

Living the dream

Robertsbridge-based Sarah Massini always wanted to illustrate children's books for a living and now she has two out in time for Christmas. Sarah tells Simone Hellyer how she made it happen

It was a move to Robertsbridge in East Sussex that prompted Sarah Massini to fulfil her dream of becoming a children's book illustrator. And now the Sussex countryside has inspired the landscape of her latest book, *The Girl and the Dinosaur*.

The book, written by Hollie Hughes, is publisher Bloomsbury's picture book of the year and is a charming story about the friendship between a dinosaur and a girl called Marianne that proves that both boys and girls can love dinosaurs.

"I just loved this story the moment I first read the text, partly because there's loads of adventure in it, which meant there was plenty of interesting stuff that I could illustrate," Sarah says, adding: "I'd

been doing lots of cutesy, lovey dovey and sentimental things and I really wanted to do something that I could get my teeth into."

In the book Marianne creates her dinosaur pal from fossils found on the beach and Sarah drew inspiration from Hastings' shoreline when creating the illustrations for the book, as she explains: "Hastings inspired the hilly aspect of the landscape and the boats on the beach. But I did make the beach sandy in the book and, to be honest, I'm not sure if boats can be pulled onto a sandy beach as it's all pebbles in Hastings. I used a bit of artistic licence there."

The friendly dinosaur in the book was the easiest character to create, Sarah says, but some

extra work was needed to capture Marianne. "With the little girl I explored the possibility that she might be Victorian because the author was inspired by Mary Anning, a woman who collected fossils in Lyme Regis in that era. But, in the end the publishers decided they wanted her to have a modern look," Sarah explains.

"There are thousands of brushes on Photoshop and they are amazing, but you still can't get the same quality as a pencil"

BELOW:
The Girl and the Dinosaur illustrations are partly inspired by Sarah's local landscapes



Sarah regularly works with three children's publishers and another one of her projects, *Mouse's Night Before Christmas*, has also just been released. Picture books make great gifts for Christmas and you may imagine that illustrating a festive book is an illustrator's dream, but according to Sarah it actually presented a few challenges.

"This was my first Christmas book and actually it was quite constraining in some ways, such as having to do different spreads for the European editions because Christmas is different in certain countries," she says. "And we also discovered that Rudolf the Red Nosed Reindeer is patented, so I had to go back and change all the reindeer. Plus, I was illustrating Father Christmas on the hottest day of the year, so it didn't feel very Christmassy at the time."

When creating a new character Sarah always starts out by creating rough sketches in pencil,



which she sends to her publishers for approval before creating more detailed versions on layout paper. "I scan that onto a computer and manipulate it in Photoshop, where I'll add specially created watercolour washes as well as textures and patterns," she explains, adding: "I like a mixture of traditional and modern techniques as it stops it looking too digital, retains the hand-drawn look and gives it softness. There are thousands of brushes in Photoshop and they are amazing, but you still can't get the same quality as a pencil – for me anyway."

Sarah's former job as a designer helps with the more technical aspects of life as an illustrator. Motivated by a desire for gainful

employment, Sarah studied graphic design at college rather than illustration. One of her first jobs after college was to design the logo for Bloomsbury, for whom she now works as an illustrator.

"Because I was so interested in illustration, I drifted into children's publishing but as a designer and art editor. After our son was born and we moved back to Sussex, my husband said that now was the time for me to really try out being an illustrator," she explains.

Success soon followed and Sarah is now living her dream as a full-time children's illustrator,

ABOVE:
Mouse's Night Before Christmas is Sarah's first festive book

BELOW:
Sarah creates all of her images in pencil first

with jobs booked for the next three years. Her next project is to illustrate a classic children's book, the title of which she wasn't allowed to reveal, but which she described as "exciting and a bit scary".

Lots of people have a special fondness for the books they loved as children or read to their own children and Sarah says she gets a real thrill out of seeing her books enjoyed by children at readers' events. She has also spent time in her local school helping children with reading. But when asked what the best part of her job is, Sarah says: "I sit here in my little room in Robertsbridge, look out the window up Glottenham Valley towards Battle and marvel that what I'm creating here goes global. The books have been translated into Arabic, Hebrew, Japanese, Albanian and Ukrainian and loads of other languages and I just think that's amazing and really humbling. I get lots of lovely post from people and pictures of their kids enjoying the books and that's lovely too." ♦



Good to know

The Girl and the Dinosaur is published by Bloomsbury and is available in hardback RRP £10.99.