



KAREN PATKAU - AUTHOR & ILLUSTRATOR

– NASEEM HRAB

WRITING PICTURE BOOK BIOGRAPHIES

– AMANDA WEST LEWIS

VOLUNTEER JILLIAN DOBSON

– HELENA AALTO

THE CANSCAIP COMMUNITY – JOYCE GRANT

ILLUSTRATOR'S SKETCHBOOK – SOYEON KIM

LOGO DESIGN BY KAREN PATKAU

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Introducing Karen Patkau · Author & Illustrator

By Naseem Hrab



I was invited to profile author and illustrator Karen Patkau (pronounced “PAT-co”) just when the COVID-19 pandemic started to upend our world and everyone was told, well, to stay away from each other. I don't often admit to this fact lest it shatter the charming curmudgeon persona I'm trying to cultivate, but I love making new friends. So, I was especially excited for this opportunity even though Karen and I couldn't meet in person. (You know you're feeling isolated when you miss taking public transit!) I was first introduced to Karen's books when I worked at the Canadian Children's Book Centre, but I had only exchanged a handful of greetings with her over the years at launches and such (see above re: my persona). Lucky for me, Karen was equally happy to make a new friend.

We first spoke on the phone one Friday morning in May, since neither of us felt up for a video chat. (I can't speak for Karen, but I now live in constant fear of my face freezing in some grotesque expression and someone taking a screenshot.) Admittedly, I was a bit nervous about our call—Karen has, after all, crafted

22 award-winning children's books to date. Talk about book goals! When I told her that I wasn't recording our initial conversation because I wanted things to be more casual to start, she quipped, "I got dressed for this?" And so, I quickly learned that there was no reason for me to be anxious: Karen is absolutely hilarious and down-to-earth.

NEVER LOSE SIGHT OF YOUR EARLIEST PASSIONS

Born in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Karen started to draw when she was three years old. In school, she was often called on to illustrate class projects and became known as the class artist. Karen laughs that she was not nearly as good an artist as she thought, but there was a certain status associated with the title and she wore it with pride. She also had a wonderful teacher named Miss Lambert. "She inspired us. She was a huge influence and an exceptional teacher. She made us all feel special." Miss Lambert told Karen that she had a gift.

Karen's mom was also very artistic, but she didn't get the opportunity to pursue her talents professionally like Karen and her brother John, an architect. Karen speaks of her mother with great admiration. "My mother was resilient and creative. She loved to paint, but she didn't have confidence in her skills. She wanted us to become artists and she encouraged our creativity." As for Karen's father, she jokes, "He was very tolerant and enabled us to do our own weird stuff."

Along with drawing, Karen has always loved books. (Except for Dr. Seuss—She thought his characters' eyes looked creepy.) Every week, she would check out a stack of books from the bookmobile that visited her neighbourhood and her

parents would read to her and her brother every single night.

Karen's greatest passion though seems to be nature and, especially, animals. As a child, she had pet cats, visited the family farm in Saskatchewan yearly and was more interested in toy animals than dolls. I ask Karen why she loves animals so much.

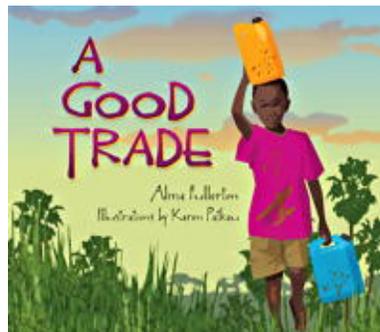
"Animals aren't judgemental," she says. "They accept you and you accept them." Karen now lives with her much-loved tabby cats, Tigger and Lily. She jokes that she's their full-time slave.

I've often heard that we should never lose sight of our childhood passions because our earliest interests and activities can fuel us for our entire lives. Unlike those of us who have had to rediscover these passions as adults, Karen never seems to have lost her grip on those threads of drawing, books and nature.

ALWAYS BE REINVENTING

When Karen went off to university, her parents wanted her to do something more practical: They wanted her to study to be an architect like her brother, not a fine artist. She

decided to pursue graphic design and graduated from the University of Manitoba with a Bachelor of Fine Arts Honours degree. Then she became particularly interested in visual storytelling while studying for her Master of Visual Arts degree at the University of Alberta. Her instructors were educated in European illustration traditions, and they introduced her to the art of children's book illustration. Karen found her studies extraordinarily inspiring and fascinating—it hadn't occurred to her that one could have a career in children's book illustration.



After university, Karen taught at York University and worked as a graphic designer. During that time, she experimented with traditional collage, using different materials including paper, fabrics and pressed plants. Karen explains that she loves the way shapes, colours, textures and patterns can work together and trying different things resonates with her.

Then Karen decided to take her illustration portfolio to publishers. I asked Karen why she wanted to showcase her art in picture books instead of in galleries and she replies, “I like picture books because they’re like little art exhibitions—except without all the schmoozing.” I think Karen just explained to me why I also love picture books so much. At Oxford University Press, Karen met William Toye—whose many claims to fame include being Elizabeth Mrazik-Cleaver’s editor. He loved collage, Karen’s work and her sense of humour, so he gave her a manuscript filled with fun, silly poems to illustrate: *Don’t Eat Spiders* by Robert Heidbreder. Karen’s first foray into children’s books received an Ezra Jack Keats Memorial Medal for illustration. *Don’t Eat Spiders* was published in 1986 and it’s still in print. I don’t know about you, but I can’t imagine a greater testament to the appeal and popularity of one’s work than one’s first book staying in print for nearly thirty-five years!

Karen continued to work in mixed-media collage until 2000. When Orca Books asked her to illustrate *Sir Cassie to the Rescue* by Linda Smith, she decided to try something new. For this sweet, imaginative story about a little girl who wants to act the part of a brave knight instead of the damsel in distress when playing with her brother, Karen taught herself how work digitally with some help from a close friend. There was a steep learning curve involved in the move away

from traditional collage, but Karen says it’s much easier to experiment and make changes digitally. Plus, she can play with different textures and patterns by scanning in different media including paper and textures. As I come to understand Karen’s love of learning, experimenting and playing, I can see how collage—whether traditional or digital—and its potential to meld together different materials into

infinite combinations is the perfect form of artistic expression for her.

Karen is not one to shy away from pushing herself as an artist; in fact, she seems to seek out new challenges: Her latest artistic adventure is writing. She says, “I never knew that I could write. I love illustrating other people’s work, but I wasn’t getting the types of animal books that I wanted to illustrate. So, I thought that I’d try writing one. Then I realized that I didn’t know how to write. I’m a visual person and I didn’t know how to get into the head of a writer. It was painful for me to write.” Karen ended up taking one of the George Brown College writing for children courses with Ted Staunton

at Mabel’s Fables. “I just needed to find out what a writer does and Ted’s course gave me that insight. He gave me enough of a nudge in the right direction to get me writing my own books.” And that’s when Karen realized that she had a knack for writing nonfiction, in particular, more lyrical, poetic nonfiction.

NATURE CALLS

Karen’s passion for nature and animals is evident in nearly every book that she has written and/or illustrated. In 1990, Annick Press published *In the Sea*, the first picture book Karen both wrote and illustrated. In this captivating book, the dramatic depths of the sea are explored by a glass fish named

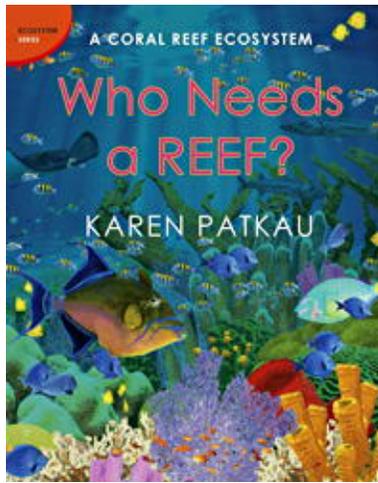
“I make art all the time now. It feeds me and I love to do all the parts of it. I’m grateful that I’m doing it. I’m most productive when I’m supposed to be doing something else like paying bills or filing paperwork. When I’m looking for a new idea to work on, I meander around a bit.”

Crystal. In 1992, Karen was awarded the Dimensional Illustrators Bronze Award for her vivid and enchanting paper collage.

Creatures Great and Small, her first nonfiction book, was published by Tundra Books in 2006. *Creatures Great and Small* takes young readers on a fact-filled exploration of extremely big and extremely small animals. In 2008, she wrote and illustrated the companion title *Creatures Yesterday and Today*, an exploration of living animals and their prehistoric ancestors and what links them. Both books were celebrated for their vibrant illustrations and extensive research.

In 2009, Karen wrote and illustrated the first book in her Ecosystem series, *Who Needs a Swamp? A Wetland Ecosystem*, followed by *Who Needs a Jungle? A Rainforest Ecosystem*, *Who Needs an Iceberg? An Arctic Ecosystem*, *Who Needs a Desert? A Desert Ecosystem*, *Who Needs a Prairie? A Grassland Ecosystem* and *Who Needs a Reef? A Coral Reef Ecosystem*. (Phew! Talk about prolific!) For this series, Karen's stunning illustrations introduce ecosystems to young readers in an easy to understand way. The level of detail and dimension in Karen's illustrations is mesmerizing—readers of all ages will feel like they're actually visiting the different ecosystems. Karen wants to impart her love and appreciation for nature to her audience. She hopes her work will help children feel a connection to nature and inspire them to protect it.

Karen really does create entire worlds in her books and the level of care and attention she takes when crafting her nonfiction books is extraordinary. From gathering visual references to visiting zoos, aquariums, and refuges dedicated to animal conservation to traveling to the places she's exploring in her books, it's clear that nature calls to Karen.



INSPIRATION IS EVERYWHERE

In 2016, Karen's husband, Michael passed away. They had always dreamed of going on an African safari. Two years later she booked a trip to South Africa organized by the Royal Ontario Museum. Before the trip, Karen attended a lecture by a paleontologist at the Royal Ontario Museum, Dr. David Evans. During the lecture, he circulated a plaster cast of an embryo

fossil and three eggs and described what it was like to uncover the extremely rare dinosaur nursery where he found the eggs. "When the cast was passed to me the idea just fell out of my head." And that idea was *Triceratops Stomp*, the story of newly-hatched Triceratops babies exploring the world with their mother. Karen says, "I didn't know what my life would be like after Mike died. I had started illustrating a book that the publisher put on hold for me. Getting back to it was incredibly helpful in moving forward. I'm

grateful and happy to do what I do. It gives me a lot of focus. It gives me a purpose."

Now that Karen both illustrates and writes children's books, I ask her what comes first when she's conceiving of a new project—the writing or the illustrating. "I start writing first. I need to get the words out and then I break them down to each page. I don't tend to go back-and-forth between writing and illustrating." When she's ready to submit to a publisher, she'll usually create a sample illustration to go along with the manuscript. Given that Karen is so prolific, I wonder if she's someone who is incredibly disciplined in her craft. "I make art all the time now. It feeds me and I love to do all the parts of it. I'm grateful that I'm doing it. I'm most productive when I'm supposed to be doing something else like paying bills or filing paperwork. When I'm looking for a new idea to work on, I meander around a bit."

THINK OF THE CHILDREN

As someone without children, adults often asked why I write books for children. I hate that question with the burning rage of a thousand suns, so, I try my best not to ask Karen that question. Instead, I tell her that I am 100% not asking her that question when I ask her why she chose to illustrate books for children. She says, “I still remember what it was like to be a seven-year-old.” This remark makes me think of one of my favourite quotations from esteemed children’s book editor Ursula Nordstrom’s book of letters *Dear Genius: The Letters of Ursula Nordstrom*, “I am a former child, and I haven’t forgotten a thing.” Karen exclaims, “Exactly! I’m not doing it for them—I’m among them!”

Karen respects her audience and takes great care to ensure that her work doesn’t talk down to children. She recalls a presentation that she made to a class at a Montessori School in Toronto. “The kids were so focused and asked me really interesting questions. It was great to get one-on-one time with them and have some serious discussions. We were seeing eye-to-eye. One very small boy said, ‘Ecosystems are cool!’”

I ask Karen what she’s going to create next and she tells me about a new nonfiction manuscript she’s working on. It’s a book about tardigrades, eight-legged, water-dwelling, segmented micro-animals that are nearly indestructible and can even survive in outer space. Karen and I marvel at how fun it is to make children’s books about these astounding things in the world... And how much fun it is making new friends during a pandemic.

NASEEM HRAB is the author of the picture books Ira Crumb Makes a Pretty Good Friend, Ira Crumb Feels the Feelings and Weekend Dad. Her comedy writing has appeared on McSweeney’s Internet Tendency and The Rumpus. Sometimes Naseem likes to get up on a stage and tell true stories. She loves improv and coffee ice cream. She worked as a librarian for a time and currently works in children’s publishing.

