

Satoshi's journey to become a children's book creator.

When I was 19 years old I made my first picture book. I wrote few lines and added an illustration in the first page of a small sketchbook. Then I made up a story page by page, and it ended at page 22. It was not good enough to be published, but an interesting experience for me. I always liked drawing and wanted to write a story. It turned out to be perfect to combine the two. I discovered picture books by making one by myself rather than reading someone else's book.

But soon afterwards I became quite busy as a commercial illustrator working in advertising and magazines, and didn't think much about picture books for some time.

A couple of years later I was living in London. I had come to the UK to learn English but also to find out what I really wanted to do with my life. I was interested in art in general, but not quite sure which direction I should take.

One morning when I woke up I didn't feel like doing anything at all. I was so bored that I went on lying in bed looking at the ceiling. I thought: I must come up with something interesting to get out of this boredom. So, I tried to think of something. A while later I had a story in my head. I decided to get up, and sat at the table. I wrote down the story and added some drawings. I started to enjoy it and the boredom had vanished into thin air. I spent all day writing and drawing.

When I had finished I made photocopies and sent the idea to publishers.

I visited many publishing houses, and met editors and art directors, but nothing happened until I met Klaus Flugge of Andersen Press. He gave me the text of 'Angry Arthur' written by Hiawyn Oram. It became the first picture book that I illustrated, and my career in children's book had started!

Satoshi's working day and his studio

When I'm working on a picture book, I work for long hours every day.

I usually go to bed early, like 9 pm, and get up around 4 o'clock in the morning and start to work when it is still dark. When the weather is good I look at the moon or stars with a binocular, watch the sunrise or listen to the birds singing from the balcony. I like the quiet time in the morning. The advantage of starting early is that I can concentrate better and continue in that way for the rest of the day.

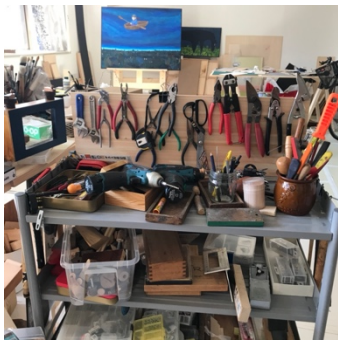
I buy a roll of water colour paper and put it in the holder that I made for myself.

I stretch the paper across the table and draw on it.



(insert pic 1) When I finish a drawing I cut the paper and pull out more paper for the next drawing. I used to use sheets of paper, but some years ago I found that I can work better with the rolls.

When I'm not working on books I spend a lot of time building things out of different kinds of wood. I make tables, shelves etc, and in fact almost everything I use in my studio. Last autumn when I had a show at a gallery I made lots of picture frames.



Sometimes I work on sculptures, too. I have lots of carpentry tools and pieces of timber and my friends say that my studio looks more like a cabinetmaker's. (pictures 2 and 3, 4)



The genesis of The Smile Shop

I was 23 years old when I came to UK the first time. I lived in London for almost 30 years but had to return to Japan permanently in 2009. I loved living in London and had many friends but had to leave for family reasons. My book, The Smile Shop, is in a way, my 'London book'. In it I try to recreate my favourite city where people from all over the world live in harmony.

The market I used to go to fairly regularly was Borough Market near London Bridge Station. It must be one of the biggest food markets in UK. There are so many interesting stalls. I would find exotic things to eat like a purple coloured tomato or dark green juice, a kind of meadow grass extract. It had such a strong, strange taste that it could have turned me into a sheep or cow. Anyway, my fond memory of the market helped me to create the book.

In the last fifteen years or so I have been invited to book fairs in Latin America many times. At one point I tried to teach myself Spanish although I never got beyond beginner's level. One day I found the word 'sonrisa' in a dictionary. It means 'smile' and I liked the sound of it. Panaderia means bakery and verduleria is a green grocer, so, I thought if I put '-ria' at the end of sonrisa, it would sound like a shop that sells a smile. . . I thought it could be an idea for a book. So, I wrote a story in my basic Spanish. A boy goes to a market and looks round the stalls and shops. . . then, he sees a sign saying 'Sonrisaria'. He goes in the shop and asks a man behind the counter if he can buy a sonrisa. The man replies saying a sonrisa is not something you can buy with money, you can only exchange it. The man smiles and so does the boy.

I wrote the words and added some simple pencil drawings on small pieces of paper. I must have shown it to a few people but soon forgot about it.

Some years later my wife saw the sketch and thought it was a very good story and told me that I should develop it into a picture book. So, I made a proper rough sketch, this time in English, and showed it to Scallywag Press. They liked it and gave me the go ahead.

The story itself is quite simple but the process of producing a book can be very complicated and time consuming. I need to draw hundreds of drawings until I find

the right style and details. For example, I drew scores of sketches of the standing boy just to decide on the colours for his scarf and jersey. It takes months to finish a book.



I tried to make the man at the Smile Shop a little like the late James Berry. I met him a couple of times. He was such an interesting person as well as an excellent poet and the coolest looking man I'd ever come across. I tried my best, but probably my character does not look as good as Mr. Berry himself.

All living organisms communicate with each other; even the simplest organisms do and so do plants in their own ways. Birds exchange songs, dogs get messages through smells. Communication is the essential thing in life. We cannot live without it. We humans use words most of the time, but body language is also very important. Occasionally you can smile in a negative fashion: a sarcastic or contemptuous smile is possible, but that is a one-way smile that you cannot share. When you exchange a genuine smile with other person, it is a show of good will as well as equality. When you share a smile with someone you are both equal. A smile might be the finest asset we possess - like kindness.