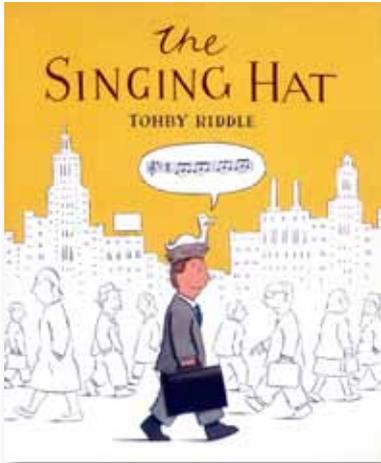


Notes on *The Singing Hat*

by Tohby Riddle



The Singing Hat was first published in 2000 in Australia. It has won a number of awards for literature and design, including Honour Book in the Australian CBC Picture Book of the Year Awards and APA Best Designed Cover, Children's Books in 2001.

The *Singing Hat* is a story about a weary man whose life is changed when a bird makes a nest on his head. On the insistence of his young daughter he does not disturb the bird and this decision results in his life as he knows it being torn away – to reveal a new and very different life. Despite the potentially weighty themes of this narrative, the story is told as a comedy (perhaps in the more traditional sense of the term: a play characterized by its humorous or satirical tone and its depiction of amusing people or incidents, in which the characters ultimately triumph over adversity).

THE IDEA

The starting point for the idea of *The Singing Hat* was playing around with a kind of joke: an exaggeration of a situation to the point of ludicrousness. What if something happened to someone, unbeknown to them but apparent to everyone around them? This often happens in ordinary ways, such as a person being unaware they have a conspicuous piece of food on their face after eating meal. But what if, for the fun of it, this was exaggerated to a bird's nest on a person's head after they'd napped in a park? What could happen then?

The interesting thing about this playful, hypothetical kind of thinking is that by setting up a situation – however bizarre or silly! – then applying it to an ordinary life, it can meaningfully reveal reality. What does the experience of Colin Jenkins say about our lives and our world?

By this process, what started as a small fanciful joke evolved into a fable of modern life: the degree to which modern, urbanised life can diminish our connection with nature (our own nature and the nature around us). Of course, I didn't start out with this idea – it was simply the by-product of curious exploration of an idea. And, in fact, this is only one possible interpretation of the narrative. The narrative appears to generate any number of meanings. And all are valid. The audience completes a work.

A narrative that has many meanings and interpretations appeals to me. For a story idea to be carefully unfurled it helps to consider its potential meanings, literal or metaphorical, at each step. The meanings then guide and shape the story's development – if only in such a way that particular meanings aren't excluded as one goes along. Sometimes, knowing what not to say is all you know as you proceed (perhaps like a winding route through a slalem course of unwanted cliches, conventions and sentiments).

Use of ambiguity

Ambiguity is at the heart of these kinds of stories – or perhaps all stories that have vitality. The aim being to frame a story in such a way that many meanings are possible, but with a clarity of expression that excludes confusion. This is *intentional* ambiguity, as opposed to the unintended ambiguity that comes from unclear, confusing expression.

The Singing Hat attempts this kind of carefully handled ambiguity. That is why the story ends the way it does. Speaking of “beautiful and improbable things” that appear in the empty nest kept on the table by the window in Colin Jenkins’s room – the fruits of having tended to a rare bird, no matter how onerous the task. What are these things specifically? An answer lies within each reader.

THE EXPRESSION OF THE IDEA

The illustrations

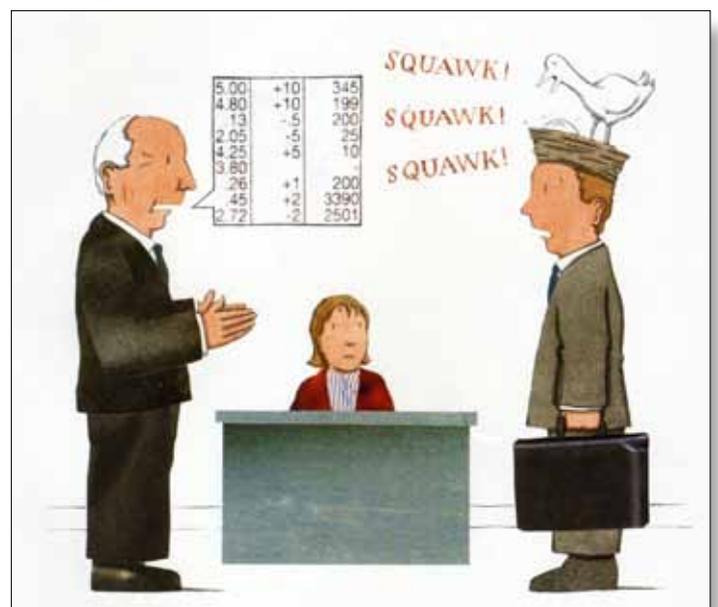
Medium: pen and ink, gouache, collage. The artwork implies a staged, almost theatrical reality to the story, and the cartoon-like style amplifies its humorous tragic-comic side. There might be some law at work here: the weightier the idea, the lighter the touch.

The writing

A law might also be at work in the telling of the story of *The Singing Hat*: the more absurd or outlandish the story, the straighter it needs to be told. This often maintains tautness of delivery.

Cartooning conventions

The use of cartoon-like illustrations allowed the use of conventions common to cartooning, such as the speech bubble and the thought bubble. These relatively recent innovations in visual art (their wider usage began in the 19th century) are able to explicitly express what a character is saying or thinking – something that couldn't be done before. By using these



conventions, and by playing with them too, ideas in the narrative could be amplified. So Colin Jenkins's apparent disconnect with his working life would be further revealed by showing his boss speaking, not in words, but in alienating stockmarket numbers. The cartoon convention employed here: the *speech bubble*, was used not to write out what the boss was literally saying – specific statements weren't necessary – but to *show* the theme of what he was saying.

Another example of this use of cartooning conventions is when Colin Jenkins's daughter sings a song to cheer him up (*right*). Rather than write out song lyrics, the speech bubble is used to *show* what she is singing about: some kind of blue-sky day, in a field of wide open space. And it becomes an illustration within the illustration, that offers counterpoint to the barren, delapidated setting for the characters.



FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

1. The central idea of *The Singing Hat*: the predicament Colin Jenkins finds himself in when a bird makes its nest on his head, can be seen as a metaphor for various life situations: a burdensome responsibility or conspicuousness because of some personal feature. Consider this metaphor and list possible interpretations or meanings. What are specific situations in life that are similar to this?
2. What does Colin Jenkins find in the bird's nest on the table at the window in his room? Write or draw these things. [Note: there's no *right* answer to this – it's more an exercise in thoughtful interpretation and imagination.]
3. On the question of where Colin Jenkins belongs in the world: Is he better off after the changes in his life? What kind of work does he do now?
4. What can birds represent? Consider a list of possible meanings and how they might apply to the bird/s in *The Singing Hat*.
5. Sometimes in the artwork Colin Jenkins is the only character fully rendered. Why might this be so?