

How to BE an Illustrator of Storybooks

by Chazda Albright -

<http://greatstorybook.com/how-to-be-an-illustrator-of-storybooks/>

This entry is part 4 of 4 in the series [Artist for Stories](#)

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In today's market, it's difficult for writers to make a living doing what they love most: namely, to write. The same is true for artists. With traditional publishing houses sometimes paying artists as low as \$800 to illustrate a book, one question necessarily arises: "Is it even possible for an artist to make a living from illustrating storybooks?"

The short answer is yes, you can make a living as a storybook illustrator. But there's a long road to getting there if you're not both tenacious and savvy. You must be both.

Let's Talk about Fiverr Artists (it's a thing)

If you look at websites like Fiverr.com, you'll see a long list of artists (over 250 illustrators to date) who are willing to create illustrations for as little as \$5.00. It's depressing, disheartening. But don't walk away shaking your head in dismay just yet.

A street artist makes at least eight times that amount, so how can Fiverr-artists make a living from that? You might well think that they cannot possibly live off of that income. (That's what I first thought.) You would be wrong. Take a closer look.

It's a numbers game. Some art buyers aren't looking for the Mona Lisa. They just want a picture that meets their needs. They might need something for a website and they might need something for a storybook. Whatever it is, they want it for as cheap as possible – naturally. Put yourself in their shoes and you understand. You might not like it, but you get it.

Fiverr art is never just \$5.00 if the work is going to be used to market anything or to be used as an image that will be sold (like a book). When that's the case, the buyer must also purchase Usage Rights, or a License for Commercial Use. Think of this as something rather similar to purchasing a Copyright.

Too, if the artist is clever, they charge for different types of artwork and even different layers. For example, a black and white line drawing is the base price. In color, it's more. With a background, that's again more. Additional drawings of the same character also yield a higher, additional fee per image grouping. In the end, a single drawing can earn the artist \$120, with the promise for more work.

When an artist shows very clearly what sorts of images they are willing to create for these prices, then the buyer can be satisfied knowing they've made a smart purchase for the type of visual they want.

What about artists who don't want to post on Fiverr?

The Not-Paid-by-the-Hour Artist

I am not on Fiverr and have no plans to be, because that just sounds like work to me. If I were happy to do that, I could paint by numbers just as well.

The trick is in knowing not just what your base price is, but also knowing what you're willing to do and for what sort of project. I do this with my own illustrations and with my writing and editorial services as well. I am self-employed, which means I only do what I want to do. Sometimes I work for less money than I'd like, but I'm okay with that. That's my decision to make.

The thing is, no one pays me to be a writer. They pay me to write. Meaning: because I'm self-employed, I don't get paid by the hour; I get paid for results. If it takes me longer to create those results, that's my problem. The same is true of any artwork I create. I don't get paid to be an artist. I get paid to create art. That's a big difference.

I won't be at this working level forever. As I build upon my reputation, that dynamic will start to change. Let me explain what I mean here.

A few (there are many, many more) artists who live on their storybook artwork:

Jon Klassen
Oliver Jeffers
Eric Carle
Mo Willems
Robin Preiss Glasser

Establish Yourself a Reputation

As an artist, you need to establish a reputation. A reputation is what you earn from the way you work, not the type of work you do. It doesn't matter if you can paint the classics, it doesn't matter if you make angels weep with your inspired brushstrokes.

If you're unprofessional, always late, making your partners feel like they have to hound you for the next image, and you constantly drop hints that you aren't getting paid enough for this – well that's a great way to build a horrible reputation.

Amazingly, I've heard all sorts of stories from editors, gallery owners and writers who have run into this sort of problem when working with an artist. Unfortunately, these are really common problems.

This is one of the reasons why first-time storybook illustrators traditionally get such a low pay. The risk is just too high if they haven't proven themselves to be professionals.

How to be Paid like a Professional Artist

But luckily, many real artists are on the other end of the spectrum: they are professionals. Someone who doesn't complain all the time, someone who delivers artwork on time, someone who is reachable and who communicates openly about what they're doing and how they're progressing with the work they've been contracted to do.

If you are an artist and you want to illustrate storybooks for a living, you can work your way up to earning \$12,000 and \$17,000 per book. But you cannot expect to earn that straight away, no matter how talented you are. Just as a writer has to "pay dues," so do artists. You have to show your professionalism and establish a reputation. You have to work on your branding, build a fan base and partnerships with writers, publishers and other professionals.

If you aren't willing to work with a publishing house or an indie writer for less than \$5,000 on a first book, then my best advice is that you create your own storybooks. Get them on the market, show that you understand how to create artwork for a story, show that you understand the storytelling beast and that your work has traction.

If you can do that, chances are good that editors will make you an offer that is higher than the normal ground-floor price. Once you have a reputation, then you'll be paid to be an artist with a name.

It's ultimately up to you how you want to sculpt your career and what you're willing (or unwilling) to do to make that a reality. How you pull it off? It's entirely in your hands.

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