

# A Conversation with Jon Klassen



## How would you describe *The Rock from the Sky*?

It's a book of five short connected stories about three characters in which they don't go anywhere or do almost anything, but also it involves a meteor, time travel, aliens, jealousy, betrayal, and death.

## *The Rock from the Sky* is much longer than your previous books. Was that a deliberate decision?

No, not at all. There are very few deliberate decisions in this book. But it doesn't *feel* like a long book—it still reads pretty quickly. It's strange because it started with just the first story, about the rock actually falling somewhere above them, and I finished that story and

thought, *Well, that's too short for a book. It doesn't feel complete yet.* And it turns out it took four more stories to make it feel complete. I think that even though it's longer, it feels lighter than my other ones, and that was deliberate. The three hat books, I thought of them almost like little operas or something. But with this one the approach was that the opera is over and a few of the bit players stuck around onstage and put on a weird absurd comedy play for an empty theater.

## Tell us a little about the technique you used.

The illustrations look pretty simple, but there was actually a lot of research done beforehand to try to get some of the

things I wanted. I'd never painted skies before in my books (there was always a flat color back there), but for this one I wanted a big sky that moved above them, making them feel small, so I had to figure out what that was going to look like, and it took forever because I don't do a lot of actual painting. I don't think the result is very complicated-looking or conspicuous, but that was the tough thing to get to. The elements and characters themselves were done with a combination of watercolors and Crayola markers—we have a lot of those around now with the kids in the house, and I'm really into them. Their use here is kind of minimal, but I'm hoping to find ideas for them that show off what they can do a little more.

## Congratulations on ten years as a children's book illustrator! What has been the biggest change you've noticed since your first book?

I originally thought the job of making picture books was largely coming up with new ideas for stories, and it kind of is. But it's almost just as much about coming up with new ways of fooling yourself into doing it. I've thought a lot about what went into making that first book, because so much of it seemed so smooth and easy, but I think I forget how many of my own problems I was solving to get it there, and that process of identifying your hang-ups or anxieties about the work and protecting yourself from them or using them to your advantage is most of the job. Whatever story or book comes out of it is almost secondary to that—it's the negative space around what you can't do right then. At the beginning I thought the job was additive—making

things—but now I know, for me, it's mostly subtractive—deciding what I'm going to avoid doing.

## Do you have a favorite character in any of your books?

I keep coming back to the turtle, though he changes from book to book. In the first hat book he's kind of a dim participant; in the third hat book there are two of them, and one is prone to guilty thoughts and the other is basically a Buddhist monk; and in this latest book, the turtle is a jealous, vindictive, fragile little guy. I think maybe a common thread is that he's always pretty powerless, in terms of his situation. Turtles are vulnerable and passive, but they are also defined, pretty literally, by their ability to completely withdraw. I guess I relate to a lot of that.

## What type of picture book did you like to read as a child?

My favorites were the P. D. Eastman ones, and there were these books about kings and castles and riddles by Benjamin Elkin that I loved. I think those books are partly why my own books have gotten a little longer. They were around eighty pages and often contained multiple stories, and I just remember the effect being so immersive. You really felt like you'd been in a world by the end of them.

## Has becoming a father changed how you view picture books?

This probably isn't the answer you're looking for, but I think it's given me back a certain edge I'd lost for a while, not because kids are inspiring but because they take up so much of my time. When

I was starting to do books, I had other jobs, and making the books was almost a release from everything that was bothering me about those jobs. The simplicity of them and the freedom I had relative to my other work was so exciting. But after I began to do books full-time, I didn't have a machine to rage against anymore, not personally anyway (there's plenty to be upset about broadly, but I've never been good at directly funneling that into the work). But now, being a dad (twice over), my time isn't my own anymore. I'm back to not being in charge of my life, and it's frustrating, and weirdly energizing. I finally get to my desk and I really want to make it count. It doesn't mean that happens, necessarily, but the intent is there.

For a sweeter answer, I should say my three-year-old is *really* into books about ghosts, and so was I, always, and I really want to make a ghost book for him.

### Your books generally feature animals, not people. Why is that?

I think there are lots of reasons for it. Largely it came from my not really knowing how to write. If I write something a bear says, and it sounds weird or off, well, how does a bear normally talk? You get to start from scratch with animals, and so I get to say, "Well, animals talking might sound like they were approximating what people

sound like, but not quite getting it right," which is very handy because that's how I feel as a writer most of the time. If it was people talking that way, you'd wonder what was up with them/me. Also, I don't think I'm good at realism—I like approximation and symbols, and animals are very useful stand-ins for people. They can act in a heightened way that, again, might seem weird for a person, but who's to say "Well, that turtle wouldn't have done that."

Also I hate drawing people. I'm getting better about it, but slowly.

### What is it with you and hats?

Hats are incredibly useful story devices, it turns out. They are superfluous most of the time, so when a character wants one, or misses one, or whatever, it's completely emotional, not practical. It comes to stand for something or reveal something about them. Also, just graphically, it's very easy to see if a character is wearing one or not.

In this latest book I didn't use them in that emotional way; they are more there in the background to help the tone. The characters wear little bowler hats (though the snake has a beret for reasons I've not explained to myself) to sort of help the feeling that they are these little stage comedians, to help things feel a little more contrived.

### What's next?

Back to deciding what I'm going to avoid doing!

