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## Artist Spotlight





Selection of some illustrated and picture books by Juan Hernaz (Trailer produced by the author).



Juan Hernaz

## Juan Hernaz (Gijón, Spain)

### 1) You have always been passionate about books and art. What first inspired you to utilize your exceptional skills and talents, to illustrate children's books?

*From a very young age, I felt a special attraction to drawing. Long before learning to write, I filled hundreds and hundreds of pages with my scribbles, and that was a constant throughout my childhood. As a child, it was already clear to me that my future was going to be linked to art. And in parallel, I felt especially attracted to books. I was a good student and for me books were a kind of sacred space, largely because of the respect for them that I learned from my parents. As a teen, I spent my weekly tip buying books that formed the seed of my current library. But it wasn't until I studied Fine Arts, that I discovered*

*illustration. That was something like closing a circle, as if the two extremes were touching, a kind of neural synapse or revelation: I linked my love for books and the stories they contained with my natural way of communicating.*

**2) What do you find most satisfying about illustrating children's books?**

*For me, each story in each book is a kind of riddle, a place to be accessed using a series of keys. In a narration without images, those keys are found in the text, in the descriptions, in the characters, in the environments ... In a picture book, the challenge is to build that parallel language, capable to create an alternative story that complements and serves as key to the recreated world, and to develop a language that, in many occasions, is unique for each book. This creative work, which is always born from very deep research and documentation process, is probably the most satisfying part of the work for me. In fact, when I finish the storyboard of each book of mine, I consider that the creative work, to a large extent, is already done. The only task remaining is to turn those sketched ideas into illustrations.*

**3) When you create art for books, what is your end goal, or primary objective?**

*My end goal is always the communication, the transmission of ideas and concepts that can be found superimposed in different layers, that can also excite the reader. My goal is always to create books that are, above all, experiences of knowledge and emotion. I believe that a rich book capable of contributing something is one to which you can return again and again, and in each visit, discover new nuances that can be appreciated differently by each person or by each emotional state. In the end, it is the magic of an illustrated story that I compulsively pursue in every project I tackle.*

**4) You often illustrate books written by others. In such instances, what sort of collaboration is required?**

*In each book that I illustrate, I dedicate an essential and abundant part of my time to documentation, to reading 'between the lines' and to the search for multiple references that can support my visual discourse and serve as structural support for the album as a whole, thus understanding the union of text and image. This initial process is very private and I make sure there is no outside interference. I need to conceive the universe of the book based on my own experience with that text, my readings in different states of mind and my research process. This part of my work is the most strenuous and always converges in the creation of the main storyboard, with dozens of annotations and references, but with a fairly clear vision of how I conceive each image, both individually and within the general rhythm of the book. And this is the moment when I introduce it to other people. I am always open, of course, to the suggestions and appreciations of the author or the editor that can serve to improve the book. That is, after all, the ultimate goal: to get a work that is capable of communicating and moving.*

**5) What practices do you employ, prior to beginning the actual initial sketches? What research is involved?**

*I am quite systematic in my creative process. After a series of analytical readings, I try to understand all of the facets of each text: The depths of the ideas, its structure, its references and the ability to suggest, the aesthetic form, the writing style and, especially, the ellipsis that always exist in every story. From this series of readings, I obtain my first notes to begin my documentary search, trying to reach the maximum depth and understanding from dozens (or hundreds) of references that come from very different sources.*

*Each story is born from a cultural experience that is common to all of us and that draws from sources that sometimes go unnoticed. Sometimes I feel like a detective, trying to find those patterns that incite the creation of stories and of which, sometimes, even the author of the text is not aware. I subsequently try to build a visual language capable of generating a whole, indivisible with the text. For all these reasons, the initial research is, very probably, the most important part of all my work.*

**6) How do you work to achieve that seamless story, when considering the eventual combination of text and artwork?**

*Although the essential part of my work, to which I tend to attach more importance, is the intellectual creation (ideas, references, documentation, concepts ... that come together in the storyboard), none of this makes sense if I cannot create some illustrations that serve as an effective channel to all of that previous work.*

*The selection of materials to work with and the aesthetic approach play a very important role here: not every technique, every type of drawing paper, every color range, or every way of approaching atmospheres, light and others, does convey the same. I conceive each book as a whole and I always wonder what final feeling I want the reader to experience. The answer to that question determines many of the variables with which I choose to work. And, at the same time, I ask myself another question: What emotional experience does the text require? What envelope, what atmosphere does it need to fully communicate? If I can answer these questions, I will have achieved the objective of creating a channel in which text and image are indivisibly unified.*

**7) Are there one or two suggestions you could provide illustrators who are just beginning their careers in children's publishing?**

*I am not very given to offer advice. I think that the true learning, the really enriching one, is a lonely path on many occasions. However, I can share some ideas that I consider important for a long-term career.*

*For me, the most important is humility: the creative act is necessarily permeable to all knowledge. The artist must be able to constantly learn and enrich his inner universe. In the case of the illustrator, he must take into account that, in addition, his images are born with a very specific narrative objective and, therefore, he must make them coexist with words (whether or not they are written).*

*Humility is the virtue that will make us capable of subordinating our art to a greater purpose and, if necessary, modeling our style for it. Regarding this, I like the following simile with the*

*world of acting: for me, a good actor is the one capable of moving the viewer by disappearing behind his character, transforming into another person and making it tangible; On the other hand, a bad actor is the one who, no matter how many characters he plays, will always remain himself. Similarly, a good illustrator will be the one who is able to model his style to most effectively move the reader.*

*The career of an illustrator is like any creative path, a path of many failures and perhaps some success. Learning from mistakes, assuming them as an essential part of the work, and persevering in the effort, are the only keys necessary. And always, stay driven by passion. If there is no passion, there is nothing.*

*Therefore, constant work, perseverance, passion and humility. I think that in the end, they are valid suggestions for life itself.*

#### **8) Is there a publication that you wish you could have illustrated? If so, Why?**

*When I take a publication or an illustrated book in my hands, I simply enjoy it and value it for what it is capable of communicating and moving. But the truth is, whether I like that publication or not, I never ponder the possibility of having illustrated it. I don't really know why. I think I like to face tangible challenges and get involved in them in a realistic way. On the other hand, I am fortunate to be able to apply my work to very different areas, collaborating with clients of a very diverse nature, from theater to advertising or botany, as well as, of course, the publishing world. The enrichment that I obtain from all of these areas allows me to face each new project with maximum interest.*

*A few years ago I was fortunate to illustrate a first edition of Don Quixote in one of the few languages into which it had not been translated until then. Facing a work of such magnitude was an enriching experience and a challenge; but I approached it with the same interest and passion with which I can approach any text that motivates me enough. In the end, the inner journey involved in the adventure of illustrating a story is not contingent (and should never be) to the apparent size of the project.*

**9) The children's book market is always changing and evolving. Do you feel that is true for art too? Do you feel your art is constantly evolving?**

*Life is a constant evolution. Every day we face new situations, ones we had not experienced before, forcing us to make new, different decisions. A little over a year ago we began to experience a world health situation which we had never known in our lifetimes. And every day we meet different people, we exchange opinions, we nourish ourselves with information that varies from minute to minute. In other words, our reality constantly changes and evolves. And we adapt, evolve and change with it. It is something that characterizes us as a species: our ability to adapt to the environment.*

*In the end, art is an expression as human as the changes we are experiencing. Necessarily, my way of illustrating, seeing and analyzing, is very different from how it was years ago and without a doubt, very different from how it will be 10 or 20 years from now. It is natural. I feel, therefore, that my art evolves and changes. I like that and in fact, it gives me some kind of security. The truth is that I would panic if one day I found myself repeating the same processes from 10 years ago.*

**10) You live in Spain but work with countries all over the world. What differences do you see in the various markets? What similarities?**

*In addition to my country of residence, I usually work with clients in France, Israel, Turkey, China, Singapore and the US. Working regularly with very different countries, with such distinct and different cultures, speaks in favor of the universality of art. The emotions transmitted through images are transversal to many cultures. It is exciting to see that, regardless of ideas or ideologies, a good illustration and a good story equally move people from different origins. This is something that honors us as a species and shows us that we are not so far from each other.*

*However, there are nuances in the predilections of the public, more sensitive to certain subtle modes of expression that sometimes escape us and force us, as creators, to model our work. As*

*example, expressions of the characters, compositions of the illustrations, atmospheres ... these can all be interpreted differently depending on the country in which you work. As a result, it is often necessary to carry out certain adjustments.*

*Another very different matter is that of the markets themselves. For example, the European market, very rich and varied, has been experiencing a somewhat oversized number of publications for some time, a fact that contrasts with the Asian market, which has grown exponentially in recent years, increasingly demanding the participation of illustrators from other countries. A common pattern that I see in all of them, however, is the commitment to quality books: There are always publishers who love their work, who value a good illustrated book and who are willing to bet on it. And, on many occasions, the most interesting books are those that come from small publishing houses.*

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