



Celebrating five years of picture books that pass the 'EEK test'

Sarah Pakenham took a gamble and set up her own firm, Scallywag Press, in 2019, just before the pandemic hit. Not only did the business survive, she now has more than 30 titles under her belt

I could have paid off my mortgage or done this," Sarah Pakenham says, looking back on the past five years as a solo entrepreneur. The "this" she is referring to is Scallywag Press, the picture-book publisher she set up in 2019 after leaving Andersen Press, where she started off her career "making teas and filing"; she left 27 years later as Andersen's rights director, with the blessing of founder Klaus Flugge.

Decades of experience, coupled with the irresistible prospect of choosing and publishing books from start to finish, gave Pakenham the courage to go it alone. "There was a lot of nail-biting before taking the plunge," she admits from her office in central London. "But publishing is all about risk, gambling and revenue—working out which books are going to do well, or not. We just have to hope that a few [successes] will support the others."

Now numbering 30 titles, Scallywag's list is selective, with every manuscript put through a rigorous vetting process. "Our books have to pass the 'EEK' test: emotion, empathy and kindness. Those are values and skills we feel are the most important to learn about and remember,



Julie Vuong @julesvuong

because we want children to remember Scallywag books into adulthood." As a result, there is a certain signature to Scallywag books and a leaning towards titles that radiate humour and the surreal, as renowned author Satoshi Kitamura encapsulates (more on him later).

There is an endearing sense Pakenham is coming to realise the scale of her achievements at Scallywag as we talk in real time. We're chatting, as is customary these days, via Zoom during the interlude between the London and Bologna book fairs. Although far from quiet, the break before Bologna offers Pakenham a much-needed breather, and a useful moment to reflect on her show strategy. The London Book Fair is about "consolidation, networking and meetings", reaching new export customers including from Korea, alongside agents and suppliers. Bologna, on the other hand, is about "exhibiting and meeting new people" as well as selling backlist and new books for translation rights.

This year, both occasions also serve as celebratory opportunities for Scallywag's fifth birthday. And the party poppers look set to come out again after the fairs, peaking with a "do" and a partnership with Independent Bookshop Week in June, with prizes and promotions on offer. Pakenham's immediate reaction to the milestone is, though, one of relief. "I'm very glad to have reached five years because of the pandemic," she confirms.

Back then, with her business strategies scuppered, Pakenham rode with resilience through the stuttering years. "In the first year of trading, I was coming to terms with what to expect and learning the ropes. Then the pandemic happened. Would I have built up faster or sold more? It's very good to have come through the other side, but maybe I would have achieved more [had it not happened]." Pakenham, though, is far from disheartened. "I'm quite pleased with where I am and absolutely grateful for all the support I have got from the industry."

Solo ventures are rarely solitary and Scallywag is no different, calling on a trusted group of freelancers. Pakenham is keen to sing the praises of Janice Thomson, her former editorial director at Andersen Press, who she calls her "main support". Alongside acting as Scallywag's freelance editor, Thomson came up with the firm's name—and a doubly good one it is, capturing the "spirited and liberated" nature of young children, while also mirroring Pakenham's "S P" initials.

It takes a village

At this five-year appraisal, Pakenham seizes on the chance to recognise others who have made Scallywag a success. She cites the aforementioned Kitamura, who believed in her potential as a publisher from the very start. "When I told him I was leaving Andersen to start a new company, he gave me a book to publish called *Hat Tricks*, which really put me on the map." She emphasises how crucial that moment was to outside perceptions, as well as her own confidence. "Just having his name attached to a Scallywag book made me feel as though I could do it."

To have secured such a distinguished author as Kitamura early on was a real coup. His unforgettable

Scallywag's Bologna hotlist



Wolf in the City
Rachel Tilda Wolf
April 2024, £7.99,
9781915252531
Debut from British author/illustrator Wolf, a graduate of the Cambridge MA in Children's Book Illustration.



Hannah and the Violin
Satoshi Kitamura
April 2024, £7.99,
9781915252531
Scallywag's sixth book with the Tokyo-born, London-based author and illustrator Kitamura (pictured below).



Ivy Newt and the Swamp Dragons
Derek Kelly & Magda Broi
April 2024, £7.99,
9781915252531
Third in Kelly and Broi's Ivy Newt in Miracula series.



animal characters and quirky tales had been published by Andersen Press ever since Flugge spotted his work in a Covent Garden gallery and asked him to illustrate Hiawyn Oram's 1982 hit *Angry Arthur*.

"I thought the first year would be mostly finding new talent and older books to reissue," Pakenham says. After Kitamura signed up to Scallywag, more authors followed, including Ruth Brown, an established book artist of more than 40 titles. "She had a book that was turned down by Andersen and when she showed it to me I loved it," Pakenham beams. "I'm working on a fourth by Ruth. She is now in her 80s and is a real household name, especially in schools and libraries." Passionate to talk about her list, Pakenham goes back to the book that kicked everything off. "*Me and My Sister* by Rose Robbins, about life with an autistic sibling, is the first book I took on and it remains an important book," she says of the Waterstones Children's Book Prize-shortlisted title.

There is, of course, a word of appreciation for the towering Flugge, her employer for almost three decades and the person who "allowed me to see how publishing works". One of the core principles she learned, which she has instilled at Scallywag, is a strong author-publisher relationship. "I had a desire to return to what we see as the 'good old days', when authors and illustrators had a more personal connection with a small publishing staff, and decisions could be arrived at in a less commercial and more altruistic and experimental environment."

Expanding and consolidating

Looking back on key events in Scallywag's brief history, Pakenham thinks Bounce Sales & Marketing taking on the list to sell to the trade was "pivotal". She says: "Robert Snuggs at Bounce agreed to take us on, even though we only had two and a half books to show at the time."

Scallywag recently branched out across the Atlantic, working with Lerner Publishing to Americanise six books a year. So far the link-up has been fruitful, selling out of Ruth Brown's *Eye Spy* and Rob Ramsden's *We Planted a Pumpkin*. Pakenham is also excited to work more with American author Jon Agee, one of Scallywag's flagship names. "We have been lucky enough to buy 10 books by him and I love everything he does. His *The Wall in the Middle of the Book* is a classic in the making."

Scallywag also expanded into poetry last year after Pakenham was captured by the writing of journalist Simon Lamb. "I came across Simon in a local Scottish newspaper and he had written such a spirited review that I contacted him and asked if he had written a book," she says. "This became *A Passing on of Shells*, illustrated by former Children's Laureate Chris Riddell, which was nominated for the Carnegie and made the UKLA Book Awards and The Week Junior Book Awards shortlists."

As to the next five years, Pakenham wants to consolidate what she has and not lose focus of why she launched the business. "Scallywag is rather personal to me. I want the books to mean something to people and be memorable for generations, as my best childhood books were to me."