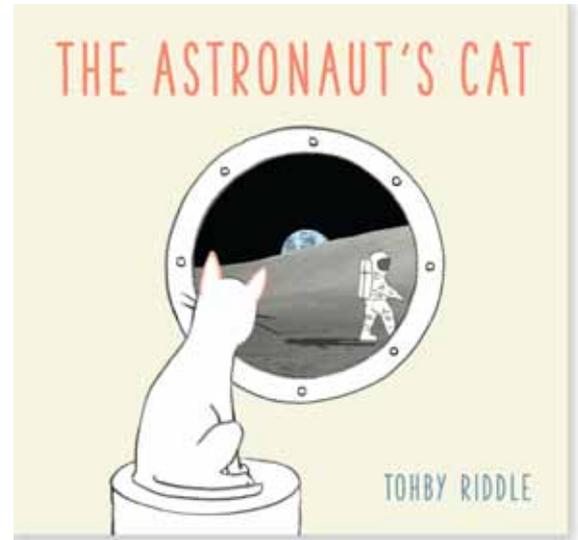


NOTES ON THE MAKING OF THE ASTRONAUT'S CAT

BY TOHBY RIDDLE

The Astronaut's Cat is a seemingly simple story about an inside cat on the Moon. It is the cat's inner life that teases out deeper meanings and bigger ideas. And that is partly triggered by her seeing a beautiful blue ball rising over the Moon's horizon.

This distant perspective on planet Earth strikes me as a timely one, just as it was about fifty years ago, when the first astronauts of the Apollo space missions were seeing Earth for the first time as a lonely blue ball in space; that changed the way we saw our world – our home in the universe.

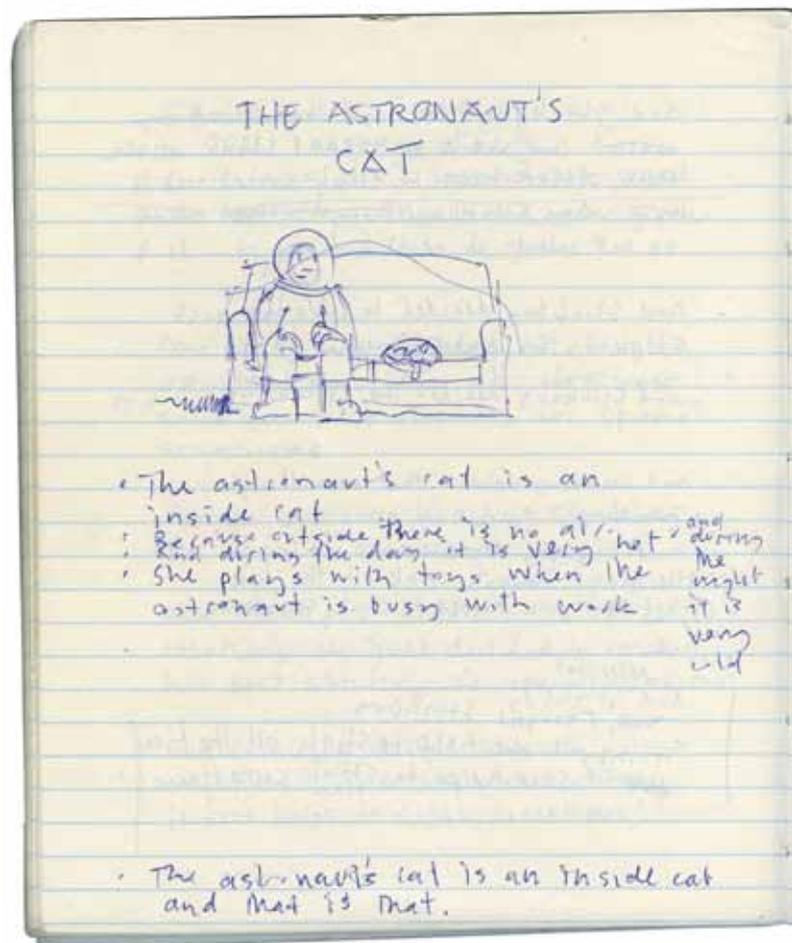


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GETTING THE IDEA

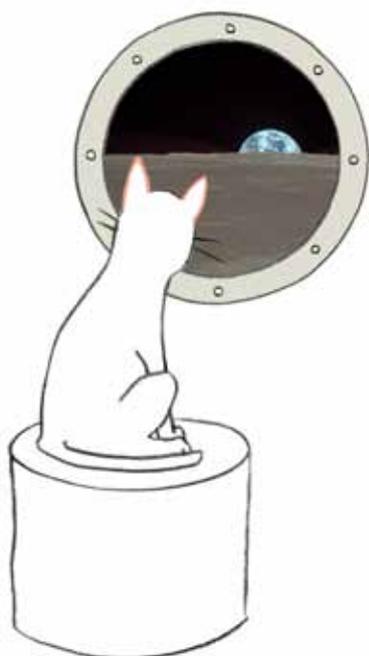
When I begin writing a story I don't usually know what will happen. I write to find out. So it was with *The Astronaut's Cat*. The book started with a title. That was all I had. For some reason the phrase 'the astronaut's cat' popped into my head and right away, I wrote it down in my notebook, thinking 'there's a story in that!'

At this stage in a creative process, I don't rush to try and write anything – I just let the idea sit in my notebook and percolate awhile. Then, I usually get a sense – weeks or months or later – when it's time to have a shot at taking the idea further. Once I settled on the opening line, 'The astronaut's cat is an inside cat', I knew I had a way into the story. And from there, it very quickly unfolded.



In some ways, the story was the sum of various preoccupations of mine at that time. I think the ideal form of artistic expression is one where the artist can put as much of themselves – their feelings, the things that interest them and matter to them – into a work. *The Astronaut's Cat* allowed for this to happen. For starters, a long-term fascination with the Moon found form. As did awe for the natural beauty of Earth and its myriad landscapes and lifeforms – especially at a time when there's talk of going prospecting to Mars, when so much needs to be done to repair and care for Earth.

Another influence on the story was the arrival of a new cat in our house. Her behaviour and her appearance clearly impacted on the story (I realised this mostly in retrospect). And she became the model for the astronaut's cat. She's mostly an inside cat and her wonder and curiosity about the world outside, as she sits at the windows, is palpable.



So the book is about a cat, and it's about the Moon, and it's also very much about Earth. By contrasting the lifeless severity of the Moon's environment with Earth's life-giving abundance, a renewed appreciation of our planet home might be evoked.

And at the end of the book (*left*), although it might be saddening to see the cat looking yearningly at the distant blue ball of Earth (but maybe she will go there soon?), the reader is simultaneously relieved to be reminded of how lucky they are that, unlike the astronaut's cat, they live on that incredible blue ball!

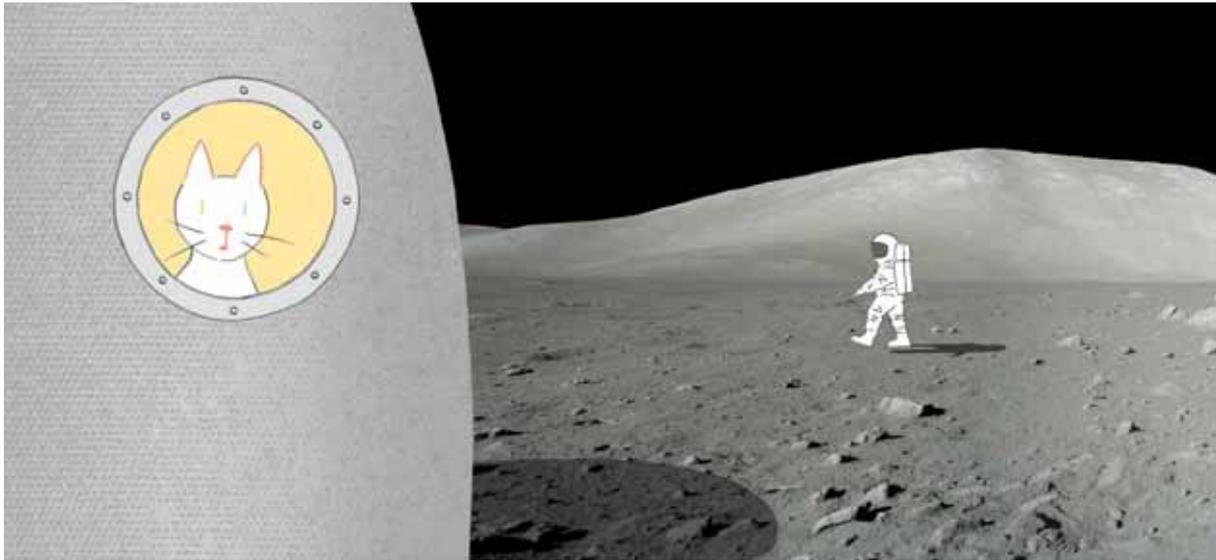
MAKING THE BOOK

The artwork

Once the story was written my job was to picture the artwork. For the characters, I opted for a very simple form of pencil line-drawing that wouldn't compete with the various backgrounds. The cat is drawn with four pencils: black, pink (ears, nose and mouth), blue (left eye) and green (right eye). The astronaut is drawn with a black pencil. Both characters are left white. I treated the moonbase the same way, just adding occasional textures or tints. The outside locations were a different story.

The Moon and Earth artwork

It is rare in my experience that substantially differing artwork techniques sit side-by-side in the same picture book. But due to the idea of contrasting the Moon with Earth in *The Astronaut's Cat*, there seemed no other approach that worked. It also became the most challenging part of the book to do. In particular, the Earth sequence – as dreamed of (or remembered?) by the cat. The sequence of four spreads had to do justice to this idea of illustrating the wondrous liveability of Earth in contrast to the barren unliveability of the Moon.



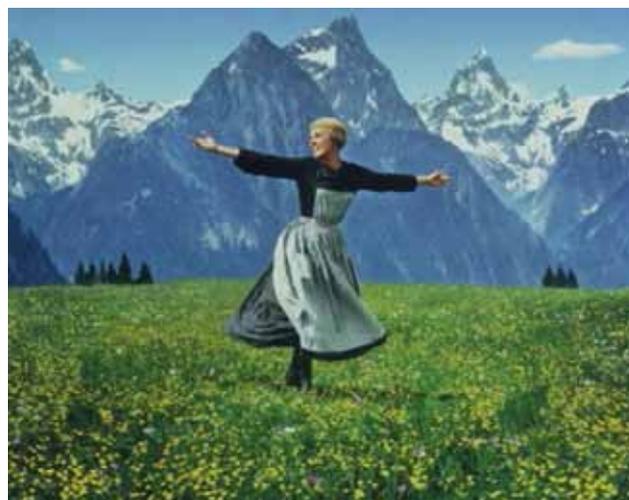
While the Moon landscapes were depicted photographically, early attempts at using photos for the Earth sequence just weren't hitting high enough notes. After many fruitless attempts at various artwork techniques, I realised I'd have to develop techniques that were new to me, to solve the problem. The technique is a form of collage using acrylic-painted textures on paper, that are cut into the various shapes: trees, ferns, mountains, etc. and arranged into scenes.



Two of the four spreads drew inspiration from the jungle paintings of Henri Rousseau (see example below, left), and stills and promotional photos relating to the final scenes in *The Sound of Music*. Ever since I saw this movie as a child, this magnificent alpine landscape has always conveyed an expansive and joyful feeling of liberation. Just what I wanted for *The Astronaut's Cat*.



Exotic Landscape, 1910, by Henri Rousseau



A promotional image from The Sound of Music

The text

The text of *The Astronaut's Cat* is economical but, like the artwork, varied in style according to the ideas being expressed. It starts in a simple almost perfunctory style of prose, getting straight to the point of the cat's life on the Moon. To some degree the descriptions of conditions on the Moon read as non-fiction, as they describe the physical reality of the cat's unearthly world.

Then, as the cat's thoughts become more expansive and fanciful, in her dreams about her world and beyond, the prose becomes more lyrical. Finally as she returns to wakefulness and remembers her somewhat barren and sterile surroundings the text returns to a more direct and perfunctory prose.

So the styles of prose in the book mirror the styles of the artwork. Reflecting on my creative process for this book, I honestly can't remember if this approach to the prose was consciously conceived or just a natural and intuitive response to the content. I strongly suspect the latter, as I usually let an idea take shape as freely as possible before the rigours of the editorial process kick in to tighten things up and make things work as optimally as possible.

OTHER FEATURES AND DETAILS

The typeface for the book

It's always a challenge settling on a typeface for a book. There are seemingly endless options and choices and not always an obvious or clear-cut rationale for what to choose. Whatever you choose has to work! It needs to sit harmoniously with the other content and ideally add to or amplify what is appealing about the content.

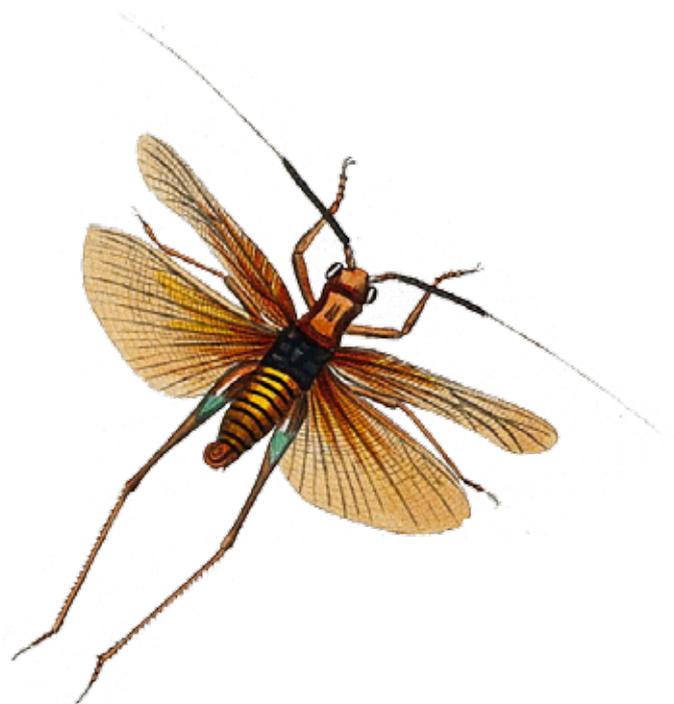
One line of exploration was to look at typefaces popular at the time of the Apollo space missions: the late 1960s and early 1970s. This led me to Futura. I tried Futura Medium in the layouts and it seemed to work. Then, after we decided to go with Futura, a nice kind of synchronicity occurred. I discovered that it was the typeface used by the aeronautical and space industry - and, further to that, it was used on the plaque left by the first astronauts on the Moon!



The plaque left on the moon by Apollo 11

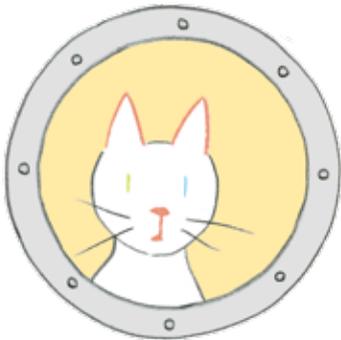
Insects

Instinctively, I filled the Earth-sequence scenes with insects. First, because of their fantastic shapes and forms, but also because intuitively they felt like evidence of healthy natural ecosystems (bees being a good example of this). During the making of the book, this seemed to be confirmed when scientists reported dramatic declines in insect populations and the subsequent threat to our own existence if insects were to disappear. Even though their research was questioned by other scientists, the simple fact of insects' importance to all life on Earth was a sobering one. And even though I'd wondered if I'd overdone the insects in the Earth illustrations - I kept them all!



The motif of the circle or ball

Without realising it at first, there seemed to be a number of round shapes in the artwork. Given the story content, this is no surprise really: planet Earth, the cat's ball, the cat's bowl, portholes, golf balls, craters, and the Moon itself. Picking up on this, I introduced circular illustrations and background tints, as if the reader might be viewing things through portholes.



Pom Pom the cat

Pom Pom (*right*) lives in our house. She is an unusual cat. Among other things, she likes riding in cars and sticking her head out the window like a dog, sleeping on her back, and collecting toys like marbles and pencils and keeping them next to her food bowl. She is also completely white, with pink ears and nose and odd eyes (one blue, one green). Her eyes have reminded people of David Bowie's (*right, bottom*). He had eyes of different colours too. I don't mind that association. David Bowie was a childhood hero of mine. And there's that extra resonance because of David Bowie's many high-concept songs about space and space travellers, such as 'Space Oddity' and 'Moonage Daydream*' – which, incidentally, were written at the time of the Apollo space missions to the Moon. All up, Pom Pom seemed the natural model for the astronaut's cat.



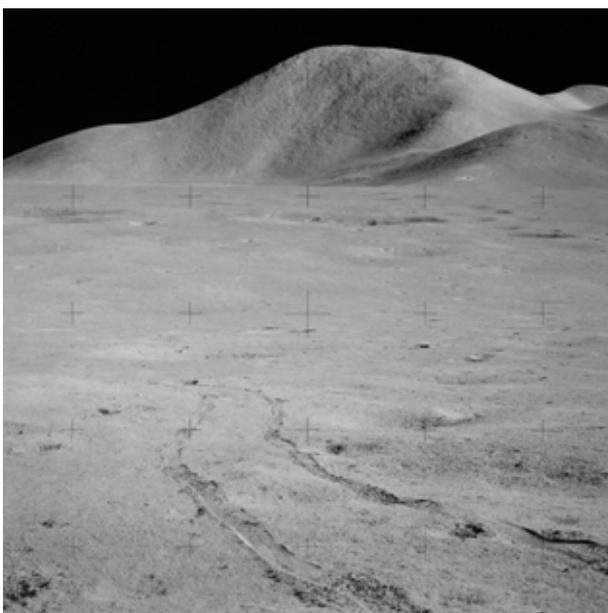
Photo © Brian Duffy

* One of my favourite songs as a child

David Bowie circa 1972, as alter-ego Ziggy Stardust

NASA's Project Apollo

NASA's Apollo missions achieved many things, the ultimate achievement being to safely land humans on the Moon and return them to Earth. Another achievement was the exceptional photographic record of their missions. The photos taken on the Moon are a revelation. They bring home the stark, barren, largely colourless nature of the Moon. Its lifelessness is confronting, yet it is also very beautiful. For a long time I've wanted to use these photos in a book somehow – and *The Astronaut's Cat* finally gave me the opportunity. It is a significant credit to NASA that they took so many stunning photos of the Moon – and that these have been made widely available to people across the world.



A selection of photos taken on the surface of the Moon by the astronauts of Project Apollo
Images courtesy National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)

ART ACTIVITIES BASED ON THE ASTRONAUT'S CAT

Collage using painted textures

1. Plan or even lightly sketch a garden or forest.
2. Think of what flowers, plants and trees you'd like. What are their shapes and colours?
3. When you have an idea of their different colours, paint sheets of paper in the different colours. Allow the colours to have texture and variation in tone.
4. Then lightly draw your plant, tree or flower shapes on the textures and cut them out.
5. Arrange your cut-out shapes on your artwork paper until you are happy with the composition and glue each piece down.
6. You might also want to draw a simple character to cut out and place in your scene, as in *The Astronaut's Cat*.
7. Aside from looking at the forest or mountains scenes in *The Astronaut's Cat*, look at the art of Eric Carle and see how he did his work. He is a great proponent of this kind of technique.



Collage using photos and drawing

The other main type of collage in *The Astronaut's Cat* involves using photographic backgrounds for the character.

1. Look through a magazine or print out a photo from the internet – or even a photo you might have taken yourself! – for your background. The scene could be of anywhere! The deep sea, a lonely desert, Mars, a mountaintop, etc.
2. Draw a character. It can be a very simple pencil drawing like in *The Astronaut's Cat*. Make sure you draw it at the right scale to fit in your photographic scene.
3. Also carefully consider where it will be placed in the landscape. Think about perspective and lighting, so that it will really look like it is there!
4. Cut out your character and place it in the scene.
5. A finishing touch is to think about drawing or painting your character's shadow. Consider where the light source or sources are coming from in your scene. You can do this by looking at other objects in the landscape and how their shadows fall. Then add your character's shadow so that it matches. Remember shadows that fall on objects are not usually black but just a darker version of the object's colour.