

The Perfect Leaf

Teacher's Notes

This book was inspired by watching my then 3-year-old daughter playing in autumn leaves in Daylesford, in central Victoria. She'd met another little girl at a cafe, and they amused themselves for an hour or more outside under the trees while we chatted to the girl's parents over coffee. When they left, I asked my daughter what was her friend's name. 'I don't know.' She shrugged as she ran off to find more leaves. I wrote the first draft a couple of days later.

As the book goes to print, my daughter is now ten. This book took a *long* time. Not because it was particularly difficult, or because I couldn't find a publisher. Ford Street was the first publisher I ever showed it to, and they took it straight away. It took so long because I didn't show it to anyone for six years, which pretty much guaranteed that it wouldn't be published!

Why? To be honest, I started working on other ideas, and it just fell along the wayside. I lost interest in it, I guess. As time passed, since I wasn't thinking about it, I didn't develop any picture in my mind of its 'look', and as an illustrator, that's what keeps me working on a story. It languished, a forgotten leaf swept into a corner, until added to the end of an email about some other books. Presto!

As so often happens (at least to me, but I'm sure to other authors too) other people saw things in the story that I didn't. Having two great editors helped. Even though some things went full circle and ended up back where we started, the process helped refine and tighten the text. When there are only 293 words, each one had better be good!

One aspect of the story in particular jumped around a lot. In the first draft, the girls were anonymous, no names. They didn't know each other's names, and neither did we. That had really struck me all those years ago – kids just don't care about names. However, it made the text clumsy: 'the girl', 'the new/other girl', 'her new friend'. So it was decided names were needed. How, then, to introduce them? It was suggested that the girls could say their names, introduce themselves. I never really liked it, as we were losing that special aspect that I so remembered, but it sort of worked. Then it was pointed out that those two sentences were the only conversation in the story, and stuck out as such. It sounded too obvious – look everybody, we're introducing the characters on this page! So the conversations were dropped, and the names just used, and that worked. Then it was pointed out that now it sounded like the girls already knew each other, which I didn't want, so 'new friends' was added, and then Well, you get the picture. We went from no conversations to conversations and then back again, each time fiddling and changing other words. Sometimes it felt like we'd never get it right. Who knew writing children's books was so hard (!)

One important aspect of picture books that is often overlooked is that the pictures can tell the story – without the words. Authors think in terms of words, of course. As an author/illustrator, though, I was thinking of when I could get away without any words, and let the pictures do the work. Words are totally redundant at the end. In fact, they would probably wreck it. Some things are just beyond words – at least, ones that I can write.

Another thing I like doing is having the words and pictures 'live together'. The very earliest roughs of the art included the placement of the text – these words would go under that branch here, those words spill down the page like a falling leaf there, and so on. Extra line spaces and odd groupings of words change the way you read it. You have to dodge around the page like the kids dodge around the trees, you chase words as they chase leaves. That's what I was thinking anyway. Perhaps it just annoys you!

Something that came up that I had never considered was 'Where are the parents?' Yes, the issue of adult supervision was raised. What were these kids doing running around a park and climbing trees without a suitable parent/guardian? To me the story was such a fantasy that it never even crossed my mind that I might need to include adults. I certainly didn't want any in the story. If the students ask, just tell them that the parents are behind them, just out of view.

As you would expect, there are many things hidden in the pictures. They are listed below. Encourage students to look for the creatures. They are in the shapes of shadows, on the tree trunks, and also in the negative spaces framed by branches. They are mostly large – one is nearly the width of the page, but easily missed. The list below has those creatures that I intentionally put in. They are the minimum you can find. I am sure that I have inadvertently put in others that the students might imagine, so there are no 'wrong' ones. If a student can see SpongeBob SquarePants in a cluster of leaves, then it is there (although I definitely didn't intentionally put it there!) That's the whole point of it – everyone's imagination is different.

List of hidden creatures. This does not include the imaginary 'leaf animals' scattered throughout.

Pages 8-9.

Two snails, on the tree roots. A lizard in the bark above Mai's head. A dog made of shadows on the large leaves on the left. A dragon in the sky on the left. A fox in the sky on the right.

Pages 10-11.

Elly is sitting on a weevil beetle. A large whale in the negative space beneath her. A rhinoceros on the central trunk, starting near Mai's feet. A seal in the negative space of the branches at centre. A deer with antlers in the branches at centre. A frog on the right-hand trunk. A sleeping cat in the tree roots at right.

Pages 12-13.

In the fallen leaves, from left to right – a chameleon, two fish, a dragonfly and a seahorse.

Pages 14-15.

In the fallen leaves, starting along Mai's left-hand side – a penguin, a lion, a crocodile above Elly, a squirrel and a kangaroo below her. A ladybug on the branch.

Pages 20-21.

On the left-hand tree – a horse in the leaves partly outlined by branches, a snail on the tree root, an elephant's head on the tree trunk (the elephant's trunk forms part of the horse's head), an octopus on the tree roots. On the right-hand tree – a bird, an old man's face.

Pages 30-31.

A rabbit, a dolphin, a butterfly fish, and of course, the dragon.

Questions for Students

1. Why do you think the author has put the text in different places all over the pages, and not just in a block, or along the bottom? Does it change the way you read the story?
2. Why do you think the author didn't write any text for the last pages. Do they need words? Do you think it is better without words? Why?
3. Do you think that the girls really fly away? Why or why not? (There is, of course, no correct answer.)
4. Little acorn fairies and leaf dragons appear throughout the story, flitting around the edges. Do you think they are meant to be real, or are they part of the children's imagination? Can the children in the story see them, or only the reader? Why? (Again, there is no correct answer, so don't ask me!)

Student Activities

1. Have the students collect leaves from home, and bring them to school. Try to identify what tree they came from, using school books or the Internet.
2. Break the class into teams, and see which team can find leaves from the greatest number of different types of trees from around the school. Identify them.
3. Have students collect leaves and paste them on paper to create 'leaf creatures'. Encourage the students not to tear or cut leaves into the shapes they want, but to use only those shapes that are available. Let the leaves' shapes lead the creation rather than planning a particular creature beforehand.
4. Have the students search for shapes and patterns in clouds, trees, asphalt playgrounds, carpets etc. Older students can be given iPads to photograph them. Encourage students, when photographing, to frame the photos in such a way, if possible, that the object itself is not obvious, but the imagined shape is clear. Use close-ups, unusual angles, silhouettes etc. Imagined shapes do not have to be an animal – they can be anything at all, the more varied the better.
5. Have students write a short description of an object – a whale, a castle, a geometric shape, anything at all, and then arrange the words so that they are still easily read, but are in the shape of the object itself. In the simplest example, a circle, the text might read 'I go round and round without ever ending.' For an ant, the 'body' of the text - literally - could say 'I am extremely small.' Then each leg branching off could have a brief added piece of information or association: six legs, very fast, one queen, working, scurrying, very strong.
6. The last pages of the story are silent. Have the students write the ending of the story as if it were not a picture book, but a chapter book.
7. There are several metaphors and similes in the story. Have the students create their own to describe leaves, colours, tastes, friends, etc.
8. Have students compose simple poems, and write them on the page in a way that reflects the meaning. Encourage the use of verbs in particular. For example:

Leaves

drifting

whirling

spinning

down in Autumn.