Spring 2023

Highlighter

SCBWI Mid-Atlantic Journal

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Spring 2023 // The Independents

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For more information on our region, see https://midatlantic.scbwi.org/

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From Imagination to Image

Creating the Art for MARLON AND THE SCARY SOMETHING

By Dan Bailes

Have you ever wondered how those wonderful children's book illustrations evolve from idea to image? I wondered too.

As an author and self-publisher, I feel comfortable in the world of words. As an illustrator, not so much. I tried illustrating two of my chapter books and, while I could see improvement, I'm just not that good at it. I decided that for my next chapter book, MARLON AND THE SCARY SOMETHING, I would look for an experienced illustrator.

But first I had to figure out what kind of illustrations would make sense, how many to include in the book, what they should show, and where they should go. I decided on spot illustrations that would appear now and then at key moments in the story. A picture book typically features an illustration on every page, while a chapter book may have just one per chapter. Or none at all.

I prefer an illustration style that is fairly realistic and wanted an artist who could capture Marlon's quirky personality and range of emotions as he deals with his fears about the Scary Something. But with each illustration limited to less than half a page, this task would not be easy.

About the Story

The hero of the series is a cat named Marlon. Like many cats, Marlon follows his own path. He's independent, curious, and full of mischief. Marlon is a tuxedo cat with black fur, a white chest, white paws, and a white tip on his tail. With those markings, he looks like he's dressed for a formal dinner, which is funny since Marlon is a very casual cat.

In the story, Marlon encounters a Scary Something that he's never seen before. He's frightened and scampers away to safety. Soon his fears take over and he's caught in a spiral of worry and anxiety. After getting advice from his friend Silky, a wise sparrow, and learning some key skills for dealing with anxiety from Momma Cat, Marlon summons up the courage to face his fears and meet the unknown animal face-to-face. As he joyfully discovers, the animal is a playful dog named Kukka, and they learn to romp and have fun as friends.

Finding the Right Illustrator

Where do you find an illustrator who can draw with the skill and insight to express complicated emotions? I knew it would take time to find the right person.

There are plenty of places to look, but I focused on two: Reedsy.com and SCBWI. Both online sites feature professional illustrators and book designers and show sample portfolios of their work.

I used Reedsy.com to find cover designers for my first two books. On Reedsy you can pick up to five people and fill out a form describing your project. Each person can then respond with a bid. If you accept a bid, then you're ready to start work. Reedsy works as a broker for communications and payment. I had a misunderstanding with the cover designer for my first book, and Reedsy helped clarify and solve the issue to everyone's satisfaction.

In SCBWI, some member illustrators only work with big publishing houses but anyone can look over an illustrator's portfolio and send them an

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email inquiry. If they are willing to work with you, you negotiate a price and sign a contract. With an illustrator from SCBWI there is no intermediary—all matters of communication and payment flow between the author and illustrator.

I spent a lot of time poring over portfolios on both sites and tried to analyze which artist would work best for my story. I settled on SCBWI PAL member Melissa Gardner in the Oregon region. Melissa had the talent and background I was looking for. Since she was my first choice and I loved her portfolio, she was the only illustrator I contacted. Fortunately, she said yes.

Our contract was very detailed about payment and the approval process. It's really important that everything is spelled out in a contract before work begins. It protects the author and the illustrator. Ultimately, though, this is a collaborative process and you will be working together to create something wonderful for your book.

How We Worked Together

I sent Melissa the story, a description of Marlon, and a list of illustrations I wanted. Here are some excerpts from how I described the project:

- Marlon is adventuresome and good at overcoming obstacles, but takes a quirky path to get there. For example, after some funny false starts he found a way to gain a sparrow's trust and become friends.
- In this story, Marlon becomes quite anxious over an encounter with an unfamiliar animal—the Scary Something. The animal is actually a sweet dog, Kukka, who just wants to play. But Marlon misinterprets Kukka's behavior and his fears grow.
- A note on style: The target audience is kids ages 6-9. The illustrations can be slightly stylized or expressionistic, but they should feel fairly realistic. Although the story is about dealing with fear and anxiety, I don't want the imagery to be dark or menacing. The illustrations should be oriented towards evoking the feelings but not too scary.

Here are a few of the illustrations I requested:

- For Chapter 1, Marlon is outside and happy because it's a beautiful spring day.
- For Chapter 4, Marlon is frozen with fear (after spotting the Scary Something).
- For Chapter 5, Marlon is hiding under the tan couch at home, breathing fast with a stomach full of butterflies.
- For Chapter 9, Marlon is outside and asks his sparrow friend Silky for advice.
- For Chapter 13, a wary Marlon does the hunch up/scrunch up to confront Kukka as she does a playful bow to invite play.

I sent Melissa photographs of cats with tuxedo markings that I found on the Web and my own photos of Kukka, whose character is based on KukkaTahti, our Finnish Lapphund, who is my canine companion and partner in Nice Dog Books. Melissa decided that she needed to explore Marlon's personality and decided to try to capture that first.

Melissa used Procreate, a drawing program on her iPad, to create the illustrations for Marlon and Kukka. Here is the first character study she did for Marlon. (The dabs of color remind her what she used to create Marlon's character.)

Marlon's first character study (with color palette)

From Imagination to Image
(continued)

Then Melissa refined her illustration of Marlon. You can see his coat is now darker. And his expression has changed a little too.

A few weeks later, Melissa did another character study of Marlon. She made a note that this character study is about making sure each drawing of Marlon looks just like him.

The next iteration of Marlon

Next character study of Marlon

The following are examples of how we worked together to refine the illustrations.

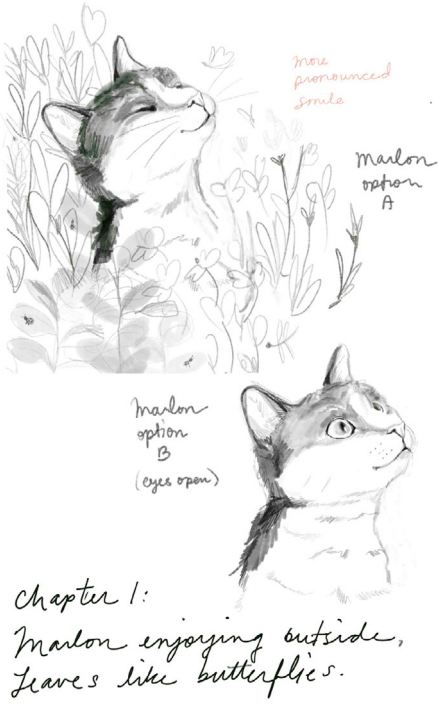
Example 1 - A Lovely Spring Morning

In the first chapter, Marlon steps out to enjoy the lovely spring morning.

Melissa first did a thumbnail sketch to show Marlon and the flowers.

The thumbnail (rough sketch to convey the design)

Then she made a more complete sketch. She sent me two options.



Drafts to verify the approach for the illustration

In the drawing on top, you can see him with his eyes closed, enjoying the flowers. (For the second option, she didn't need to draw the flowers again so just imagine those around him as you see him looking at the lovely spring day.)

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From Imagination to Image
(continued)

I told her I liked the sketch on top, but wanted a bigger smile so you can tell Marlon is really savoring the moment.

So in the next sketch (below), he has a bigger smile.

The next iteration after author (publisher) feedback

Melissa often added comments to her sketches to explain what was different from previous ones.

When it came time to do the actual illustration, Melissa decided to change the position of his face. She did a more complete drawing in color and sent it to me. It worked really well. And she added a little spider in the bottom right of the frame along with the butterfly (see next image).

I gave Melissa notes at each step of the process about what I liked or what I wanted to change. With Marlon's face now in profile, I asked Melissa to have his eyes open.

Draft full color illustration for feedback

The following is the final version. She really captured Marlon's mood so we can all share his delight in that beautiful spring morning.

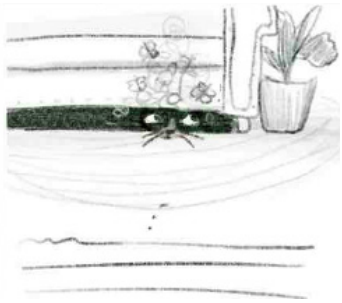
The final version of the illustration

Example 2 - Hiding Under the Couch

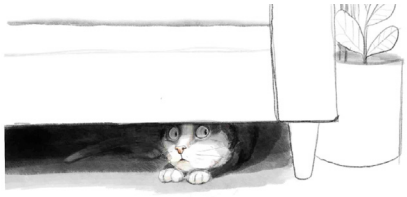
In a later chapter, we see Marlon hiding under the tan couch "with a stomach full of butterflies." First, Melissa did a thumbnail sketch. Next, she did

From Imagination to Image
(continued)

a more complete sketch. We decided you didn't need to see the "butterflies."

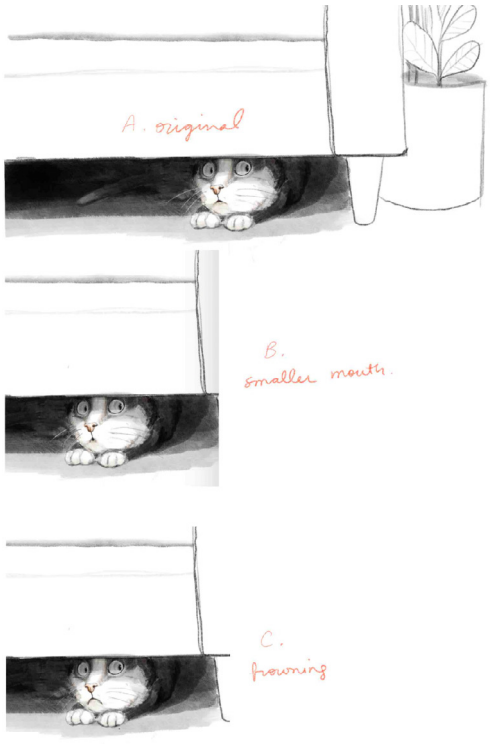


Thumbnail for the hiding illustration



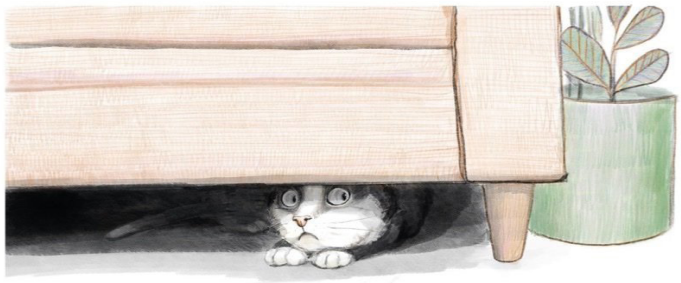
First sketch of the scene

Then, she drew some new sketches to make Marlon look more frightened. Below are the original sketch and two alternatives. We decided to use the last one.



Options for Marlon's expression

Here's the final version that appeared in the book. You can see how the color makes such a difference. And Marlon's expression shows that he's really upset.



Final version of the illustration

Example 3 - Capturing Kukka

Kukka's markings are surprisingly similar to Marlon's (she's the Scary Something). Here's a photo of Kukka and Melissa's first portrait of Kukka.

Kukka's original character study and photo

You can see that Melissa's first portrait of Kukka looks just like her. But Melissa felt the style was different from the way she pictured Marlon. So she changed Kukka to look the way you see her on the following page.

I think the portrait of Kukka and Marlon together as friends really captures both their personalities.

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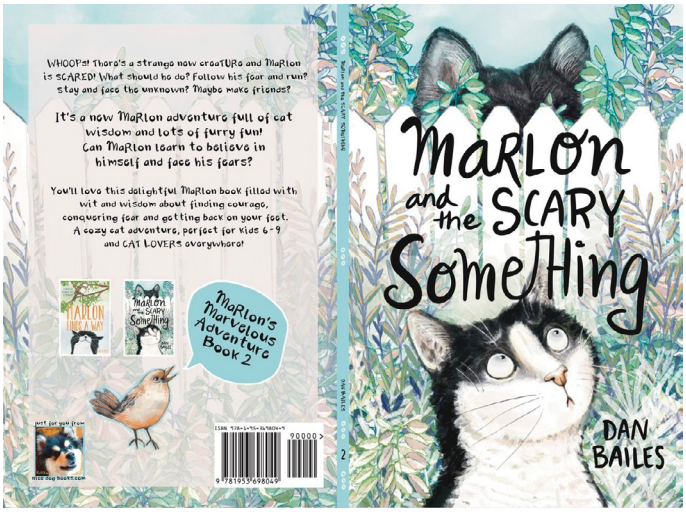
Updated character design showing Kukka with Marlon

The last piece of art was the cover. Here's the cover Melissa designed and created. She even created the fonts. The portrait of Kukka and Marlon together as friends really captures both their personalities. If you'd like to see the book and more of Melissa



Final cover for MARLON AND THE SCARY SOMETHING

Gardner's illustrations, here's a link to MARLON AND THE SCARY SOMETHING. And you can read more about Marlon and Kukka at https://nicedogbooks.com/.

Melissa and I are currently working on the next book in the series, MARLON AND THE WIDE WORLD, due out late spring.

Some Final Thoughts

- Your illustrator will depend on you, the publisher, to ***give them the technical specs for the illustrations and the cover***. Amazon and IngramSpark have cover templates you can download. You can access an ISBN code generator at Kindlepreneur. Kindlepreneur also has links to book formatting guidelines for eBooks and print.
- It's important to ***talk through everything***. Illustrators are not mind readers. I tried to be very clear about the feeling I wanted in each illustration and gave Melissa a brief description of what we might see. But I left it up to her to shape the art in a way that worked. If I thought of something to make it better, I asked her to make a change. But I also asked her for her opinion and advice along the way. And listened to what she had to say.
- This may be obvious, but authors work in a conceptual medium and ***illustrators work in a visual medium.*** They're different ways of seeing the world and expressing creativity. In each illustration, Melissa added little details that created a mood that helped amplify the words and bring the characters and story to life.
- ***Be patient***. This is not a fast process. Expect there will be a lot of back and forth. And the process will take longer than you might expect. I suggest you give the illustrator the time they need to do their best work.
- This process is a collaboration. It's possible there will be differences of opinion or perhaps misunderstandings. If you think there may be an issue or problem with something, check it out. Ask questions. Get clear about what you're thinking and wanting and see if you're both on the same page. Most importantly, ***be curious, ask questions and try not to make assumptions***. If you both talk it out, you may find an easy fix to whatever issue you're dealing with. //H//

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