



# Erica Wagner

*Above: Erica's artwork, "Dancers 1". Following page - La Mama poster by Erica.*

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Current children's book publisher at Allen and Unwin, Erica Wagner is also an artist. Erica kindly shares her incredible path to her current role, giving a great insight into the world of publishing, the changes it has gone through, and her plans for the future.

**Outline:** We would love to learn about your career path, including your time spent at the Beatrice Davis Editorial Fellowship. What drew you to publishing, and in particular children's books?

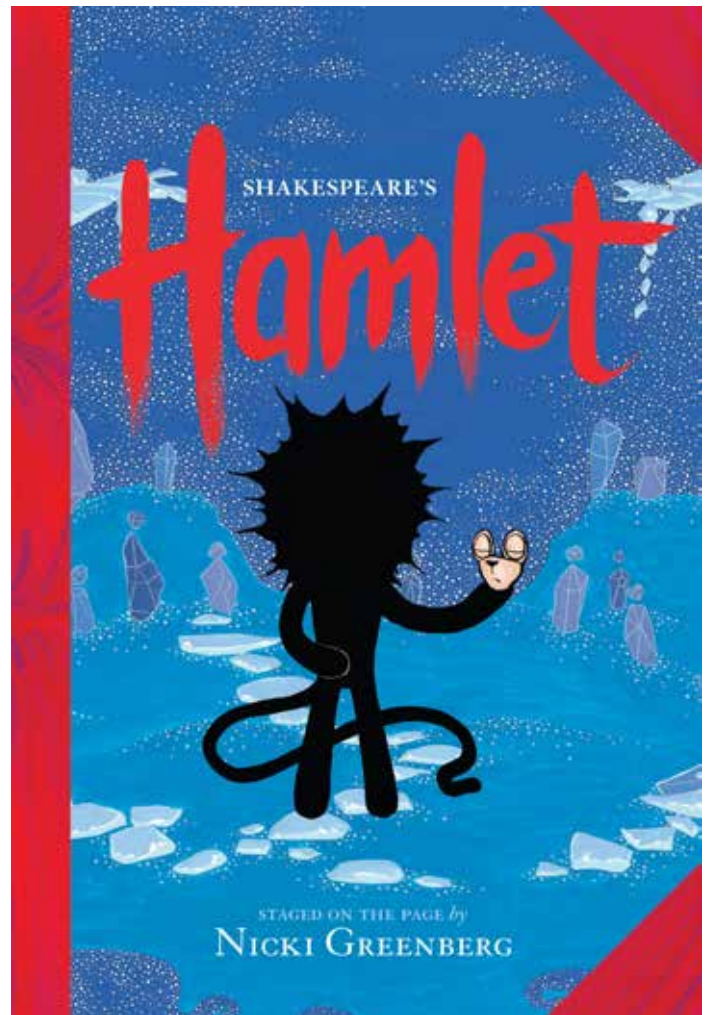
**Erica:** My first job in the book trade was crushing boxes at Thesaurus Bookshop in Church Street Brighton. The owner, Luke McCartney, was a friend of my brother's, and mentioned that he needed a bit of help in the lead-up to Christmas. I was a fifteen-year-old introvert but a voracious reader, so it was the perfect job. As well as crushing boxes, I helped out in the shop, unpacking boxes, dusting shelves, serving customers. It was the ideal training ground for someone who loved books and reading. I was exposed to books and authors I would never have heard of otherwise, and I experienced firsthand how people choose books, and how influential hand-selling can be – a common experience was harried parents rushing in on Saturday mornings saying, 'Help! I need books for an advanced five-year-old, an eight-year-old who hates reading and a twelve-year-old who loves horses, right now!'

When I finished school, my best subjects were English, Literature and Art. I was direction-less though and didn't have a strong sense of what I wanted to do or be. I wanted to write, I wanted to paint, I wanted a different kind of life to how I had been raised – I was hungry for experience. I applied for the College of the Arts and didn't get in, so started an Arts degree at Melbourne Uni instead. But after

the first year I deferred and focused on saving enough money to travel overseas. As well as working in the bookshop, I worked in the kitchen at a nursing home, picked grapes in Mildura, and finally departed for a three-month trip to Europe. That trip changed the course of my life as, at the end of the trip, I fell in love at first sight with a 41-year-old poet in Cornwall and when I returned, he followed me to Australia. We headed up the coast ended up working on a tomato farm in Bowen in North Queensland for six months. There we got married and by the time we left at the end of the season, I was pregnant with our son. The fated feeling we both had about our relationship pulled us together, and back in Melbourne we led a financially poor but artistically rich life, forging friendships in the underground poetry and writing scene. In 1985 my husband started La Mama Poetica with Mal Morgan, I designed the poster and added the poets' names by hand every month and around the time our daughter was born, I illustrated Kristin Henry's book of poems *Slices of Wry*. My husband eventually found more regular work in Community Arts and I started working again at the bookshop, gradually becoming the buyer for the children's section.

It was during these years – the mid-late 1980s, that I had an epiphany: I wanted to work with books but not with the public - I wanted to be an editor! But I had no idea what editors actually did and how I could become one, a young mother of two, having dropped out of uni. So I wrote to Penguin Books and asked, 'What do you have to do to become an editor?' I received the most wonderful letter from Bruce Sims, the publisher of adult books. Instead of saying that I needed a Masters in Literature he said, 'Try and get any job you can in the publishing industry and work your way up'. This advice was gold to me, and encouraged me to apply for a job as a trainee book editor in the newly formed children's department at Penguin Books when it was advertised in the Weekly Book Newsletter. My husband typed the application (as I didn't know how) and I wasn't surprised when I received the answer, that my application had been unsuccessful ...





Months passed and one day the phone rang. I was wrangling our two young children and answered the phone somewhat gruffly – but my tone changed instantly when I realised I was talking to Julie Watts, the children’s book publisher at Penguin. She asked if I was still interested in the job and could I come out to the offices in Ringwood for a chat.

This was July 1988 and I was twenty-five. I tell this story in such a long-winded way to encourage anyone reading this to realise the role serendipity plays in the way our lives unfold. Without Julie’s intuition, I would never have had the chance to work in this industry that has given me so much.

Those early years at Penguin were terribly exciting. It was a time of growth, a golden era in the world of Australian children’s book publishing with a fantastic crop of talented writers and illustrators starting their careers and being published. We were a small editorial team: Julie, Jane Godwin (writer and current publisher of children’s books at Penguin/Random) and myself, and we discussed everything together, laughing and crying a lot along the way. I was incredibly fortunate to have fantastic mentors, including Kay Ronai, Isabelle Carmody’s editor at the time, who I was able to ‘shadow’ as she worked on *The Farseekers*, the second book in the *Obernewtyn Chronicles*. It is impossible to list all the authors and books I worked on in my ten years at Penguin, but a small selection includes Melina Marchetta’s *Looking for Alibrandi*, Isabelle Carmody’s *The Gathering*, Leigh Hobbs’

*Old Tom* series, the puzzle books *Spoooner or Later*, *Duck for Cover* and *Freeze a Crowd* by Paul Jennings, Ted Greenwood and Terry Denton, Sonya Hartnett’s *Sleeping Dogs*, Maureen McCarthy’s *Cross My Heart* and *Queen Kat*, Carmel and St Jude *Get a Life*, David Metzenthen’s *Johnny Hart’s Heroes*, Caroline Macdonald’s *Speaking to Miranda* and *Spider Mansion*, Judith Clarke’s *The Lost Day* and Boori Monty Pryor and Meme McDonald’s *Maybe Tomorrow*. I learnt so much from each and everyone one of them and from all the other amazing writers and illustrators of that time.

At the end of 1998, after a few years of turmoil, which included the end of my marriage, it was time for change. I left Penguin to start up a children’s list with the small publisher Duffy & Snellgrove. This was tremendously exciting and I named the new list *Silverfish*. That same year I was awarded the Beatrice Davis Editorial Fellowship and in 1999 I travelled to my first-ever book Bologna Book Fair, before taking up the Fellowship with Front Street Books in North Carolina and then St Martin’s Press and Greenwillow in New York.

This international exposure was exactly what I needed at that time. It was a humbling time too as I realised that I’d perhaps over-estimated my capabilities. Moving from being an associate publisher in a huge multi-national company, with many colleagues and solid infrastructures, to doing everything myself in a tiny independent set-up required a shift in thinking that was a bit of a shock for me! My time with Front Street was a tremendous learning curve.

*Above and following - Allen and Unwin picture book titles.*

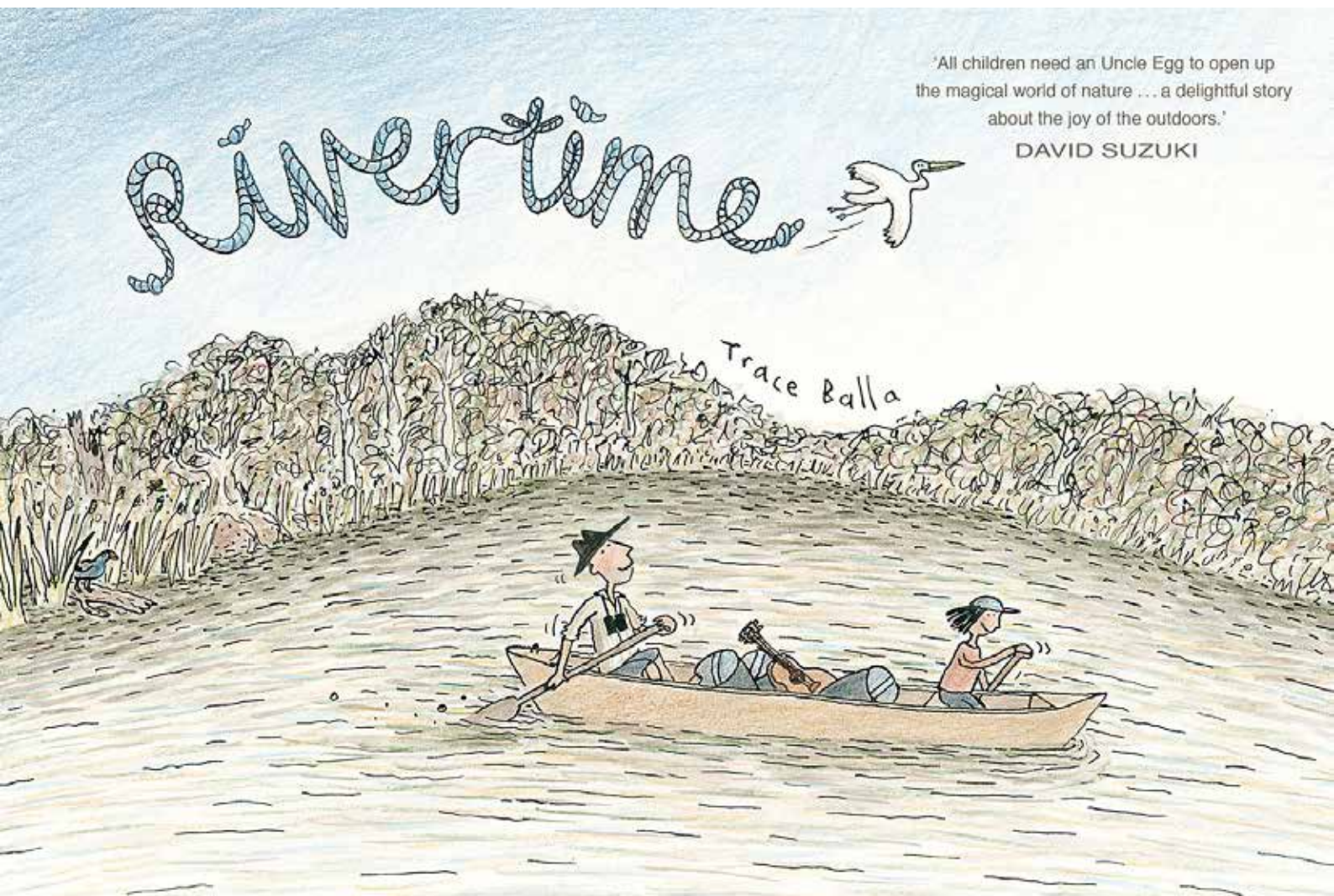
Stephen Roxburgh had previously been Publisher at Farrar Strauss and Giroux, working with Madeline L'Engle and Roald Dahl, and with a fearsome editorial reputation. He taught me so much and helped me understand what I needed to do to reinvent myself as a small publisher. But in the end that wasn't enough to save Silverfish – after just one year and the publication of five books, including Terry Denton's brilliant *Storymaze* and the Book of the Year winner, *Wolf on the Fold* by Judith Clarke, it became clear that Silverfish could not continue in its present guise – the imperatives of cash flow are everything for small businesses. So it was time for me to look for someone who would adopt the Silverfish books and me ... My saviours turned out to be Rosalind Price and Patrick Gallagher from Allen & Unwin, who were keen to talk, to acquire the books I'd published and to give me another chance.

So on Valentine's Day in 2000, I started at Allen & Unwin. My initial brief was to publish 12-15 books a year to add to Rosalind's list of about 25 books a year. In 2005 that list had grown to about 50 books a year and now we are up around 85-90. My personal list of books per year is currently about 24-28. Structurally Allen & Unwin is very different to the generally hierarchical structure of other Australian houses, and is most similar to some of the bigger American companies I observed on the Fellowship. To manage the list after this period of growth, we now have Liz Bray as our Children's Books Director overseeing the whole operation and three publishers, Eva Mills, Anna

McFarlane and myself; four commissioning editors, Sarah Brennan, Jodie Webster, Sue Flockhart and Susannah Chambers (currently in New York on the Beatrice Davis Fellowship: <http://www.susannahandbeatrice.com>); a Senior Editor, Elise Jones and a team of three editors and three admin staff who work on the books with the publishers and commissioning editors. All of us are very hands-on, involved in every aspect of the making of our books and there is a wonderful collegiate quality to the way we work with each other and with our authors and illustrators.

These last fourteen years at A&U have been incredibly exciting and for me personally have seen a development in the number of illustrator/artist-led projects, including graphic novels. Observing the working patterns of my partner of fifteen years, illustrator Craig Smith, who has illustrated over 380 books in his 30-year career, has given me a very direct insight into the life as an illustrator. Leigh Hobbs, creator of *Old Tom*, *Horrible Harriet*, *Mr Badger* and *Mr Chicken*, has taught me so much about the art of picture books and how to create books that start with pictures rather than words. Together we've learnt to trust the creative process, to keep pushing until it all clicks into place, to stay true to the heart of a project, to attend to all the little details that make a book sing ...

This method has served so many people well including the late, great Gregory Rogers, whose wordless masterpieces





*The Boy The Bear The Baron The Bard, Midsummer Knight* and the 2010 CBCA Book of the Year Award winner, *The Hero of Little Street* were all developed in this way: starting with an iconic picture, that might need to ferment for a couple of years, playing with pictures and story ideas, developing and understanding the characters, storyboarding, doing roughs, revising roughs, playing some more, letting it sit, and then finally pulling it all together.

So, as well as continuing to work with writers on works of fiction and non-fiction for children and young adults, I've been working on many illustrated books over the last decade, including a number of graphic novels as well as picture books. While the more traditional method of creating picture book – responding to a brilliant text first and then finding an illustrator to develop the pictures – still has its place, I've found it liberating working the other way round – letting the pictures lead the way. And of course graphic novels in which the text and pictures develop simultaneously have a magic all of their own ...

Publishing books with Indigenous authors and themes has also been a big part of my time at Allen & Unwin. Stand-out books include the *Papunya School Books of Country and History*, Mary Malbunka's *When I was little Like You*, John Danalis's *Riding the Black Cockatoo* and the Prime Minister's Literary Awardwinner, *Shake a Leg* by Boori Monty Pryor and Jan Ormerod. In the last couple of years, Allen & Unwin has partnered with the Little Big Book Club in South Australia on the Emerging Indigenous Mentorship Program. Working closely with mentors including Ann James, Nadia Wheatley, Ken Searle, Nick Bland and Bronwyn Bancroft, six new Indigenous writers and illustrators have created four books for young children. All four books will be released this year.

**Outline:** We would love to hear about one or two stand out children's book projects you have worked on in your

career. When first seeing the manuscript or illustrations did you know you had something special?

**Erica:** Over the years, I've learned to really trust my instincts. These make themselves felt in quite a physical way. I genuinely do get shivers up my spine when something is so good that I simply must publish it. I had the shiver reaction when Nicki Greenberg showed me the first 100 pages of her graphic adaptation of *The Great Gatsby*, even though it took a few years to work out how to publish it; I had it again when she showed me the first ink splash drawings for *Hamlet*. I had it with Trace Balla's brilliant *Rivertime*, to be published in April this year. I had it with Tohby Riddle's *Unforgotten* and Neil Curtis's *The Memory Book*. Some of the books I've felt this way about have gone on to be bestsellers, some have faded away. The book market is fickle – timing is everything. Sometimes books are overlooked for no apparent reason, sometimes people are simply ahead of their time. But even then I've never regretted backing that feeling.

**Outline:** Apart from the ability to draw well(!), what in your opinion makes a great children's book illustrator?

**Erica:** To be a good children's book illustrator, you have to be in touch with your inner child. You have to have a sense of fun as well as acute emotional recall of what it is like to be a child (without rose-coloured glasses ...). You need to love stories and have a curious and adventurous mind and a spirit of generosity.

**Outline:** For any illustrators looking to submit their portfolio, can you share any advice?

**Erica:** In approaching children's book publishers, try and show a variety of work, in colour and black and white, showing children and animals in action and from various view points. Be yourself and be persistent! Being flexible, good with deadlines and easy to work with is a strong advantage.

**Outline:** Over your publishing career, the market has changed so dramatically, particularly recently. How have you navigated these changes? What changes are you excited about?

**Erica:** The market has changed significantly since 2008. The retail environment has shrunk, online sales have increased, and we've seen – in the adult market – the rise of ebooks. In the area for which I'm directly responsible – books for children and young adults, ebooks are not as significant a factor, but there are exciting digital developments that I am personally very interested in. With four grandchildren I am again closely in touch with young children and can see the magnetic power of the tablet.

Thankfully though for our industry I think the printed book



were young, but when they were older I started to do classes again with artists and that kept me going until I could rejig my life so that I now work three days a week at publishing and have more time to spend in the studio. It has been difficult to find clear patches of time, especially at certain times of the year when the publishing life takes over due to relentless deadlines, but generally it works pretty well. I have all the same creative self-doubts that plague the writers and illustrators I work with, so I think it has made me more empathetic with their struggles!

**Outline:** Could you share with us how you create your work - inspiration, environment, materials, process?

**Erica:** I go to life drawing classes religiously with Yvonne Audette at the Hawthorn Artists Society. The sessions are all short poses, which stops you getting attached to the outcome. Drawing from a life model feeds my painting in a way that nothing else can. There is something so direct and intimate about trying to capture movement and humanity in a few charcoal strokes.

I also love painting outside in the landscape. Trying to capture the feeling of a place, trying to observe the shapes and colours and translate them into paint ... frustrating at times, but blissful too!

I also like to just play with shapes and colours and see if an image evolves. One of my favourite techniques is collage - I just love ripping up old drawings and paintings, magazines, and bits of writing, pasting and painting and creating an image that way.

I think I'm probably most influenced by the German expressionists, with their direct, forceful and expressive use of colour, line and shape but I know I have a very long way to go in my artistic life. I'm enjoying the journey though!

**Outline:** Are there any upcoming shows you are involved with in 2014?

**Erica:** I exhibit regularly with the Victorian Artists Society and the Contemporary Artists Society and my work is also represented by Port Art and Cambridge Studio Gallery. I'm hoping to build up to another solo show in the next couple of years. 📍

is still a long way from dead and illustrated books still have a strong market presence in print form. It is true though that the market is extremely competitive. On the other hand the opportunities for writers and illustrators to self-publish and promote their own work is much greater than its ever been. Publishers too are engaging more directly with consumers and I think this is a good thing, as in the end we all need help to find the right books at the right time and navigate the vast choices that are now available.

**Outline:** I've read about your commitment and interest in graphic novels in the media, such as *Meanjin*. Could you share with us what defines a graphic novel, and what in your opinion makes a good one?

**Erica:** I absolutely love the form and we remain committed to publishing a small number (about three a year) of graphic novels by local creators. We have found though that we are best at selling graphic novels that have a clear market for children and teenagers and that ones that are pitched to a general audience are trickier for us.

A good graphic novel has the same definition as any good book - the story must be well told (in words and pictures), have well developed and interesting characters, an engaging and unpredictable storyline, something strong to say and the 'x' factor - that indefinable 'something' which makes you love it.

**Outline:** Have you always created art? How do you balance your work as an artist with your publishing role - and do you find one influences the other?

**Erica:** My art life has ticked along quietly alongside my publishing life. It was hard to find time when my children

{  **CLICK!** } Erica Wagner

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