



Author-Illustrator Spotlight — Robbie Cheadle



Robbie Cheadle: Author-Illustrator

Robbie, the number of books in the Sir Chocolate book series is continually growing with five books now available. What gave you the idea for this series?

My son, Michael, has an auditory processing problem, which meant that he found learning to read and write difficult. We improved his reading skills by reading together every day. However, writing was more difficult as Michael hates to write. The process of converting thoughts into words is laborious and frustrating for him.

I encouraged Michael to write by making up these Sir Chocolate stories with him. Sir Chocolate and Lady Sweet are both Michael's ideas. The concept of Chocolate Land and a world where you can eat everything also came from his fertile imagination.

Michael has had input into all of the stories, coming up with the trolls that throw liquorice, a baby cookie monster and a dragon that breathes fire in different colours depending on his mood. We took his lovely ideas and wrote them into rhyming verse stories which he handwrote into a book form.

What appeals to me about your books is the uniqueness of their illustrations. You make all the illustrations from fondant. What gave you the idea of creating illustrations in this way?

My brother-in-law saw and liked the little books we created. He suggested we include some child-friendly recipes in the book, simple items that parents or grandparents could make with their children.

Baking and fondant modelling had been a hobby of mine for several years, and it was relatively easy to make these sorts of illustrations. Initially, Michael helped with the fondant items for the books. Now that he is older, he likes to bake with me and helps make our chocolate houses and cakes. I take photographs of our creations and insert them into the stories in the appropriate places.

Robbie, can you please tell us a little about how you create these fondant illustrations. There is a lot of detail in the figures and objects. Is it a time-consuming process?

Because I have been dabbling in fondant art for years, I have a lot of bits and bobs for making all sorts of things. I have things such as petal and leaf cutters, moulds, fondant art tools and a box of different powdered food colours and edible pearls [for eyes and noses].

The level of complexity depends on what I am making. The little people in these books are not difficult as their facial features are not very detailed. They are just cute, with round heads, chubby arms and legs and plain bodies. I decorate them with hair, hats and clothes.

The standing figures are much more difficult than the ones that sit. I have to let the legs dry for about a week so they can bear the weight of the figurine when I attach the body, head and arms. I let them dry for another week, leaning against a glass, before I photograph and use them.

The more realistic people, like Fiddledee Dee, are more difficult to make as their faces include a lot of detailed lines and paintwork. These take a couple of hours a day to make.

The cake art also takes a bit of time as the cakes have to be made and then baked. Often, I have to carve the cake/s to get the design I have in mind.

I make icing, often in different colours depending on the design, and ice the cake in parts and layers. The fondant decorations are attached last.

I find baking and fondant art very relaxing and enjoy spending the time on our creations.

What time of day do you most enjoy working on your illustrations?

I generally work on my cake art and fondant projects over weekends as I don't have time during the week. I like to make fondant art early in the morning when the house is still asleep, and I won't have any disturbances. I often listen to audio books while I work and create.

What parts of your illustrations do you most enjoying creating?

I enjoy making flowers the most, although they are the most difficult. Each petal must be cut out, frilled and fluted with a ball tool or a cocktail stick, so they curl and are thin at the edges. Each petal must be left to harden for about 30 minutes before they are attached to the centre piece. Timing is important. If they are left too long, the petals will crack. If they are attached too soon, the petals will droop. I do have some disasters, but I am very determined, so I usually get it right in the end.

Do you have a favourite Sir Chocolate book? Which one and why?

That is a difficult question to answer. I must admit I do love them all.

I love the trolls in book one, *Sir Chocolate and the Strawberry Cream Berries story and cookbook* and the message of friendship it contains.

I love the sugar crystal cave featured in book five, *Sir Chocolate and the Sugar Crystal Caves story and cookbook*. I do think it is my best cake ever.

However, I also like the fairies in book three, *Sir Chocolate and the Sugar Dough Bees story and cookbook*.

Both book three and book four, *Sir Chocolate and the Condensed Milk River story and cookbook* highlight the importance of nature conservation.

Book two, *Sir Chocolate and the Baby Cookie Monster story and cookbook*, is possibly my favourite. I just love this little monster with his jagged nose and ability to create havoc in Chocolateville. I love his rolling biscuit shaped Mum too. This book highlights the concepts of mother love and teamwork.

What were you hoping to achieve with your books?

When my children were growing up, I read them all the books I loved as a child. When I ran out of ideas, I turned to more modern books, and I didn't like a lot of what I discovered in them. I feel that a lot of modern books almost promote rudeness towards teachers and parents by children who don't listen to instructions and deliberately defy authority figures. I don't like this kind of literature.

I wrote the Sir Chocolate books because I think they are lovely and fun-filled ideas. I hoped that they would promote parent and child bonding by taking the form of a first cookbook for children. I also hoped they would inspire children to be creative. I gave the book to one little boy who comes from a deprived background. He made the figurines out of clay that he dug out of a ditch. That kind of story warms my heart.

How do you hope readers will feel as they read them?

I hope children who read these books will feel inspired to read and be creative. I would like them to try out the recipes and find ways of enjoying activities that do not involve screens and television.

How would you like teachers to present the books to children?

I think the Sir Chocolate books are best presented together with a baking activity, though it doesn't have to be baking. It can be cupcake decorating or biscuit assembly art. The books are written in rhyming verse to assist young children with learning to read and word recognition.

Do you have any advice for teachers when responding to children's artwork?

Teachers need to appreciate each child's creativity. Some of us are more artistic in the formal understanding of art than others, but every child has a creative side that needs to be nurtured.

Creativity is the springboard to progress, as progress requires leaps of faith and "out of the box" thinking. This means that everyone, including scientists and mathematicians, benefits from creative thinking.

Do you have any advice for children when creating artworks?

Good artwork requires patience and effort. If you rush a project and do not give it your best effort, you won't get the best result. If it doesn't come out quite as you intended, try tweaking it or working with the part you see as a mistake. You can end up with quite surprising outcomes by being open-minded.

Are there any messages you would like them to discuss?

My books are largely fantasy and aim to provide an enjoyable story for children, to encourage them to read more. The pictures are intended to stimulate their imaginations and promote imaginative artwork.

The books work best when they are read interactively, and children are encouraged to express themselves using fondant or play dough, to make sculptures of how they imagine the various characters and creatures to be. They can learn how to think of an idea and turn it into a reality. There are messages about environmental awareness, friendship, bullying and other topical issues in the books, but they are subtle. I try not to make the books "preachy".

What is your favourite picture book?

I am not sure if this counts as a picture book for children, but I just love *The Butterfly Ball and the Grasshopper's Feast*. It has the most amazing colour plate illustrations and beautiful poetic stories.

Who is your favourite illustrator? What do you like about his or her work?

My favourite illustrator is Lauren Child. She does simple drawings, but the expressions on the faces are just too cute. Somehow, she makes her drawings speak volumes with only a few lines and colours.