

# Creations to crow about

Children's author Sarah Brennan introduces her brand new Calendar Tale, *Rickshaw Rooster*. By Carolynne Dear.



“ WRITING and CHILDREN, they're my two true loves, so I have my DREAM JOB - Sarah Brennan ”

(Above) Brennan is passionate about the importance of reading for young children; (right and following page) the delightful illustrations of Harry Harrison in her latest book.

“ It's funny,” muses Sarah Brennan, as we sit back with a latte in the comfortable confines of Cafe Causette, where we're meeting to talk about the release of her latest book. “Bookcases these days never seem to contain books anymore - they're always full of ornaments and photo frames.”

It's an interesting observation from a writer who is passionate about print and travels the world promoting not just her own stories, but reading in general, to avid school children.

We are living in age where technology is fast overtaking the written word, something

that Brennan is very passionate about. But more on that later.

Australian by birth, Brennan has always loved writing and has taken on something of a celebrity status in Hong Kong for her Calendar Tales series of stories (my own two primary-aged children were in awe when I told them who I would be meeting for coffee, and demanded signed copies of their favourite books).

Each tale - ten have been published to date - follows the story of an animal linking with the current Chinese zodiac year. This year is the

turn of the rather excitingly named Rickshaw Rooster.

“Writing and children, they're my two loves. So I have my dream job,” she smiles, as the wait staff bustle around with second coffees and water.

Brennan's first book, *A Dirty Story* was published in Hong Kong in 2004 and was an instant success with local school children. She followed it up with *An Even Dirtier Story*.

“So I was promoting these books in schools, and the children were loving them, but then I started feeling a bit guilty,” she says.

“Being Hong Kong, there were obviously lots of Asian children in the classes and I thought it would be lovely to do something about their culture rather than submerge them with yet more western ideas.”

So she went away, set up a publishing company and wrote *Chester Choi*, the story of a Chinese dragon who loves eating children but is secretly lonely. “This was a bit of a dummy publication to see if it worked - actually I needed it to work to pay the start-up bills - but I took it into schools and it seemed to be very popular, so I came away and wrote the story of *Run Run Rat* (to coincide with Beijing's olympics and the year of the rat). And a few months after that, to my huge surprise, I walked into a party and everyone started clapping. To my utter joy *Time Out* had run a piece on favourite children's books in the territory and *Chester Choi* and *Run Run Rat* had come in at number one and number two respectively, beating *Harry Potter* who was at number three. So to my absolute delight, for six weeks and in Hong Kong only, I beat *Harry Potter*!”

Brennan then decided to introduce elements of Chinese history and culture into her stories - *Oswald Ox* is based on Chinese farming practices, for example, and *Temujin* on Genghis Khan. And the rest, as they say, is history.

But what makes her books so popular? “I write what I want to write and I don't hold back because my readers are children. I love the beauty of words, so my text is often littered with longer words and more



complex vocabulary,” she explains, using the “precocious Princess Precious” in Temujin as an example. “Children are clever, I haven't had any complaints so far.”

The books have been hugely popular, both in Hong Kong and overseas. “I think with the emergence of China, schools are keen to pick up on something that will encourage the learning of Chinese culture and history. It's also fantastic to see the looks on the faces of Chinese children in the overseas schools that I visit. When I'm in an Australian or British school and start talking about the Chinese zodiac their faces just light up - they're thrilled to hear somebody talking about their culture.”

Brennan is keen to point out that Chinese history has been fundamentally important to the development of western nations.

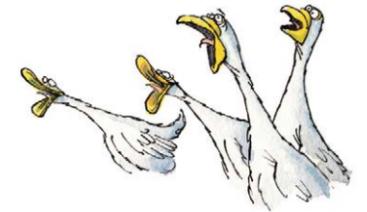
“Ancient Chinese history has informed a lot of western history,” she says. “Of course for

“ To my absolute delight, for six weeks and in Hong Kong only, I beat Harry Potter. ”

hundreds and hundreds of years you had a very active Silk Road promoting cross-fertilization not just of trade, but of culture, religions and ideas. If we're talking about books, print-quality paper and the printing press are classic examples, both were developed by the Chinese in the second and eleventh centuries respectively. We always talk about Gutenberg and the first printing press, but the world's first movable type printing press for printing paper

books was invented by a Chinese innovator, Bi Sheng, in the eleventh century.”

This and Ts'ai Lun's paper creation, in the second century - sheets made of fishnets, rags and hemp waste that could withstand the rigours of printing, unlike papyrus - boosted literacy across China.



When it finally arrived in Europe in the 1440s, the printing press also made a huge impact on western society, particularly as it needed fewer alphabet characters than the ancient Chinese version with its thousands of symbols. Soon books were rolling off the presses quicker and cheaper than ever before.



## THE BIG INTERVIEW

But as enthusiastic as she is about her trade, Brennan does have a bug bear - the thorny old issue of tech. When I bring up the subject, she groans.

"Look, I'm just the messenger, I'm in no way an expert. But I do talk a lot to teachers, I do interact a lot with students, and I do read a lot of emerging research. And experts are finding that as the use of tech increases, literacy is on the decline. I personally believe there must be a correlation here."



She quotes research from global five-yearly literacy tests for grade four students in schools where English is the teaching medium.

"The results for Australia were appalling," she says. "And this is a country that is one of the most digitalised in the world in terms of its primary schools."

Studies carried out on students in the US assessed recall after a Ted talk - "there was basically a huge difference between those who had used pen and paper to take lecture notes, and those who had used an i-pad."

The thinking goes that because writing manually is a slower method of note-taking, we automatically listen and process what we're hearing to filter what we need to write down, whereas with an i-pad, we are merely recording the content without thinking about it.

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It is also believed that there is a huge deficit in the absorption of information into the brain when using a screen rather than a notepad because of the movement of the pixels that make up screen text. It is thought this movement interferes with the crossing of the information into the deep brain. Brennan recommends reading *The Shallows: What the Internet is doing to our Brains* by Nicholas Carr.

"We're in an experimental age and I do think the clock will turn back at some point. Young children need to be able to know how to

concentrate, focus, listen and analyze, and the digital medium isn't helping them to do any of that. Give students an assignment these days, and the "skill" is making a cut and paste from google not look plagiarised, it's got nothing to do with actually learning about the subject area. Digital devices have not improved results in any way, so why are we still investing so much time in them?"



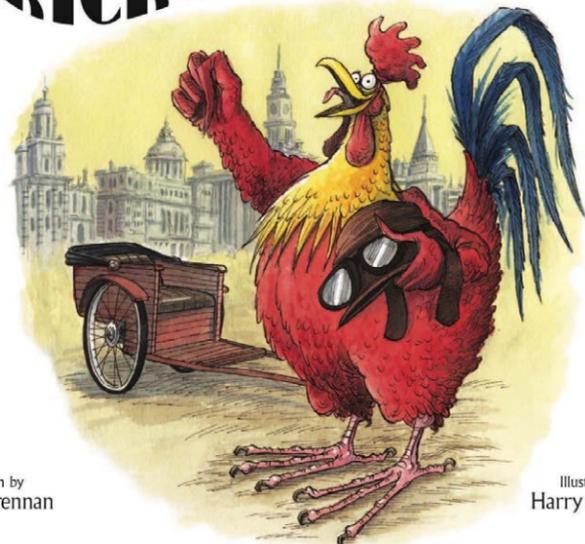
It's a good question, but not one we're likely to see an answer to any time soon. In the meantime, she is revealing very little about her latest creation, the tale of *Rickshaw Rooster*, except to say the story has a modern Chinese setting.

"It's been published in Hong Kong in time for Chinese New Year, and then I'll be doing a big launch in March at the Shanghai literary festival," she says with a smile.

I know of at least two small children at home who can't wait. □

## THE TALE OF RICKSHAW ROOSTER

The Chinese Calendar Tales



Written by Sarah Brennan

Illustrated by Harry Harrison

The Tale of Rickshaw Rooster is available in Hong Kong bookstores and from Brennan's website, sarahbrennanblog.com.



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