

Rebecca Markwick:

Before we start, if I could get you to say your first and last name to make sure I pronounce it right. If you'd like to give pronouns, give pronouns.

Tom Gauld:

Well, it's Tom Gauld, and Gauld rhymes with called. I guess my pronouns are he/him.

Rebecca Markwick:

Well, hello and welcome to Shelf Healing, UCL's bibliotherapy podcast. I'm your host, Rebecca Markwick.

Our guest today is Tom Gauld. Tom is a cartoonist and illustrator whose work is regularly published in The Guardian, The New Yorker and New Scientist. He also pops them, very handily, up for us on Twitter. I love it; so much fun, seeing them pop up in my feed. His cartoons regularly feature authors, editors, and some really good jokes around reading and writing.

He has recently published a new children's book, called *The Little Wooden Robot and the Log Princess*, which is available now in all good bookshops. You can see a little sneak preview of some of the pages on Tom's website, which we'll link to in the show notes.

First question Tom, to get us started, is nice and easy. Do you find that reading in all aspects is therapeutic?

Tom Gauld:

Yes. It's one of my favourite things to do. If I have some time, I, if, which are not free, either working or frittering away uselessly, then yes, definitely for me.

Rebecca Markwick:

Brilliant. Obviously, you're an artist and you draw a lot. I don't know how you fit it all in, it's impressive. Do you find that, sort of, the act of drawing and creating art is also therapeutic? Or is it a bit more stressful because it's now your job?

Tom Gauld:

That's interesting. I suppose reading for me is therapeutic. But writing, that feels like hard work. It's an element of my work I need to do, but it's not for me quite as enjoyable as drawing, which is truly therapeutic. I'm very happy to just sit with a blank piece of paper and enjoy the motion of making small drawings or patterns without even thinking of them as my work. So, there's some element of pure pleasure in drawing. It's different from the, I suppose for writing, I feel a pleasure when it's finished and when I've made something and when it works. But for me, drawing is in itself pleasurable even if it's to no purpose. So that's definitely more therapeutic for me.

Rebecca Markwick:

I've spoken to quite a few comic artists and illustrators over the course of this year, which I have been very lucky. There's been a big divide between people that draw digitally now and people that still draw on paper. Which side do you fall for? Or are you a bit of both?

Tom Gauld:

More on the paper side. I mean, the computer is involved in everything I do, but I do like to make an actual drawing as I go along. So, I'll make some pencil drawings and then I might scan them into the computer and fiddle with them and print them out and trace them off and change them.

I use a light box a lot. So, I think for some artists drawing is like a sort of virtuosic beauty that comes out of them. But for me, even though I enjoy it, it's, it's, it's drawing something badly and then tracing it, so it's a little bit less bad and then tracing it again. Maybe the 10th traced version I've, I've got to something I can live with.

So, the computer can help. If I draw something a bit too small, I can make it bigger. I can straighten things up and I do all my colour on the computer. So, it's very handy from that point of view, but I still like the feeling of moving a pen across a piece of paper.

Rebecca Markwick:

I love that!

You've created a huge number of comic strips over the years. A lot of those feature writers. What is it that draws you to creating comics based on writers and authors?

Tom Gauld:

Well in the simplest terms, that's the job I have for The Guardian. My cartoon has always been on the books page. It's always got to relate to writing or reading or, or some, or maybe occasionally they are, but, but most of the time it's about books.

So, I think it can give the impression that I am a sort of brain in a jar who lives in a library and does nothing but read. I wonder what, what it would be like if I, if I didn't, you know, when was it 16 years ago, we've been hired by The Guardian's sport page or something. I guess that idea of what I am will be quite different. But actually, that's not entirely true because I do like reading and I think the reason why they've kept me there for 16 years is because I am interested in books. It isn't every week me saying, God, I, another cartoon about reading, how am I going to do it? It is something which I do find continually interesting.

I suppose as a creative person, I can put myself quite easily into the mindset of a writer, a prose writer most often, but it's pretty much the same process.

Rebecca Markwick:

Yeah. I was going to say you have some incredibly astute observations. Sometimes I've got a favourite one that I've bookmarked forever, which is your editor's one where there's a massive stack of paper.

And he goes, 'the sticky notes are the ones which don't need any edits doing.' Just felt very accurate.

Tom Gauld:

Yes. Well, I'm pleased. I'm pleased when I come up with something, which is, I suppose, if you were, a sort of, an analyst of humour, that's basically just a reversal joke where things seem to be one way round and then they're flipped to the other.

But it's great when you come up with something which is nice and simple, but it has a sort of underlying truth in it. I guess that's what I'm hoping for in the cartoons is they're both those things, a surprising piece of humour, and hopefully with some truth or even emotion in there as well.

Rebecca Markwick:

So obviously you do your cartoon, do your comic strips for a variety of newspapers. I think you're also in the New Scientist, as well, although I don't see those so frequently because I'm a bit laxer on actually buying the New Scientist. I love you a lot, but you also illustrate, and your illustrating style is slightly different to your comic drawing style.

Is the comic style, something you've done in order to get them every week? And that illustration is more time? Or have you just got like a different brain that you get into when you're doing your illustrations, as opposed to the comic strips?

Tom Gauld:

I suppose, I suppose the illustrations there is more space to have visual fun. In my cartoons and my comics, I suppose the drawing style is paired down and simple. I don't want stuff in there which will distract from the joke or from the story. So, I tend to a much more stripped down style. Whereas with an illustration, part of the job is to draw people in with a little bit of visual fireworks. Even though it's pretty much the same style, it tends to be slightly bigger drawings. I guess, I can have more fun. It's more like, as I was talking about, when I'm doodling and enjoying the act of drawing. So, the illustrations probably are a little more, I'm having a bit more fun in some way, the drawing fun, rather than the comics, which is about my ideas.

And the nice thing about an illustration is someone else has done the hard work of figuring out what this thing's going to be about and the research. Really, as an illustrator, all you have to do is read the piece and then be inspired by it. So, it can be fun and maybe that frees me up a bit to be more playful with the images.

Rebecca Markwick:

That leads nicely into my next question.

How did you find creating your new children's book, compared to your usual mode of illustrating and drawing your cartoons and comics?

Tom Gauld:

Well, in terms of that thing of how the words and pictures go together, writing a graphic novel, I've always found very difficult. You can't just, or I can't just write it out as a script and then illustrate it. You need to think how the pictures are going to be on the page. So, the whole thing, it's like constantly trying to figure out whether you're putting the cart before the horse or you're, this is a terrible metaphor, whether you're leading the horse or the cart or whatever. It's a muddle, and it's both times I've done a long graphic novel I find it very, very difficult. Whereas with the kids book, I very much wrote the story as if I was a writer and then gave it to myself almost as if I was an illustrator to illustrate. So, I really enjoyed the illustrations because I felt like people like the story, the story had been signed off really by the publisher. Even though all along I've been thinking about the illustrations, I felt like I had a more from footing for making those pictures. But getting to the stage of having a written children's story was, it was almost like putting all the difficult work at the start, I suppose.

Rebecca Markwick:

Lovely.

This is a question I ask a lot of people and I quite like asking the artists because we always get really interesting answers.

So, is there a book that has profoundly affected you in your life? In regard to either illustration, or comics, or cartoons, or writing, or reading, or just anything in general?

Tom Gauld:

Yes, I think probably the book which changed my life, maybe that's a little bit grand, but I was studying illustration at Edinburgh College of Art. I had an idea, a vague idea, that I wanted to tell stories with pictures, rather than just illustrating other people's writing. But I didn't, I didn't think I wanted to make comics like any other comics I saw, and I couldn't see how I could, by my own way, get into that world. Then I discovered a book called *Amphigorey*, by an American artist called Edwards Gorey who wrote, maybe a hundred or maybe more even, strange short, illustrated books, which looked a bit like weird Victorian kids' books, but they were written for adults and they're beautiful objects. He designed every aspect of them, and they were just like nothing else. I sort of thought, 'that's what I'd like to do'.

I don't want to do a photocopied zine which looks punky, because that's not me. I don't wanna do a superhero comic. I didn't want to do a kid's book and I saw his work

and I just thought that's what I want to do. And for awhile, my work was just ripping him off all the time.

But I got through that, and I kept some elements. So, I think there's definitely a big connection between my work and his work. But yeah, I think if I hadn't seen this Edward Gorey book, I don't know what I'd be doing now. Workwise.

Rebecca Markwick:

I think saying that it changed your life is not grand at all. It sounds very accurate.

Are there any books that you return to over and over again? Sort of like comfort book? Well, comfort food but a book.

Tom Gauld:

I think probably, well, Edward Gorey's books, but also PG Wodehouse when I was at school. This was in the nineties and there was the TV show of *Jeeves and Wooster* with Stephen Fry and Hugh Laurie. A friend, my friend Vicky, at school said, 'oh, the TV show is good, but you've got to read the books, they're much better.' I didn't really believe her, but she was a good friend and she lent me one of her dad's books. And it was right. I mean, as much as I love Fry and Laurie, and at the time these were the funniest guys in the world, you realize that writing is just so perfect. Those books are so warm and hot. I almost want to say harmless, but not in a bad way. Just everybody is good and well, maybe then, and when they're bad it's forgivable. I just find them very, as you say, like comfort food, very warming and the writing is completely perfect as well.

Rebecca Markwick:

Thoroughly agree with you there. P G Wodehouse, *Jeeves and Wooster*, they're fabulous.

Do you have a specific time or place that you read? You said earlier that obviously you read when you can fit it in, because you're very, very busy. Are you a sort of a snuggle up in bed with a book or have an audio book as you wander around?

Tom Gauld:

I tend to get the bus to my studio, so I get a little bit of reading done on the bus and I tend to try and get to bed not too late and get some reading in before I fall asleep.

But often that's like a page and a half before I start nodding off. More and more, I listen to audio books when I'm working. I can't listen to an audio book when I'm thinking of ideas or when I'm writing words. But when I'm drawing, especially, colouring or doing the crosshatching, which takes a long time and needs very little attention. It needs it, it needs enough attention, but it doesn't need the attention that listening to a podcast, or an audio book does. So, any book that I think I'd like to read, but I sort of had a feeling that I might never read it because it's too frightening, then I listen. Sometimes that has

the unfortunate side that I sort of regret that I didn't read the book. The most recent one I listened to was *The Magic Mountain*, by Thomas Mann. I totally realized that if I'd been reading that to myself, I'd have stopped because it was hard work, but there was something about having it read to me while I was drawing. I feel like I, I really enjoyed it and I did get through it. So that's when an audio book really pays off, I think.

Rebecca Markwick:

Definitely. Do you have any beautiful books? I feel like someone that draws a lot must have at least one beautiful book sitting somewhere.

Tom Gauld:

I used to buy books just because they're beautiful and I'd go most years to an amazing comics festival in the south of France, in a town called Angoulême, which in fact is where they shot that new Wes Anderson. It's all filmed in that town. So, it's a lovely town. And the whole town gets taken over by this comic festival. I used to go and buy so many comic books, in French, that I couldn't read, just because the French make the most beautiful comic books. The production is lovely. I've kicked the habit of buying books that I can't, will never be able to read. Partly just because they were piling up and piling up.

But I still get tempted sometimes with a lovely book. I think probably my favorite one is as a treat to myself, I bought a slip-cased edition of the first three, what I think of as the first, the best Edward Gorey books. It's a lovely slip case that he designed with three lovely editions of his books inside. It was quite expensive, but I feel like it was a treat. I, well, I, I suppose I must feel I deserve it.

Rebecca Markwick:

Sounds like it. I'm very tempted. I've never heard of him before, so I know what I'm doing after we were finished recording this.

Tom Gauld:

Oh yeah, he's wonderful. He's best known probably for one book he did called *The Gashlycrumb Tinies*, which is an alphabet book of children and the way that they died. Big influence on Tim Burton. So, there's that sort of dark thing. That books may be a little more, that's a good one to start with. It's very simple and obviously funny, so it can't remember it and they're very, very deadpan. So yeah, if you like my work, I think you'd, I think you'd like his.

Rebecca Markwick:

Now obviously a lot of your comic strips and your cartoons are very, very funny. Do the jokes come to you before you start drawing? Or do you have like a little image of the drawing that is the joke?

If that makes sense. I feel like that was very complicated way of saying drawing image first or joke first.

Tom Gauld:

Well, what sorts of comes first is an idea which is in my head and isn't necessarily words or pictures. It might be a scene with some people talking in it. So, I guess everything comes at once in that case. Other times, it's a funny phrase that I think I can work with so that I get the phrase rights and figure out how to make it work and the picture. Other times I have a funny image and have to work out what text to put in it. The hardest thing is when a really good text piece comes to me that I can't figure out how to do visually. I know that one of the things I have to do on the pages of these magazines is, is make the page, not just lots of words, I have to add some images. So those are the trickiest ones where I'm trying to almost reverse engineer a picture out of an idea, which would probably be better as a, as purely a text piece. So those are the trickiest ones.

But the best feeling in the world is when I'm walking to work and I have a coffee at home, and then I pick up a coffee on the way and the walking and the caffeine, some days means as up by the time I open studio door, there's enough of an idea that I can pretty much come straight to the drawing board and start drawing. Those days feel like an amazing gift. Whereas other days I'm still here sort of two days later, scratching my head and trying to think. There's not a worse feeling. I suppose it shows how easy my life is that there isn't a worst feeling for me in that.

Rebecca Markwick:

Now, obviously we've spoken a little bit about it already, but your new book with a fabulous name actually, *The Little Wooden Robot and the Log Princess*, it feels like a fairy tale and it sounds really lovely.

I do need to get a copy. I've been meaning to get a copy for ages. The little sneak preview pages on your website, it looks heart-breaking, absolutely heart-breaking. She falls asleep and he's broken. It's one page and I was very upset.

Tom Gauld:

It does have a happy ending. So, we should say that, don't worry!

Rebecca Markwick:

I'm relieved. What sort of sparked the idea for *The Little Wooden Robot and the Log Princess*?

Tom Gauld:

Since I had children, I've got two daughters who are now 13 and 16, so you go through a stage, or we went through a stage, I guess, from when they were two to like seven or

eight where you're reading them stories every night at bedtime, often two, sometimes three picture books. For me, it was like a real boot camp on what children's books are and how brilliant they can be when they work and how disappointing it is when they don't work. I saw at the end of, or as those years went on, I more and more felt I wanted to have a try of writing a children's book, using the things I'd learned. You know, if I think if I tried to write a children's book before that period, I'd have written something quite different. Sort of realising that sort of picture book is very much a script for a performance by a parent, to a child, accompanied by pictures in a book, which is very different from how you read a comic book.

So, I sort of realized that I wanted to make a book and I liked how much my children enjoyed the classic fairy tales and how powerful those Grimm's fairy-tales are, particularly the Grimm's ones. My plan was to find the right Grimm's fairy-tale and adapt it to be my own story. But I realized either they're really well-known, and they're well known because they're good ones, and other than deconstructing it, which I didn't want to do, it didn't seem there was anything very interesting there. Or they aren't well-known, and the reason is that they're absolutely horrifying, or they have some weird sort of moral.

One of my favourites is called *The Mouse, the Bird, and the Sausage*, and they lived together in a house and things go wrong. But the moral is basically knowing your place and don't try new things, which doesn't seem a very good moral for children today. So, I sort of slightly despaired at, I guess, what I was hoping was the easy route of not having to write a story.

In the end I thought, well, I'm going to have to write my own story. The same time I was, we quite often make up stories for my daughters. We had a series of ones called the Fox stories, which were about an evil fox and some children, but they were often told in the car when we were trying to get the kids to go to sleep. They were intentionally very slow and boring. So I didn't want to make a very slow, very boring story, but I did have one story that I'd made up for them because we call my younger daughter, Iris, who sleeps solidly every night, never seems to wake up. We called her the log, and I invented this story about a little log princess who every night, when she fell asleep, she turned into a log. In the first verse I made for the girls, it was two princesses, and she forgets to wake her sister up. The log gets lost and then there's a quest to get it back. So I sort of wrote the first draft accidentally, just improvising it as I went along, which if I, if I could I'd write all my stories like that, because it's a great way of getting over all the tricks your brain can play on you to persuade you not to write. It's quite good to just get on with it and get it out there. So, I don't know. I have to find a way that now, now I don't have small children, I need to improvise more often if I can.

Rebecca Markwick:

That sounds like a really lovely way to come up with a story idea. I'm a bit jealous now.

Tom Gauld:

Then I just worked on it for a couple of years in the background, when I wasn't doing something else. Just tinkering with it and trying to meet the story work as well as possible. Because I love, for some reason drawing robots, I thought it'd be more fun and more unexpected to have a princess and a robot than two princesses. I just thought it was visually more interesting. So that sort of went into the story, and quite a lot of the story was me, the writer, thinking, well, what would me the illustrator like to draw here? So, there's, you know, I, I do like maps and I like complicated pictures with lots happening in them. So, I sort of wrote a story which would be a sort of a vessel to hold some of the things...

Rebecca Markwick:

That must be quite a fun dynamic, because most of the time you'll have a writer who writes the story and then a completely different person illustrates it. Like you said earlier, you know, you get given the story and you draw for the story. But it's quite unusual to have someone that gets to write the story and illustrate the same story.

Tom Gauld:

You know what, I've never illustrated a kid's book by anyone. I did illustrate one, but the author had been long dead, so. But the point is, I imagine you'd have an urge to say, well, can we, can we change this text a little so I can draw what I want to draw? And I would imagine most of the time they'd say no. But if you were the writer, then you can be generous to yourself and say, sure, go ahead, knock yourself out. So, it's good from that point of view.

Rebecca Markwick:

Excellent. Well, we've run out of time. I was getting really into that it was so good. Thank you so much for coming on. I'm going to pop links to your new book, and to your website, and to all the authors and books that you've mentioned into the show notes.

And thank you very much for coming on. It's been marvellous.

Tom Gauld:

Not at all! Time has flown, I didn't realise we had been talking so long!

Rebecca Markwick:

I highly recommend Tom's new book. I've read it since recording this and it is heart-breaking, and beautiful, and wonderful and it does indeed have a happy ending. Do check out Tom on Twitter. We'll pop his Twitter link in the show notes. Do follow us on Twitter at shelf underscore healing for fun book things on Twitter.

Thanks, as always, to Nicholas Patrick for our music, and to Nat Balch for our transcripts.