



Celia Godkin

AUTHOR/ILLUSTRATOR

Born

1948, London, England

School

London University, England;
Ontario College of Art, Toronto;
University of Toronto

Where I live now

Toronto, Ontario

My favourite books when I was young

"*Winnie the Pooh* and Beatrix Potter's books, especially her illustrations."

My favourite book now

"*A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry."

Career

"Biologist; then a scientific illustrator and children's author/illustrator. I also teach art at the University of Toronto."

The room where I create

"My office/studio has a sloping drafting table for drawing and painting and a big desk where I write. There are bookshelves with wildlife magazines, field guides and other reference books. There are deeper shelves and drawers for art supplies, filing cabinets full of manuscripts, illustrations, business records and teaching notes."

There's a fax machine, but no computer, as I use the one in my office at the university."

Spare time

"I like to read or paint in oils. I own an old stone church in eastern Ontario, which has been converted to a home. The church is rented out, but there is a cabin at the back where I stay. I love gardening, so I have a flower garden there as well as an allotment garden in Toronto."

When I was growing up

When Celia was two, her family moved to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil where they spent most of the next 10 years. "My favourite memories of that time are of the ocean voyages — eight in all — between England and Brazil. We would be two weeks at sea — a week out of sight of land — and we'd stop at places like Lisbon, Portugal, the islands of Madeira or Tenerife and the ports of Recife or Salvador in northern Brazil."

My first book (and how it happened)

"In 1972, friend Arnold Skolnick, a well-known New York illustrator, asked me to write a children's nature book for him to illustrate. So I wrote three stories and he prepared some sample illustrations. We went looking for a publisher but had no luck."

"Years later, I illustrated the adult book *Endangered Species: Canada's Disappearing Wildlife* by Clive Roots. Encouraged by its success, I prepared the illustrations for *Wolf Island*, one of the books I'd written in 1972, and showed it to my publisher. This time the book was accepted and published in 1989 — 17 years after I wrote it."

Where my ideas come from

"Ideas pop into my head when I'm least expecting them. The central idea for my first three books (*Wolf Island*, *Ladybug Garden* and *Sea Otter Inlet*) came from flipping my original idea about-face. I knew I wanted to write stories which showed how everything in nature is interconnected, and at that time there were lots of news items about introductions — plants or animals arriving in a new location and disrupting everything. The problem with that idea was that it was hard to see how I could arrive at a happy ending. I knew it was important to give children a hopeful message. Then I thought: what if, instead of adding an animal, I take one out? Then I can bring it back at the end to restore the balance. Once I'd hit on that idea, then it was just a question of finding examples of where that had happened."

Who and what influenced me

"Ever since I can remember, I've loved animals, written stories and drawn pictures. In high school I had a wonderfully eccentric biology teacher, Miss Walker, who maintained that she was a drug addict because she drank gallons of tea. Though I was good at a whole range of subjects and not particularly brilliant at biology, I think it was her influence that headed me in that direction initially. But when my career as a biologist landed me in a dead-end job where I spent half my time cleaning out dirty animal cages, I decided to embark on a career as a scientific illustrator and from there it was a short step to illustrating children's nature books."

How I work

"First comes the idea. Then I collect all the background information I can, both for the story and — either then or later — for the pictures. Next I write the story. When that's done, I put it away for weeks or even months so I can come back to it with fresh eyes."

"When it's been revised and polished to my satisfaction, I break it into images and prepare detailed pencil sketches, leaving space for the text, if necessary. I may go on revising the text as I work on the illustrations. Once

the texts and sketches are approved by the publisher, I go to final art."

Something nobody knew about me (until now)

"I used to work at the Reptile Breeding Foundation, a non-profit organization which bred endangered snakes, tortoises and charials (Indian crocodiles) to save them from extinction. One of my jobs was to feed the animals. Sometimes they tried to eat me!"

My favourite book that I've created

"I think *Sea Otter Inlet* is my best book in terms of the quality of writing and illustration, but *Flying Lessons*, which I've just completed, was the most fun to do because it was so quick and easy."

Tips for young creators

"Once you've written your story and drawn your pictures, show them to someone who can give you helpful feedback. The person who can help you best will be one who encourages you but who will also make suggestions for improvements. Remember: there is always room for improvement; if you don't agree with others' advice, don't follow it; and never give up."