

Living la vida

PHOTOGRAPHED BY SAKURA SHIBATA

Award-winning children's book designer Vida Kelly tells *Sarah Lang* about working with Quentin Blake, how she met her husband, and moving from London to Wellington.

As I walk up Vida Kelly's drive in Raumati South, three beady-eyed chickens dart towards me and I freeze, then bolt past them. Emerging from her design studio in the garden, Vida laughs when I explain my chicken phobia, and offers to be a human shield when I leave. The 49-year-old – who is slight, sweet, softly-spoken and self-assured – has baked banana bread to have with a cuppa, while husband Luke (also a designer) is at work and their three children are at school.

When the 2019 Publishers Association of New Zealand Book Design Awards finalists were announced, Vida discovered she'd nabbed an unprecedented three of the nine finalist spots in the Scholastic New Zealand Award for Best Children's Book. 'Books are such a team effort, so it's lovely to get the recognition,' says Vida. What she doesn't say is that authors and illustrators tend to get public attention, while the designer's role is often overlooked. Vida attended the awards in Auckland on 25 July. She didn't win, but was happy to simply be a finalist, and to catch up with and meet people in the industry.

Her three finalist books are, of course, all beautifully designed. The first is picture book *Oink* by David Elliott (Gecko), in which a pig farts to evict the animal friends who invade his bath. The second is *The Cook Who Cooked For Captain Cook* by Gavin Bishop (Gecko), about the challenges of cooking for The Endeavour's crew. The third is *Dear Donald Trump* (Millwood Press) by Hawke's Bay farmer Sophie Siers: a boy writes to Trump, wanting to build a wall between him and his brother in their bedroom.

Vida, 49, isn't just one of New Zealand's best children's book designers. She works internationally, too. Before moving here 11 years ago, she had in-house jobs as a book designer for large London-based

publishing houses – Penguin, HarperCollins, and Pan Macmillan. For three years she was Pan Macmillan's Art Director of Picture Books and Gift Books.

How did she end up on the Kāpiti Coast? By falling for a Kiwi. When she was visiting New Zealand in 2001, she and Luke were introduced by a mutual friend who'd made so many matches he was called Cupid. When Luke visited London later, he suggested that 'Cupid' invite Vida to a gathering, but not to let on that he'd asked. 'When I got to this pub, Luke said "Hi, what a surprise." He'll hate me saying this!'

After two years together in England, they moved to Wellington in 2008. Vida knew that most New Zealand book designers were freelancers, rather than in-house staff. 'I thought "Will I get any work?"' An editor at Penguin UK introduced her to Ann Mallinson, who published the Hairy Maclary books. Word of mouth did the rest. 'Freelancing was a big change, but I've enjoyed the variety.'

'It was a real wrench leaving my family and friends, but it was a new adventure. I'd already been to New Zealand as my best friend Lucinda moved here when I was 16. We'd save up and visit each other regularly. Very sadly, she died aged 25. I miss her very much, but her mother and sister are like my other family. And Luke's family lives nearby. Plus, Luke said if things were too hard, we could move back. The hard thing is that my parents aren't really getting to know my children.' They're now 7, 10 and 12. 'Luckily I met Luke in time to have kids.'

Wanting more space, the family moved from Vogeltown to Raumati in 2012, when their youngest was a week old – 'Not the best timing!' Vida and Luke both worked from home for 11 years, which was handy when the kids were young. Luke, who designs books,



corporate logos, business resources, and film and TV props, currently works at graphic-design company Tangerine in Whitby. The couple have collaborated on children's books. 'But mostly we have our own projects and give each other advice.'

Vida works from her studio during school hours and, if a deadline's looming, sometimes in the evenings. She enjoys baking, gardening, walking on the beach, attending a book group, visiting neighbours. After the bustle of London, does she get bored? 'No. We enjoyed London but we're not city people at heart.'

Often, people she meets aren't sure what children's book designers do. 'Some ask "Do you write the book? Do the illustrations?"'. She explains she lays out the book as a graphic designer, and is an art director of sorts. 'I guide the illustrator with the story's pacing and flow, so the illustrations and text work together on the page. When a designer isn't involved from the beginning, the text often feels "plonked on".'

Gecko Press publisher Julia Marshall commissions Vida for all their local picture books. 'I like having the illustrator, author, Vida, our associate publisher and myself around the table early on, to talk about the book's feel, vision and mood. Vida is gentle, never pushy. She has an eagle eye for consistency and "trueness": whether a child feels the right age, for example.'

Vida also works with children's book publisher Scholastic, and New Zealand's largest publisher Penguin Random House (both based in Auckland). 'We usually work via email, phone, sometimes Skype.' She's about to work with animation studio Pukeko Pictures as it begins publishing picture books.

Vida isn't intimidated by big names. While working for Macmillan in London, she designed *The Gruffalo's Child* and other books for picture-

book luminaries Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler. 'Axel, Julia and I met to discuss things like what the Gruffalo's child would look like – her horns would still be little buds, and she wouldn't have a wart on her nose yet!'

Vida also does 'colour treatment'. Essentially, she colours black-and-white illustrations (usually using watercolours) – for books including new editions of the Milly-Molly-Mandy series. While she was designing new editions of Roald Dahl's books at Penguin UK, she became Quentin Blake's 'watercolour treatment artist'. 'Quentin didn't have time to colour all his illustrations, so a few people tried, and he liked mine and gave me painting lessons. He's just lovely.'

What happened when she moved Down Under? 'Quentin said "So what?"'. The distance hasn't mattered. She's coloured Quentin's illustrations for new editions of *The Witches*, *The BFG*, *Matilda* (and the recent 'sequel' *Matilda at 30*), her childhood favourite *Danny the Champion of the World* – plus Quentin's sketches for two David Walliams books. 'My children think I have the world's easiest job: "colouring in".'

Vida grew up the fifth of six children on an acre in Kent, with fruit trees and chickens. Her mother was a nurse, her father a patent attorney. 'When my sister went to art school, my parents said, "Will this get you a job?" and it did. So they were resigned to me going.' In 1990, Vida graduated with an honours degree in graphic design, then became a picture-book designer at HarperCollins.

Vida says the children's book industry is thriving – and not just because more parents (like her) are limiting screen-time. 'E-books might be all right for a novel, but not for children's books. The illustrations, the smell, the texture. And nothing beats reading a book to a child on your lap.' ■