

THE DREAM AND REALITY OF PICTURE BOOKS: THE MAKING OF JIMMY LIAO'S CREATION

繪本的夢想與實際： 幾米分享創作心得

Taiwan's most internationally successful children's author/illustrator shares his insights into the creative process. Jimmy Liao discusses inspiration, ideas, and implementation, and brings it all down to earth by analyzing his own books.

Since the release of his first picture book in 1998, Jimmy Liao has always managed to release between one and three new books each year. His works have been translated into 20 languages, making him Taiwan's greatest success story in the international picture book market. Now, he shares the story of the process behind his whimsical creations.

Liao starts from the interior elements of creativity: attitude, ideas, and inspiration. He provides tips to help aspiring illustrators understand the creative mindset, and inspire them to create their own works. He addresses breaking through creative blocks, dealing with discouragement, maintaining work/life balance, taming inner demons, all the while sharing ample details from his own life and work.

In the second half of the book Liao breaks down seven of his own books to explore what went into creating them, revealing the initial inspiration as well as the frustration and difficulties he encountered along the way. The seven books thus analyzed are: *Turn Left Turn Right*, *The Sound of Colors*, *The Rainbow of Time*, *Starry Starry Night*, *So Close Yet So Far*, *One More Day with You*, and *I'm Not Perfect*.



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Finally, Liao shares important tips for dealing with the less creative aspects of getting a book published: working with editors, communicating with publishers, dealing with criticism, handling book rights, etc.

A must-read for aspiring illustrators, lovers of picture books, and anyone who does creative work, this heartfelt guidebook is packed with insights, tips, and techniques gleaned from Liao's prolific and uniquely successful career in children's books.

Jimmy Liao 幾米

Jimmy Liao is Taiwan's most internationally successful author/illustrator of children's books. After graduating with an art degree from Chinese Culture University (Taiwan), he worked in advertising for twelve years, until a battle with leukemia inspired him to change careers. He began publishing illustrations in newspapers and magazines, and in 1998, he released his first two picture books: *Secrets in the Forest* and *A Fish with a Smile*. Earning him fame throughout the Chinese-speaking world, Liao's books have been adapted to film, television, and a line of branded merchandise. He is the recipient of numerous awards and honors, and his books have been translated into nearly two dozen languages. He has also done illustrations for a series of collaborations with English writers, including an Amazon Best Book of the Year for Kids winner, *The Champion of Staying Awake* by Sean Taylor. Bright colors and child narrators are two of the signature characteristics of his works, which often hint at a world that is sometimes sinister, and sometimes lonely, but always filled with rich emotion.

THE DREAM AND REALITY OF PICTURE BOOKS: THE MAKING OF JIMMY LIAO'S CREATION

By Jimmy Liao

Translated by Stella Jiayue Zhu

CONTENT

Prologue

Memories of Childhood
Artistic Talent and Genetics
A Discovery: There Are Fine Arts Programs in College!
The College Years: Nothing to Be Passionate About
Taking up Illustration and Taking a Break
My First Illustrations
Becoming "Jimmy"
Working with Newspapers
The Sibyl
1995
The Real Meaning of a Great Blessing
Discharged from the Hospital: A New Beginning
Picking up Drawing Again and Becoming a Picture Book Author
The Birth of This Book

Part 1: Cultivating a Creative Mindset

1. Art is a Praxis

- 1.1 Drawing is Like Gardening
- 1.2 Doing Outweighs Thinking
- 1.3 Making Art is Like Working Out
- 1.4 The Solitude and Discipline Required for Making Art

- 1.5 Save the Best and Most Time for the Most Important Thing
- 1.6 Getting in the Right State of Mind
- 1.7 Making Art is Like Climbing a Mountain
- 1.8 Obstacles and Perseverance
- 1.9 Suffering Through Writer's Block and Challenges
- 1.10 Creative Concerns and the Anxiety of Facing One's Own Work
- 1.11 Should We Think About Readers and Markets When We Make Art?
- 1.12 Self-Doubt and Encouragement
- 1.13 Worse to Waste Talent than Time
- 1.14 Combatting Self-Doubt
- 1.15 Mutual Stimulation Between Creative Work and Everyday Life
- 1.16 The Emergence of Style: Letting the Self Come Through in the Creative Process
- 1.17 Finding Renewed Joy in the Blessing of the Muses

2. A Guide to Picture Books

- 2.1 Drawing Freeze-Frames: Capturing Motion in Stillness:
- 2.2 The Furthest Distance Between Illustration and Picture Books
- 2.3 Picture Books for Adult Readers
- 2.4 Brainstorming Subjects for Picture Books
- 2.5 Illustrating Short Stories vs. Picture Books: Percussion Music vs. Symphony
- 2.6 The Differences Between a Picture Book and a Novel
- 2.7 The Organic Unfolding of a Story in Practice
- 2.8 An Overworked Author and His Clueless Readers: The Weaving of a Cohesive Story
- 2.9 Building Excitement into the Image Rather Than the Plot
- 2.10 Writing Picture Books is the Praxis of Complementing Story with Style
- 2.11 You Don't Have to Write Picture Books
- 2.12 Miniature Storyboards
- 2.13 A Big Box and Plenty of Time
- 2.14 A Studio and a Drawing Table

Part 2 Developing a Methodology

3. Editorial Illustration and Short Story Illustration

- 3.1 Start with Doodles
- 3.2 Practice Drawing Single Frames: Starting with Details
- 3.3 Wrestling with Editorial Illustration
- 3.4 Drawing for Newspaper and Magazine Columns
- 3.5 What I Gained from Editorial Illustration
- 3.6 Practice Minimalism

- 3.7 Learn to Appreciate the Beauty of Simplicity
- 3.8 The Importance of Starting with Themes for Serial Fiction
- 3.9 Short Story Illustration as a Useful Exercise
- 3.10 Preparing to Publish a Short Story Collection
- 3.11 Breathing New Life into an Old Column Through Editing

4. Inspiration and Theme

- 4.1 Finding Inspiration in a Theme: *Beautiful Solitude*
- 4.2 Pursuit: A Thematic Obsession
- 4.3 I'd Love to Draw a Story about XYZ!
- 4.4 Why?
- 4.5 What If the Moon Comes Down from the Sky
- 4.6 Start from One Interesting Idea or Image
- 4.7 Wishes Inspired by a Song
- 4.8 The Siren Call of Cinema
- 4.9 Tapping into the Subconscious
- 4.10 The Vibrancy of Sorrow
- 4.11 The Corruption of Truth as a Rich Mine of Inspiration
- 4.12 Should We Revise According to Feedback?
- 4.13 Should We Illustrate Someone Else's Story?
- 4.14 Adding Flesh to the Bones of Someone Else's Story
- 4.15 Provisos Before Accepting Commissions
- 4.16 Stories Engendered from Fused Concepts

5. Structure and Pace

- 5.1 Free the Imagination by Keeping it Simple
- 5.2 Break Down the Pacing
- 5.3 Start with a Set of Questions
- 5.4 Some More Questions for Ourselves
- 5.5 Elucidate Difficult Ideas with Simple Presentations
- 5.6 The Need for Formal Reiteration and the Distinction Between Reiteration and Repetition
- 5.7 Formal Variation Through Bisection
- 5.8 Contrast and Echo in Multi-Panel Illustrations
- 5.9 Finding Maximal Creative Space Under Maximal Constraints
- 5.10 The Confines of a Window
- 5.11 A Storyboard Engendered from Two Images
- 5.12 Imitating the Camerawork in Films
- 5.13 Dedication and Distance
- 5.14 Sometimes, What Is Simpler Has More Heart

6. Image and Text

- 6.1 Transformation from Text to Motif to Image
- 6.2 The Order of Ideation Between Text and Image
- 6.3 Writing the Plot before Starting on Illustration for the First Time
- 6.4 When Text and Image Live Their Own Lives
- 6.5 Parallel Text and Image in *Missing My Cat*
- 6.6 In Case of Writer's Block, Read Aloud
- 6.7 Transitions and Their Function
- 6.8 Making Old Material Shine a New Light with Editing

7. Medium, Color, and Character Design

- 7.1 Choosing a Style
- 7.2 Choosing a Medium
- 7.3 Building Color and Depth with Acrylic Paint
- 7.4 Fluid Linework Inspired by Comics
- 7.5 A Lovely, Mysterious Green Light
- 7.6 Depicting Adversities in Life with Rich, Vibrant Colors
- 7.7 Keys to Character Design
- 7.8 Me and My "Paper Dolls"
- 7.9 The Pleasure of Enacting Different Characters
- 7.10 The Kid in Me
- 7.11 A Kids' World
- 7.12 *Paradise Lost*: The Antithesis of Kid Perfect
- 7.13 May All Grown-ups Have More Patience for Kids
- 7.14 Kids Who Defy Authorities
- 7.15 Facial Expression and Situation

Part 3 Case Studies

Case Study 1: *Turn Left, Turn Right*

- 1. A Story from a Single Image
- 2. Inspired by Space
- 3. Presenting Left vs. Right
- 4. Time and Temperature
- 5. Character Design and "the Melancholy of Youth"
- 6. Conveying Emotions
- 7. Designing Props
- 8. Solving the Final Mystery
- 9. A Very Simple Story

Case Study 2: *The Sound of Colors*

1. The Starting Point: Drawing a Great Many Entrances and Exits
2. How the Blind Girl Took Shape
3. The Golden Mean Between Plausibility and Fantasy
4. Presenting Up vs. Down
5. Giving Cohesion to Text with Image and vice versa
6. The Key to Composing the Ending: Patience
7. Behind the Intricacy and Artistry

Case Study 3: *The Starry Starry Night*

1. Images that Flashed Across My Mind
2. Taking Inspiration from a News Story
3. Building Concrete Character Backstories
4. The Background Underneath the Surface of the Story
5. Foreshadowing and Intertextuality Between Text and Image
6. Mutual Contextualization and Amplification Between Text and Image
7. A Magic Trick: The Un-reality of Image
8. Setting up a Shock Reveal
9. When the Image Alone Suffices
10. A Spark of Bliss in the Darkness
11. The Importance of Intuition
12. Composing the Ending: An Embrace from the Ocean
13. The Suffering of the Author

Case Study 4: *The Rainbow of Time*

1. Thanks, Films, for Giving Me Power
2. The Prophecy of a Film Poster
3. Seating and Rhythm
4. Variation Through Structural Changes
5. Thematic Reinforcement and Variation Through Structural Repetition
6. Allusion and Symbolism

Case Study 5: *So Close yet So Far*

1. An Idea Prompted by a Foreign Book Title
2. A Sequel in the Looking Glass
3. Utilizing Perspectives
4. Putting Protagonists from Different Books in the Same City
5. Designing Barriers
6. Pacing “Regret”

Case Study 6 *One More Day with You*

1. Stringing the Pearls
2. Continual Editing and Revision
3. Finding a Point of View

Case Study 7 *My Little Perfect World*

1. Having Fun under constraints of the Premise
2. Betting on Yourself
3. Fitting the Puzzle Pieces Together under the Right Theme

Appendix: Considerations beyond the Creative Sphere

Every Book Has its Fate

Disagreements Over Artistic Intention or Direction with Publishers

Book Design and Cover Art

Obtaining Permission for Copyrighted Work

Marketing and Interfacing with Bookstores

Receiving Book Reviews and Meeting Readers

The Urge to Publish as Young Writers

Merchandise and Theme Park

Animation, Film, and Musical Theater Adaptations

Themed Notebooks and Pocket Books

Epilogue

Part 1 Cultivating a Creative Mindset

1. Art is a Praxis

1.1 Drawing is Like Gardening

In attending to a garden, a gardener must work diligently every day: tending trees, monitoring pests, and keeping an eye out for new blooms.

Once you've grown familiar with your garden, then you can afford to work with leisure.

Given water every day and bathed under the sun, the flowers will one day burst into blossom.

Diligence does not guarantee optimal results, but if you don't put in real work, then you may rest assured that there will be no flowers.

Drawing, especially drawing picture books, is like tending a garden. It needs to be immersive.

Funny enough, not everyone who draws likes drawing.

If I say that I am super into drawing, then I am bound to be called out for belaboring the obvious.

Yet, in fact, not everyone who draws likes doing it. That includes many of my artist friends. I find it baffling too: If they don't like drawing, why do they still do it?

I have taken up many a vexatious job in the past. From fussy contact persons and dismal terms, to pressing deadlines, onerous demands, and unreasonable rates.... Nuisances would drive a person crazy.

However, whenever I get down to drawing, I am at peace with my work, and all my frustrations temporarily fade from view.

At times, I am amazed by my own instinctive filtering mechanism. I'm lucky to have this "super power", which has kept me from being burnt out by the peripheral hassles in my creative career.

I am super into drawing, so I don't regret the many sacrifices I make for its cause.

I am super into drawing, so I save the most and best time for it.

I am super into drawing, so I won't be crushed by the distress and disappointments that arise in the process.

I love being the gardener tending my own garden.

1.2 Doing Outweighs Thinking

I read an article many years ago about a rookie comic writer from the US, who broke through with his debut work and racked up many important awards. When he was interviewed and asked to give advice to other young artists, he said, "Keep your head down. Go home and draw thirty pieces a day. Come back three months later. Then, we can talk about the creative process."

He might have sounded arrogant, but he cut to the chase about what's essential in making art.

Making art requires continuous practice. If you consistently produce a lot of art over time, you might eventually experience the magic of it.

Thinking is of course important, but oftentimes the actual doing is what brings ideas to their most glorious fruition.

Keep on drawing, keep on writing. Only then can you unravel your perplexities and solve your conundrums.

Keep on drawing, keep on writing. Only then can you find out where the problems lie and understand what the trade-offs are. Only then can you enter into the creative flow and continue finding inspiration and momentum.

You rack your brains to build castles in the air. But, no matter how elaborate your plan is, once you sit down and start drawing, you may find yourself heading in a different direction from the very first page. Other times, a long period of deliberation might leave you undecided, yet once you sit down to draw, you find that all the hurdles and problems dissipate.

In addition, when you are drawing, situations and actions naturally unfold from what you have already drawn, or rather, *because of* what you have already drawn: there is a kid standing here, so it follows that he must be looking in this direction and wearing that expression. The immediate context and process of drawing will settle a lot of questions for you. Once you finish a page, the next will naturally come to you.

None of us is the genius of the century, so we've got to accept our lot, keep our heads down, and put in the hard work.

Perhaps one day we will discover our talent; perhaps on another day, we will realize that we can do nothing right. The only way to find out is to keep drawing and writing.

Imagination alone does not make art happen. Neither does it make the future.

1.3 Making Art is Like Working Out

A screenwriter friend of mine once related an analogy about making art from the French director Luc Besson.

Luc Besson wrote many incredible screenplays. This friend of mine found it so remarkable that he asked him how he did it.

Luc Besson replied: "Screenwriting is like working out."

If you work out every day for two hours consistently, the early days will hurt. You won't see any visible result and you will feel sore all over.

Keep at it for a month, and gradually, you will see gains in your muscular strength and physique.

Two months in, the payoffs will improve.

By the third month, you may have already become the envy of those around you.

Four months in, as you proudly strut down the street, you think it is time to celebrate, so you give yourself a three-month-long break to lie back and feast.

When you return from the break, everything is ruined. You have to start from the misery of ground zero all over again.

Luc Besson said that he dedicated fixed time slots to writing and working out every day. He did not indulge himself with extended breaks.

I am lucky to have learned about Luc Besson's work habits and to share his method. Luckily for me (and, also, woe is me!), for the past fifteen years, I have been "working out" for close to eight hours every day.

1.4 The Solitude and Discipline Required for Making Art

When I make art, I need to be completely alone. Being alone brings a tranquility that comforts me.

I think that solitude is essential for making art.

If you ask me what characteristic of mine has had the most impact on my creative work. I would say: discipline.

It pleases me that I work like an artisan. Day to day I occupy the same space. There, I polish and perfect artifacts in silence. When I am done with one, I continue on to the next piece. This perpetual process is what enables me to keep creating.

1.5 Save the Best and Most Time for the Most Important Thing

I save the most and best time for drawing.

I have a daily routine.

When my daughter was little, I used to wake up around seven in the morning, send her to school at half past seven, and arrive at the studio around eight. In recent years, I have been sleeping less, so I get up as early as five or six and get to the studio by seven.

Before my “workday” starts, I skim through the newspapers. If I see an interesting or funny story about animals, I clip it. Roughly ten minutes later, I start working.

I have always worked alone without an assistant. Sometimes, if it gets too quiet, I listen to music or tune in to the radio.

If I don't have to be out, I will likely stay in the studio for the day.

When I was younger, I could hold on until six in the evening before quitting, and I was productive in the afternoon as well. After getting home, I could continue brainstorming ideas, making sketches, or planning columns into the evening, or think about things that didn't require picking up a pen. I usually turned in before midnight, although sometimes I'd be so whacked that I was ready for bed by nine or ten o'clock.

It was like this every single day, Monday through Friday. My routine was comparable to that of a salaryman working nine to five.

These days, as soon as I finish lunch, I am ready for a nap. When I wake up at around three, my work slows down. Later I go home for dinner and watch TV while sprawling on the sofa. Usually, I am asleep by nine or ten.

But this is why I am all the more convinced that the best and most time ought to be saved for drawing, and that the prime hours before noon ought to be spent with diligence and mindfulness.

1.6 Getting in the Right State of Mind

In 2002, I started a center-spread column in Taiwan's *Next Magazine* called *La Dolce Vita*, even though I myself wasn't living the "sweet life" by any standard.

At the time, I was juggling picture book writing with the maintenance of two separate columns, while commissions for editorial illustrations were pouring in from newspapers and magazines. The time pressure, thematic divergence, and the fact that my creative mind went haywire all added to the unbearable stress I was suffering.

Nevertheless, every Wednesday morning, no matter how chaotic my life was or how sluggish I felt, I would sit in front of the desk in silence and start working, with unwavering focus, on a full color illustration measuring 38 by 56 centimeters for the column.

If it was smooth sailing I would be done in a day. Usually, it took two days. Still, sometimes, I would fumble until day three. I lived like this for six years.

Even though there was a theme to the column, every single week I would still be wondering what I should draw or say. What's remarkable, however, is that as soon as I laid down the paper, the pencil in my hand would start moving. It might be a stretch, but I felt somewhat like a medium – as soon as I was ready, divine spirits possessed me.

I liked drawing trees, prairies, rocks, streams, lakes, fallen leaves, flowers, balloons, houses, highways, and a child who traverses these environments.

I liked drawing any situation that was not part of my existing urban reality. All that is lovely resides in places far away.

I liked drawing backgrounds that allow for idiosyncratic doodles. I liked drawing an idle kid with a forlorn face.

I liked drawing large animals with wide, naive eyes gazing at kids on the page who want to be loved.

I liked using vibrant colors and elaborate brushwork to create an ineffable sense of loneliness.

But if I were asked in detail as to why I drew everything the way I did, how I decided on a combination between characters and their environments, or what rationale there was behind a color, texture, or brushstroke, I wouldn't be able to explain the particulars with articulation. I could only say that I was in a certain "state of mind" when I drew them.

All I could do was convey how I instinctively felt when I was in that state of mind.

Now, at a different time and under different circumstances, I cannot look back and rationalize why I drew what I drew.

Some works exceeded my initial vision, and I was amazed and overjoyed when I completed them. Other works did not please me quite so much, but given my abilities and circumstances at the time, I could only turn them in with a heavy heart and a troubled conscience.

1.7 Making Art is Like Climbing a Mountain

The brainstorming stage of creating a picture book is the most fun; I let my imagination run wild and forgo all rules. Sketching feels liberating too, as it is dictated by nothing but my whims. Yet I am beset by annoyances and difficulty when it comes time to finalize the draft because that is the real work, and the only way out is through. It's no different than manual labor: there is no alternative but to put your nose to the grindstone.

Over the years, I gradually learned to appreciate the torture of making art. It would seem that I wouldn't have produced anything without undergoing such distress. That said, every time I settle down to work, I feel restless. Often, I find excuses to escape into ideas about other interesting stories. I want to be a smart visionary, not a lonely craftsman.

Making art is like climbing a tall mountain. It's uphill all the way at first and grows more challenging as you approach the summit. Only after you have overcome the hardest section, will you start to feel more and more comfortable and find yourself drawing more and more swiftly.

*It was trapped in a sturdy wall
Listening to people's sighs all night long.
Behind the bars, a girl wept every day.
And when the moon rose, she would always
Sing a song at the heavens for herself.
The melody soared through the darkness,
Shining like the twinkling stars in the sky....*

It took me three years to complete *The Blue Stone*. I had always meant to dedicate it to my parents. But when it was halfway done, my father fell ill. At one point, I considered speeding through it. But my life was in total disarray. I was visiting the hospital all the time and could not devote my attention to work. At the same time, I also bore witness to the love and tenderness my parents had for each other. It touched me to the core. Sometimes, when I was by my father's hospital bed, I thought of *The Blue Stone*; sometimes, when I was drawing *The Blue Stone*, I thought of my parents.

In the end, I did not finish the book before my father passed away, which remains a source of regret. Oddly enough, after he was gone, I finished it within a few short months.

1.8 Obstacles and Perseverance

My books usually have happy endings because I find life exceedingly bitter. *Mr. Wings* is my first book without a happy ending. But I could not have changed the chairman's fate; as a birdman, neither human nor animal, he was destined to be forgotten by the whole world.

I have always been susceptible to loneliness. The feeling of loneliness keeps me company even in a crowd. I am convinced that no matter how much a person owns, they eventually depart the world alone. That is why my work is always tinged with an air of loneliness. This is especially the case with *Mr. Wings*, in which the chairman is left all by himself at the end. Although I have written many books over the years, for whatever reason, I still find the child in *When the Moon Forgot* and the chairman in *Mr. Wings* deeply heart-wrenching.

When I started drafting *Mr. Wings*, it felt natural to insert the protagonist of *A Fish with a Smile*, who became the chairman's driver. The story was also told from his point of view. When later it was adapted for the stage, they became classmates in elementary school – one always in the limelight, the other constantly forgotten. Who is the one with lucky wings then?

*From time to time, I would gaze
At the drifting clouds outside and recall
The chairman who inspired jealousy and envy.
Then, unwittingly, I would whisper
At the sky: Keep on fighting!
Keep on fighting!*

Drawing *Mr. Wings* felt like writing a novel. I was fond of the layout of the last few pages, where images intersperse with text, then grow apart. It imbued the work with a magnificence, creating a lasting resonance for readers to experience and interpret. Once I was done, I felt greatly relieved. It had taken so long to write that I found myself unable to feel exhilaration. I couldn't bring myself to read it for a long time.

Now, what I used to find unbearable seems tolerable. And the struggles I went through no longer feel taxing. I think I too have undergone a baptism of fire, where I soared beyond adversities with thrusting wings, and am now traversing the distant horizon together with the chairman.

What I came to realize with this book is that making art is difficult. It gave me even more respect for all the artists in the world who never give up. Short-lived geniuses give us pangs of jealousy, while craftsmen who hunker down and toil tug at our heartstrings. Whenever I am mired in a creative drought, I always remember that great artists persevere. So I keep my head down and continue working.

1.9 Suffering Through Writer's Block and Challenges

All creative projects run into roadblocks, but a crisis can also be an opportunity.

Since making art involves challenging myself, I will always choose the most difficult project, which means frequent writer's block is guaranteed. When I look at the multitude of my half-finished projects, I long for another chance to tackle them and bring them to a close.

Still, when you run into problems you have to pause. If you obsess over projects that you are stuck on, then no matter how much effort you exert and how many more images you draw, you will never come through. In that moment, it is best to prioritize something else, wait until your frame of mind has changed or you gain a new perspective, then come back for a second look. By that point, you will likely have worked on a different book or gained new experiences, and you'll be able to think outside your previous limitations. Meanwhile, a new perspective often affords new chances to find a solution.

Take *The Starry, Starry Night* from the case studies as an example: the final product is an accessible and seamless read. But the process by which I arrived at the narrative and imagery was rife with creative ruts. It is hard to explain why I got stuck on what seems like a simple story for so long since, in retrospect, the story makes so much sense that it appears inevitable. Indeed, there is neither a plot twist nor any suspense, so it shouldn't have been so tricky. Regrettably, only those who have been stuck in the creative process themselves can appreciate exactly how it feels to suffer.

1.10 Creative Concerns and the Anxiety of Facing One's Own Work

When I am out and about, I worry that I've forgotten to lock the door or turn off the stove. When it rains, I worry about leaving the window open or my laundry on the clothesline. When my head aches, I worry that I have brain tumor. When my stomach is upset, I worry that I have colon cancer. When I spot a single white hair, I worry that I might wake up fully gray. And when I can't find anything to worry about, I worry that maybe I have dementia.

I am very good at worrying, staying anxious, overthinking, and having nightmares. I'm the type of person who will stress himself out. I can't conclude objectively that this is related to my creative anxiety, but as a theme, anxiety depicts my experience of real life, in which I worry not only about my creative work but also, perhaps, about every aspect of the day-to-day.

Don't Worry, Be Happy! looks at the world from a kids' point of view. Their bravery and positivity stand in stark contrast to the fears of worrying adults like me. They probably think: *You don't have to worry about me!* My kid is quite assertive. She doesn't listen to me, which worries me, but in some ways, I am also relieved. The appeal of *Don't Worry, Be Happy!* lies in the tension between concern and relief.

That book stayed on the bestseller list for six months after publication, I suspect because its theme relates to the worries every modern person experiences. Moreover, it is packed with images large and small. The variety might draw more readers in.

When I look at my own work, I usually see the flaws first. Even though this book was very well received at the time of its publication, I still worry that it may fall fast into oblivion.

I worry that it might be missing something, like a strong and powerful visual aspect and therefore lacks those elements which leave an impression or generate discussion. This is the sort of pessimistic self-reflection I subject myself to as an artist.

On a more positive note, the book's themes and recurring characters weave together its lovable but not strongly memorable images into a unified whole. It employs every technique I ever learned for writing short stories in an easy, pleasurable reading experience. Rather than a grand main course, its table features a myriad of gourmet appetizers crafted with practice and finesse, and which still suffice to sustain readers' interest and fulfill their expectations.

There are as many odd creative themes out there as one could imagine. If "anxiety" as a theme can be made into a book, then all kinds of human emotions and behaviors stand a chance of being turned into interesting books. What themes should I attempt in the future?

Don't grieve!

Don't laugh at me for being clueless!

Don't cry!

Don't lie to me!

Don't goof on me!

Don't make a fool of me!

Don't scare me!

Don't ask me to pay for dinner!

On a more serious note, any quaint idea can grow into a great theme. If you are also interested in these topics, I will let you have first pick.

1.11 Should We Think About Readers and Markets When We Make Art?

Of course, my mind goes there sometimes. But while I am in the middle of in the creative process, I could care less.

When I illustrate children's books, I take kids into consideration by trying to gauge their reading comprehension and engage their questions. I am sensitive to the fact that I am making art *for* them. When I draw picture books for adult readers, I trust my own intuition.

To use myself as an example, before the publication of *Turn Left, Turn Right*, there wasn't a genre called picture books for adult readers, let alone a market for the genre. After its publication, a dedicated readership emerged for this type of work, thereby creating a niche market.

It's worth noting that the converse isn't necessarily telling. Lackluster market reaction does not mean that a work is bad. The bottom line is the market in Taiwan is not sufficiently diverse. Many genres don't have enough readers to sustain them. Furthermore, whether a book is popular is outside the author's control. Editorial decisions, marketing strategies, the zeitgeist of the moment, and so on all need to be right. Without a doubt, every success needs some good luck.

Making art is sweet, but the market is grim.

I am lucky enough to have found a niche, a genre, and a publisher that fully supports me. All I need to do is remain a diligent, dedicated creator.

1.12 Self-doubt and Encouragement

I've found decent success as a picture book author. But I can't escape the feeling of loneliness, especially when I encounter difficulty and doubt, but cannot find peers to learn from or lean on for advice. Oftentimes, I feel helpless. During the process of finding my way around, I've come up with some thoughts to share. Whenever the opportunity arises, I feel compelled to make a few quick notes.

I enjoy reading books in which artists discuss the details of their process. Whenever I find an answer to my own puzzlement, I feel greatly encouraged.

Everyone needs to be cheered on and complimented. But does encouragement really help artists make art?

It seems to me that timely encouragement can have a positive impact on artists only if they are already hell-bent on making work. However, complimenting a passive, uncommitted artist (regardless of how talented they might be) will always be a waste of time.

During my years of teaching at a university, I encouraged students to write picture books. I had some brilliant students whose assignments really caught my eye.

I urged them to finish their work and set them up with publishers to explore publication options. Meanwhile, I continued meeting with them for discussions and revisions. Years later, finally, a book came out. So, my effort was not completely in vain.

The students weren't at fault. For them, this was icing on the cake to their college life, not the meat and potatoes of real life. To be honest, I was upset, but at least it broke my bad habit of offering unwanted advice.

I Wish I Could Make a Wish collected most of my horizontal illustrations for newspaper supplements, while the vertical pieces went in *It Was Not a Long Long Time Ago*. Having illustrated a picture book on stories about wishes, I chose the format of an art catalogue for *It Was Not a Long Long Time Ago*, keeping the images by themselves, and adding a few personal essays about illustration.

It Was Not a Long Long Time Ago is like a time capsule, a treasure chest that holds my old memories for safekeeping, evoking nostalgia for an era of black-and-white newspaper supplements consigned forever to the past. Every artistic period is uniquely colored by its time. Once gone, it is gone forever. I am fortunate to have the opportunity to reprint my past works together in a book, and share them with my readers.

I did editorial illustration for newspapers for about twenty-five years altogether. One summer, on a trip to eastern Europe, I stood on the crowded Charles Bridge in Prague, gazed into the coursing river, and made the quiet decision to finally retire from this beautiful ground whose soil nurtured me as an illustrator.

I am grateful to all the editors and art directors who gave me opportunities for such a long time, such that I could afford to improve slowly through constant practice.

1.13 Worse to Waste Talent Than Time

Looking back to when I started illustrating, at those early days when I was teaching myself how to draw, I notice one thing that I must mention.

For the first ten years, I always maintained a stable job outside of illustration. I didn't face financial stress, only difficulties managing my time.

When young friends who want to go into art ask me for advice, I often don't know what to say. Working a job takes time away from making art; in the end, you will blame it on your boss. But, without a job, you cannot make art comfortably. The resolve to grit your teeth and take the temporary pain is undermined by the fear that the good times may never come. Day by day you lament your misfortune. What should you do then? I don't know, either.

This brings us to that oft-shouted platitude: "Choose what you love and do that! Work hard and sacrifice for it so you don't live with regret." Even a life in shambles, is destroyed for the sake of the people, work, hobbies, wishes, and dreams that you love the most. Of course, this is easy to say. Real life is harsh, cruel, and unforgiving.

It is the same with making art. Nobody scrutinizes your work less because you have a toothache, because you cat is sick, or because everything is going south for you and your house is leaking. Yet your harshest critic is still yourself, and you will never be satisfied with your own work. Any desire to cut yourself slack is curbed by the reluctance to yourself down.

I admire gifted artists who work diligently and feel sorry for those who waste talent.

In making art, a lot of people complain about overreaching their abilities.

That is not such a bad thing. It is more of a shame to "underreach", that is, to lack the artistic vision that evokes deeper feelings even when you have a great skillset and potential.

However, that is still not the same as wasting talent.

Some people have great skills and potential, as well as a strong vision and a sensitive mind. In the sight of others, they are incredibly talented. But personality issues or an uncontrolled temper keep them from delivering. That is a waste of talent.

When you are unable to devote your time to meaningful pursuits, you waste your talent. For example, I know a writer who is incredibly gifted, but gets distracted by stocks all the time.

So when I see a Facebook post titled *It's a Greater Shame to Waste Talent than Squandering Time or Money*, I hit the like button a hundred times over.

1.14 Combating Self-Doubt

I am plagued with backaches, fatigue, and presbyopia, but the most challenging obstacle remains self-doubt.

I have always suffered from "imposter syndrome", in which one feels like a fraud and is unconvinced by one's own achievements. Praise seems false and criticisms true, and if I win an award, I ascribe it to luck. All my successes and commercial hits are ready to flop overnight.

None of the major events in my life feels real to me. I became a fine arts major in college by chance and started out with a blank slate. Then I joined an advertising agency and began working as an illustrator. I was happy and carefree, but then I fell severely ill. When it seemed like life was slipping away, I decided to express my revelations with drawing, and that ended up garnering acclaim and accolades. Then I drew *Turn Left, Turn Right*, which was successful but took home no award. Nevertheless, it was beloved by readers.

Of course, there is another possible explanation, namely, that making art is relatively easy for me. I've certainly devoted a lot of time to work, but when I see that it takes other people even longer to draw, that it is more time-consuming for them while not necessarily productive, and that in contrast my doodles and scribbles have yielded such results, I cannot help but wonder if it is a coincidence.

It's been over twenty years, and I still can't rid myself of all these doubts, even though I really should. They do in fact continue to haunt me.

I have also collected new worries in recent years. I reminisce about my years starting out, when I was daring, unstoppable, and full of ideas. Where did that person go? Why hasn't it gotten easier now that I've been drawing for two or three decades?

Shouldn't I be more competent, more practiced? I have fine-tuned my technique and acquired more expensive and comprehensive tools. I am also more circumspect and experienced. So why do I find making art more difficult and puzzling than ever? Well, I am old. But is that all? I am frustrated. I want to hang my head in shame and look away from my work. I want to hide.

I need to speak to someone with experience.

My editor says, "You have more experience than most."

I need to speak to a peer.

My editor says, "Many of your peers would like to speak to you too."

I have often been stern with friends who want to get into art. "There aren't that many do's and don'ts to fuss about in making art. As long as you keep your head down and keep practicing, you'll find an answer that moves you. A small, quiet path of exquisite beauty will open up, with fragrant flowers flanking the sides and a warm glow ahead in the distance...."

But now? The flowers are wilting, the path is buried under wayward weeds, the glow in the distance has suddenly dimmed. I feel like a spinning top that's slowly losing its momentum, on the cusp of falling. Am I a lost cause? Do I need to face myself and accept that my creative energy has declined? That would be so lame!

I am embarrassed to admit that every single day the thought *Give up! Just give up!* crosses my mind. But should I give in to it so easily?

Granted, I have read a theory that says if an artist does not experience these self-doubts, then they are not really an artist anymore.

Feeling great at one moment and beyond incompetent the next is the sort of anxiety faced by every artist who genuinely cares about their work.

So, I shake my head, and shake it hard!

No! I will give my all! Every day I sit myself down in front of an increasingly messy desk, sip on black coffee, and play Mozart, Brahms, Mahler, Beethoven, and Chopin in the background while I bury my head in stacks of drafts and keep on adding to the pile.

1.15 Mutual Stimulation Between Creative Work and Everyday Life

First things first, there is no doubt that we cannot escape the question of innate talent.

Knowing if we have creative talent can help us decide early on whether we are fit to tread down this path. For young artists, I always say this: Start early, practice consistently, continue to gather experiences and open your mind.

Marking art cannot be just high-minded talk; we must apply ourselves to the praxis. If you treat artmaking as a necessity for living, then you will persevere no matter how many obstacles come your way. Sure, much discouragement awaits. Society in general makes for an uncongenial environment for artistic work. Still, in order to make it on this path, we must manage to survive first.

I have been asked, “Will you ever stop making art?”

If my health deteriorates, my work loses its market appeal, or if I burn out, then I will stop making books. But I will probably find another creative outlet.

Essentially, I’d like to continue drawing. I have said previously that I am an individual of contradictions. Sometimes I think making art is very important, other times I think it is worth nothing in comparison to the everyday life. I didn’t used to think that I had patience or discipline. Neither did I see myself as a workaholic. But when I started drawing, I realized that in fact I do possess all these traits.

That said, I have sacrificed a great deal after taking up illustration.

For example, when I was still working in an office, I had time to go shopping or to satisfy whatever idiosyncratic desire I had. Now I don’t. I am no longer showing up to get-togethers with friends. I have got no time for brunch and tea, and no time to eat. In the end there is nothing left—when you keep on working as an artist, you grow to be quite unlike your friends. Editors and publishers are your only acquaintances. Overtime, you grow old and become increasingly unsociable. The only thing left to do is to go to bookstores. Even then, the only books you read are picture books, art books, and books about the making of art.

Being an artist requires habitual discipline. Routine calls for a great deal of sacrifice. In the past, whenever my routines were interrupted, I would get upset. I am not like that anymore. Maybe I have become weak, so interruptions seem welcome instead.

It strikes me that an artist must also consider whether they have established a creative workflow. If you find yourself in a sufficiently robust position as an artist, then the particularities of life may spark inspiration – then, you may enter the world of artmaking.

And my recommendation is: If you make good art, then do it. If you make great art, also do it. Otherwise, spend more time with your family – live more.