

Collaborating on Picture Book 'Plato, the Platypus Plumber (part-time)'

800 words

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Apart from, 'How do you work with an illustrator?',

'Where do you get your ideas?' would be the most common question creators are asked.

I had the toolkit idea, but illustrator John Petropolous designed it.

Kids love tool kits. Why shouldn't a platypus who is a watery creature, be an on-call plumber who fixes pipes but also fixes grumpy people. What would this tradie platypus keep in his underwater toolkit? Would it be a backpack or a carrybag? Apart from spanners, would he need a joke book, smile spray, feather for tickling or a smilasorus? Would the toolkit fall off when he swam? Would the mobile work underwater?

I trialled an early version called 'Platypussyfooting Around', with various school groups. They LOVED designing and working out what went into the toolkit.

A platypus has always seemed to be an all-purpose creature to me. Amphibious. Occasionally endangered. And with a wonderful 'proper' name of ornithoryncus...

I saw the platypus as an imaginary friend for a child whose fractured family was under stress. They'd live in old housing so there was need for plumbing help, with leaking pipes, dripping taps, tanks and holey gutters.

I live in Melbourne and along the upper Yarra River bike trail, there are rambling, old houses made into run-down apartments. This seemed a believable setting for ferals, water access for the platypus and a money-short family doing renovations.

I talked to plumbers. I visited up river where platypus were reappearing and did some inside storm drains research with the council engineer. I found out everything that might go wrong.

The platypus plumber idea has been swimming around for thirteen years in my sub-conscious, which is ironic, because originally I called the character Thirteen. That's how many years platypus survive in the wild if they're lucky. If ferrets or six pack plastic rings don't get them.

From the beginning, the story was so active; I had a TV series or maybe animation in mind. So I created a family cast, with a mother with travel poster dreams, a muso father and Gran with her TV soapies in 13 possible episodes. Now it's possible that this story may go into some very new electronic formats like Kindle or Ipad.

At our local pool, where I swim laps, I heard a mother yell out 'Zanzibar' to her swimming child. A really blond kid appeared, which was a shock because Zanzibar (the island off Africa) seems such an exotic name. So I had my boy character's name.

John P did original platypus sketches, but the concept was rejected by several publishers and producers who thought I already had a classic imaginary friend hippo story and didn't need another.

I continued to workshop it with kids who loved making their own toolkits and saw him as more of an eco-warrior. So I added more recycling and water-saving issues. Tank pipes in convoluted shapes running off the roof.

Then I experimented with viewpoints. First person Zanzibar. Could he have dialogue with the platypus? Did his parents know he communicated with a platypus? Was it by mobile phone? Underwater? Mental telepathy? These are all problems of the logic of fiction which must be believable within the story.

Plato was a name which came later, when we were fiddling with the title. It's no surprise that my illustrator John Petropolous has Greek heritage, but a friend suggested the short and philosophical Greek name. Finding the right name for a fictional character is harder than naming a baby. Especially when we have so many P's on the cover words.

Ten years on, art director John had a young family and was still delighted to illustrate his first picture book. From my experience parents of young children make the best picture book illustrators

because they get the kid shapes right. John also has a sense of humour and love of word play. He even created a business card for our plumber platypus. We met in a café in Carnegie and sketched concepts on their outside table.

I wanted 'blokey' artwork that would appeal to young boys too. John suggested using the lettering of his daughter and created a new Cassandra font.

John did a number of drafts before we got Plato the character right. Plato is now joyous, resourceful, affectionate and appropriate for the age group.

Who was the major character? Zanzibar? The platypus? Water? The river? The editor made some constructive suggestions about sequencing, starting and ending with the river.

Later the eco-issues of drought became more important when I visited outback communities like Condobolin. And I realised how stories could be therapy for those in extreme climactic conditions. IPKIdz publisher David Reiter was interested in eco issues too.

Some books are favourites. Plato is an endearing character and authors, like parents, shouldn't have favourites, but...

Now I've written a classroom playscript, where students actors are the tools...who 'fall in', when Plato the Platypus Plumber gets a call. that's going to be a fun performance, with a spanner, Hard hat, Joke and a feather to tickle grumpy people.

Plato, the Platypus Plumber(part-time)

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Plato is a platypus and a part-time plumber with a tool kit.

On call ,Plato fixes watery problems like leaking taps, but he also fixes grumpy people. From his tool kit, he uses smile spray, a feather or a joke.

Sometimes Zanzibar's family need a little help. Plato always comes, despite the ferals along the creek bank.

Water carries secrets, stories and (yucky) stuff! An eco-warrior, Plato knows how to fix things.

2010 Astrid Lindgren Award nominee, and recipient of the 2009 ASA Medal Hazel Edwards (www.hazeledwards.com) has written across media and her works have been performed and translated into Chinese, Korean, Tamil, Auslan and Braille. Platypus are her favourites, and after her Antarctic expedition, Hazel has great respect for Antarctic 'tradies' who can fix any problems.

John Petropolous is Art Director at Advertising Australia . As a graphic artist has worked freelance for various groups, including Cracker Comedy (Sydney Comedy Festival) and Antipodes Lonsdale Street Festival Reason for living...my beautiful girls. This is his first picture book.