# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**PART 1: Resource notes for Text**
Prepared by Meg McKinlay

- **Introduction** .......................................................... p.1
- **Inspiration** .............................................................. p.2
- **Development** .......................................................... p.2
- **But what's it about?** .............................................. p.6
- **Working with Matt Ottley** .................................... p.6

**PART 2: Resource notes for Illustrations**
Prepared by Matt Ottley

- **Introduction** .......................................................... p.8
- **Cover image** ......................................................... p.9
- **Endpapers** ............................................................ p.10
- **Title page** ............................................................. p.11
- **Colour palette** ...................................................... p.12
- **Page by page analysis** ......................................... p.13-p.29
- **Working with Meg McKinlay** ............................. p.26

Designed by Tina Wilson 2021
Introduction

How to Make A Bird is a book that is deeply connected to my heart and my history. It has been a long time in the making, having had its first spark some seventeen years ago. Why so long in the making? When I sent it out back then, I was told that it was – among other things – ‘lovely but not a picture book’, ‘intriguing but a little too odd’, ‘poetic but too conceptual’ and ‘beautiful but unillustratable’. Something, but always too something else.

When Linsay Knight at Walker Books had the vision to see beyond those buts and take the manuscript on, she asked me to put together a wish list of illustrators. It was the first time I’d ever been asked this question and I found myself quite at sea, so I called on an illustrator friend for assistance and we sat down together, looking through online portfolios, jotting down names. At some point in that process, we looked at each other and breathed, “Oh! Matt Ottley.” And from that moment on, it was Matt Ottley and blue sky and then the rest of the list, even though I knew Matt would never do it because he was too busy and not taking on new projects and ...

And here we are, with this beautiful, unillustratable picture book which has been the most glorious collaboration I could imagine, and about which I sometimes feel well, if I never do another thing, at least I did this.
Inspiration

In one way, *How to Make a Bird* began with the title.

In 2003, as an aspiring writer, I stumbled across a review of a book by Australian author Martine Murray. It was called *How to Make a Bird*, and on reading the title I was overwhelmed by envy and regret. Because I felt, in a suddenly collapsing instant, that this was my book, a book I’d never thought of writing until that exact moment but now knew that I wanted to, that I must, that I couldn’t, because Martine had already done it. And as odd as it sounds, I experienced such an extreme sense of loss I felt physically ill.

But then I went on to read the review and oh, what a thing. Because Martine’s book was a novel, for young adults, and it was nothing like ‘mine’. Nothing like the whole and perfect thing I had spun out in a second from her title, a strange little thing about the notions of permanence and transience, ownership and letting go. I could still write that book, and so I did.

In a deeper sense, though, *How to Make a Bird* didn’t begin with the title at all. The fact that the concept crystallised so immediately suggests that on some level, it was already there, unrecognised. And this, I think, is a result of my longstanding interest in Japanese culture and philosophy, and my doctoral work in the field of Japanese Literature. I’ve always been moved by the notion of ‘the dewdrop world’, the philosophical concepts of *wabi/sabi* and *aware*, which hold that so much of the essential beauty of things lies in the bittersweet knowledge that they will pass.

On the most essential level, it is these ideas that were the catalyst for the book, and which sit at its heart; without my connection to them, I suspect I would have skimmed past that review without a second thought.

Development

*How to Make a Bird* began in the way of all my work, as a series of fragments jotted down in a notebook – a line here, a thought there, a mess of questions and ideas, raw material for pondering.

The first line was with me from the start and in many ways set the tone for the piece. “To make a bird/you will need a lot of very tiny bones” may be short and simple on the face of it but there’s actually quite a lot packed in there, a direction already set. The second-person address, for one thing, the notion of a sort of all-knowing narrator speaking out to an implied audience. And the poetry of the piece: there is a rhythm to this line, a particular weighting to the cadence that came naturally and seemed exactly right. Though I wasn’t entirely sure what form things were going to take, I always knew this was a prose poem of sorts, that every aspect of the language must pull together with lyricism and economy.
With this in mind, I first let myself play, opening ideas and sentences out in a kind of stream-of-consciousness way, as in the following examples from my notebook:

It won’t be long, though, before you realise that your bird is cold and blank and, although looking very much like a bird, with its bones and its feathers and its strong, grasping claws, has no bird-ness to it. So you might touch, and smooth and fiddle for quite a long time before you see that this is not something you can do. So you’ll shrug your shoulders, perhaps, a little sad, and walk away to get your friends and show them, well, anyway, look I’ve made this…shape of a/statue of a bird.

And while you’re gone, somewhere inside this case of feathers and bone you’ve made, your bird will begin to stir. Somewhere inside this rapidly beating heart it will fill with the dreams only birds can dream, of open sky and soaring flight.

You’ll watch/And when you see that bird stretch out its wings, lean forward onto the air, take off straight up like a *** from the windowsill, filling the open sky, never once looking back until it is just a tiny disappearing speck in an enormous blue sky. And that is when you will know that you have really made a bird.

Then comes the economy, the paring back. If you compare these examples to the book itself, you will see that while each appears in some form, a lot has been stripped away. Not only is the language much more spare, so too is the narrative itself: the friends disappear, along with the narrator’s physical movement away from and back to the bird. The extraneous falls away, condensing the heart of the piece to a finer point. And while I’m not sure I was conscious of this at the time, this not only leaves more room for the illustrations to speak, it also has the effect of making that soaring window-opening moment at the end all the more powerful.

Something else that was crucial at the ‘fragment’ stage was the appearance of the last line, which you see in that third example above. I say ‘appearance’ because, even though I know the text is my creation, it really does feel sometimes as if a line just presents itself, whole and perfect, and this was one such time. Once I had that line, I saw the shape of the piece; that was the moment when I felt sure I was going to actually make something of these funny little fragments.

Unusually for me, once the pondering and play was done and I began shaping the piece, the manuscript actually changed very little from first through to final draft. The entire re-drafting and subsequent editing process consisted mostly of me reading the text out loud over and over and making tiny tweaks like the following:

“... you will know that there is more to a bird than all these things you have given it.”
Read these two versions over – retaining and deleting ‘that’ and ‘all’ - and hear the difference. It’s not that one version is intrinsically ‘better’; it’s simply that one better generates the effect I’m after, considering the piece as a whole. I want the reader to breathe down from ‘know’ to ‘there’, without the in-between peak of ‘that’, and I want ‘than’ and ‘these things’ side-by-side, for euphony; ‘all’ is extraneous, a hindrance in that tiny effort. With such a spare text, and with the sound and cadence being so important, I really did edit it like poetry, weighing and measuring each beat.

I also gave a lot of thought to pacing and flow, paying careful attention to where I wanted the reader to slow down and breathe, or where I wanted to give a particular line more impact. For an example of this, consider the movement between the following lines – one longer, with multiple clauses, one short and sharp.

*And they will be hollow, these hundreds of bones – so light that when they rest in your palm you will hardly feel them.*

*These are what will float on air.*

If you look at these lines in the book itself, you will see that the contrast is made even greater by the layout. The first sentence spreads out across the page in two parts, bisected by the illustration, in effect taking up even more space than the sum of its words.
Then, following the short rest and anticipation of the page turn, we have just a single seven-word line across the double page spread. A short breath out, surrounded by space.

Consider, too, the structure of that first sentence:

*And they will be hollow, these hundreds of bones, so light that when they rest in your palm ...*

Why not just say:

*And these hundreds of bones will be hollow, so light that when they rest in your palm ...*

It’s to do with cadence, with how I want the reader to breathe through that particular sentence, but there’s something else as well. In giving the phrase ‘these hundreds of bones’ its own clause, I mean to subtly draw the reader’s attention to it, let it rest there a moment. Earlier, the text simply said ‘a lot of bones’; here, the language adds to that, becomes more specific, creating a more vivid, particular image in the mind’s eye. I want the reader to experience that, even if they don’t realise it’s happening. Choices like this may seem tiny but they are crucial and it’s the cumulative effect of all of them that makes a poem, or a picture book that reads like one.

Similarly, when I say *The making of a bird is not a thing to be hurried*, I’m not just saying that line. I’m also choosing not to say:

*The making of a bird should not be hurried.*
*The making of a bird is not something to be hurried*
*The making of a bird is not something you should hurry.*
*One should not hurry when one is making a bird.*
*Birds should not be made in a hurry.*
And hundreds of other semantically similar but otherwise utterly different iterations. In a piece like this, every line has these little ghosts behind it, the paths not taken. I’m fortunate to have grown up surrounded by poetry and when I’m writing, these choices are mostly unconscious. It’s during the editing process – and when I sit down to write notes such as these – that I find myself realising why I’ve done the things I have.

**But What’s It About?**

Someone asked me this question at the launch of the book and I threw my hands up in a kind of despair. Matt and I had just delivered our launch speeches, in which we each talked about the range of ideas the narrative evokes, its various resonances. ‘Resonance’ is a vastly overused word these days but I consider it infinitely preferable to speak of meaning in that sense, rather than what single theme something is ‘about’. I suspect the person asking wanted to know what my intention was, but that’s not at all the same thing. As I noted earlier, my inspiration came from Japanese notions of transience, loss and beauty, but many other ideas crept in along the way, and others continue to emerge as readers respond to the book. It wasn’t until after I’d written many drafts of the manuscript that I realised it was also an allegory for the creative process, that cycle of labouring and letting go. That I was writing what I was doing, doing what I was writing – a singularly odd sensation. Others have seen it as as a metaphor for parenting, or for the gap that exists between the concrete and the abstract, the material world and the spiritual, what we see versus what we feel. I feel like it’s a book that opens out in all sorts of directions, depending on what you see in it, depending on what you bring to it. That’s what it’s about.

**Working with Matt Ottley**

As a non-illustrating author, a question I’m often asked is what happens if what the illustrator comes up with is different to what I imagine. And my answer is always that I’m very fortunate in this regard because I imagine nothing.

I am not a visual thinker at all. When I read, I don’t form any images of settings or characters; I have no concept of how or what things look like or how they interact on the visual plane. I’m impatient with physical description and tend to skim past those sections. In my own work, I often forget entirely about these things; from time to time, an editor will ask me, “But where are your characters at the moment?” and I have to stop myself from replying, “In their heads!” When she asks, “But how did they get from all the way over there to here so quickly?” I think, “Who cares!” It’s the interior landscape that always takes precedence for me. (And isn’t this interesting, because I just realised that I’m talking here about the tangible/intangible, concrete/abstract binary, which is one of the themes threaded through *How to Make a Bird!*).
In any case, the point is that when I went back to Walker Books with my illustrator suggestion of “Matt Ottley, followed by blue sky”, they asked what specific work of Matt’s I’d been drawn to, and asked me to provide examples that represented the style I was looking for. And I was genuinely flummoxed by this, because I absolutely couldn’t. Because in thinking of Matt for the book, it wasn’t about that at all; it was to do with a general sense of who he is as a person, of the way he sees the world and the sensibility he brings to things. In hindsight, it was perhaps odd for me to feel this way, because I really didn’t know Matt much beyond having heard him speak at events, and a few brief conversations in passing. Still, I had a feeling – that he would connect with the text, that he would understand the sensibility I was after, and how to render that visually, even if I didn’t – and I trusted that.

After Matt agreed to take the project on, we met over coffee and really just had a chat. I talked about where the text came from for me, and he talked about how it connected with him, what he saw in it. We talked philosophy and existentialism and creation and construction and really nothing at all specific about what form the illustrations might take, but I think we both went away feeling like we understood each other and that this was going to work somehow.

Months later, when I saw Matt’s early sketches – the narrative he had created with the girl and the birdhouse shack and the beach, the sense of space and light – it was somehow both nothing I could ever have imagined and everything I hoped it might be. I never know what things should look like, but I always know how I want them to feel, and here it was on the page.

Despite having lived with these words for almost two decades, I can no longer imagine them without Matt Ottley’s illustrations. We think of picture books as collaboration, but this has felt more like alchemy. I’m so glad this manuscript sat in a drawer for so long, waiting for its moment. I hope you’re able to linger over it too.

_Breathe deeply and take your time/The making of a bird is not a thing to be hurried._

*****
Introduction

Following is a very brief overview of some of my thinking behind the creation of the works to Meg McKinlay’s text in How to Make a Bird. Readers of the book may find different meanings in the images to those I suggest, the ideas I put forward are merely the things I thought about as I produced the works. The wonderful thing about art is that we can all find different and equally powerful meanings within it.

I am deeply grateful to Meg for suggesting me as the illustrator for her text. Working with her beautiful words has been one of the highlights of my career. My thanks to the team at Walker Books for publishing How to Make a Bird, and I would like to make a special mention of Sarah Davis, who was my art director during the production of the works. I don’t think I would have done anywhere near as good a job without Sarah’s suggestions for my work.

The paintings were all created on a Wacom Cintiq tablet, using Corel Painter.
Cover image

My intent in making the cover image was to create a sense of what the book is about (without giving any of the story away) but not about the literal object of the story, i.e., the making of a bird. I was helped very much in forming my ideas for the cover by my art director for the book, Sarah Davis. Sarah’s idea was to put the ghosted schematics on the cover, which I think was a brilliant idea. Thanks Sarah! So … the cover image is about the endlessness of the sky, the freedom of flight and the beauty of clouds, and also, thanks to the schematics, something to do with creativity – all things that, for me, sum up the essence of the book without telling the viewer what the book is actually about!
End papers

The endpapers contain the faint images of various birds – eagle, hornbill, chicken, swift, pheasant, heron, peacock, bird of paradise and dove – and most importantly, two feathers. These are not quite as faint as the birds themselves because for me, feathers are a powerful evocation of freedom, more so than the birds themselves. They are light and are designed (though not exclusively) for flight and are beautiful objects. They are also ephemeral, birds lose their feathers all the time and grow new ones. The other important feature of the endpapers is the image suggesting old paper. The parchment look is thematically important in some images in the book.
Title page

Because of the colour tone of this page the parchment paper background is more obvious. This, in combination with the drawing schematics reminiscent of Leonardo Da Vinci, suggest themes of both inventiveness and of ancient treasures. For me innovation and the creation of the new can only come from thinking that has been steeped in heritage. This, I think, is an important part of artistic creativity.
The colour palette

Meg’s text is so beautifully spare, with a richness of language that makes it a wonderful standalone poem as well as a picture book text. I wanted to reflect the poignancy of the words, and to infuse the images with the same kind of space and atmosphere, so I chose slightly muted colours for the paintings, with only occasional splashes of stronger tones. The stronger colours then have more regency in contrast to the muted tones. The girl, for example, in her blue dress becomes a strong element in each composition. We feel her strength by dint of her stronger tones. The stronger tones of the fabrics within her faded suitcase (spread 14-15) become important elements of the bird she makes and are reflections of the power of her creativity.
Page by page analysis

My notes begin with the spread on pages 6-7, and then I will refer to the two previous spreads. My reason for this is because of the significance of the shack on the beach, the home of the girl in the story.

For me the shack represents creativity. It is made from various materials all cobbled together. It is rambling and looks like it should fall over in the wind. Our creativity is made from things that are both new and things that are old and have been weathered by storms and by the sun. It is something that has strength and longevity, but is also fragile.

The words on this page are: These are what will float on air. There is a boat tied to the shack. The boat is for floating on water, our ideas float out into the world from within our creativity.
Spread 2-3.

If we now go back to the beginning of the book, we see inside the tall, wobbly building. The interior appears similarly cobbled together, but unlike the external appearance, it looks solid, impervious to the storms. We are within the strength of the girl’s creative mind. There are only a few drawings stuck to the walls. Perhaps she has taken other drawings down, is in the process of clearing her mind, creating space for her next project. She is looking out through the window, perhaps seeking inspiration from the world outside.

The interior of her home has an ancient, cottage feel with its heavy wooden beams and window lintel, but there are also elements of a later industrial age within the space as well, such as the metal tubing legs of her work bench. The objects on the bench come from many different ages as well. Human creativity and ingenuity are without cultural or temporal borders.
Spread 4-5

The bones of a bird are spread out as if on ancient parchment. They are like the basic elements of an idea, but it is impossible, arrayed like this, to see in them the glory of flight. With thought and dedication however, they can be arranged into the miracle of a bird.
The girl has been looking out from within her creative mind, and now it is time for her to go out onto the beach – into the world – to gather the materials for her creation. There is a windswept sense of desolation in the landscape. The curved horizon and the single, flying bird add to a sense of expanse. Although the girl may appear alone on this beach – perhaps even lonely – the vastness and distance of this landscape can also be seen as openness, as potential. The endless beach will always be a source of new treasure for the girl, there will always be new and inspiring objects offered from the rolling ocean.
While the girl fossicks on the beach she takes those random, scattered bones in her mind and begins arranging them into ideas that will need ‘fleshing out’. She can see the beauty of what she wants to create, and so she knows what she needs to look for out in the world – on the beach.

**Spread 8-9**

Take these bones and arrange them into a bird-shape. Any bird-shape will do — the soft curve of a sparrow, the proud arch of an eagle. Breathe deeply, and take your time. The making of a bird is not something to be hurried.

Preliminary drawing
Spread 10-11

She has found what she wants, it is now time to retreat back into her creativity, to begin making her bird. The boat is prominent in this image – her idea is waiting to ‘float’. The sunset reinforces the idea that it is time to be indoors, to come home to the security of her inner world.
Spread 12-13

This image is similar to the earlier bones spreads – it is like a dream of what is possible. The girl can create an infinite variety of feathers – all shapes and colours – in her mind. The background has the same ancient parchment feel as the bones spreads; the ancient heritage that is human creativity.

Next you need feathers — for warmth and for flight.

Smooth these over the bones of your bird-shape; press them firmly into place.

Some the longest for the wings and the tail, these are what will lift your bird into the air.
We are in the intimacy of the girl’s creativity and the focus of her mind, hence the spotlight feel of the lighting. She not only has the objects she has found in the outside world spread out before her, but has a suitcase of old treasures opened as well – the combination of the heritage and the new in her creativity.
The clouds and the height of our viewpoint reflect the power of creativity. Again, there is a reference to the old (as if we are looking at a vintage sepia photograph), but we are also experiencing the majesty of the planet, we are looking beyond that curved horizon to the future, to newness. This idea is reflected, for me, in the words on the right-hand part of the spread: — a sure, steady heart to carry it across oceans and continents, all the way home at the end of a long winter. For the creative soul, a sense of coming home is encapsulated in the thought of traversing vast oceans to arrive at the perfect idea.
As the bird begins to form, we see the objects it is being created from: sea shells, fragments of pearl shell (or is that sea-worn plastic?), a fragment of coral, twine, cloth, used and un-used matches. And can you spot the USB (the same one seen in spread 14-15)? All the objects represent aspects of, or vehicles for creativity. We need the fire of creativity – the ‘burning’ desire to create (and a sense of the potential of that desire); we need the inspiration of things already created; the ability to ‘tie’ the elements of our idea together; and something with which to ‘wrap it up’ into the unified, completed thing of beauty.
This view of the made bird, with its shadow and the background it is set against, encompasses the ancient and the new, that unbroken heritage that is human creativity. But it is lonely, there is still a sense of incompleteness to it.

And when you have made your bird, with its bones and its feathers and its gripping claws, you might sit back and sigh... this silent, still shape of a bird. You might think to yourself, I have made this bird...
So you will gather it into your hands and cast it gently upon the air. But when you see it sitting, cold as a statue, you will know there is more to a bird that these things you have given it.

If we look carefully at the girl’s face, we can see that she is blowing breath at the bird, she is breathing life into it. This is what is needed to bring light, which we can see flooding the room, into her creation. There are only a few found objects remaining on the floor and the suitcase of old treasures is closed: the girl’s creation is ready to assume a life of its own. As you can see from the preliminary sketch (below) I only made the decision to have the girl breathing life into the bird as I worked on the final artwork, which meant turning the bird around to face her. I also have subtly made the girl appear older as we move through the text, a reflection of the time and patience in the making of things of beauty.
Our viewpoint is from above the clouds and we can see the shape of the globe – that far distant horizon. The positioning of the girl’s hands suggests she is looking towards the rising sun, towards the new life of her creation. The words on this spread resonate deeply with me as an artist: And then your bird will catch your eye and you will know it is time to go and open the window. Open it. One of the most difficult parts of the creative process, for me, is knowing when the work itself is telling you that you need to stop working on it, to stop worrying at it and to let it go, to release it to the world.

For me, the light in this spread can be read two ways. It is either sunrise, as suggested earlier, or it is sunset. This second reading relates to the words at the end of the story (a few pages on from here): And you feel your slowly beating heart fill with a kind of sadness, a kind of happiness. Meg, in an early conversation about the book – before I’d begun working on it – introduced me to the philosophical idea that there can be an element of sadness in thinking about things that we find beautiful, even if those things are joyful. It’s a sadness borne of the knowledge that the beauty will be over – or our experience of it – will pass, will be over at some point. But that only sharpens its exquisiteness, only heightens our sense of the preciousness of that beauty.
Spread 26-27

This is the moment of life, the time when the thing that was missing in the initial completion of the bird (spread 20-21) comes into being. It represents the power of creativity for changing the way we see things, for opening our eyes and hearts to a sense of life and beauty in our world. As the bird comes to life, it flies from the shadows, from the inner world, towards the light where it takes form. The bird will eventually be seen by other people, who will perhaps see something different in it, but all will be touched by it.
Spread 28-29

Obviously others can only find meaning and wonder in the bird if they can witness it. For this to happen, we need to open the window and release the bird. The moment of release brings about a sense of the vastness of the world. There are two views of the sky in this image, one through the glass frames of the opened window, and one an unimpeded view of the sky itself. One – the view through the glass – is the idea of release, of freedom, the other is freedom itself.

See it shiver as it bows forward onto the air and then takes off in a strong, sudden movement, soaring straight up, away and away, never once looking back ...

... until it is a disappearing speck in a vast blue sky.

Preliminary drawing
Again, we have a sense of the sheer expanse of the world. The girl, tiny against the far horizon, is looking towards that horizon, knowing that she has created something beautiful that is now somewhere out there in the world, with a life of its own. There is a sense of loneliness in this, but also of a deeper happiness, of contentment and peace. I tried, in this image to create a sense of that peace, of contemplation by evoking the constant blowing of the wind on the beach, of the reassuring lapping of the waves, the solidity of continuation.

And let your slowly beating heart fill
with a kind of sadness,
a kind of happiness.

For this is when you will know
that you have really made a bird.
This image flows on from the previous spread, back into the inner world, to a space of light and warmth, of peace and stillness. The chest, which we saw in the very first spread, is a thing of solidity in which we store treasured things, things of value and importance.
Working with Meg McKinlay

Although I had not known Meg very well, as we’d only ever seen and spoken to each other in passing at various book events, I felt, at once, a sympatico with the things I heard her speak about. When I first read How to Make a Bird I felt a lump in my throat and couldn’t explain why, just that it seemed to be so powerfully imbued with a sense of joy, of loneliness and poignancy and of celebration all at once. My first thought was that it was so very unlike any picture book text I’d ever read that it was going to be one of those rare picture books that truly spans all ages of readers. The potential for me to take the images in multiple directions was very exciting. There was no thinking about it, I said ‘yes!’ immediately.

Working with Meg was, as Meg has stated, like alchemy. So often, in conversations with her, I found myself saying, ‘I know exactly what you mean.’ If I could have conceived a series of paintings and then asked an author to match her text to it, this would have been that work.