



BETWEEN THE CRACKS: AN INTERVIEW WITH KATE GREENAWAY MEDAL WINNER SYDNEY SMITH

By *AndreaMReece*

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Article Author:

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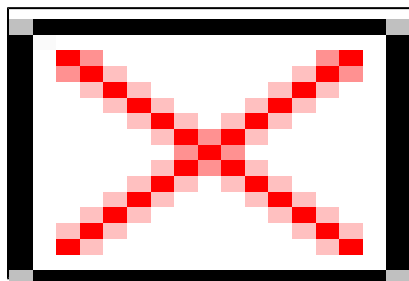
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It was a delight to talk with Sydney Smith about his work and congratulate him on his second **CILIP Kate Greenaway Medal**, received for [Small in the City](#) [3]. Like the running and cycling he does around the city, this conversation was something he fitted in 'between the cracks of his work and family life,' as at the moment he is ensconced in writing and illustrating a new book.

Thinking back to his childhood, Sydney reflects 'I wasn't especially gifted at drawing. I did a lot of drawings of hearts - broken hearts that were crying, hearts where half was going off to war, in a way that still continues to this day, it's quite poignant.' The capacity for drawings to convey large and deep emotions remains a constant in Sydney's work.

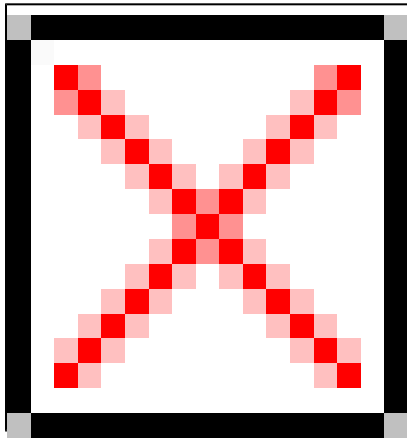
Around age ten, Sydney had a best friend and the pair would spend hours and hours drawing together, creating sketchbooks and binders of pictures. 'We drew monsters, superheroes and fantasy things.' It wasn't until Sydney began moving around with his family that drawing became more of a release, 'I dove deep into drawing and associated that with friendship and a warm feeling of being creative and exploring my imagination. My personality went into it and I escaped.'

Sydney enjoyed reading, but was a slow reader. 'I have a visual mind, I have to see everything when I read words, I

became very invested and sometimes that was intense. Nonetheless, he was drawn to picturebooks, and remembers loving Rupert the Bear, exploring the panels. I wouldn't read the dense text, sometimes I wouldn't even read the short rhymes, but would just follow the illustrations of a bear eating a berry and floating away, there was a dreamlike quality to them that was quite surreal.

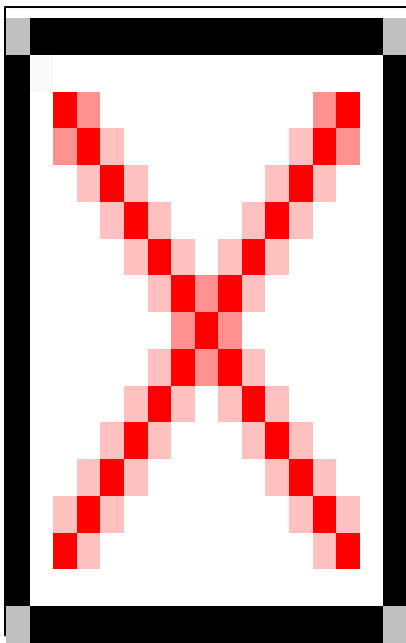
A family friend gave Sydney some paints and he soon became interested in painting and the fine arts. This would lead to him studying drawing and printmaking at Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. Perhaps echoing his exploration of the Rupert books, as a project there he made a lino-cut wordless children's book about a boy who was visiting different places. That was the first time that I did anything which suggested I could be interested in children's books. I had a great response to it too. It was one of those moments where you feel you've wandered into something with a lot of potential.

Sydney's first published book was **Mabel Murple** by Sheree Fitch. You would think the progress of your work would go from the roughest and most naïve to the most refined. There's lots I would do differently now, but I love the feeling of it. Even though I didn't know what I was doing, there's a real style. Sydney worked on two additional books by Sheree. They were all republications, Sheree had the rights returned to her and wanted to put them out with the same illustrator. I was in the right place at the right time. Sydney speaks highly of Sheree, She taught me a lot as I was starting out. I learned what to do, what not to do and how to talk with groups of children without feeling intimidated. Nothing compares to Sheree! She is entertaining, enthusiastic and children are hypnotised by her.



Sydney's first shortlisting for the **Kate Greenaway Medal** was with JonArno Lawson for the wordless picturebook [Footpath Flowers](#) [4]. I was given a rough description that was paginated and laid out clearly. The work had been done by the author, editor and art director at Groundwood Books. It was given to me to try to figure out how to show it all wordlessly. It was tough, but a great opportunity. It gave me the keys to the car! I'd just moved to Toronto too, it was a book about looking at the city with fresh eyes. I had the right kind of eyes to be working on this book.

It's notable that many profound and poignant moments in Sydney's subsequent books have featured wordless sequences. The book taught me a lot about using wordless moments in storytelling. I always think wordless moments punctuate whatever they follow. They give the reader a pause to let something resonate.



Sydney would go on to win his first **Kate Greenaway Medal** in 2018 with [Town Is by the Sea](#) [5], an extraordinary book with a vivid sense of time and place. The setting in **Town Is by the Sea** is a character. There's the ocean and the town, it's a complicated character that is always there and is always impacting on the characters. In illustration, I often feel the details are where the poetry lies. You can cut-away or focus in on the kinds of detail that surround the characters and you learn so much through this.

The 2021 **Kate Greenaway** winner, [Small in the City](#) [3] is the first book where Sydney both wrote the story and illustrated it. It was hard. When you are working with someone else's text, it's final and that is easy, you work within its parameters. When you are working with your own words and images, anything and everything can change. It's all negotiable. Even right now, I'm working on a book and I should be done with it, but I'm still changing the words and the images, trying to figure it out. It's more like a Rubik's Cube. It's three-dimensional and it's really difficult.

Small in the City worked out well, but it was a long process of building sketches and source material. I didn't know exactly what I wanted it to be about. It was originally about a city quietened by snow and it featured a snow fort. I couldn't figure out the ending, it wasn't exciting. In the end, I kept the snow and the city as that was where I was living, but ditched the fort. I spoke to a few people asking advice and they said they thought it worked and they liked it, but nobody really felt it *had* anything. I spoke to Neal Porter and showed him some sketches, he asked whether it should feature a dog. I thought, buddy this is not a not a book about a dog!?

Sydney had a moment of revelation which changed the story, I was listening to Paul Simon's **Graceland** and loved how the voice switches into something really personal almost as if he's mumbling to himself and not really speaking to you where he says 'She comes back to tell me that she's gone, as if I didn't know that, as if I didn't know my own bed.' It's such an emotional reveal and I loved that flip. I came up with the idea of a child looking for a cat but trying to sound mature about it and hide his true feelings until the moment when he lets that reveal happen and allows himself to be vulnerable. I hope that's a powerful moment.

The weight of emotions carried through the book was definitely noted by judges for the **Kate Greenaway Medal**. The news about the win has not fully settled in. If I hadn't been experiencing imposter syndrome before, I would be now. It doesn't feel real. It feels like it was meant for someone else and somebody has made a mistake and everyone's just being nice and playing along. Getting the news about the Kate Greenaway is really good for my mind, it reminds me that although I'm in a remote place in Canada, I'm still part of a community.

Jake Hope is chair of the working party for **Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Medals**. He is a children's book and reading development consultant. His book [Seeing sense: visual literacy as a tool for libraries, learning and reader development](#) [6], is published by Facet Publishing, 9781783304417, £39.95.

[Small in the City](#) [3] is published by Walker Books.

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