

GRAPHIC GESTURES  
AN INTERVIEW WITH SARA FANELLI  
BY STEVEN HELLER

# WOLVES, LOGIC AND HAPPY MISTAKES

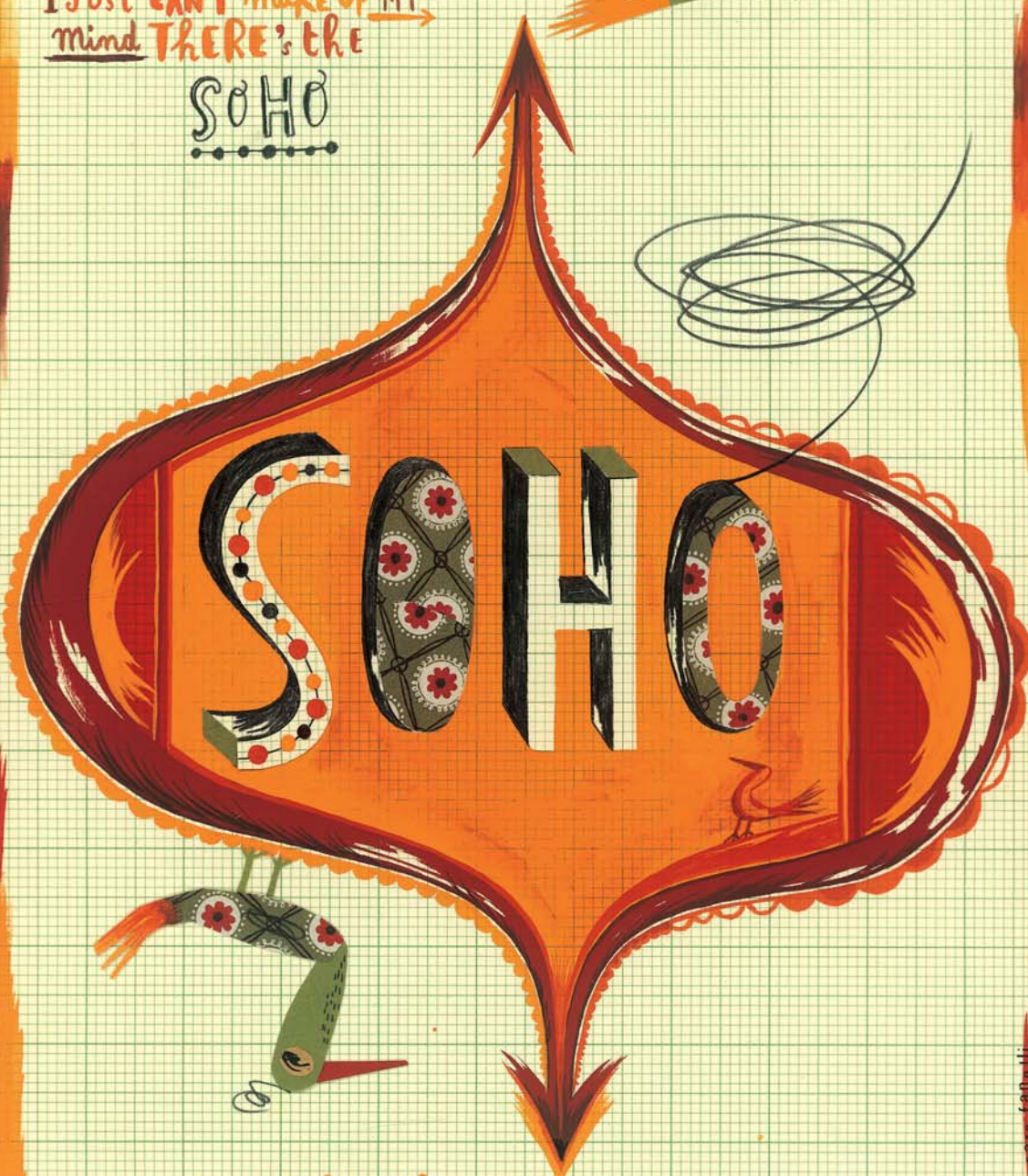
IN A DISCUSSION WITH STEVEN HELLER, SARA FANELLI EXPLAINS HOW HER DREAM-LIKE IMAGES ARE DRAWN FROM A RICH GENE POOL OF MYTHOLOGY, LITERATURE, ART AND PLAYFULNESS, AND HOW HER PHILOSOPHICALLY INCLINED IMAGINATION HAS CREATED A BODY OF WORK THAT CHALLENGES AND DELIGHTS IN EQUAL MEASURE. BUT BEWARE – THE FAMILY DOG JUST WON'T LOOK THE SAME ONCE YOU'VE BEEN EXPOSED TO FANELLI'S CANINE IMAGININGS.

Sara Fanelli was auspiciously born on 20 July 1969, in Florence, Italy, during the first Moon landing. After finishing a Diploma di Maturita at the Liceo Classico Michelangelo in Florence, she came to London to attend a foundation course, which was followed by a BA (Hons) Graphic Design course at Camberwell College of Art (specialising in illustration in the final part of the course). Her degree was followed by a two-year MA in Illustration at the Royal College of Art. Between the foundation course and the BA she also attended a one-year Architecture Degree course at the University of Florence.

She currently lives in London where she has created 10 children's books, and has just completed a book of drawings and writings, for no particular age group called sometimes I Think, Sometimes I Am. It will be published in Autumn 2007.

→ THERE'S salad  
AND THERE'S PIZZA.  
And FOR THOSE DAYS WHEN  
I JUST CAN'T MAKE UP MY  
MIND THERE'S THE  
SOHO

salad →



← pizza

sara fanelli

**Steven Heller:** Your work seems to derive from a mix of the Dadaists, Futurists, Cubists, Paul Klee, and, well, am I forgetting anything?

**Sara Fanelli:** Your list is correct. I look at photography and film – Bauhaus, Russian Constructivist, Surrealist, 1960s art – and I also find inspiration from popular art and primitive art. Much of your visible work has been for children's books that are at once friendly to kids, but also go beyond the usual conventions. Why did you choose this genre as your métier, or did it choose you? I love books. I love the book format, and the challenge to use it and expand it as much as possible according to the project. The books I enjoy working on most are picture books, where the page is mainly occupied by pictures but punctuated by the parallel voice of type. I would love to be working on illustrated books for adults as well, but this is a rare format nowadays.

There is also a part of me that directly relates to the magic in children's books, looking for new worlds to go to, with their own, different characters, colours and logic. This is the side that naturally guides my children's book output. **What do you mean by 'logic'? Do you really mean 'illogic', weird juxtapositions, silly worlds? Can you explain how logic enters into your work?**

Generally logic enters into my work mostly to be put to shame. I love Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco. The worlds one creates in books have their own rules and logic. In my book *Wolf* (1997), wolves and humans interact, and wolves wear boots. In *It's Dreamtime* (1999), you can be flown to Mars by the Moon, and in *Dear*

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"THERE IS ALSO A PART OF ME THAT DIRECTLY RELATES TO THE MAGIC IN CHILDREN'S BOOKS, LOOKING FOR NEW WORLDS TO GO TO, WITH THEIR OWN, DIFFERENT CHARACTERS, COLOURS AND LOGIC."

*Diary* (2000), chairs and spiders keep a diary, and foxes throw masquerade parties. I also really enjoy and admire Lewis Carroll's approach to logic in his books.

**Although your work plays with collage, you create recognisable characters. Do you create specific characters to answer a narrative need, or in the course of your play do the individuals emerge organically?**

Both. Especially in the short-term commissioned jobs where I often have to create characters appropriate to the brief. But often with the picture books I develop stories from characters that have appeared organically.

**Tell me about some organically 'farmed' characters? And where do they really come from?**

I am not sure that the Soil Association would approve of this organic produce! The dog/wolf character is very organic and also adaptable. I love the way dogs expressions can sometimes be read as brilliantly enacted human emotions. I have always drawn dogs, but they change and grow. At first they were fairly 'squirish', as in *My Map Book* (1995).

Then my dog became a scratchy wolf, and then it took on a whole variety of roles. In the book *A Dog's Life* (1998), it went from a Japanese geisha-like dog to Cerberus. Next, it became a shadow figure of the main character in *Pinocchio* (2003), and so its nose grew very long just like his master's nose, and so on. For the cover of a CD of cello and piano music for children – *Children's Cello* (2006) – I turned the dog into a cello. Then he was the hound that went round Tate Britain on an art trail [in 2004 Fanelli created an art trail as part of British Art Week, to explore Tate Britain's collections.] An example of this character in the context of non-children's books, is the maze-headed man – he is a recurring character in my work, he has a human body and a maze for the head – or Theseus [mythological king of Athens] who also transformed himself into the neurotic lover and finally the everyday neurotic.

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**I love the idea of introducing Theseus into illustration. Who is your favourite character in your work, and why?**

When I think of my books I see them less as collections of different characters and more as samples of different worlds, realities. But to answer the question, maybe the *Wolf* character is the one I am most fond of. It appears as well in the guise of a dog sometimes. I also enjoy giving life to inanimate objects very much. **I've got to know, what exactly does the wolf, or dog, mean to you? Is it some demon or loved one or wishful fantasy person?**

There is a very liberating element in being an animal and being able to be wild! And it can be scary as well and dangerous, both of which are rather appealing aspects, to a certain degree. Also there is sheer enjoyment in making the graphic gestures and movements to draw that kind of dog. With their spiky hair and ears and noses, they are almost like deformed creatures with illnesses that maybe we can all end up with.

**Do the children's books satisfy all your creative urges? I know this sounds a little pretentious, but as an artist do you get as much from this line of your work as from other areas where you are not telling such regimented linear stories?**

I like both. But I wouldn't like to be doing only one thing. Everything is fed by personal research both in materials and ideas. The ideas most of the time come from marrying events and emotions in my life with texts I come across in my reading. This is the core of all the work and it feeds the general illustration commissions as well as the books.

**So, what do you like to read? Do you prefer heavy literature or light reading – or word-a-day calendars?**

As an Italo Calvino fanatic, I value playfulness and lightness of spirit, though in the context of great literature. I like to read books that make me see or think things in a different way, or make me enter wonderful worlds. I really dislike over-sentimentality. My great love is Calvino (his early stories as much as the later work), and I also really enjoy Jorge Luis Borges, José Saramago, Vladimir Nabokov, Laurence Sterne, Flann O'Brien and many more.

**The book you are currently working on, *Sometimes I Think, Sometimes I Am*, is a collection of many, shall we say, randomly deliberate images.**

**Would you call these collected works, illustrations?**

In this new book I collected works from moments of that visual personal journey I was telling you about, which feeds all the rest. Almost all of the images are inspired by a text. They are visual interpretations of the ideas contained in the text I chose. But I have complete freedom in the way I want to express those ideas and in the degree of obscurity of the narrative.

**Give me a for-instance. What is one of your most challenging texts and what did you do to make it your own?**

I found that changing technique helped me tackle the harder texts. For instance, the Dante quotations, which are peppered throughout the book, are challenging because of the historical weight they carry, especially for Italians. So I used black and white etchings to help to make them more dramatic. Having taken this decision I had to become quite bold about the figures and the rhythm of the overall picture as well, and I think this helped make stronger images.

**Would you say you lean towards Surrealism in your work? Are you trying to hide something? Or is it the way your mind processes visual information?**

To me the world is surreal and I find its absurdities and surprises make it worth coping with all the rest. There is also an element of playfulness in the surreal side of things that is equally fundamental, for me, in order to live.

**"Coping with the rest" is a curious reason for making art. Are you depressed or happy or somewhere in between? And would you call your artwork happy?**

Difficult question. I think that I am by nature a happy person but often find everyday life quite demanding and at times overwhelming.

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*Soho Pizza*  
2005  
Menu for Pizza Express

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*Sometimes I think,  
Sometimes I am*  
2007  
Personal work, inspired by quotations which will be

included in Fanelli's new book, due to be published by Tate Publishing, Autumn 2007

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*The Puppet Theatre*  
2003  
Book illustration for Pinocchio, published by Walker Books.

4

*First Flight*  
2002  
Front and back cover of children's book *First Flight*, published by Jonathan Cape.

5

*Fluctuat nec Mergitur*  
2001  
Poster for AGI exhibition, Paris.

6

*The Helmet of Horror*  
2006  
Cover for book by Victor Pelevin, published by Canongate.

7

*Ron Aran, Milan Fair*  
2002  
Show invitation for Ron Arad Associates.



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8 [Pizza Margherita](#)  
2005  
Menu for Pizza Express.

13 [The Cat and the Fox](#)  
2003  
Book illustration for Pinocchio, published by Walker Books.

9 [Paper and the environment](#)  
2001  
Illustration for Swedish paper manufacturer's magazine, Bark Design, on the effect of papermaking on the environment.

14 [Map of my day](#)  
2005  
Book illustration from Fanelli's My Map Book. ABC reissued by Walker Books, 2006

Sometimes my work is less happy than people want to think, but on the other hand sometimes people find it more scary than I think it is. I'm not sure I would apply the term 'happy' to your work, but nor is it sad, either. Some of your characterizations have a slightly demonic edge, yet most of your work does not push the emotional edges. Is this a fair interpretation? How would you describe what you 'put into' your artwork? For the personal visual journey – the body of work that is not commissioned but feeds commissions eventually – I often end up choosing texts that are relevant to emotions or events in my life at the time. But it tends to be a way of understanding or trying to understand some emotion, rather than pouring the emotion into the work. It is a way of looking at something from several perspectives and trying to do-it and un-do-it in an attempt to make a little more sense of it.

Drawing often forces us to see common things in an uncommon way (at least sometimes). I was taken by a drawing in one of your sketchbooks with the caption 'in search for an author -LP' – I wonder whether this was a pre-meditated image or a serendipitous one? And what kind of author are you looking for?

This image is from a series inspired by Luigi Pirandello's Six Characters in Search of an Author (1921). On the left hand side is an area of reflective tin foil, a mirror aimed at the Pirandello figure. Pirandello's work constantly dealt with issues of how we perceive ourselves, how other people perceive us, the masks we present to others, and how all these 'selves' make us feel at the same time one, nobody and anybody.

One of my favourite of all your books is My Map Book. This seems so un-child-like. But it's perfect for children. Were you making a break here? Was this a cry from you to go into un-chartered territory?

I worked on My Map Book while I was still at college. I've always been fascinated by old maps and their mysterious narratives, and I was looking at them at the time. One day I decided to test my memory of certain places back home in Italy, and I did this by drawing map-style sketches. I was also looking at Jean Michel Basquiat's work and so these three elements came together in the book.

Given all your inventive books, why Pinocchio? Hasn't this been done to death?

This is the only book I was commissioned to do, as opposed to me taking an idea to the publishers. At first I wasn't sure. I didn't particularly like the story when I was little – too much moralistic talk and guilt-ridden logic. But when I read the original again I was surprised by the striking, fabulous escapades of the puppet, and also by the large number of characters and events. The publisher, Walker Books, wanted to commission a new translation, so when I met with the translator, Emma Rose, we talked about how the text should be a faithful

translation but at the same time should mute the moral tone. I think she did this very well. I liked the challenge of making a picture book that looked contemporary, but still retained the spirit of the traditional story.

I decided that it was very important to maintain the connection with the rural landscape of the story – the Tuscan hills and the surrounding countryside. Once this connection was in place I was free to take the images where I wanted. So the book starts with a sequence of images leading the reader into the world of Pinocchio's countryside, even before the story begins. I thought of those films in which the title sequence follows, instead of precedes, the beginning of the narrative.

You have such a Fanelli signature, even when you jump from children to non-children's media. Is there a method or manner you would like to try that will totally alter your signature? Have you tried it? Is it yet to come?

I hope that I will always arrive at new ways of making images. I have been making a few more three-dimensional pieces and I have begun to play with photography techniques, too. Let's see! I can't wait. But when you sit down to make art, what do you want to come out of it? And are you sure at the outset what it is that will come out?

I definitely love the element of accident and surprise which is a gift of the process of making images, especially in a relatively old fashioned technique like collage. Cutting the wrong shape; spilling the ink; covering mistakes. However I do plan a general composition, so that I have a guide for the happy mistakes. In fact, playfulness in the work (as in life!) is so important that if there wasn't an element of it with its surprises, I wouldn't enjoy making pictures as much as I do.

If you were to step out of Sara Fanelli and describe who you are as an artist, would you describe yourself as a children's book illustrator? Just an illustrator?

I think I would describe myself as an illustrator. But in the context of contemporary illustration which gives personal interpretations and visual comments to texts rather than merely literal descriptions. ♦♦

Further reading:  
[www.sarafanelli.com](http://www.sarafanelli.com)  
[www.rsa.org.uk/rdi/index.asp](http://www.rsa.org.uk/rdi/index.asp)  
[www.britishcouncil.org/russia-arts-magic-pencil-fanelli.htm](http://www.britishcouncil.org/russia-arts-magic-pencil-fanelli.htm)

10 [SARA FANELLI](#) 5/6

10 [In search of the author - LP](#)  
2007  
A personal piece inspired by Pirandello's 'Six Characters in search of an Author' (1921).

11 [Gallery entrance](#)  
2006  
Poetry and Dream is one of four gallery entrances for new rehanging of permanent collection at Tate Modern.

12 [The Snobs](#)  
2005  
Book cover for The Snobs by Muriel Spark. Part of the Penguin 70th Birthday series.

Photography by Morley von Sternberg.

13 [The Cat and the Fox](#)  
2003  
Book illustration for Pinocchio, published by Walker Books.

14 [Map of my day](#)  
2005  
Book illustration from Fanelli's My Map Book. ABC reissued by Walker Books, 2006

15 [The Insects Party](#)  
2000  
Book illustration for DearDiary, published by Walker Books.

8 [Pizza Margherita](#)  
2005  
Menu for Pizza Express.

9 [Paper and the environment](#)  
2001  
Illustration for Swedish paper manufacturer's magazine, Bark Design, on the effect of papermaking on the environment.

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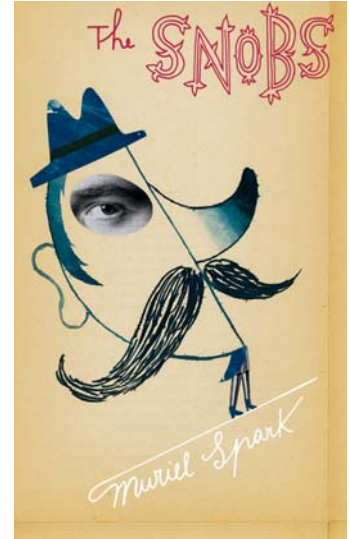
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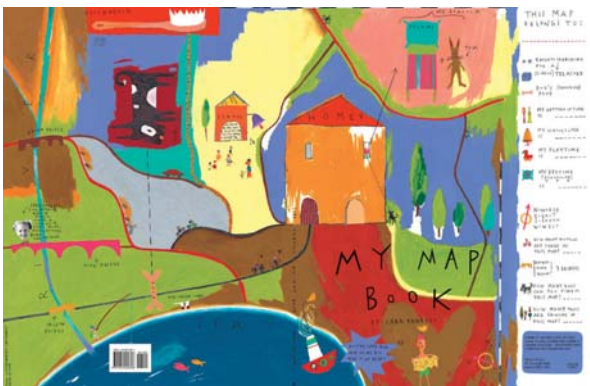
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