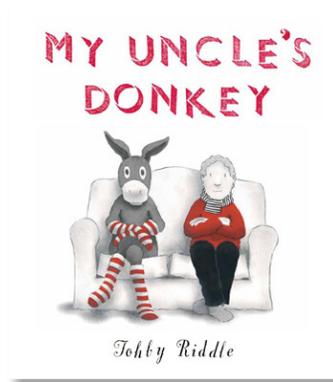


Author Notes for *My Uncle's Donkey*

by Tohby Riddle

Penguin/Viking 2010 ISBN: 9780670040339



My Uncle's Donkey is a simple story presented in a direct way. But as these notes seek to reveal, there is much to discover in the artwork, and further ideas to explore.

THE IDEA

Getting the Idea

The idea came about after a silly* conversation with my then three-year-old niece. For some reason I decided to tell my niece that I had a donkey in my apartment. This led to all kinds of questions from her about what it did there and all kinds of answers from me. She laughed a lot at the thought of it all. Later, I thought the idea could become a book. The premise of a donkey being allowed in the house offered up a lot of appealing incongruity humour (that is, a series of pleasingly incongruous scenarios).

*I like to think there are two kinds of silly: *good* silly and *completely daft* silly. 'Good silly' is a kind of mental playfulness that has value because it can lead to new thoughts.

Two thoughts on the idea

1. What appealed to me about this premise was that the donkey gets to indulge in childish pleasures and fantasies that children rarely get to indulge in (but would probably love to!). My own children enjoyed seeing him raid the fridge (p.7), stay up late eating popcorn (p.29), make a huge racket on the piano (p.25), watch a movie (p.5) and more.

2. Is the donkey real? Does the uncle know he's there? This subtle ambiguity was maintained by the fact that there is no actual interaction between the two characters. The uncle is either nonchalantly ignoring the donkey's capers – or is oblivious.



THE TEXT

Structure

The narrative is loosely structured around a domestic day/night routine. It more or less begins with breakfast and ends with bedtime. A routine familiar to a young child.

Narrative

The narrative opens with the premise of the book: 'My uncle's donkey is allowed in the house' then is delivered in a series of statements (one per spread) that are worded somewhat like one-liners. Each statement begins with 'My uncle's donkey ...', and cumulatively builds and expands upon the story's premise.

THE ARTWORK

Medium

Charcoal pencil, 6B and 8B pencils, Indian ink, acrylic paint, collage, handmade stamps, letterpress type, and my fingers to smudge the graphite for shadowing and tone.



Black-and-white and red

It took some trial-and-error before the particular and distinctive artwork style and medium for this book was settled (see early sketch, *left*). The initial inspiration for the palette came from the black-and-white colouring that many real-life donkeys actually have.

Character design

The donkey was partly inspired by the black and white animals from early cartoons and comics. I liked the bold artwork and the liveliness of these characters. A remnant of this style remains in the donkey's eyes: vertical oval-shapes with large pupils. This seems to give the donkey a wide-eyed excitable look.

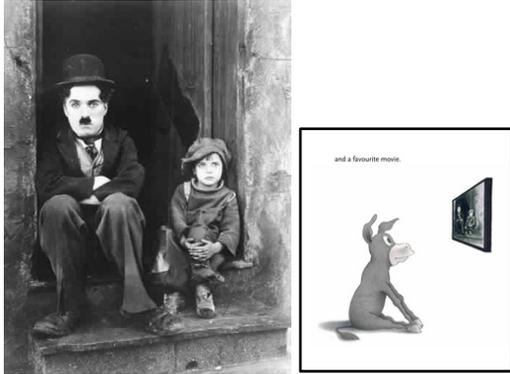
Simplicity

The book is simple and character-driven, and place or location don't have a major role to play. A clear, minimalist expression of this story seemed therefore paramount. Hence the minimal compositions with little or no backgrounds and the choice of a limited palette of (mostly) black-and-white and red.

Simplicity is hard to achieve. This is because the fewer the elements on the page the more stringently each element must be evaluated for its worth, in terms of composition, possible meanings or some other effect. It's a process of eliminating the arbitrary – the 'noise' or clutter of unintended ambiguity and extraneous information (ideas, emotions etc.).

Notable artwork details

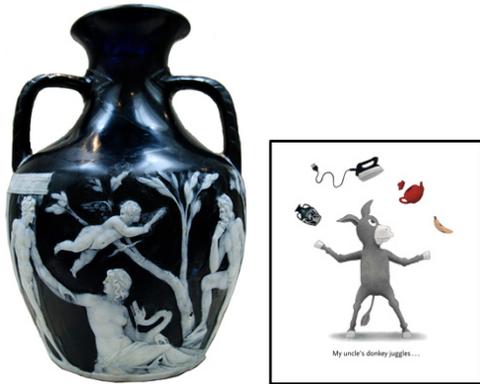
1. Charlie Chaplin and Jackie Coogan in *The Kid*, 1921 (on the TV screen on p.5)



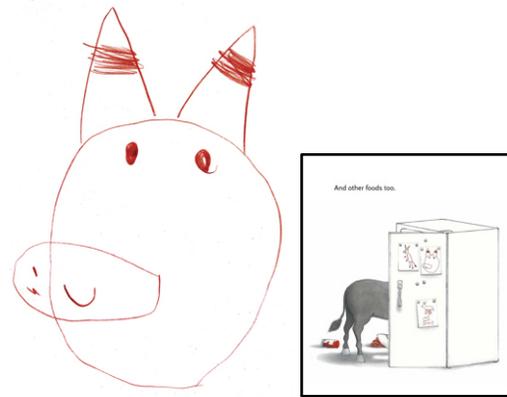
4. The intro to Erik Satie's *Gnossienne No. 3* (Uncle playing piano on p.24)



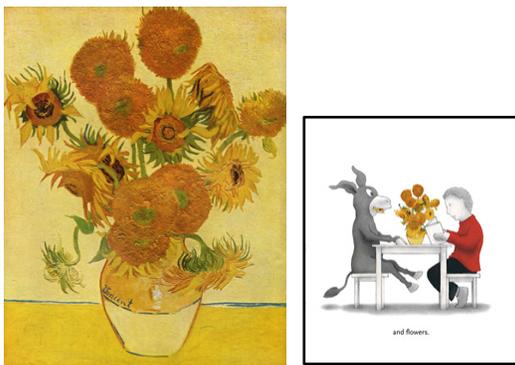
2. The Portland Vase, Roman 5–25 BC – the world's most valuable vase (being juggled on p.14–15)



5. The artwork of the author's six-year-old daughter, Ivy, on the fridge (p.7).



3. Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* (being eaten on p.21)



This came about because Ivy decided to do her own version of *My Uncle's Donkey*. I really liked her drawings and remembering that the fridge door on page 7 needed something on it for compositional reasons, I thought this could work really nicely, both visually and conceptually (are the drawings that of the narrator – the uncle's niece or nephew?).

FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

Other donkeys in art, literature and history:

A donkey, named Humphrey, was one of the main characters in my previous picture book, *Nobody Owns the Moon*.

Some other donkeys are:



- Simpson's Donkey, Gallipoli (see photos and a statue at the Australian War Memorial, *left*)
- the donkey in the Nativity story
- William Steig's picture book *Shrek* (and many other Steig books)
- Winnie the Pooh stories
- paintings by Giotto, Picasso, Chagall and others.

Similar books

Three well-known books that focus on exuberant and/or incongruous characters in domestic settings are:

The Cat and the Hat by Dr Seuss

Olivia by Ian Falconer

The Tiger Who Came to Tea by Judith Kerr

Activities

1. Research donkeys in history, art and literature. How and why do their depictions differ?
2. The author had many ideas for pages in *My Uncle's Donkey* but there wasn't enough room for them all. What else could the donkey do in the house? Do your own *My Uncle's Donkey*!
3. Find out more about the details (1–4 above) in the illustrations (e.g. what does Erik Satie's *Gnossienne No. 3* sound like and how does the donkey's music differ on the next page? Who was Charlie Chaplin and what was his film *The Kid* about? Who was Vincent van Gogh? What's the story behind the world's most valuable vase, The Portland Vase?
4. Try doing a picture in black, white and red only. What are the challenges?
5. How was the artwork for *My Uncle's Donkey* done? There are a range of techniques and media used. For instance the pattern for the endpapers, which is also the same as the curtains on (p.8), was done with a hand-made stamp (cut from an eraser with a scalpel).

Author Website

For more information: news, reviews, interviews and other resources visit:
www.tohby.com

MY UNCLE'S DONKEY



Tohby Riddle

The following unit of work on *My Uncle's Donkey* was kindly provided by teacher Vivianne Byrnes of St Canice's Primary School, Katoomba.

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CREATIVE THINKING Unit of work for Stage One

FLUENCY

List as many ideas as possible:

- Your favourite food, games, hobbies, clothes, music (ideal for the start of the year)
- List as many animals as possible.

- Draw an architectural-style plan of your cafe.
- Colour a cartoon-style picture of your cafe.
- Make a diorama of your cafe.
- Design an advertising leaflet about your cafe and include your menu.

FLEXIBILITY

Think of unusual responses:

- List one relative, one animal and one place (e.g. Grandad, giraffe, shop etc.)

Write a story about your character who takes their animal to this cafe

- Plan a super sentence to start your story.
- What would the animal be allowed to do?
- What problems would the animal cause?
- How would the story be resolved?

ELABORATION

Add details to an idea:

- Take an idea from the previous list and draw the idea.
- Develop these characters with pictures and names.

Make your story into a book

- E.g. use three A4 sheets folded together to make a 12-page A5 book. Add a cardboard cover.
- Write and illustrate your story.
- Add some funny sections – your advertising leaflet could be displayed on the fridge. A poster advertising the book *My Uncle's Donkey* could be on the wall. A newspaper lying on the table may have a headline about pets.
- Add your own pet names, family and friends into the story.
- Finally dedicate your story to your own family!

ORIGINALITY

Plan an outdoor cafe that serves people and animals

- What is the name of your cafe?
- What would be on your menu? Give some original and funny names to the food.
- What problems could arise with your cafe and how would you solve them?