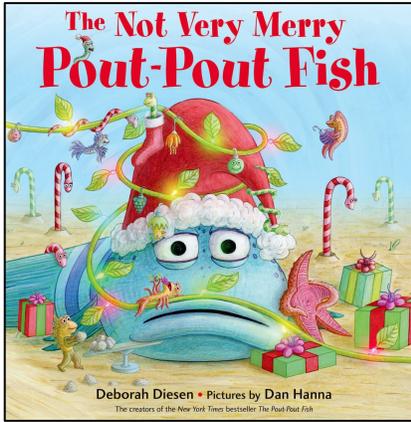


The Not Very Merry Pout-Pout Fish

A Conversation with illustrator Dan Hanna



How long have you been illustrating the Pout-Pout Fish books? What inspired your depiction of the main character, Mr. Fish?

I started illustrating the first book in early 2007 and so it's been about 8 or 9 years now.

About 15 years ago I was scuba diving in Fiji. There was a huge rusting hulk of a shipwreck about 80 feet down. At the end of a pole extending above the deck was a small metal basket. Resting in that basket was a pudgy fish about the size of my fist. I swam up and looked right into his eyes and he looked right back with a deep, gloomy frown. Years later, when I received the manuscript for *The Pout-Pout Fish*, that memory bubbled up. I realized, at that moment, that Mr. Fish was an actual fish, living on the other side of the world, 80 feet down on a shipwreck.

When there's a new Pout-Pout story to illustrate, how do you collaborate with author Deborah Diesen?

It may seem odd but I don't communicate with Debbie regarding the illustrations. I work with are the Editor (Janine O'Malley) and Art Director (Roberta Pressel). When I initially receive a manuscript I'm given complete freedom to break it down into pages and to illustrate it however I think best. After I complete the first dummy (a mock-up of the book) I send it to Janine and Roberta. That begins a long series of feedback and changes until we get to a version that we're all happy with. At that point I begin the final art that will eventually be delivered to make the book.

What has been your favorite Pout-Pout book to illustrate? Why?

The first book! Nothing can compare to getting your first book published. Its success paved the way for all the others. The original book was the first for both Debbie and me and that made it extra special. Usually a publisher will team up a first timer with someone who has experience. Fortunately, FSG took a chance on two rookies.

What medium do you use to make the illustrations? What's your favorite to work with? Tell us about your creative process.

I use the PPPPP approach: Paper, Pencils, Pens, Paint and Photoshop.

My favorite is just pencil and paper. When I start a new book I like to visit a variety of coffee shops in my area. I let my caffeinated mind roam, scribbling out ideas and laughing to myself. If a sketch doesn't make me laugh then it usually doesn't make the cut.

What illustration in *The Not Very Merry Pout-Pout Fish* did you have the most fun creating?

I especially like the one where Mr. Fish imagines giving Ms. Clam the robot body. She just looks so happy and empowered.

The items in the shop and the gifts Mr. Fish imagines in this story are so detailed and quirky. How did you come up with them? Did you have a specific inspiration?

For the imagined gifts, I drew on my own experience as a kid where I would dream up magnificent presents for my family and friends. Eventually, as with Mr. Fish, I would have to confront reality and drastically scale back my plans.

The shop items are based on all the goofy stuff you can find on the shelves of some of the more interesting gift shops.

Of all the items that the Pout-Pout fish dreams up (robot, spaceship, submarine etc.), which one would you love to get this Christmas?

The Submarine! When I was a kid there was an ad in the back of a comic book for a submarine. The ad went something like this:

"Delux Submarine! Life Size! Torpedo Tubes! Absolutely NO Cardboard Parts! Only \$10!!

I saved up the money and sent away for it. As I waited for it to be delivered my dreams were filled with visions of underwater adventure. Eventually it arrived and sank my dreams into the abyss. It was just a cardboard box with torpedo tubes made from toilet roll tubes. It was even more depressing than the Sea Monkeys and X-Ray Glasses.

What do you think was your most valuable childhood experience?

Being bored. I firmly believe that having enough free time to sit around and be bored is very important for the development of a healthy imagination.

What kinds of things inspire you to work?

I'm primarily motivated by death. When I contemplate my eventual demise it scares me into action. Although what really gets me going — is death and a cup of coffee.

What do you want the students to get out of your school visits?

That being a writer or illustrator is like being a wizard. Your magic wand is a pencil. Your potions are words and scribbles. And the spells you cast will be the stories you write and the pictures you draw. So pick up a pencil and make some magic happen!

Do you enjoy researching or do you prefer working totally from your imagination?

Initially I let my imagination run wild. Then I knock it out with a tranquilizer dart while I do some research. Finally, my groggy imagination re-awakes, snarls angrily and then runs wild again. I've found that this approach works best for me.

Do you have any advice for aspiring picture book illustrators?

Buy one thousand parrots and place them in a room with a looped recording saying something like: "Dan Hanna can sure draw fish!" Then release the parrots, using a helicopter, over each of the major publishing houses. When the editors leave for lunch they'll hear the parrots in the trees screeching "Aaaaccck, Dan Hanna can sure draw fish!" Now I know this scheme seems rather elaborate, but it worked for me.

How did it feel to have your first book (and author Deborah Diesen's first book) become so successful?

It feels like a hot air balloon ride. But not like one of those rides where the basket catches on fire or the balloon hits a power line or something.

What do you think will be the ultimate fate of your work?

Five billion years from now, when our sun has blown up and the Earth is a smoldering chunk of charcoal, humanity will hopefully have escaped to another planet. Perhaps, packed away in one of the zillions of moving boxes will be an old, dusty copy of "The Pout-Pout Fish". Maybe then, some remnant of my wandering soul will smile as a genetically enhanced child stumbles across it and cracks open its ancient spine.

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