to basically do hybrid Seuss/Smith illustrations ? it all clicked.

**You work closely with the book designer, Molly Leach, who is also your wife. I know Molly was responsible for the ground-breaking design of *Stinky Cheese Man***

**. Can you say something about Molly's contribution to your work and how you work together?**

I don't make a move without Molly. Her name really should be on the covers of my books, she's too modest for that, but really it is a very back-and-forth collaboration on everything we do. I do pencils and she designs the type. Then I start giving her finished artwork and she might say, "If you move this character over here then I can make the type really big here?" that kind of thing. She has designed every book I have ever illustrated but has also designed the **Dahl** library, **A Wrinkle in Time** and many other classics by much bigger writers than me.

**I really loved the latest of your books that I have read, [A Perfect Day](#) [4]**

**. Such a quiet understated atmospheric book (well, not counting the bear). Gently funny, and not as zany spiky or edgy as your early work maybe, but still with that touch of anarchy. Looking back over your career, would you say that the types of story or styles of illustration that interest you have changed in that time?**

When I first started out, many years ago, I was doing punk and new wave album covers and working for those same kinds of edgy magazines. These were the only places that wanted my "weird" work. And even though **The Stinky Cheese Man** and **The Happy Hocky Family** are a little edgy and stylized I was still just as influenced by the crazy gesso work in a Brian Wildsmith book about birds or fish or a gentle book by John Burningham that still had wild ink splatters in the background. You mentioned **A Perfect Day**. That book was VERY influenced by Wildsmith.

**How do you do that stippling effect that you use a lot in your recent books (and with particular virtuosity in *There Is a Tribe of Kids*)? Was it a technique you came across by chance?**

It's a variation of the technique I have used since the mid-1980s. Whether it's **Tribe of Kids** or [Grandpa Green](#) [5] or **It's a Book**? It is layer after thin layer of oil paints, sprayed with a water-based varnish and blown dry with a hair dryer while the paint and varnish are still wet. The oil and varnish react to one another, separate, and dry as sponge-like, stippled, textures.

**Which illustrators, living or dead, do you especially admire?**

Alice and Martin Provensen, Anthony Browne, Lucy Cousins, Maurice Sendak, Charles Schulz, Brian Wildsmith, Raymond Briggs, Mini Grey, Edward Gorey, Ralph Steadman, Lawrence Weisgard, Remy Charlip? so many. Then there are the fine artists: Klee, Dubuffet, Calder, Hopper, Gorky?

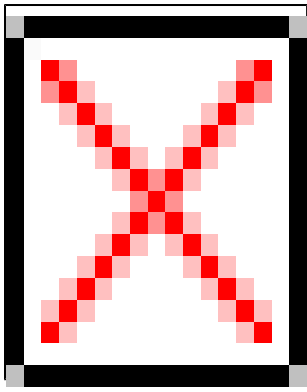
**It's *A Book* is one of the greatest and funniest pieces of advocacy for the book. This must be something you feel strongly about. What do you feel is important about the picture book in particular: as art and literature, and in children's lives?**

Thank you. Actually, I feel whatever delivery system children or grown-ups are getting their books from is fine. But for me, there is nothing like an actual book. The type design, the tooth of the paper, the smell, the binding, the embossed cover, the matte or gloss design elements. It's just such a great object of art.

**I know you're a great collector of early American picture books, and *The Happy Hocky Family* is both a parody of a beginner reader from the 30s or 40s and a kind of homage, even to the point of using the colour separation printing that was used then. Can you tell us something about your passion for earlier forms of the picture book and how it feeds into your work?**

**The Happy Hocky Family** books were an homage in particular to the books of Munro Leaf. I just love the way those early, simple books look. I like the minimal colours that the paper drinks up and I love when a plate shifts and the colours get a little off register. It's all got a very handmade feel that I respond to.

**Here's a question kids like to ask: do you have a favourite among your own books? Which one would you like us to read if we haven't already?**



I feel like my best illustrations appear in [A Perfect Day](#) [4]. I am very proud of the technique in that book: expressionistic brushstrokes rendered in gesso and ink. And I like the deceptively simple story too. And as you said earlier, it's still got a touch of the anarchic. My other favourite book is a young adult novel I wrote called **Return to Augie Hobbie**. It is very autobiographical. It is my childhood in a nutshell. Plus, the story has a really neat mystery.

**It's rumoured that you have a box containing a very large item of red underwear that is connected to your sideways introduction to important figures of the American Revolution, John, Paul, George and Ben. Can you explain?**

Ha-ha! I feel very uncomfortable speaking in front of crowds, so when that book came out and I had to speak to kids I would read them the Paul Revere story that features very large underwear. After, I showed them a dusty old box and told the kids that it was discovered in an old New England cottage that Paul Revere once lived in. Then I cracked open the lock and pulled out a pair of six-foot-long red underwear. It always got a laugh. A cheap laugh, but a laugh. And the red underwear deflected the attention away from my red face.

**And here's the last one: what are your ambitions for the future? Can you give us any hint of what we can look forward to from Lane Smith next?**

I am working on some new young adult novels. I am also doing very big paintings on canvas that no one will ever see. It is relaxing after a day of painting books to put down my brush, pick up a slightly bigger one, and begin painting again!

**And, last of all, congratulations again, and best wishes from Books for Keeps and the UK.**

Thank you so much. I am humbled and delighted. Mostly delighted. Okay, humbled somewhat. But really, really delighted!

**Clive Barnes** has retired from Southampton City where he was Principal Children's Librarian and is now a freelance researcher and writer.

**[There is a Tribe of Kids](#)** [3] is published by Two Hoots, £6.99 pbk

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