

# Illustrate YOUR OWN CHILDREN'S BOOK

*Tony Laidig*

## IN THIS TRAINING...

### **Illustrate Your OWN Children's Book:**

- The Biggest Challenge for ALL Children's Authors.
- Understanding the Artistic Options You Likely Never Considered.
- Planning Your Illustrations...Telling Your Story Visually.
- Photographs and How They Change the Rules.
- A Powerful Case Study You Can Use Immediately.
- And Much More!

Not long ago, it would have been impossible for me to entertain my passion for creating children's books. Like many of you, I would have been overwhelmed with the idea of finding \$10,000 to hire a professional illustrator to illustrate my book or have to settle for something sub-standard, something less than the illustrations I would want in my book. But, I've developed some methods using photography, digital editing and "painting" techniques to solve this problem and I think you are going to enjoy learning about it.

When you are looking at the prospect of creating a children's book, you are probably thinking, "The story will be easy to write, but how in the world am I going to portray this story in a way that children will love?" I've been in publishing for more than 20 years, working as a book and cover designer. I've learned a lot about writing and publishing books. I have 15 books I've written in various ways, shapes and forms. I'm not going to say that the writing is easy, but the biggest challenge with all children's books is the illustrations. Illustrations are almost always the stumbling block.

Many years ago when I worked for a Christian publisher, we were always getting the latest and greatest children's books presented to us. We rejected nearly every one, not because the story was bad or poorly written—some were wonderful stories—but because the books either had no illustrations or the illustrations were not good quality. For the publishing company, children's books were not a safe enough bet to invest the thousands of dollars necessary to create quality illustrations that would help ensure their success. Fortunately for us, print-on-demand technology and digital books have changed that dynamic completely, putting the tools back in the hands of anyone, author and illustrator. Consequently, the children's book market is exploding again.

If you want to now benefit from this exploding market and the power print on demand has afforded you, there are some key issues with regard to your illustrations that you must keep in mind at all times:

- ◆ As an author, you must aspire to create illustrations for your book to tell your story visually in an amazing, compelling and inspiring way. You hope that as the parent reads a child your book, the child is taken in by the visuals, the artwork that children respond to.
- ◆ Whether you are writing your first book or producing a series, your illustrations are setting a standard that can make or break your success. As a children's book author, your illustrations define your brand.
- ◆ It is important that you establish a “look” right from the start that can carry on in sequels, future projects, product development and more. You don't know how inspiration is going to flow. A book you think of as a one-time thing could inspire a series of books based on the same characters; or a series could inspire an animated children's program or physical products like dolls. Of course all of our projects are not going to turn into that, but I've always found that it is better to think long-term and plan big in the beginning rather than embrace small thinking and have to back-peddle down the road.

## The Illustration Process

So you have a great little story...Whether creating books for Kindle or for print, and whether you are creating the illustrations yourself or hiring a professional illustrator to whom you need to communicate your vision, there is a process involved in illustrating your books. A lot of factors go into the illustration process before you begin to create the actual illustrations:

- **Illustration PLANNING:** What elements of your story should you illustrate? It won't be everything so what needs to be illustrated?
  - Some of this will depend on the age bracket you are targeting. If you are writing a book targeted at the age 4-8, you are going to have more illustrations than if you are targeting 8-12. Books written for ages 8-12 are likely to have one or two illustrations per chapter where a book for 4-8 is going to be fully illustrated with full-color illustrations.
  - Where are the natural breaks in the story?
  - What visuals is your story going to create?

- **Illustration STYLE:** What “look” are you after? We are talking about your design style. Do you want it to be modern? Exaggerated like animals with giant heads and tiny bodies? Painterly? Minimalist, etc.?
- **Illustration COLOR SCHEME:** Color palette must be consistent throughout the entire book! The worst mistake you can make is to have one illustration look one way, say muted earth tones and a few illustrations later have bright, neon-looking one. You have to decide on a color palette and stick to it throughout the entire book and/or series. Is that color scheme going to be earth tones? Monochrome? Bright, primary colors, etc.?
- **Illustration MEDIUM:** This is often related to style. Each medium has a totally different look and feel to it. What is going to fit best in telling your particular story? When it comes to the illustration mediums, you have several options:

- Traditional mediums: Acrylics, Gouache & Watercolor are the most common used for illustrating children’s books
- Computer-based mediums: vector (cartoons), raster (all digital photos, pixel-based) & 3D art (modeled using 3D programs)
- Photography-based mediums: photograph imported into computer and then using digital art filters (image right). We live in a time when the software available to us is practically miraculous. What you can do with even apps on your phone today were impossible to do ten years ago. This is a great age for creating information products, books, and more.



- **Illustration SPECS:** What specifications does your book require?
  - **Final Image Resolution:** where is your final image going to be? Print? Digital eBook? If you are going to print, you need to know your page size and your images must be 300 ppi so image size is going to be page size x 300. If you are going just to Kindle, your image is 800 pixels wide at 72 ppi. With some of the newer Kindle versions, some would argue that the image could be wider and that is probably true, but if you want to remain compatible with the broadest number of Kindle devices, 800 wide is a good place to start. Remember, the bigger the image is, the larger the download size and the greater the risk of increasing download delivery charges.
  - **Aspect Ratio:** what is your page width vs. your page height. If you are printing, your illustrations need to match your page size! Unless you are trying to create illustrations that only take a smaller portion of a page, you don’t want to create illustrations that are horizontal and then try to fit those into a vertical frame. If you are using Kindle, the Kindle aspect ratio is 1:1.6 so that means the long side of your page is 1.6 times the size of your short side.

- ALWAYS plan for the largest size! Many of you are likely just Kindle publishers who haven't done much in print and may even think you are never going to print. First of all, you **should** be creating books for print. You cannot take advantage of opportunities like Amazon's Matchbook program if you are not creating books for print. Furthermore, there is something about having a print book, especially for children's books, and with the color options available through CreateSpace and other printers, there really is no reason why you shouldn't create a print edition for your book. All of this is to say you have to plan for the larger size. Not only are there different book type options, but you will need web graphics and Facebook images of your illustrations. There are also ancillary products like posters and calendars, greeting cards and apparel you can create. If you have amazing illustrations, chances are good that people are going to want them in a form beyond the pages of your book. You can take a high-resolution image created for print books and use it for other products or easily reduce the size for a Kindle device, but you cannot take a small illustration created for a Kindle device and turn it into a print version or use it for much else without literally starting over and recreating the illustrations! Can you imagine creating a book for Kindle that just takes off with thousands of downloads every month and people asking for a print version when you only have an image 800 pixels wide? Even if you think you will never create a print version of your book or an ancillary product, you cannot guarantee you won't change your mind in the future so **always** create your illustrations in the larger size so you are ready for whatever the future might hold.

## CREATING ILLUSTRATIONS

Once you have planned for your illustrations and know what it is you want and need, where do you begin to create your illustrations? First and foremost, know and understand your options for getting your illustrations produced:

- Draw or paint them traditionally yourself. Maybe you are a talented artist who can draw or paint your own illustrations. That's great! That will save you a lot of money and effort in getting the illustrations to look the way you envision them.
- Friend or family. Do they understand the process? One of the big problems I've seen, especially in illustrations that have people in them, is the illustration of the eyes. People are difficult to illustrate. Young and inexperienced illustrators very often do a terrible job making eyes big and goofy looking. It looks unusual and ruins the illustration. Maybe you have that person in your family, the one who draws all the time or is a trained artist or is an art student whose work is amazing. That is fantastic news for you. But for most people, "Suzy's" doodles are not the kind of a skilled and talented artist that you need for your brand. Now is not the time to encourage "Johnny" in his illustration dreams if you don't have the courage to tell him when the work is bad. This is about your book, your brand, and you want it to look as good as you can get it.
- Find an art student in high school or college. This is a smart method and can work out good for you. They are studying art and art styles, they want to build their portfolios, and very often you can strike a deal with one of the top students who can do your project for a fraction of what a top illustrator would charge. Just remember, working with students can

present challenges. Your project is not their top priority, so you will have to manage the process and expect delays.

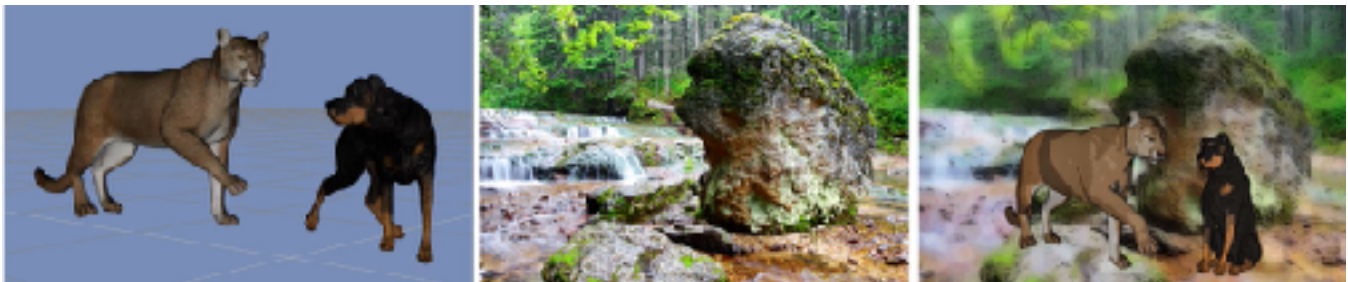
- **Outsource.** You can always hire a professional illustrator. Depending on the type of art you want, you may be able to find an artist on Fiverr, but you have to be very picky. There are not a lot of “professional” artists working on Fiverr because professionals will not work for those fees, but you can try. Alternatively, you can find and hire a true professional illustrator. If your story is hot and you think it is going to be a huge seller, you may want to hire a professional for all the advantages and benefits they can bring to the table; but be prepared... you will have to spend hundreds of dollars per illustration. It is not unheard of for a 32 page book to cost \$10,000 for a set of illustrations.
- **Use photo-based illustrations.** As a photographer and Photoshop junkie, I really like this approach. I’ve been experimenting with it for a long time and teach a number of courses on how to use the many different techniques I’ve developed. Once you take your photos, you have lots of options for converting them to illustrations. You need to know how to properly use the techniques to get a desired end result, but there are a lot of options.

## Photo-based Illustrations

A book published in the early 2000s inspired me along the path to create illustrations from photographs. The book, *Stranger in the Woods*, was a children’s story created by two photographers who built a snowman in the woods and over the course of a winter, they were able to photograph various scenes like little deer interacting with the snowman. The “illustrations” in the book are all photographs. I thought it was amazing that they could use photographs in place of illustrations for a book that became a huge best-selling book and won a boatload of awards. Once I saw some of the new software technology that was coming out where you could turn photos into illustrations, it all just clicked.

There are basically two methods used to create a photo-based illustration:

- **“Live” Photos:** the entire scene is shot in picture form, either staged or not. You set up the scene live, take a photograph, and that picture becomes your illustration, either “as is” or as a photographic “illustration” using software manipulation techniques.
- **Photo Composite:** take multiple elements—like multiple photographs, photographs and 3D models, etc.—and bring them together to create the scene in an image editor like Photoshop. The images below show the basics of creating photo composited scenes.



The image on the right is a photo composite for a book I am illustrating. The story is based on a dog's interactions with various other animals. The odds are slim that I could photograph the dog interacting with a mountain lion in a way that would be acceptable for a child's book. So, for that book, I am modeling the characters in a 3D program (left). I found a photograph in a stock photo site that I thought would work good in a particular scene in the story (center). On the right, you see the result of me compositing these two elements together and then applying some of the illustration techniques I use to get the end result.

## **ADVANTAGES OF PHOTO-BASED ILLUSTRATIONS**

Photo-based illustrations change the rules. Photographs are the most commonly used visual medium for telling stories. Most people take and use photos EVERY day, especially with their phones. Why? Because we see something that is cool or we are having an experience that we want to remember, etc. We want to capture those memories so we can share the stories with others. And, anyone can take a photo. It may not be a great photo, but I can fix that. On the other hand, few can actually draw or paint in a way you would actually want to use in a book.

The process is also fast and puts control back in your hands. Sometimes, you have an idea for an illustration but when you see it, you decide it is all wrong or you want to change the story and the illustration no longer matches the text. Unlike with traditional illustration, using these techniques allows you the flexibility of changing your mind, quickly and often. Have an illustrator create an illustration for part of your story, then change your mind and see what happens. After they freak out, they will do a new illustration and charge you all over again for every time you change your mind. Because the techniques I am showing you are quick, when you change your mind about a scene, you can just find a new photo, bring it into your software, render it into a new illustration in ten minutes. That is a game-changing, low-cost difference.

## **POTENTIAL FOR PHOTO-BASED ILLUSTRATIONS**

You may think, "Tony, I don't want "photographs" in my children's books. That isn't the look I want." Great! There are so many different possibilities for using photos to create unique illustrations that you don't have to just take a picture and slap it onto a page in your story.

Lately, I've been looking at the work of best-selling children's book authors and then developing methods to create digital styles inspired by the illustrations in their best-selling children's books, illustrations from the likes of Dr. Seuss, Eric Carle, etc. Let's look at some examples of illustrations I've created using this method. The images below are illustrations that have come out of my training course where I teach these methods. They represent a wide, varied set of styles because one style is not going to work for every book.

The image below left is inspired by the work of best-selling author/illustrator, Eric Carle. It is a photo composite of two photos that were cut apart and then, after applying filters to them, were re-composited together again. The image right is a 3D rendered dog over a photograph with a variety of different filters applied to the composited scene.





The image below left is inspired by the work of Nancy Tillman.



In the images below, the image left is a raw photograph of one of our family dogs completely processed with a little hand-drawn elements added to it. The same is true of the image on the





right. This is a multiple illustration technique compiled together, but the foundational image for this is a photograph I took a couple of years ago.

The lush illustration below is based on a photo I took in Savannah, GA. On the left is the entire illustration. On the right, I zoomed in so you could see how cool this looks. It has the look and feel of a watercolor painting. There are about ten to twelve specific steps you have to follow to get this look, but it only takes about 20 minutes and the end result is pretty amazing.



Below are two more images of covered bridges to give you an idea of the variety of styles we can create. The bridge on the left is the same bridge as above but with a different, engraving style while the one on the right is more of a watercolor technique.



Illustrations, regardless of the method you choose to use, will be comprised of two things: scenes and characters. I now always approach the illustration process using the photo and photo composite option, but photo-based illustrations require photos, photos for scenes and for characters. To be more accurate, they require images of any kind because the same techniques can be used with line art or models the same as with photographs. I will refer to these as "Image assets."



## FINDING IMAGE ASSETS

Some of you may be saying, “Photos? You are a photographer, Tony. You can take the photos you need so it makes sense for you to use this method.” True, but it is important to make clear that the photo-based illustration process doesn’t require you to be a professional photographer to take your own photos. You don’t have to make it difficult, and the fact is, you have a number of different options for getting your foundational image assets. In my Easy Book Illustrations courses, we look in detail at all of the following sources of image assets and how to use them in creating illustrations:

- Photo composites using your own or purchased photographs
- Public Domain/Royalty-free clip art
- Public Domain book art
- Public Domain comic books
- Public Domain patents
- Public Domain coloring books
- 3D modeling
- Photographing miniatures

Let’s take a look at a few of these options...

## TAKING PHOTOGRAPHS

I think you will be surprised to learn what is required for taking your own photos when you are going to convert to illustrations. When it comes to gear, you don’t need \$1,000 cameras. I have students who have created some amazing illustrations using nothing more than their point-and-shoot cameras. Using high-end cameras comes with some benefits because of things like control over depth of field, exposure, etc. but nearly ANY camera, including smart phones will work. Start with what you have and don’t let the camera be an excuse for not getting started.

More important than the specific camera you use is the macro lens. For many of the photos you want to take, you are going to need to be close to the characters, especially if you are doing just a head shot of a three inch character. A camera with a macro lens or macro setting (circled in image) is ideal because it enables you to get closer.

You can also use extensions tubes (image upper left) to increase the distance from the camera sensor to the back of



the lens which means you can focus at a much closer distance than you could without the extension tubes. Most extension tubes are inexpensive and are available for pretty much any camera on the market with interchangeable lenses.

Other options for close-up shots include close-up filters (image lower right) which just screw on over your lens. They are available in different sizes depending on the particular thread size for your lens; macro bellows (image lower center) which work basically like extension tubes but because they are on a track, you have a lot more flexibility; and even macro bands and lenses available for your phone.

A tripod is generally a great idea, particularly when photographing miniatures. Unless you have a lot of light, in some cases you are going to have to make your exposure time longer to get the highest quality photograph, something you need to always try for. Longer exposure times are very difficult without a tripod.

Of course, more light is better. More times than not, I use the sun. It is the best light source we have—and it's free. If you are shooting indoors, very often you can set up near a window that gets a lot of sunlight to take advantage of the sunlight. If you need to supplement lighting, you can use a basic lighting setup with work lights you can buy at a home center, or you can invest in a more flexible setup including a light tent and photo lights. This gives you a more even light without harsh shadows. Unless you are going for that look, shadows can be hard to work with in compositing, so avoiding them can save you some hassles in post.

Let's look at a “behind the scenes” photo of how I photograph miniatures and the end result to see what I've done with some of my miniatures. In the image below left, I've used a white blanket on the couch, some fake snow and Christmas decorations/accessories. I shot this on Christmas day right in my living room. The light is coming from the sun entering a big bay window in the room. The only piece of “high tech” equipment is the light stand used to suspend the little guy and hold him still so I could use a longer exposure. For this particular photo, I am using a Fuji Film XT1 mirrorless camera, 56 mm 1.2 lens (about the same as an 85mm on a standard DSLR) on a tripod. From the basic setup, you can see I got a pretty cool image (right).



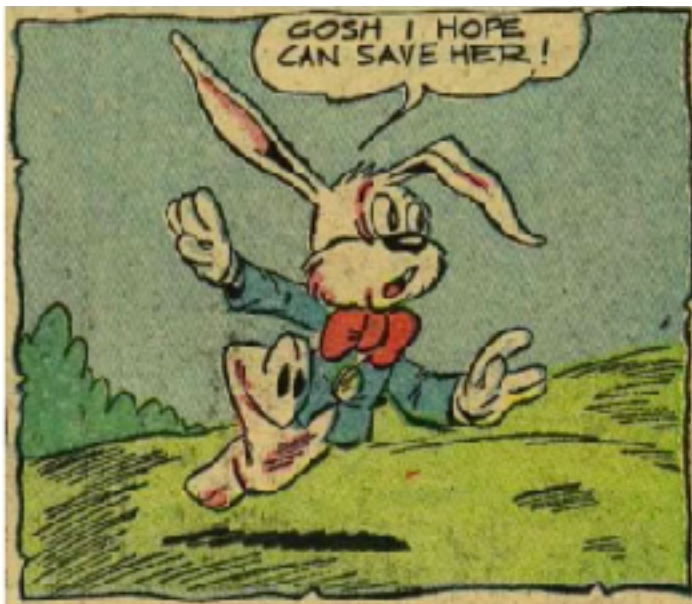
## COMIC BOOKS

It is not secret that I love the vast content available in the public domain. From clip art to coloring book art to art from old books, the public domain offers a magnificent resource for finding image assets we can use freely.

Why would we want to use old public domain stories? Ask Disney. The company has 50+ major motion pictures, pretty much their entire animated classics library, including *Frozen*, *Tangled*, etc. that are all based on public domain stories or characters. They've made billions of dollars from it.

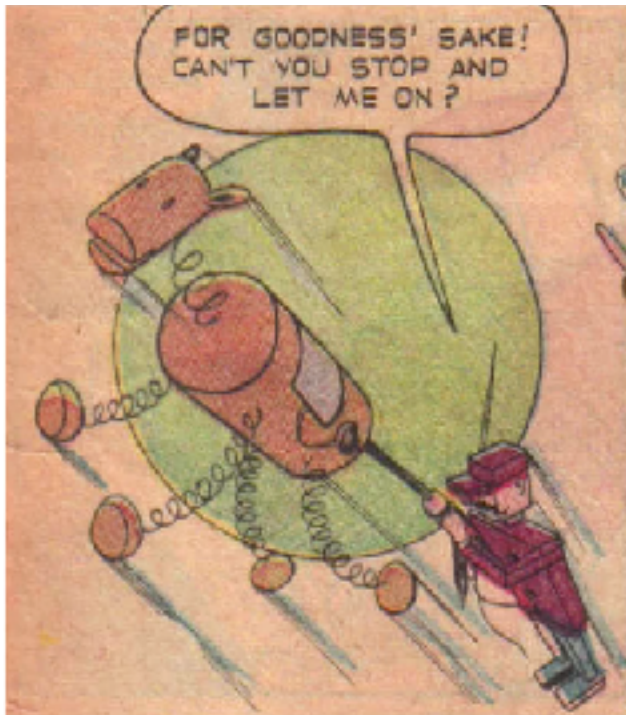
A big secret of mine is comics. I love comics. You can tell stories with comics in some very unique ways. What you may not have known is that there are over 17,000 comics in the public domain. That means we have access to great stories and a lot of great art, and we can repurpose those stories and artwork however we see fit because they are in the public domain.

One of my favorite places to go for public domain comics is [comicbookplus.com](http://comicbookplus.com). Below left is a typical screen shot of an image from this site from *Alice in Wonderland*. I think you will agree that the quality isn't very good at all. It looks nearly unusable. But with a few minutes and a little work, you can change it into something that looks like the image right, a totally usable image for illustrating a children's book.



Or, take another example, an image (below left) that is not only difficult to work with because of the halftone dots but has been yellowed with age. Using some of the techniques I teach for working with this type of image, you can turn it into something cool like the image below right.





Or, how about taking a similar comic book image and turning it into something like this:

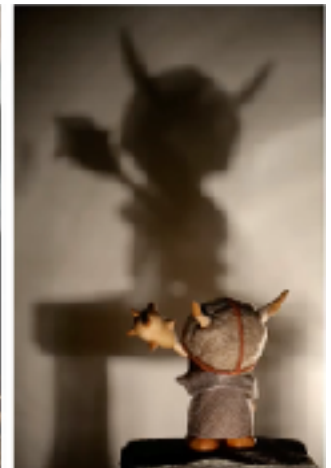




## Characters

In my Easy Book Illustrations courses, I teach about many different ways to find characters. Personally, I like working with miniatures which may be the perfect answer for you in creating character-based images.

The images below are from a coffee table book I am working on right now. In all these photos, I used miniatures I found in a gift shop with toys and even garden sculptures in the creation of the scenes. I photographed them using both the outdoors and a tabletop light tent. After photographing the scenes, I can apply some of the illustration techniques I use and teach to get wonderful illustrations like the sledding scene right.



## WHY MINIATURES?

It's no secret that I like miniatures. Using miniatures in storytelling isn't a new idea. It has been around for a long time. In fact, a number of production companies in Hollywood, including Disney, have used miniatures to create entire movies. They are using stop action to create the movie but the idea is the same: using tiny characters in a little set and photographing them. It is a great way to make a fantasy movie and it is a great way to illustrate your book.



If you've ever seen any of the Lego books, the characters in the illustrations are all created using Legos™. The company sells package kits of the same pieces so the reader can re-create the characters in the scenes and use them to tell stories based on the characters in those kits. It is a brilliant marketing strategy!

Traditional illustrations allow for the artist to create fantasy worlds and stories not limited by reality or concept, but chances are you and I just cannot draw and paint like that. The number of people who can is very small compared to the number of people who want to create children's books. So for the rest of us, miniatures are a brilliant option affording us that opportunity to create fantasy worlds that we can then capture in photographs.

One of the biggest challenges in working with traditional art is control. If an artist creates something for your story and you don't like it or you can't communicate adequately to an artist your vision to get exactly what you want and he/she creates something that isn't a good fit, chance are the artist is going to have to start over or you are going to have to use a different artist. Either way, you will incur additional cost.

Photographing miniatures as a foundation for your illustration gives you full control over the end result. You set up the scene and take a photo. If you don't like the angle, you move the camera and take another photo. If you want the scene to be a close up, you zoom in closer. Want the character in a different position? Move it and take another photo. Need a photo of a winter scene in the middle of July? You can make it snow and create a snow scene on your dining room table if you are using miniatures. The control is incredible.

Another thing I love about photographing miniatures is you can create a library of image assets. You can recycle and re-use elements over and over again for different shots, angles, scenes and even different books, either in a series with the same characters or in a totally different series. A tree is a tree is a tree. If you buy miniature trees, you can use them over and over again in your scene set-ups. You can use your characters again and again to create a series of books based on the same characters by just placing them in different scenes. The characters will always have the exact same look and feel because they are the same characters, something that is difficult using traditional illustration methods.

And when you use miniatures composited into scenes or photographed into scenes you create on a tabletop, there is no travel necessary to get that perfect shot. But if you do travel, it is easy to photograph miniatures anywhere! I have a series of characters I work with that I have photographed all over the country. They are small and fit easily in my suitcase. Many of the photos were shot outdoors with what was available to me at the time.

When it comes to the illustrations, is easy to illustrate your stories using miniatures because:

- ◆ It is one of the fastest ways to illustrate your book. You can literally illustrate a book in a day.
- ◆ You are not limited by high-end camera gear. As a professional photographer, I have it all, yet some of my favorite photos I have were taken with my iPhone.
- ◆ You can use photographs as-is or convert them into illustrations using paint programs. One of my personal favorites is GMX PhotoPainter, <http://gertrudisgraphics.com>, an inexpensive but effective program. You actually paint brush strokes in a way that is like cloning and you have a lot of control over brush strokes, density, etc. It gives you a lot of flexibility. Below is an example of one of my images in the painting process using it.






## FINDING MINIATURES

When it comes to miniatures, one question always comes up: “Can I use any toy or miniature?” No, you cannot. Some are protected by copyright and/or trademark. You cannot use popular, trademarked characters! Any brand you recognize like Disney™, Warner Brothers™, My Little Pony™, etc. is totally off the table. But, you still have a lot of options.

One of my favorite options, Etsy, will become your new best friend. There are countless examples there of little dolls and characters. Just do a search on Etsy for “robot.” You will get 250 pages of results, so when I tell you there are a lot of potential characters on Etsy, I mean a LOT. And the craftsmanship is first-rate on many of these. Look at this example of a little robot that came up in my search. It is as cute as can be and there are a number of different robot characters in this series. These could easily make wonderful characters in a children’s book series. The artist even has a pattern you can purchase and download as a .pdf to make these yourself.



**Little Robot Plush with a Big Red Heart, Robot Doll, Valentine Robot**

**\$45.00 USD** [Ask a Question](#)

Only 1 available

**Overview**


- Handmade Item
- Materials: Wool Felt, Embroidery Floss, Plastic Buttons
- Feedback: [105 reviews](#)
- Ships worldwide from West Jordan, Utah

[This shop accepts Etsy Gift Cards](#)

[Add to Cart](#)

[Favorites](#) **4.50** [Add to](#)

[Tweet](#) [Retweet](#) [Facebook](#) [Google+](#)

  
**GinnyPenny**  
in West Jordan, Utah

[Request a custom order and have something made just for you.](#)

[Item Details](#) [★★★★★ \(105\)](#) [Shipping & Policies](#)

This plush robot has a big red heart and lots of love to give. He would make a

[Sleeping Robot With Sun...](#) **\$55.00 USD**

[Pick Your Color - Plush R...](#) **\$55.00 USD**



You cannot just pick anything from Etsy and use it, however. You need to ask permission and not everyone will give it to you. I have to say though, I've had a lot of success talking to people who make little miniatures on Etsy, at craft shows, etc. Every time I've asked someone if I can use their little toy or character to illustrate books, they've said "Yes." Every single time. That includes some bigger manufacturers like Melissa & Doug, Safari Ltd., etc.

You have a number of other options for finding these miniatures, including:

- You can commission an artist to make them for you.
- You can make the miniatures yourself if you are crafty
- Find cheap, generic, Chinese-made toys at The Dollar Store or similar store
- Find generic characters in craft stores and hobby centers.

## CREATING SETS

Of course, if you are going to photograph miniatures, you need sets for them. Whether your story takes place in a house, in the woods, under water, or in outer space, your characters need some kind of sets to be positioned on if you are going to photograph them for use in illustrations.

Scenes can be created in the great outdoors or indoors using found objects, landscape scenery for model railroading, play sets, craft supplies, generic Christmas decorations and generic pieces from Christmas villages, etc. Look around your house. You will be surprised at some of the things you can turn into components of your miniatures scenes.

One of the big differences between photographs and illustrations is the level of detail. One of the things I teach throughout all my Easy Book Illustration trainings is "reduce, reduce, reduce." Reducing detail is the name of the game when converting photos to illustrations. So, you don't have to build a lot of detail in your sets like you see in the elaborate scenes of stop-motion video.

Below are a couple of examples I've created using miniatures. The examples below are just little sets I made for fun, not for commercial use. The image left was set up in a light tent in my basement and the one on the right was taken outdoors.



## Scenes: Using Hollywood Secrets

When we think of illustrating our children's books, we usually assume that for a 32-page book, the industry average children's book size, we will need around 28 **different** illustrations. If you are planning to have your book illustrated by a professional, you are probably sweating right now with the thought of the cost for 28 illustrations. But, even if you are going to illustrate the book yourself using one of the methods I outlined earlier, you may still find creating 28 different illustrations to be a daunting task.

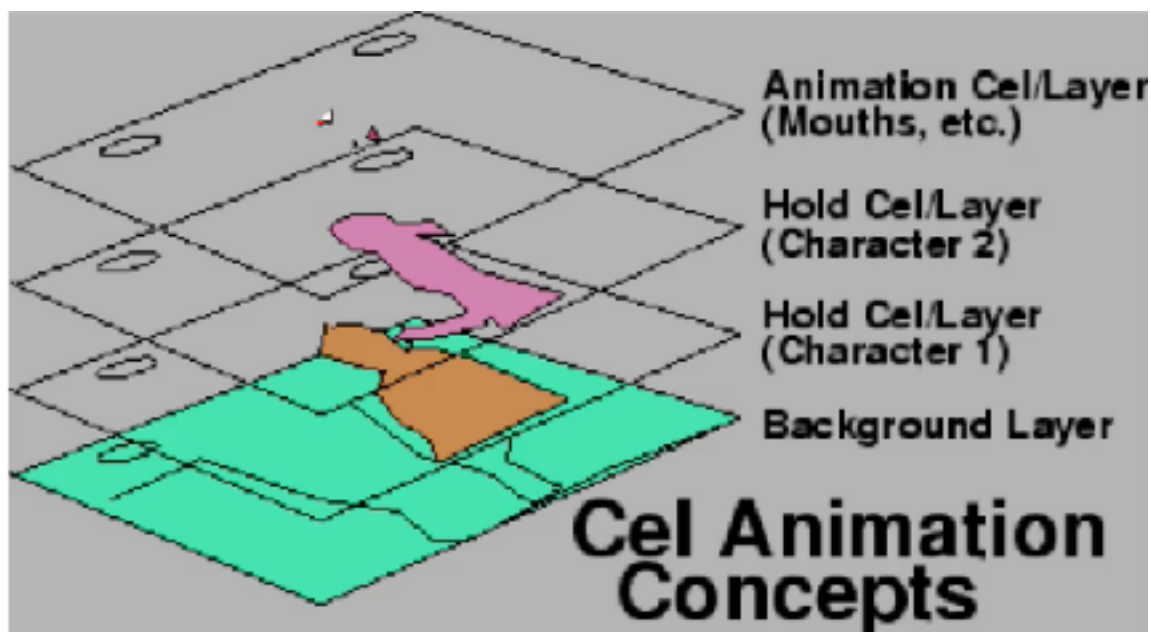
What if you didn't have to "create" all 28 illustrations from scratch in the traditional sense? What if you could create maybe four or five scenes and yet still be able to create all 28 *different* illustrations the way Hollywood does for animated films?

For 100 plus years, Hollywood has been creating cartoons using specific methods. If you ever watched Saturday morning cartoons or other classics like *Winnie the Pooh*, *The Jetsons*, *Bugs Bunny*, etc. you've seen their secrets in action.

Historically (it doesn't work like this now), 2D animation techniques work with two parts:

- 1) The Background which is usually traditionally painted, generally acrylics, gouache or watercolor.
- 2) The Cel where characters are hand-painted on clear acetate which is positioned over the background. A separate cel or layer is created just for animation of eyes, mouths, etc.

To get the movement in the characters, the cel would be repainted with a different character position. The background remains the same throughout numerous scenes but the cel is changed over the background to get a completely different look. To simulate a character talking, only the cel with the mouth changes.



You have to think that after 100+ years of creating tens of thousands of cartoons, all the studios like Disney, Hanna Barbera, etc. created some methods that would save them time and effort. After all, Hollywood 2D animation can require more than 50,000 cels for a full-length movie! Time and work requirements would have demanded the most efficient methods possible because they wouldn't want to take five years to do a 30 minute cartoon.

What if we could borrow some of those scene building and animation techniques used by Hollywood to dramatically speed up our illustration creation process for our books? We can; and it will save us a LOT of time when it comes to illustrating our books.

Again, think about the specific factors:

- The backgrounds are static while the animation is created from the cels.
- Larger backgrounds are created so that close-ups, camera pans and pull-backs are possible.

The image below top is an example from *Bambi*. Image bottom is a watercolor background from *Winnie the Pooh*. Notice the backgrounds are long, multi-page/canvas images put together to use for the cartoon. One background represents multiple scenes, and the characters move throughout the area depending on the scene.





You wouldn't see the entire background in every scene. You would see closeups of a specific area in the larger, overall background and the characters would play out their scenes in those close ups.

Let's look at a specific example in closer detail. The example below is a scene from the *Bugs Bunny* cartoon, *Hiawatha*. This is the entire background scene that was created for a segment of that cartoon. I went to the cartoon and pulled some screen captures off to show you how they use this one background to create an entire sequence of cartoons.



Each of the images in this sequence looks like a different illustration, but when you look at the larger background, you can see they are all part of the same painting. The animators only had to paint one background in order to create a sequence of images. Below are different examples—Bugs Bunny and Mickey Mouse—of the same kind of sequences using different character positions over a single background.







These are the exact same methods Hollywood uses to create books that go along with their movies and cartoons. They simply pull out scenes from the animated film and use those as illustrations for the book.

It is possible for us to use this exact same method to create illustrations for a children's book. I teach an entire course on just this topic and the multiple ways to create these scenes.

*Let's put some of this information together into a step-by-step demonstration to show you how I create illustrated images for a children's book using miniatures along with a large, Hollywood-style painted background scene...*

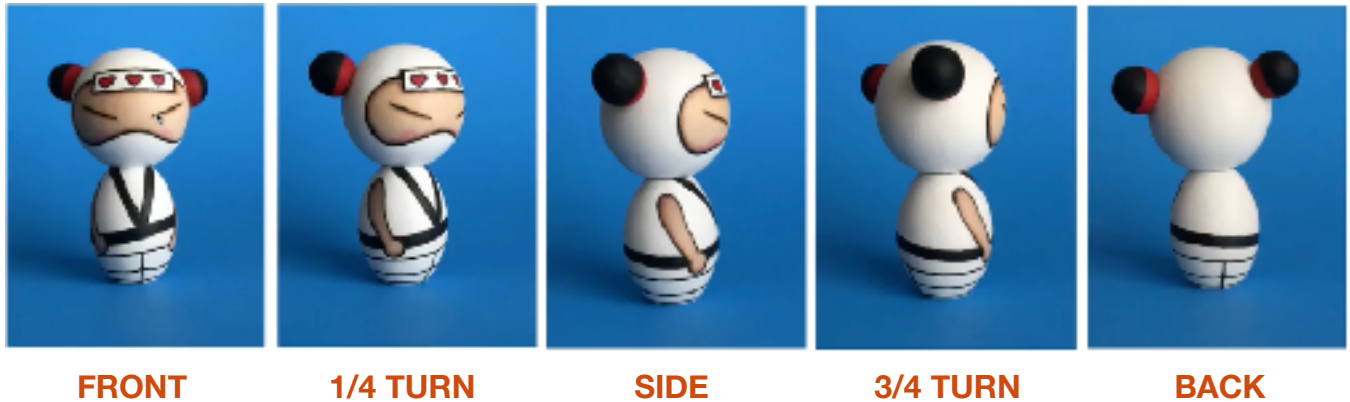
## ***Demonstration: Composites... Hollywood Style***

In this demonstration, the entire process is as follows: 1) photograph miniatures (Ninjas); 2) Silhouette the miniatures in an images editor (**NOTE:** I will be using Photoshop, but you can use another image editor if you prefer); 3) create a background scene; and 4) combine the miniatures with backgrounds to create an illustration.

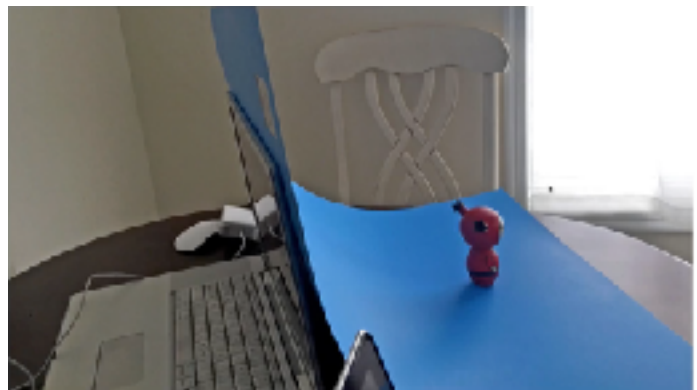
### **STEP 1: PHOTOGRAPH THE CHARACTER**

For photographing your miniatures, I recommend the following:

- ◆ Photograph the miniature in five positions as shown in the image below. This allows you to have the minimum number of positions needed to simulate walking and other movement, communicating with other characters, etc. You can reverse the image(s) when needed.



- ◆ Take your photos against an even-colored background. This will make silhouetting them much easier.
- ◆ Don't make it harder than it has to be. You don't need fancy equipment. In these images, I used a blue index card from Walmart, light from a window and my iPhone. Even light with minimal to no shadows is the most critical thing. It will make a huge difference in the quality of the photo and your ability to silhouette the image quickly.
- ◆ Silhouette (i.e. remove the background so you have only the character with a transparent background) the image in an image editor of your choice. I use the professional's choice, Adobe Photoshop.



## STEP 2: CREATE THE BACKGROUND

The background is a series of image assets I have. I've simply used a variety of elements—each on a different layer in Photoshop—to combine together and create the scene. By turning on and off the various layers, I can completely change the look of the background (see below). Each one is similar and feels as if it is in the same area because the style and color scheme are the same, but look closely and you will see that each is also different and makes the image look like a different scene.





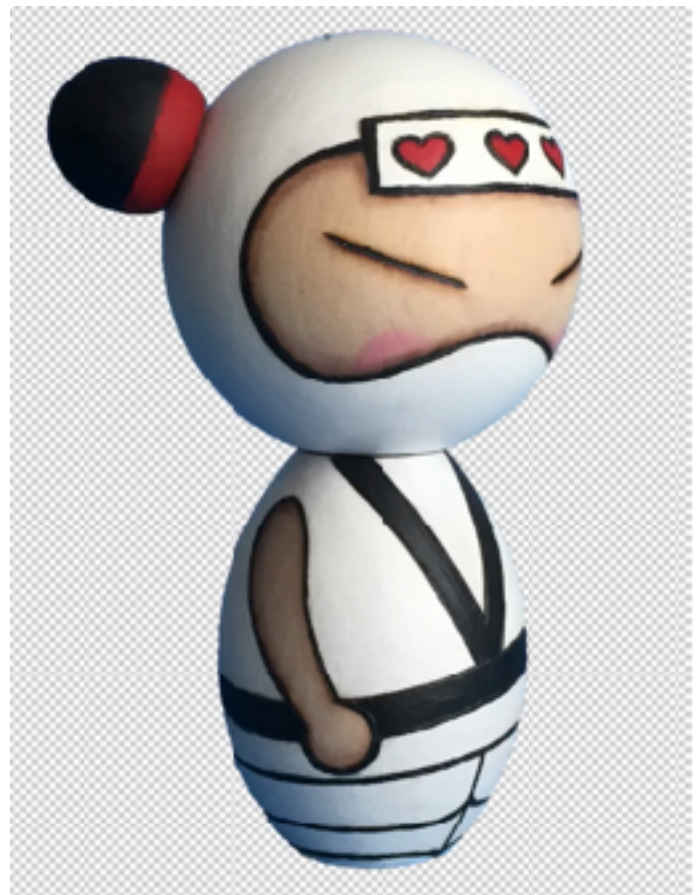
### STEP 3: SILHOUETTE THE CHARACTERS

In any image editing program, you should have a number of options—magic wand, polygonal lasso, etc.—for speeding up the silhouetting process so you don't have to take a lot of time.

1. Photoshop has a tool called the Quick Selection tool which I like a lot. This tool works on averages, so using a small brush and dragging across the blue background while holding the left mouse button down, it selects the background color. The more I drag, the more it selects.
2. Sometimes, it gets too aggressive in the process and selects things I don't want selected like part of the character (right), but by holding the «option/alt» key down while dragging the mouse across the part I do not want selected, it will subtract that part out of the selection. It is a little bit of trial and error, but the more I repeat this, the more the tool “learns” about what I am trying to select and the more accurate the selection. I think you will agree this little trial and error can save you a serious amount of time.



3. Shadow areas can be a little tricky. Pay attention to that. The easiest way to prevent complication with shadows is to eliminate shadows with your lighting when you take your photograph.
4. Once I've finalized my selection through this little bit of trial and error, I will have all the blue selected. I want the ninja girl selected so I invert the selection: Select > Inverse (or «command/ctrl» «shift» «I») > copy > paste (creates a new layer) > turn off the background (right).
5. You will notice there is a little bit of fringing (blue color from the background left over on the edges of the image) on the image. There is also a bit of a cast to our ninja girl because of the blue background. I could have used green screen software, but this is easier. To address the fringing, with the ninja girl layer selected > Layer > Matting > Defringe and change the value to 2px. This will average out some of the edges and get rid of the fringe.





6. I still have the blue cast to remove: Image > Adjustments > Selective color > choose cyans in the drop down list and turn the cyan slider to zero. The cast pretty much goes away. Do the same thing choosing the “Blues” in the dropdown menu, and the blues go away but there is now some magenta in there. Turn magenta down with the blue and cyans selected and the color casts go away (image right—**NOTE**: a white background has been added to make it easier to see the change).



#### STEP 4: COMPOSITE THE IMAGES

1. With ninja layer still selected, left mouse click the ninja with the move tool (arrow) selected and drag the character over to the background document tab and position onto the scene. She is big so Edit > Transform > Scale to get corner handles > drag handles while holding down the «Shift» key to proportionally scale her to fit (see image below).

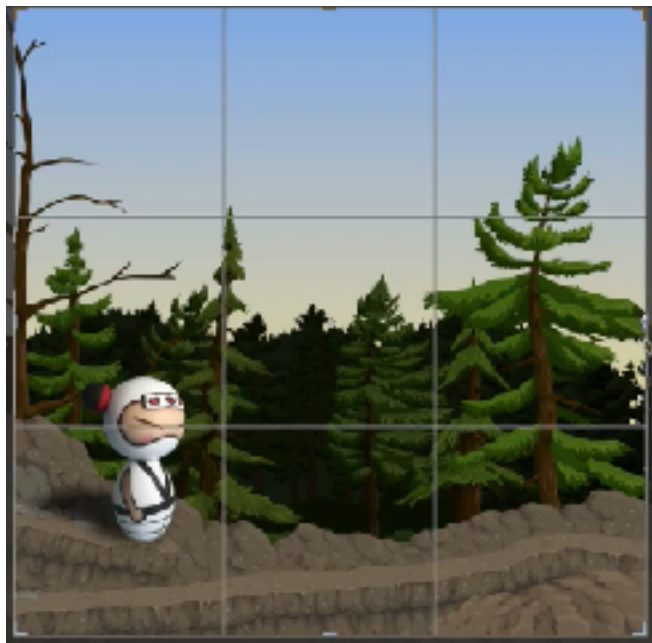


2. Shadows are a normal part of life when there is light shining on a person or object, so for this scene to look more realistic, a drop shadow makes sense. My quick and easy way to make a drop shadow is as follows: With ninja layer selected, duplicate the layer («command/ctrl» «J» or drag layer down to the icon next to the trash can) > lock the copy layer > fill locked layer to black (locking layer ensures the fill will go only where there are pixels not in the surrounding transparent area) > unlock layer; Edit > Transform > Distort to distort layer & flatten as a shadow; Filter > Blur > Gaussian Blur at around 9-10 px.
3. Shadows are not completely black so go back to the



shadow layer (name your layers as you create them so you can find them when you need them!). The default blend mode in Photoshop and other image editors is “Normal.” I want to change the blend mode to “Multiply” and turn the opacity down to about maybe 70%. Using the move tool, I can further position the shadow to where it needs to be for a correct light angle in the scene.

4. With the two ninja layers selected, I can pick up the ninja and move her and her shadow anywhere in the scene. I can also copy her and her shadow onto another background to get a completely new set of scenes.
5. Just with this character, I can create several illustrations for a story I’ve written. If I am doing an 8x8 book, for example, I would just crop a scene to a square, save as Illustration-1. Then I can move the ninja and her shadow in the scene, crop again and save as Illustration-2, and so on (below). In minutes, we can create four or five images just from this one background by moving the ninja in the scene and cropping the image. If I had to have an artist paint those four or five images, it would take them weeks where it took me minutes.



One of the nice things about having image assets on layers is the flexibility it gives me in changing the scene. For example, if I had a tree on a separate layer, I could make the ninja



walk behind the tree just by changing the layer order and moving the tree layer above the ninja. It is that simple.

You are not limited to doing this with image assets in the background. You can do the same thing with photographs. For example, take this photograph right, a public domain photo I found on [pixabay.com](http://pixabay.com). I like to first apply a filter to make the photo look like an illustrated background. In this case, I am going to use a program called Artista Impresso Pro which basically takes a photo and makes it look like a painting. There are a lot of different presets you can try to get the look you like. It all comes down to a matter of preference in the style you choose.

Once you have made your selection, save the background image. Copy the painted image





and paste it into Photoshop onto a layer in the photograph document. I then like to turn back the opacity of the painted layer (top layer) to say 60-70% in order to get some of the detail from the photograph but still have the painted effect.

Now, I have a background I can use to drag my ninja girl and place her with her shadow into this scene. Now instead of being in the vector asset forest, she is in this kind of painted forest (below)—and it is all photo based.



Repeat the same exact silhouetting procedure with the front facing ninja photograph. Place it into this scene. Duplicate the ninja character layer several times, resizing each one to a smaller and smaller image. Then, you can create a series of images where you create the illusion that the ninja is farther off in the distance and appears to be walking closer to the front of the image because her position is changing and she is getting larger as she gets closer (see series below).



Maybe you don't want to do this process using photographs of miniatures. That is okay. You can do the same thing with clip art.

Go to [openclipart.org](http://openclipart.org), a public domain site, search for a character you like and download the png (transparent) file. Open this already silhouetted file and going back to the original scene we built, drag the character onto the background and resize. Repeating the same steps we did before, we can position our character in the scene. Add all the characters you want in the same manner. Ideally, you want to find characters that have more than one pose, but even with static characters, you can reposition them to get multiple scenes.



I want you to remember some things when it comes to illustrating your children's book...

- ◆ Some of my students who have gone through my training courses on illustrating children's books have created some amazing illustrations. Many of these people never imagined they could get a children's book done before they learned these techniques and now they are on Amazon selling books.
- ◆ These methods don't require a huge amount of time or cost. They DO require planning and some skill, but these are tasks anyone can learn and do easily.
- ◆ ANYONE can illustrate their own (or someone else's) children's book using miniatures. Hopefully, from the examples I've shown here, you can see how powerful this can be, especially if illustrations are the thing holding you up from getting your book done. Yes, you will have to craft some sets and learn some photo editing skills, but these are things you can pretty easily learn. The beauty is you are not limited if you don't like a scene the way you are when using traditional illustration.

***There is an unlimited opportunity for creativity once you determine what you want the look and feel of your images to be so get started illustrating your own children's books now.***