

{PROFILE}

Mitch Vane



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I love the looseness of Mitch's work - indian ink and watercolours, as well as more textured paintings. Her work oozes humour and expression, which is a perfect match for children's books. Mitch shares a deeper look at her work, studio, books and great deal of industry experience.

Outline: As an experienced children's book illustrator we'd love to hear how you made your first inroads into the industry, and some favourite projects from your career so far.

Mitch: I didn't really get into Children's Book illustration until my early thirties - up until that point I think I'd had a go at just about every type of illustration job there is . When I left school I did a 3 year graphic design course at RMIT and at the time I thought I wanted to be an art director so this led me straight into advertising agencies working as a Visualiser (or 'wrist') So I spent years doing storyboards and layouts , handling long hours and killer deadlines , which was fun for a while but eventually I was feeling burnt out and wondering why I was using all my creativity on work that had the lifespan of a boardroom meeting.

I made the transition to full time illustrator while I was living in London and came back to Oz with a fresh attitude towards what direction I wanted to take - I spent hours building up a folio of the kind of work I enjoyed doing -then literally made calls and knocked on doors and lugged my folio around (there was no internet in those days!) until slowly I started getting some really great jobs. Some really weird ones too, but as a freelancer, it's hard to say no to work. I would convince myself that I could make incontinence pads look really cool with my 'out there' illustrative style.

I still remember my first Children's book - it was a dream job. Reed Publishing commissioned me to illustrate a gorgeous story about a cheeky dog called Mab. I had no restrictions other than the format of the book - compared to advertising, the deadlines went forever, and I got to meet & work with the author (Jutta Goetze) We had lots of

lunches and I even went to her house and met the real dog Mab

I was slowly shedding my old visualising habits and discovered a freshness and simplicity in my work and because I had a good rapport with both the publisher and the author, the illustrations came easily and I ended up doing two more books in the series. Obviously not every job has been that easy, and sometimes I don't even get to meet the author of the books I illustrate and only have an email relationship with the publisher , but illustrating *My Dog Mab* marks the time when I fell in love with the whole process of creating characters and telling stories. It put meaning into my work. Oh and of course there was the total buzz of seeing my work as a printed book for the first time (- actually, I'll NEVER get tired of that.)

Outline: What materials do you like to use for your illustrations? Do these change according to projects/ book theme?

Mitch: Most of my book illustrations are done with watercolour and dip pen and Indian ink- occasionally I'll use a pencil outline, but I really love the energy of the scratchy pen line and the medium seems to suit the humorous nature of my work. It's always a little dangerous and unpredictable - but the accidental nature of the medium keeps the work fresh.

I have mastered the art of cleaning up ink splots and the white out pen is the best invention EVER! I also love acrylic paint and I use that for editorial work or for my own painting projects, but it seems to flatten out my images if I use it for book illustrations.

Outline: Do you find now with your experience you still need to "knock on the door" of publishing houses, or do they get in touch directly now when the project is a good fit?

Mitch: A lot of publishers are familiar with my style now and keep me in mind for projects that might suit - usually stories with a humorous bent . But that doesn't mean I've stopped knocking on doors - I think it's important to keep a public profile, more so now than ever before . There is just so much good work out there competing for attention and so many more clever ways of getting that attention. Everyone is looking for the next best thing , something new, something groovy- so I think it's important to keep fresh





and always a little hungry. It's particularly important to have a presence online - the IA & Books Illustrated network is invaluable, & I pick up a bit of new work through my website .

Outline: We all know that the publishing industry has gone through some major changes over the past decade. Have you noticed any changes for children's books or the editorial/illustration process, or do you think these changes are mainly limited to adult/non fiction etc books?

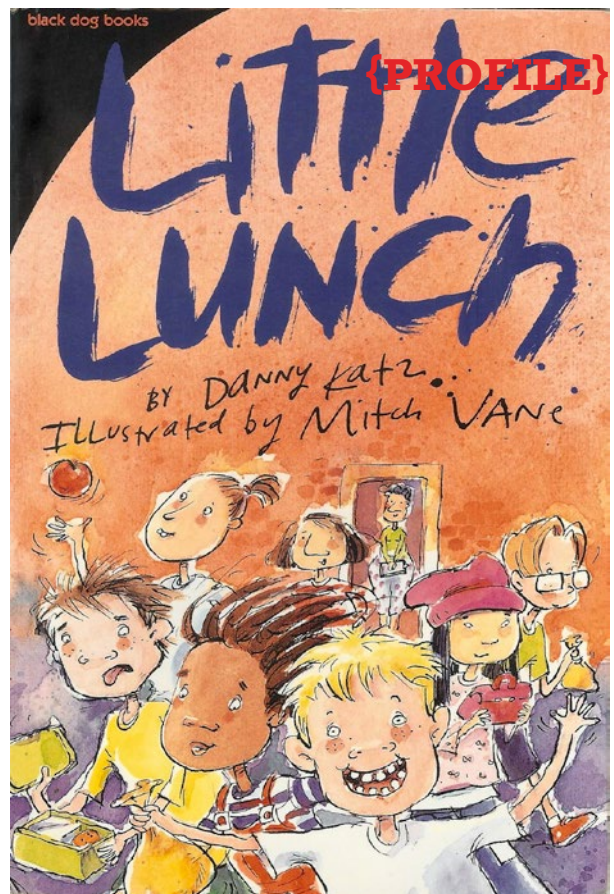
Mitch: To be honest, I haven't been too affected by changes in the industry. Perhaps there is a little less of the bread and butter stuff going around, but generally it's business as usual. I feel the industry is in transition - but still incredibly healthy. Budgets are shrinking so I get very few newsprint commissions these days, but I feel the children's book industry is alive and kicking - shifting a little to allow for the e-book & online competition - but still producing a steady stream of exciting books and beautiful images. People will always want to buy children's books. I think the biggest change for me as an artist is how quickly everything can be produced now - I honed my drawing skills in the hard copy years. It was a slower process - there was a lot more time allotted to complete work and all I needed to supply was the artwork itself. Now everything can be emailed, jpeg'd, photoshopped, downloaded , formatted - and the illustrator's skills have broadened to

suit the bottomless pith of creative possibilities that computers have to offer.

As an (almost) complete luddite, I am feeling the pressure of keeping up with the technology -especially supplying artwork files, or even just maintaining my own website . As much as I am totally enthralled by the medium and the great new wave of computer generated artwork, I just can't bring myself to spend hours in front of a screen to learn those skills -It just doesn't do it for me. I love shuffling paper around, rubbing things out, smelling the paint, getting my hands dirty - and there are enough artists out there that can do that work so much better than me.

Outline: You've partnered up with your real life partner for several of your children's books. Could you tell us about the process and benefits - as well as difficulties? Does it make the writing/illustration process easier for either of you?

Mitch: Working with your partner has it's obvious drawbacks - including overkill - so we have worked out a good system over the years where we will sit and brainstorm ideas then go off and do our own thing separately. I have an outdoor studio and we don't do lunch, or make each other tea, so we can go hours without seeing each other. I'll show him my first round of page roughs and he will always come up with clever ideas to make an image



funny, or give it an extra twist. I edit almost all of Danny's work, including his *Modern Guru* and humour columns in *The Age* (cheap bloody labour if you ask me!)

**The Little Lunch* series is up there as my all time fave. It marks the beginning of Danny and I working together as a team and is a personal career highlight. (And Maryann Ballantyne, who was responsible for commissioning my first children's book, was involved in us creating this series well!). Black Dog Books gave us the ideal brief i.e. - they were totally open to whatever we came up with. We were right in the primary school children zone at the time so the stories Danny wrote just fell out of him. There is so much of our children and their friends and the many small but important moments in their school lives in his stories. *The Little Lunch* characters I drew are a hybrid mix of all the kids we knew at their primary school. I spent so many hours in the school yard before and after school that I had built up this library of characters in my head - the things that make them unique, their hairstyles, wonky teeth, their body language - so it was a very spontaneous and natural process for me. Black Dog were happy to let me scratch out the drawings and then fit the text around them which was a completely liberating way to work .

**Little Lunch* has been picked up by Gristmill (creators of *The Librarians*, *Very Small Business/Upper Middle Bogan*) and they are currently working on 26 short episodes of *Little Lunch* stories in a mockumentary type format to be shown on the ABC in 2015. Working on the pilot episode and seeing our characters literally come to life has been an incredibly experience and a huge learning curve

Outline: We'd love to hear about school and library visits.

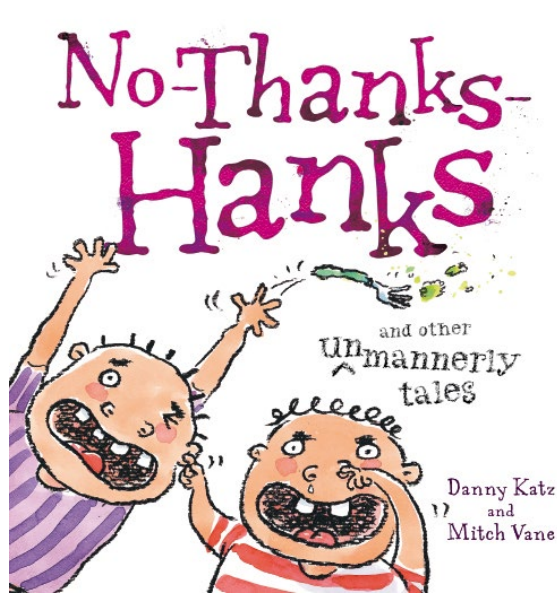
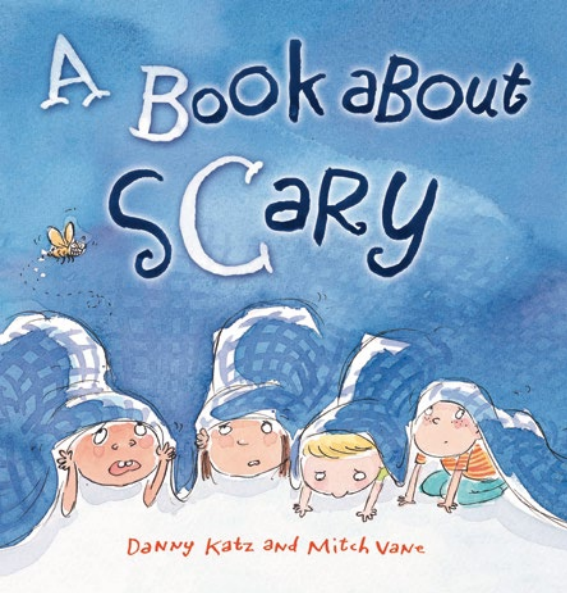
How to kids respond to your work?

Mitch: I still get completely terrified just before I do a school or a library gig, but I know that as soon as the kids pile in with their laughter and questions and energy, all will all be ok. Through many trials and many errors I have learned how to navigate big groups and made a few rules

1. Always allow half an hour more than you need to get to the venue - arriving hot and stressed and sweaty is not a good look
- 2: Not to do any groups older than Grade 6 (I have two teenagers at home, I don't have to deal with a room full of them)
- 3: Not to blather on too long - just get them started on drawing as soon as possible
- 4: Make sure the kids draw with black markers, not pencil, or they will spend the whole hour rubbing out their drawings.

Oh and 4: Don't agree to sign any scraps of paper unless you are prepared to sit there and do 50 of them.

The kids love it when I draw on the whiteboard and show them some little tricks on how to make a face funny, or create an expression or make something look like it's moving. My favourite thing is when we draw a funny character together and I get them to choose the details -*what kind of hair?* *is it a human?* *Short?* *does it have a pet ?* *Is it happy?* , *sad?* , *insaaaaaane?* , and *what is going on in the picture?* The group always gets so excited , and usually loud, and they throw me some really difficult things to draw.



But even if I draw it badly, it helps me explain the process of creating characters and that sometimes the best drawings come out of mistakes.

Mistakes are good.

Outline: You've mentioned in interviews that you draw inspiration from your children. Could you share with us some examples, and any other inspiration sources you turn to? It would be great to hear any other resources or inspiring websites/galleries you refer to for your work.

Mitch: I am a real people watcher and I am constantly storing away ideas in my head for later use. I love my phone camera - it has so much random stuff on it that I think I might find useful one day. I am currently using shots I took of my friend's kelpie for a book I am working on at the moment. I have an inspiration wall in my studio with clippings and postcards and scribbled ideas which is constantly changing -

Google is amazing. I used to lose hours in the library trying to find reference of some obscure insect or medieval costume or whatever I was drawing - now the computer does it for me in 5 seconds.

It is also great for dipping into that great worldwide pool of creativity when I am beginning a painting and I need a bit of a creative leg up - bit like a caffeine hit. I find it difficult to make that transition from drawing children's books to doing my own painting projects so I sometimes spend a day just easing into a painters mindset by trawling the art sites online, or going to a few galleries. Flinders Lane, The NGV and the Ian Potter centre are always good for a visit. Illustration - wise I always keep an eye on what groups like Lamington Drive are up to and often browse through the IA and SOBi and overseas illustration group files. I put work into at least 1 or 2 group exhibitions during the year to keep me creating new stuff, and I love the artist's community that is constantly growing on Facebook. I have just got involved with a great new project set up by Tania McCartney <https://www.facebook.com/groups/418616991575037/> which encourages artists to submit illustrations based on a different themes supplied each week. Any excuse to keep drawing.

Seriously, it's the best job in the world, and I hope to be

doing it until I'm eighty - even if my hands gave out I'd probably keep painting with a brush in my mouth.

My list of inspiration sources is endless so these are a few recent finds and a few perennial favourites

<http://www.ralphsteadman.com/>
 Joff Winterhart - (Days of the Bagnold Summer is sublime)
<http://www.vladimirradunsky.com/>
<http://jonklassen.tumblr.com/>
 (Have a look at The Dark by Lemony Snicket)
<http://serco-story.theglobalmail.org/>
<http://www.stephenbird.net>
<http://www.gemmacorrell.com/>
<http://www.rexray.com/>
<http://www.fecalface.com/SF/>
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