

Illustrated Author Notes on *Here Comes Stinkbug!*

By Tohby Riddle

Introduction

Here Comes Stinkbug! is a simple, humorous story for young children about a stink bug. As ever, making anything simple that works is a great creative challenge. And the following offers some background on my attempts meet that challenge.

Here Comes Stinkbug! By Tohby Riddle
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Hardcover (24 pages); Ages 3–6

The Idea

The idea of making a character out of a stink bug had been floating around in my notebooks for many years. First of all, I loved the name *stink bug* – it’s abrupt, funny and awful, all at once. But a character name is not a story, and it took a while for me to figure out what to do with a character who was a stink bug.



Scribbles from my notebook, 2015

The first opportunity I took to have a stink bug in a book was while working on my visual book of English grammar, *The Greatest Gatsby*, which was published in 2015. In the section on simple sentences, I gleefully used sentences about stink bugs and got to create three pictures of these funny-awful creatures (note the jets of stink in the second illustration).



Spread from *The Greatest Gatsby: a visual book of grammar*, Penguin, 2015

Afterwards, thinking I'd like the challenge of doing a short, simple book that didn't take years to create (like too many of my recent books!), I revisited my notebook character Stinkbug ...

The Text

After revisiting Stinkbug as a potential picture book character, a story quickly took shape. Though it would need plenty of drafting if it were to achieve the look of effortless simplicity!



Another scribbling from my notebook, 2015
(Often my notebook entries are a kind of shorthand scribble, just to jot an idea down rather than make a careful drawing.)

Writing the text was rather like writing a very simple pop lyric. There were severe limits on word count and vocabulary (that sounded right) – and, therefore, very little wriggle room to come up with lines that worked. While some lines did fall into place easily, a handful of crucial lines were drafted and redrafted many times – sometimes just in my mind, as I lay in bed at night. Those sentences were like very challenging puzzles.

The style of the writing also took inspiration from the diction and directness of Stinkbug's name. The line 'This bugged Stinkbug and he started to stink a bit' is an example of that.

A secondary layer of the text is the direct speech of the characters. I hadn't planned this, but the characters just started saying things – like good characters often do – and it seemed better to show this using the graphic conventions of speech bubbles and thought bubbles, rather than typesetting their speech with repetitive attributions. The intention was that the typeset narrative could stand alone in telling the story, while the handwritten dialogue extended the storytelling.



Spread from *Here Comes Stinkbug!*, Allen & Unwin, 2018

The Artwork

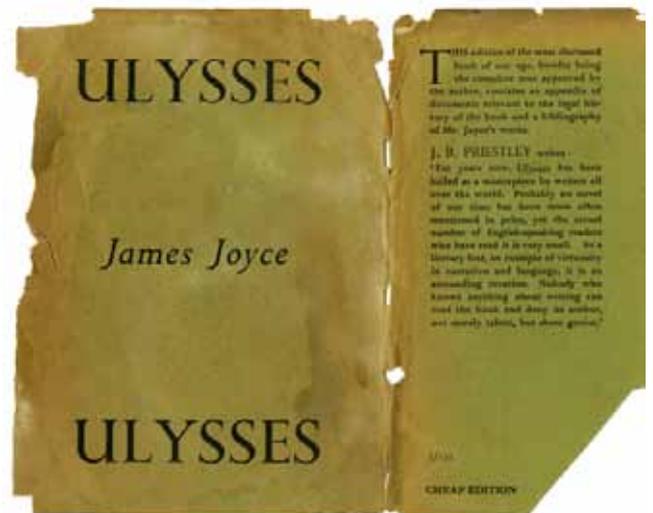
Like the text, the artwork for *Here Comes Stinkbug!* is also simple. Such simplicity was the result of careful design and distillation. Every picture element had to perform a function or it was left out. And no level of detail was shown unless it was important to the delivery of the story.

The fun part of illustrating this story was working with insects. I hadn't done this before in a picture book. Although the insects were simplified and stylised in order to anthropomorphise them a little, I took advantage of the fact that they might have six or eight limbs, and more than two eyes. In particular, this gave opportunities for multiple hand gestures. I especially had a lot of fun with the spider (right), who was suitably mesmerising with his eyes and limbs moving in all kinds of directions.

The Artwork Style

The characters were painted with coloured inks with occasional line-work in black pencil. The backgrounds were done separately using various textures found in all kinds of unlikely places: an old, uncoated dust cover from James Joyce's *Ulysses*, where the green paper had discoloured in interesting ways (used for the leaves and the log, right); a blue noticeboard full of pin holes that's at the local swimming pool here in Katoomba (used for a sky-like background behind the charming spider, right); the foxed endpaper of an old book (used for another sky-like background); and so on. Absolutely anything can be a texture for artwork!

All of these elements – drawn, painted or collage textures – were scanned and assembled on the computer to make up the final artwork.



The Story

This simple, humorous story about a stink bug is nonetheless layered with meanings. It poses questions about our social interactions, potential threats from strangers, and the risks of not being one's self – especially when it really matters.

If any 'messages' emerge in the storytelling, however, they were not a starting point for the story. The starting point was, simply: who is this funny-awful character, Stinkbug, and how does his stinking affect things?

I guess the ending shows Stinkbug encouraged to be himself, but with some added discretion – based on a little more consideration for others. Which strikes me as a pretty workable and realistic way to proceed.

And, just to end this section with a question: Could Leopard Slug be the most likeable slug in children's literature?



Some Thoughts for Teachers ...

Despite its short length and simple pictures, there is still much that can be teased out of *Here Comes Stinkbug!* Readers could be asked to engage with the book in the following ways.

Before reading the book ...

Think about insects

Where do stink bugs live? Why do they stink? Do they have predators?

Is a slug an insect? Why are slugs slimy?

What are three common names for lady beetles?

The book cover

Look closely at the cover. What do you think might happen in the story?

After reading the book ...

Themes to discuss

Stinkbug is friendly. Is friendliness the same as good manners? If not, which is preferable?

Should people change their behaviour to get along with others?

Could there be any problems with not being yourself in order fit in socially?

What are the possible reasons why the charming spider was friendly to Stinkbug?

Language Used

Ant uses the word 'preposterous'. What does that word mean?

Stinkbug uses the phrase 'a penny for your thoughts' when greeting Bumblebee. What does it mean?

Examining the Artwork

How has the artwork been made? What is the medium or mediums? Look closely at the backgrounds and leaves, etc. Where did these collage textures come from?

Can you use anything to make a picture?

Art Activity

1. Look at leaves and flowers. Study their shapes, count the petals on the flowers, name the colours, and so on.

2. Collect or make textures to make your own leaves and flowers for an artwork. This can be done by painting on paper, or shading on it with pencils, or looking for coloured papers, or lined notebook papers and graph papers, or paper from paper bags or catalogues or brochures ... There are all kinds of papers around!

3. Carefully cut your textures into the shapes you want (draw outlines onto the texture first, if you need to) then arrange them into a composition and stick them down to make your picture (using a gluestick).

4. You may want to add your favourite insects to the scene by drawing them on another piece of paper, then cutting them out and sticking them into your picture.

