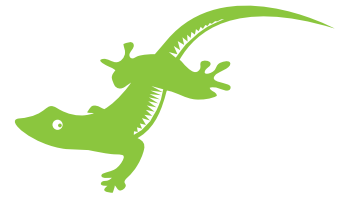


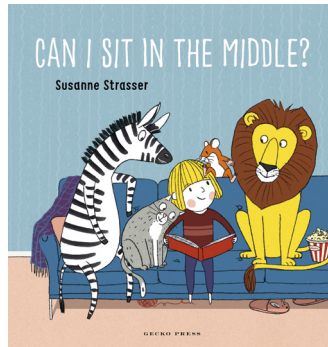
Q&A



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Can I Sit in the Middle?

Susanne Strasser



Susanne Strasser studied communication design and illustration in Munich and London. She is the author and illustrator of many successful picture books, including bestselling board books about the animal friends in *Can I Sit in the Middle?* She lives with her family in Munich.

Where do your stories start?

The creative process is not that exciting. It's a lot of thinking, fighting against doubts, fighting the "fear of the white paper." I usually start writing first (on my PC) and then do quick sketches with pencil to see if the things I have in mind can work visually. Sometimes it's the other way around and my starting point is an image. Writing, sketching, thinking all go hand in hand; it is a fluent process

What is behind the story of *Can I Sit in the Middle?*

Only my own experience as a mother. Before bedtime, me and my two kids used to read on the sofa but, as in the book, it wasn't always that easy. There was always something missing...one child had to go to the toilet, the other needed a cuddly toy, one asked for something to drink, then the other for a different book, one wanted to sit on the left side, the other closer to the lamp...a thousand issues before we could *finally* get started. This story is pure life experience.

What is the importance of the structure and refrain in your books?

All my books in this "series" have a cumulative structure that builds to a twist and an unexpected happy ending. This structure automatically creates expectations and growing excitement.

In *Can I Sit in the Middle?*, the child and animals come together to read a book but, every time they want to start, something disturbs the cozy setting. This delay of the reading pleasure, the "waiting for," is emphasized by the almost mantra-like repetition of the text. And the interruptions in the story are reflected in the text by leaving out the important word "book" that only appears at the very end when they *finally* get started.



How do children respond to this book?

Children (and adults) like the familiar setting, the cozy reading on a sofa. Almost every child knows this, whether from home or kindergarten. And when they hold the book in their hands, they almost slip into the role of the child on the cover. The listeners automatically add the missing word “book” when the book is read aloud, which adds playful interaction between the adult reader and the child.

Children also like the cute animal characters and their fun expressions and that every animal has its own little side-storyline that is not mentioned in the text. It is fun to discover that.

What do you think gives your board books their special appeal to children?

Cumulative and repetitive patterns are especially appealing to small children: soon the children know the text by heart and can “read” the book by themselves as if they were proper readers. They quickly learn how the structure works: the story is predictable till a certain point, which gives the children confidence and safeness, knowing what comes next, and also some growing excitement that soon something fun and *not* predictable happens: a turning point that will bring a happy ending!

I like developing proper stories for this young age, when kids discover the wonder of language, how words and things sound. This works brilliantly with cumulative and repetitive patterns. Children at this age especially enjoy the onomatopoeic language, which is fun to read, hear and repeat.

Humor plays a very important part in my work. I try to create little stories that are funny, with funny characters and, most importantly, taken from their everyday life. Humor is very human, and even small children understand it very early. And humor is a great narrative tool to entertain.

How has it been to have your books translated into so many languages?

It’s almost unbelievable for me that children all over the world can read my books, and I’m very grateful. I receive many nice messages from families through social media, photos or even videos of their kids reading my books. This is very touching. It’s always exciting to hold a copy of my book in a foreign language in my hands.



How do you create the artwork for the books?

First I write, then I draw a little rough storyboard to see if the story works in pictures. I do a lot of sketches of the animal characters, from very detailed and realistic to a simplified, almost two-dimensional appearance, as I want them in my books.

Then I prepare monoprints—the black and grainy outlines in my illustrations are not pencil drawings but handprinted monoprints. With monoprinting, you spread thick ink onto a glass plate, then carefully put a piece of paper on top of the ink plate and draw with a pencil or biro onto the paper. The ink from the plate transfers onto the other side of the paper.

I then have all these black and white prints (around 60 A4 sheets per book) scanned and put them together as spreads digitally, then color them in Photoshop.



What are books for you? And why do children need them?

I see myself as a storyteller, either in words or with an image. Drawing and writing is a way for me to understand the world, to get to know it and convey it to others. Books are a way to express myself.

As a reader, books give me a chance to reflect, a doorway to imagination, a little escape from everyday life—actually pretty much the same as for children.

Books are a great magic treasure box! They allow children to dream, to think the impossible, to dive into imagination, to escape ordinary life and put on different roles—which in turn prepares us for reality. Last but not least books can be a way of entertainment and having fun! Books for children should be a pleasure.

Can I Sit in the Middle? | Available February 2024 from all good bookstores

This read-together board book is a snowballing narrative of animal chaos that culminates in storytime under a blanket tent.



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