

"My head is about to explode!"

Artist Qin Leng is a very busy illustrator

BY DORY CERNY



Qin Leng is a busy woman. If her name seems familiar, it's probably because, since launching her picture-book illustration career four years ago, Leng has illustrated more than a dozen titles with publishers including Annick Press, Inhabit Media and Second Story Press — and that's just in Canada. Her work has also appeared with Usborne Books (the largest children's publisher in the UK) and the venerable French publisher, Éditions Gallimard. She has been so prolific, in fact, that even the artist herself wasn't sure how many titles she'd illustrated until I asked her to fill in the blanks on the list I'd put together in preparation for writing this profile. "It was actually a shock to me, how many books there are," wrote Leng in the email accompanying the completed list, which includes *Hana Hashimoto*, *Sixth Violin*, written by Chieri Uegaki; *Norman, Speak!*, written by Caroline Adderson and *Not Just Another Princess Story*, written by Sheri Radford, all of which came out within the past year. "My head is about to explode!"

That endearing humour, tempered by a bit of nervousness, is apparent when we meet in person as well. Despite her success, Leng has never been interviewed face-to-face, and isn't quite sure what to expect as she shows me around her small downtown Toronto condo. Petite and stylish, Leng leads me to her work table and pulls out the sketches she was working on when I arrived. A dozen incarnations of the same raccoon, each no bigger than an inch square, fill one page, while another sheet reveals a detailed rural landscape, all rendered in ink with a fine brush. I marvel at the finesse and precision she's achieved with such an unpredictable tool, and she laughs. "I'm okay with drawing," she says, "but I'm so clumsy with other things. I spill things, break things, but when I draw

I have control." The raccoons are part of the menagerie that will appear in poet Robert Heidbreder's *Song for a Summer Night*, forthcoming in 2015 from Groundwood Books. It is only one of five projects she has on the go, along with an upcoming series called Piper Green, publishing with Random House US; an anti-bullying series for Toronto's Second Story Press; a biblically themed book for HarperCollins' Christian imprint, Zonderkidz; and a proposal she's preparing in the hope of landing yet more work.

One would assume, given her output, that Leng must spend hours a day hunched over her sketch pad or perfecting her colours in Photoshop. She does, but only after she's come home from her day job. Like a growing number of illustrators, Leng's route to the world of children's books came by way of a detour through animation. While helping a friend research possible courses of study at Montreal's Concordia University, Leng stumbled upon the film-animation program at Concordia's Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema. Though she had already been accepted at McGill University, where she planned to study biology, Leng decided to apply to the film program and see what happened. "I got accepted and at that point, I was like, I just have to do it."

Since graduating in 2006, Leng has worked at several studios, joining the production company, 9 Story Entertainment, as a layout supervisor in 2009. She is in charge of designing background animation for kids' shows, including *Almost Naked Animals* and *Numb Chucks*. Leng says that people are always surprised to find out that she isn't illustrating books full-time, but rather toiling away in animation. "Five days a week, nine-to-five, that's what I do," says Leng. "Then when I go home I work on my own projects; on weekends... I'm always doing something."

Even before landing her first picture-book deal, Leng was constantly drawing. Three years after starting out in animation, she had reached the point where she felt the need for more artistic freedom and recognition, so she put together a portfolio. "But I had no confidence," recalls Leng. "I didn't study illustration, I don't know how it works. Do I just start knocking on publishers' doors?" Pushing back against her fears, Leng began mailing and emailing her portfolio and sending postcards to publishers she found on the Bologna Children's Book Fair list of attendees and exhibitors. She contacted as many as 100 in one day. The gamble, and persistence, paid off when she was hired to illustrate *A Flock of Shoes*, the 2010 title authored by Sarah Tsiang that became her first of several titles for Annick Press. Though she's now represented by KidShannon in the US, Leng continues to find work without an agent in Canada.

Determination is apparently part of Leng's DNA. Her father Leng Hong is a respected and successful painter, who supported her ambition even as he cautioned her that the life of an artist is not an easy one. But art is also in her genes. Leng recalls a childhood, first in her native Shanghai and then in Bordeaux, France (the family moved to Montreal when Leng was nine), filled with time spent doodling next to her father as he worked on paintings, and hours drawing with her twin sister on the backs of old calendars or any other paper they could get their hands on. "Even before I realized my dad was an artist, I always used to draw," says Leng. "It was my thing." To this day, she is rarely caught without a sketchbook, and frequently posts drawings to her Tumblr page (qinleng.tumblr.com), where she showcases her personal sketches as well as work from projects in progress. Scanning through the posts, one gets a sense of the range of Leng's work; quickly drawn comic self-portraits contrast with detailed, polished images in fully realized digital colour from her books or the commercial illustrations she does for European magazines, including the children's publication, *Youpi*. "The longer I spend on a drawing, the worse it will get," says Leng. "It has to be super-spontaneous, so a lot of the stuff I have on my Tumblr takes me maybe half an hour."

Perhaps it is that spontaneity that fills each image with an effervescent sense of movement and playfulness. Leng's characters can safely be described as adorable, be they animal or human, but she is careful to avoid slipping into the preciousness that pervades many children's books, saying she strives for "cute but quirky; there's a little bit of odd in the cuteness." Often, she will include fun details in her illustrations, adding another layer to the story through the visuals. It all adds up to a winning combination: several of Leng's books have been nominated for awards, and all three of the titles she published with Sarah Tsiang were given starred reviews in *Quill & Quire* and made the CCBC's *Best Books for Kids & Teens* list. *The Best Thing About Kindergarten* (Simply Read Books, 2013), authored by Jennifer Lloyd, was starred by Kirkus.

Her father was, and continues to be, an influence — Leng says she is trying to digitally replicate the textures he creates with paint — but it was those early years spent in Bordeaux that really informed her aesthetic. "French illustrations were the first things that inspired me," says Leng. "All the comic books I was reading — Sempé, Goscinny, all the Asterix and Tintin." Her affinity for comics continues; it was fellow Canadian artist Jillian Tamaki (*Skim*) who inspired Leng to switch from working primarily in nib pen and ink to using a fine-tipped brush. "There's so much range in line quality that you can choose," explains Leng, who says she's analyzed Tamaki's technique in *Skim* so many times the book is falling apart. Isabelle Arsenault, who won the 2013 Governor General's Literary Award for French children's illustration for Franny Britt's graphic novel, *Jane, le renard et moi* (La Pastèque), is another favourite. "You could take one of her drawings and frame it, put it on the wall," says Leng, noting that you'd need a lot of tiny frames to do that with her own work because her method is akin to collage — drawing each element of an illustration separately in a small scale (like those raccoons she showed me earlier) before scanning and assembling them in Photoshop, adding colour digitally.

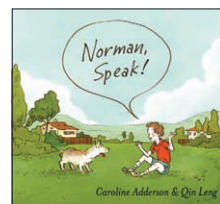
Is there a graphic novel on Leng's professional horizon? "I'd really love to [do one], just because it's a different format," says Leng. "I like different kinds of angles, almost like cinematography, but you can't really do that in picture books." Though she's received encouragement from Greenwood Books to try her hand at writing, Leng is not as confident creating with words as she is with pictures. Besides, with so many current and potential illustration projects already on the go, it's unlikely that Leng could take on a job of that scope without giving up her work at the animation studio. Not that she isn't already starting to think that step might be inevitable. Though it would be hard to give up the financial security, Leng is feeling crunched by her own success. "I need another me to do my day job," she jokes, noting that while she isn't rushing her current projects (or complaining), it would be nice to have more time for revisions and research. "And a vacation," says Leng with a sigh. ☺

Dory Cerny is the Books for Young People editor at *Quill & Quire* magazine.

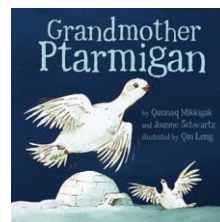
Forthcoming and Recent Titles by Qin Leng



And What If I Won't?
written by Maureen Fergus
Owlkids Books, 2015



Bible Stories for Jesus' Little Lambs
written by Julie Stiegemeyer
Zonderkids, 2015



Boost Child Abuse Series, Books 1 and 2
written by Kathryn Cole
Second Story Press, 2015



Piper Green series, Books 1 and 2
written by Ellen Potter
Random House, 2015

Song for a Summer Night
written by Robert Heidbreder
Greenwood Books, 2015

Not Just Another Princess Story
written by Sheri Radford
Simply Read Books, 2014

Hana Hashimoto, Sixth Violin
written by Chieri Uegaki
Kids Can Press, 2014

Where's That Puppy? (Waar is Max?)
written by Mathew Price
Ploegsma, 2014

Norman, Speak!
written by Caroline Adderson
Greenwood Books, 2014

Une Mamie en Or
written by Géraldine Collet
Hatier, 2014