

AUTHOR/ILLUSTRATOR INTERVIEWS

CHRIS CHENG - HAVING THE BEST JOB IN THE WORLD

So what is the best job in the world? According to Chris Cheng it's being a kids' author ... I know many of you reading this will agree. His writing journey has led Chris to a number of literary related positions. Besides being one of Australia's most loved and talented authors he is also ambassador for National Literacy and Numeracy Week. Here he talks about his professional life (with much enthusiasm) with Helen Chebatte.

When did you recognize you wanted to be a writer?

I have always loved writing - letters, notes, poems etc but never in my wildest did I expect that I would end up having the BEST job in the world ... being a kids author.

What books have you published?

Trade publications:

For publication in 2007

The Melting Pot; Scholastic Australia

Locally Wild; Pluto Press

30 Amazing Australian Animals; Random House

Seams of Gold; National Museum of Australia

William's Backyard; Harcourt Press

Existing published books:

New Gold Mountain; (2005) Scholastic Australia

ZOO You Later; (2000) illus. Kerry Millard ABC Books

Alpine Regions; (1998) Heinemann Library

Rainforests; (1998) Heinemann Library

One child; (1997) illus. Steven Woolman; Era Publications

The Eyespy Book of Party Animals; (1995) Scholastic Australia

The Eyespy Book of Rainforest Animals; (1994) Scholastic Australia

Ginger Meggs & Friends Pet Care Book; (1992) illus. James Kemsley; Scholastic Australia

The Eyespy Book of Endangered Animals; (1991) Scholastic Australia

The Eyespy Book of Night Creatures; (1990) Scholastic Australia

Stuntumble Monday - Teachers' Resource Book; (1989) with Libby

Hathorn; Dove Publications

See: <http://www.chrischeng.com/books.htm>

Tell us about your journey to publication.

I began writing material for the world to see when I was an education officer at the zoo, writing teacher resource material, and then zoo graphics. From here I was asked to write books about animals that I liked, with information and activities - then it has just steam rolled from there with a trade book a year (non-fiction titles, a picture book and a historical novel) but then in the last half of 2006 I was asked to write quite a few titles so that in 2007 I have 5 titles being published.

Fiction or non-fiction? What do you prefer? And why?

I do like writing both - fiction for the challenge of creating something totally new and that comes completely from this brain and non-fiction because of the research and the information that I discover!

What constitutes a writing day for you?

6 am rise.

6.15 am rise again.

6.45 breakfast

7.30 bid my wife farewell to work then complete domestic duties

8.00 computer work and begin writing maybe on notes, maybe on computer

9.00 writing

11.00 break to sup on fine coffee or freshly brewed LEAF tea

12.30 lunch, collect post

1.30 attack computer or the note book or edit in the local coffee shop till 4pm when wife returns from school

4.00 Prepare dinner then I have various time slots... Eat dinner rest, gossip, chat, read and then sleep

Of course if I am researching a novel then the above general schedule flies out the window as I would be sitting in libraries, museums, galleries, basements ... Wherever researching!

Do you have a support/writers group you belong to?

I have a few friends I bash heads with occasionally on an irregular basis but mostly you can blame just ME!

When writing, what are the obstacles/challenges, if any, you're faced with? How do you overcome them?

Lately it has been how to fit them all in and then schedule my writing tasks - articles and talks also crop up irregularly.

Publishers often make suggestions/changes to a writer's work. How much of this do you accept and/or reject?

Some are accepted, others not, it depends on the context. Often an editor can see through the ms for the exact words I am saying ... I cannot work without an editor ... They are fundamental to me creating my books.

What advice would you give an aspiring author?

Read read read, write write write.

National Literacy and Numeracy Week was recently in progress. What is your involvement?

NLNLW is a federal government initiative that promotes the importance of literacy. It involves everyone, not just schools but the wider community as well. I am NLNLW ambassador. It is huge. I travel to schools and functions promoting NLNLW, speaking at awards ceremonies, conferences. This year, 2007, I anchored the NLNLW community service announcement that was aired in late August through to the end of NLNLW. I also prepared book lists and reading hints and wrote a few articles that were published in education and trade magazines.

See: www.literacyandnumeracy.gov.au

How important is Literacy week?

My quote from the NLNLW site:

"Can you imagine not being able to follow a recipe that has instructions for your favourite cake? Can you imagine not being able to find your best friend's house because you can't read the street

signs? Can you imagine stumbling and bumbling and fumbling over the words so much, that the excitement of reading has gone? National Literacy and Numeracy Week is one way to make us all more aware of the importance of literacy, being able to 'play' with words and to have fun reading!"

Have you worked in the writing field as anything other than an author?

At the zoo I was an education officer writing teaching notes and graphics. In the US I was working in a science laboratory creating science based CD Roms for kids. I was education advisor and then of course writing was involved in the second best job in the world as a teacher - all those school reports and programmes and evaluations argh! Being with kids is just such a glorious activity ... I love it ... that is why I still do school visits here and overseas.

Is there anything else you'd like to add?

I am also co-regional advisor for the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators - and the international connection is just superb. SCBWI makes the writing journey a global sharing experience with friends around the world. I'll say it again ... I have the BEST job in the world. I am also a consultant for a new online literary journal for educators and parents - First Opinions Second Reactions <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/fosr/> coming from Purdue University where I used to work. I also give the occasional early morning lecture to undergrads on Aussie kids' books and the life of a writer!

Helen Chebatte is a speech and drama teacher who also works as a freelance writer of fiction and non-fiction.

Buzz Words; Issue 27; 15 January 2008.