

An Interview with iRead 2008 Illustrator Tom Lichtenheld

Tom Lichtenheld is creative director for a Chicago advertising agency who has had a second career of making things up in such books as *Everything I Know about Pirates*, *What Are You So Grumpy About?* and *What's with This Room?* Tom grew up in Rockford, Illinois and currently lives in Geneva.

When you were ten, what was your favorite book?

Oh gosh, when I was ten... I think it was a book my mom read to me called *Pagoo*. *Pagoo* is a story about a hermit crab. It was just enchanting and magical to me. I can still remember the illustrations. Someone recently sent me an original edition of the book, so it was really fun to see those pictures again. Of course, I loved Dr. Seuss, still do.

By the time I was ten, I was probably reading *Mad Magazine*. It's one of my great influences. My dad used to take us to the drugstore and buy us a *Mad*, supposedly for us kids but we couldn't read it until he was done with it.

When you were that age what did you want to be when you grew up?

I knew pretty early that I wanted to be an artist, though I had no idea how to go about being an artist. My mom tells me that when I was a very small child I would sit in the kitchen and draw on the chalkboard all day. I liked to draw ships.

Where did you go to college?

I went to school at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. I bounced around some before that, but that's where I graduated. I started out at the Rock Valley Junior College for two years and then ran out of money. I walked into their public relations department and looked at the brochures that the college had produced and I told them, "You know, I bet I can design these brochures better than you can." There was one person in the PR department and she was doing them. She said, "Okay, we'll form a position and give you a job." I didn't know what I was doing but I just thought I could do it. I worked for the college for two years, designing their brochures. Then I would take them up to their little print shop and work with the printer, printing and collating them. It was one of those situations where you learn a lot because you have to do everything. It was a lot of fun. After that, I went back to school in Madison and got my degree in Fine Arts. My undergraduate work was in printmaking, book design, letterpress printing; I found that to be a lot of fun. Meanwhile, I was working part time in an advertising agency doing layouts. They needed an art director one day, snared me and told me I was going to be an art director. I've stayed in advertising from that time on. I moved from Madison to Minneapolis, and got a really good job there, and stayed in that company for about seventeen years.

Then I got my first book [*Everything I Know about Pirates*] published and the book thing took off from there. I took two years off from work and moved here. After two years, I went back to work at an agency, and took time off to create books.

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The *Pirate* book was completely an accident. My nephew wrote me a letter. He loved pirates and he asked me to draw him a picture of a pirate, so I sat down one day, drew a pirate, wrote some nonsense about pirates, and then I drew more pirates — pretty soon I had twenty pages of nonsense and pictures about pirates. I colored it, bound it, burned the edges to make it look like a real pirate book, and sent it off to him. A lot of people told me I should try to get it published, so I made some copies of it and I sent it to a lot of publishers on my own. I got a lot of nice rejection letters. Most publishers told me it was too sophisticated for kids — there’s a lot of gags in there that teenagers would get. Eventually it got published, and it’s selling very well.



So are you a pirate?

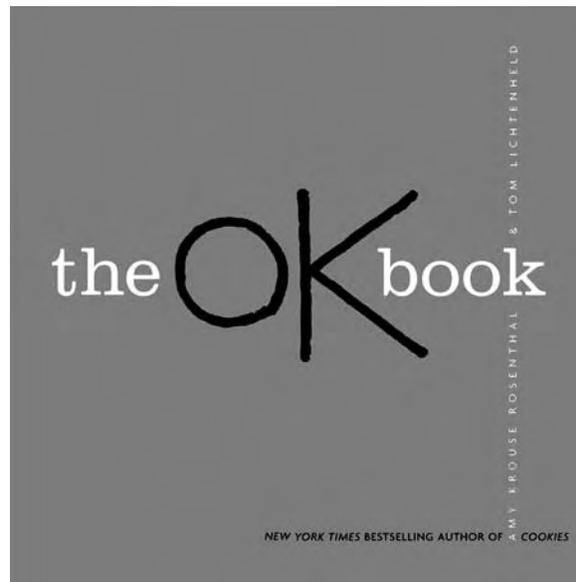
I am not a pirate, I know nothing about pirates: it’s all made up nonsense. But people keep giving me pirate stuff. I have a vast collection of pirate paraphernalia, which is fun, but...[Tom laughs and shrugs].

I do get a lot of requests regarding International Talk Like A Pirate Day, and my book is actually sold on the International Talk Like A Pirate Web site [www.talklikeapirate.com]. It’s fascinating what interest pirates hold for kids. It’s a perennial favorite. Especially for boys. I think it is permission to misbehave.

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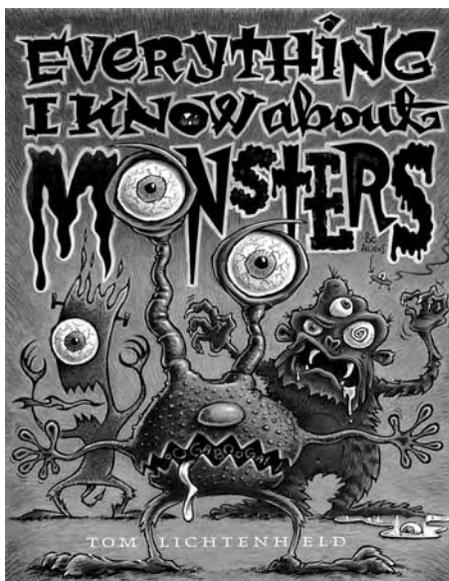
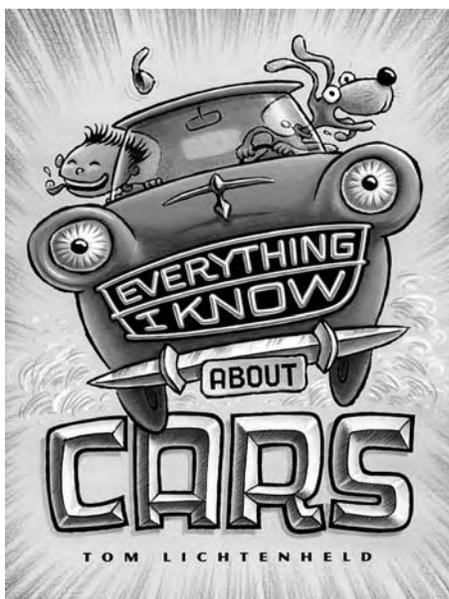
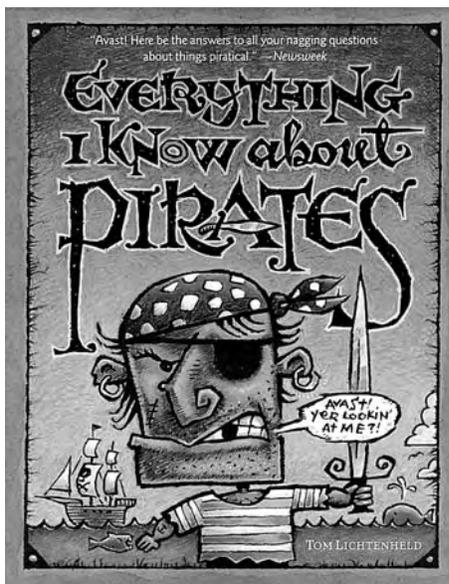
For children and adults

Yeah, exactly. There are all these people who have these pirate clubs and events, like the Gasparilla Pirate Fest in Florida. These are otherwise normal adults who get dressed up like pirates for a weekend, just as an excuse to drink, or talk dirty.

Right now I have six books out. There’s a new one that just came out called *The OK Book*. That one I did with another writer — a woman I met here in Chicago named Amy Krouse Rosenthal. She had this great idea for a book; we did it together and we’ve got a contract for two more.

It’s a really simple idea if I can draw it out for you. Here’s the whole idea: if you take the word OK and turn it over on it’s side — then it’s a person.

You can’t not say “OK” when you see that person. It’s this little kid, and he’s not very good at everything he tries. He’s just marginally competent. But, he keeps trying things, and this person knows that if he keeps trying things then he’ll eventually find out what he’s really good at. The idea behind the book is that it’s more important to try things so you’ll discover what you’re good at than to excel in everything you do, because no one is going to excel in everything they do. It’s a nice message because I look around and see kids being pushed to be the best in everything: having to get the best grades, your soccer team has to win every game. It is unrealistic. The book is about the need for experimentation, to find what you’re good at. It’s also a very simple book, the illustrations are just simple little doodles. Most of my books are really elaborate, so when this came along it was a great opportunity to do a book that’s simple.



How do you come up with ideas, like your book *Everything I Know about Cars*?

I actually came up with that at a book signing. There was this little boy with a wad of paper, he was pushing it around and making car noises. And I knew I had to do a book about cars because kids love cars. I used to do advertising for cars so I knew a lot about them. There's nothing factual in the book: it's complete nonsense. But it was a nice release, a lot of fun.

What about *Everything I Know about Monsters*?

Monsters is completely made up. I mean the theme is that there's no such thing as monsters, so because they don't exist they can be whatever you want them to be. I went to great lengths to talk about how they're made-up monsters and you can make up anything. It reinforces the idea that they're not real, and they're just from our imagination.

My book *What Are You So Grumpy About?* was inspired by a guy sitting next to me on a plane and he was grumpy. He looked fine: he looked well fed, he knew where he was going to sleep that night. I thought to myself "what are you so grumpy about?" I wrote most of that book on the plane. It really tapped into something. A lot of people say: I'm getting this book for my Dad, or my grandma, or my uncle... a lot for dads. I guess dads are grumpy.

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What Are You So Grumpy About? has done really well. It wasn’t intended as this, but it’s turned out to be almost a therapy book. It’s about a wide range of what makes kids grumpy: food getting mixed up on your plate, going to a boring museum, wearing clothes that look funny. And what I’m hearing back from people is that it’s a great help in letting kids identify their feelings. I’m getting e-mails from mental health professionals who work with troubled kids. They say they use this book to help kids talk about how they feel.

It really strikes a chord with kids. Kids don’t have a lot of control, so if they have to wear a t-shirt they don’t like it’s the end of the world. Identifying that feeling, and making a big stink about it in the book gives kids something they can relate to. Parents don’t always have a lot of time to acknowledge those feelings. This book validates them. I think kids really enjoy that.

You mentioned designing a Web site for your wife. What kind of site is it?

Her name is Jan Miller and she works for Habitat for Humanity as procurement director for their store, called “ReStore.” It’s a building materials reuse center that benefits Habitat for Humanity of Northern Fox Valley. They accept donated new and gently used goods from retailers, manufacturers, distributors, contractors, and homeowners. Those materials are sold, at greatly reduced prices, to the general public. The funds go to build new houses for people who need them. You can see the Web site at <http://www.restoreelgin.org/>.

Jan helps me with my books, helping to write the endings. She also helps with marketing, editing, and she often gives me ideas. It’s good to have someone around who can remind me of the right thing to do. For instance in the *Cars* book I was doing an illustration with some dogs in it. I tried making the dog brown; that didn’t look good. I tried making it black and spotted; that didn’t look good. I tried making it a rusty color; that didn’t look good. I called Jan and said, “What am I going to do with this dog, it’s not the right color!” And she said, “Tom, it’s a children’s book, you can make it blue if you want to!” I made it blue, and it looks great. It’s wonderful having someone around to remind me that I can do whatever I want. Sometimes I get really literal.

Your books are so imaginative; your work in advertising as a creative director is very imaginative as well. Are these different sorts of imagination?

In the advertising world there’s a certain amount of discipline, because you have to know about the product that you’re advertising and you have to know what you want it to represent to the consumer. I decide that I want this water to represent snow-capped mountains, so let’s do ads

with snow-capped mountains. Right there you’ve given yourself constraints, which I think is great for creative people. I think it’s a myth that creative people need to be able to do whatever they want. Creative people don’t know what to do; that’s why artists historically have needed themes. Religion was the big theme for a while, that gave them a box to work within. I worked on a project recently for my job, I didn’t have anywhere to go so I said I was going to do this product as seven deadly sins. No reason, it just gave me a world to live in. I did this product as the seven deadly sins. It was a great exercise in discipline. I say, here’s the box — it’s only this big around but it’s as deep as you want it to go. If you’re doing ads about snow-capped mountains, you can express that in a million different ways, but you can’t do anything with metals or flowers. I like to think of the advertising world in terms of how deep you can go in these small areas. I actually think that creative people thrive in that environment. Like children, we need discipline.

How does creativity within an ad agency environment differ from creativity in the children’s book world?

Well, it’s different in that with my books I can start anywhere I want. I can do a book about a messy room but I have to stay in that messy room. It’s quite different but it’s still using the imagination to engage people’s interest and their own imagination. And like advertising, it’s talking to people at a third grade level [laughs]. The other big difference is I am my own boss with my books. I succeed and fail by my own decisions. I’m pretty unprotected. I mean, I have editors and agents, and they say, “well, if you want to make the dog blue it’s up to you, I think it should be green but it’s up to you.”

I have a talk I do on “How to Make a Living by Making Stuff Up.” I love going to schools; I’ve got a few different talks that I do. I really like to talk to junior high and middle school kids. This particular talk is about creativity and how you can actually make a living with your imagination. When I was a kid I had this talent and nobody knew what to do with it. They tried to turn me into a science major. Which was fine, I was a science major for a summer or two. But I think it’s really important for kids to know that their imagination has real value. It’s not just a novelty. People still treat it as a novelty, but it’s not. There are many ways that you can make a job, make a living with your creativity. ■