

KRISTA'S MISSION: the journey from idea to publication

Researching, writing and getting a picture book published

by Krista Bell www.kristabell.com

As the author of twenty two published books for young readers, I know that once you find a story to tell, you need to focus on writing and re-writing it to the best of your ability — and you need to be patient until it gets into print!

Most of the books I've written have been based on real life experiences — I take the facts and turn them into 'fibtion' (my word for 'fiction') by using my imagination to stretch the story with interesting fibs. Most of my books were published within a year of my writing the text and sending it to my publisher. But my most recent book, ***Lofty s Mission***, has had an almost four year journey from idea to research to first draft to being published.

This story grew from real life, but it uses historical facts and settings. I thought it would be interesting for you to share the journey of a picture book from idea to publication, so here's the story behind ***Lofty s Mission***.

In 1992 when my family moved to Glen Iris in Melbourne's eastern suburbs, my eldest son, Ben, built an enormous aviary in our backyard. As I stood there admiring his handiwork, I could never have guessed that bird cage would play such a vital role in my writing a picture book that would be published sixteen years later, in 2008. Ben kept birds in the aviary for many years, until university studies took over his life and the cage stood empty.

Then one summer night as he bicycled home from work, my husband, Douglas, found a sick pigeon on the banks of the Yarra River and brought her home for me to nurse back to health. I'd had experience with 'Pidge' (read my story *Pigeon Pair* in *Stories for Seven Year Olds*, Random House), an orphaned pigeon who had lived with us when Ben was twelve, so I knew a little about homing pigeons and 'Xena', as we named her, proved to be tough as her namesake and miraculously survived.

Over the next decade, my flock grew until I had almost thirty homing pigeons. My best stock bird was 'Hercules', a very handsome male, who produced some excellent babies with 'Xena'. Every once in a while there was an exceptional 'squeaker' — a baby that was much bigger and stronger than its 'twin', as pigeons usually lay two eggs. The baby pigeons are called 'squeakers' because for the first six to eight weeks of their life, as their yellow fluff is replaced by real feathers, that is what they do: they squeak, asking their parents to feed them, pretty much continuously.

One very special 'squeaker' was 'Dodi', born on the day that Princess Diana died, and he grew into a big, confident adult pigeon, ready to take on the world. On several occasions 'Dodi' even physically challenged his father, 'Hercules', as to which one of them should head the flock. 'Dodi' was an ordinary grey pigeon, but like his father he was fearless. When he was still a 'squeaker', 'Dodi' started feeding himself from the seed tin and drinking water on his own, rather than his parents thrusting mushed up food into his mouth with their beaks. He was one feisty pigeon and he, with his father, 'Hercules', was the inspiration for my character 'Lofty' in *Lofty's Mission*.

The idea for the book came from a TV documentary I saw in 2004 about pigeons in Europe during the Second World War. They lived in mobile lofts and followed the army's movements. I wondered how those pigeons learnt to fly back to a loft that was moving, because I had thought that pigeons always flew back to where they were born. I discovered that if you take a six week old 'squeaker' from its home, it's old enough to survive without its parents feeding it, and yet young enough to be taught to return to a different loft. In the case of the army pigeons during the war in Europe, that was a mobile loft.

I'm a curious person — guess that's why I'm an author (as well as the fact that I love words). I wondered if our Australian Army had used pigeons as messengers during the Second World War — and, yes, they had, in New Guinea. Being me, I wanted to know more. As luck would have it, about this time I was awarded a **May Gibbs Children's Literature Trust** creative time fellowship for May 2004, which meant I had free accommodation in a studio apartment in Canberra, home of the **Australian War Memorial**, the perfect place for me to research what I hoped would become a story.

The May Gibbs' fellowship meant I was away from home for a month and could spend every minute of the day working on my writing (except when I was writer-in-residence at various schools), without having to run a family household as I usually do. This was such a luxury that I worked on two projects at once. While staying in the **Canberra studio in May 2004** I began writing my junior novel ***Who Dares?*** which was **published in 2005**, a time frame that I had come to think of as 'normal'.

'Normal' for me was that I'd write a text and less than a year later the book would be published, with chapter heading drawings done by my middle son, Damien. But, while I was diligently writing my first draft of *Who Dares?* in Canberra, I knew it was only a fifteen-minute walk from my apartment to the Australian War Memorial. So, when I was not working on my novel, I spent many hours in the reference library at the AWM, researching carrier pigeons that flew for the Australian Army during the Second World War.

Before going to Canberra I had spoken with my publisher, Helen Chamberlin at Lothian Books, about my interest in carrier pigeons during the War. I had no idea where my research would take me, but I wanted to write a picture book text about Australian homing pigeons who flew for the army. Helen advised me to do my research with an open mind and let the human element just happen — she was confident I would find my story for young readers.

I was amazed that at the **Australian War Memorial reference library** I was allowed to handle precious **historical documents** about carrier pigeons. I watched an inspiring black and white **documentary film** on video (without sound) made by the army in the early nineteen forties up in northern Queensland. I discovered that hundreds of thousands of pigeons were trained by the army in Australia during the war and that most of those birds had been bred by home breeders — 'pigeons fanciers', as they are called, who lived in the suburbs and bred these birds to race them.

There it was — the human story. How could I use this? I sat back in my chair at the Australian War Memorial library, closed my eyes and thought about my friends who live in Adelaide and have a large aviary. Ian was in his mid fifties then and his son, Evan, was a young adult, but both of them had been keen

breeders of racing pigeons since they were eight or nine. On several occasions, as their birds flew back into their garden after a race, I had watched Ian get the race ring off a bird's leg and into the time clock, hoping his pigeon might be the race winner. I knew the thrill of pigeon racing.

In **May 2004** at the **Australian War Memorial in Canberra**, my imagination whirled. What if, during the Second World War, one of the pigeons trained by the army had been bred by a young boy who was hoping it would be a champion racing pigeon? What if the bird was taken from the boy and given away to the army? How would the boy feel? If this had happened to Ian or Evan when they were boys, they would have been devastated. I had the start of my story.

More research. More details. More quirky facts. I found **an original letter** written by the army in New South Wales to a Victorian pigeon breeder, stating that his bird would be de-commissioned and returned to him. That was a vital link in the story I built up over the next few months. In real life some birds had been returned to their owners — this was an important detail. Once back in Melbourne I would talk to such breeders, now in their eighties, as well as to an old soldier who had trained the birds for the army up north.

Still at the AWM I held in my hands **a triplicate notepad** made of rice paper that was used by soldiers for writing messages during combat. The first copy would be put in the cylinder attached to the leg of one pigeon, the next copy attached to a second pigeon (in case the first pigeon was shot down and did not get through to headquarters) and the third copy was kept as a record. The AWM also had lots of **photos** of things like the cane hampers used to transport pigeons on the back of motorbikes. As well as giving me all sorts of inspiration for the text of my picture book, these photos would be good reference material for the period details in the illustrations for *Lofty's Mission*.

More research revealed that several Australian pigeons had been awarded the **Dickin Medal for Bravery** (an international award) during the Second World War, because they had made courageous flights under enemy fire. These pigeons had taken messages from the war zone back to the safety of their mobile lofts, passing on vital information to headquarters and saving

many soldiers from certain death. Some of them were seriously wounded, but kept flying. These were the heroes I wanted to commemorate in my picture book, even though my story was to be pure ‘fibtion’! Being me, I wondered how you would pin a bravery medal on a pigeon — and smiled when I realised the medal was put on a ribbon and slipped over the pigeon’s head!

With my research done I couldn’t wait to actually write, so I started the **first draft** of ***Lofty s Mission*** in late **May 2004** sitting in Canberra airport on my way home to Melbourne. During the remainder of that year I re-wrote my story many times, with input from my editor and my publisher, who were both confident that my story was a ‘goer’. In late 2004 Lothian Books said yes to their publishing *Lofty s Mission*, and in early 2005 **David Miller** agreed to illustrate it with his superb paper sculptures, basing them on my AWM research, as well as a visit to my pigeons and photos I gave him of my birds.

By mid 2005 David had drawn a small scale dummy rough which we edited together at our publisher’s office, and then we signed a joint contract for our book to be published in March 2007. Two years seemed a long time to wait — it would be almost three years since I had begun the project. But as it turned out, it was to be even longer — the publishing company, Lothian Books, was sold, and publication of *Lofty s Mission* was delayed until March 2008! Patience, Krista, patience!

So, having taken almost four years to be published, ***Lofty s Mission*** is now the book of which I’m most proud — it’s the book I always hoped I would write one day. A book that speaks to young readers and to adults. A book that feels just right. There’s nothing I want to change. It’s the book I wanted to write.

The hard work of researching, plotting, writing and re-writing my story, followed by the long wait for publication has certainly tested my patience, but now that Lofty has flown onto the shelves of bookshops and libraries, I know the wait was totally worth it. Dreams do come true! Magic does happen! Believe in yourself, find your story, do the hard work — and be patient!

Lofty s Mission, written by Krista Bell and illustrated by David Miller is published by Lothian Books, an imprint of Hachette Livre Australia