

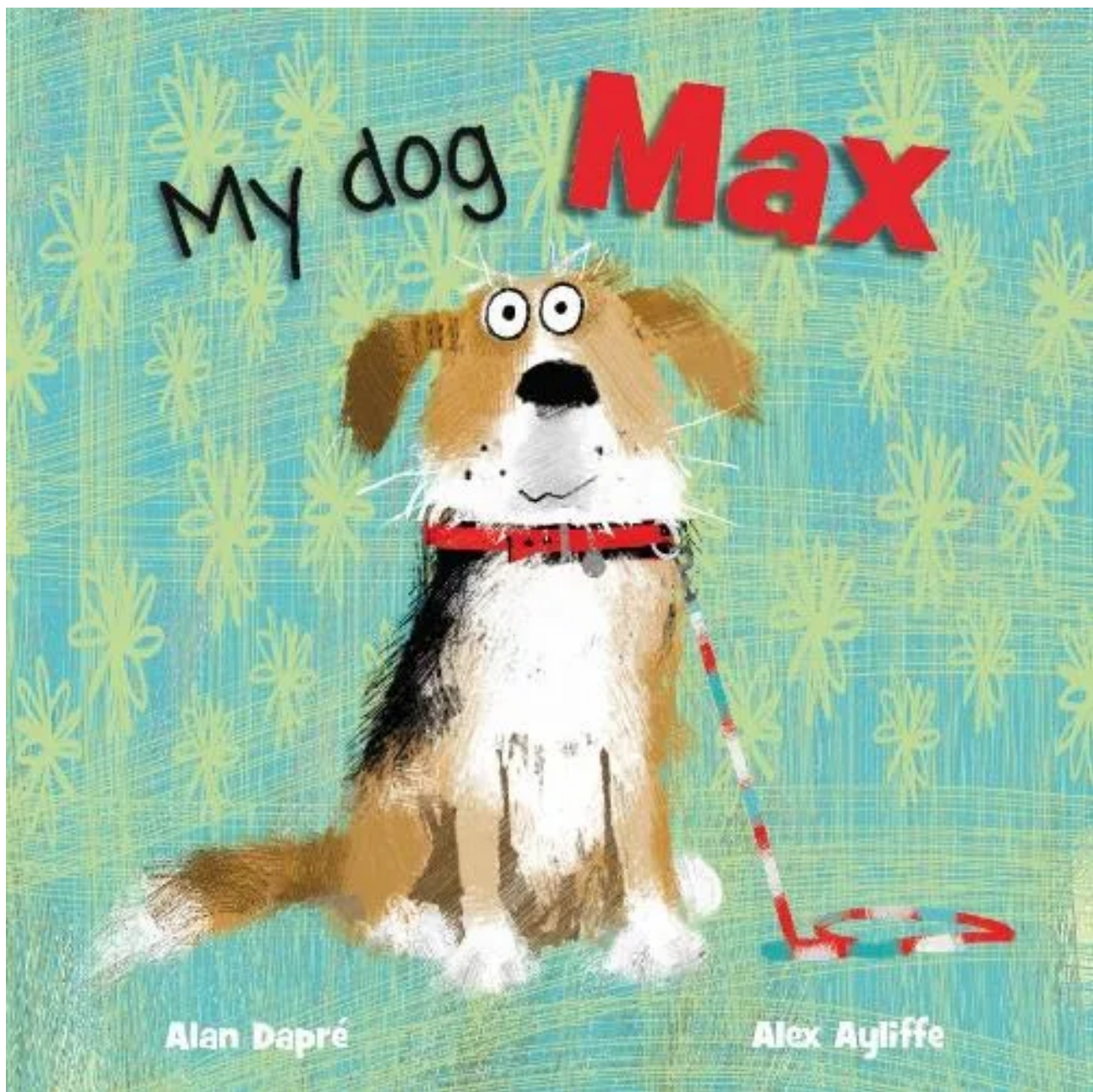
MY DOG MAX: An interview with Alan Dapré

Today, Alan Dapré, author of over sixty children's books, joins me in the Reading Realm to talk about his hilarious and heart-warming new picture book, MY DOG MAX, which is illustrated by Alex Ayliffe!



Before we settle into The Reading realm and talk about your latest picture book, what's your drink and snack of choice?

A frothy cappuccino accompanied with a toasted fruit scone. No cream, just butter and strawberry jam. That way I avoid the 'Cream or Jam First?' dilemma.



Buy here (<https://www.waterstones.com/book/my-dog-max/alan-dapre/alex-ayliffe/9781739192945/>)!

Without giving too much away, what can you tell us about MY DOG MAX, which is illustrated by Alex Ayliffe?

When a little girl meets Max at the Doggy Den, she can't stop thinking about him! She would LOVE to give Max a happy home...but will the grown ups agree? The story revolves around her quest to get a dog (plus the things that must be in place before that can ever happen).

'My Dog Max' is actually based on my dog Max, a rascally Sheprador (Shepherd & Labrador mix), who found his forever home with my family. Alex drew inspiration from photos of Max and created a wonderfully loveable character that I'm sure young readers will adore.

As you know, we love your PORRIDGE THE TARTAN CAT series in The Reading Realm. How would you say the themes in MY DOG MAX are similar? How are they different?

'My Dog Max' explores the concept of home and belonging. It's about a girl who has so much love to give and is desperate to share it. The Tartan Cat books contained ideas about boys and girls being equally adventurous, with the help of a laid back furry feline. Porridge tends to look after himself. Max, however, enjoys playing energetically with everyone!

Any similarity lies in the fact that all the books are engaging, funny and encourage children to think about why things in their world are happening.

What was it like working with Alex Ayliffe? Do you have a favourite illustration from the story? Why is it your favourite?

Alex is an award winning illustrator who interprets my words and makes them really fly. She adds a touch of magic and charm, often putting in funny and quirky images for children to explore. The book becomes greater than the sum of its parts when we create together.

My favourite illustration comprises of three images where the girl wonders what Max used to be, so she pictures him as an archaeologist, astronaut and detective. Digging for bones, bounding in Space – and sniffing out clues.

I love this because it encapsulates the wonder that children have, the questions that they pose and it's also very silly. Yet rooted in the reality that dogs do dig, bounce and sniff a lot.

Our publisher, Alan Windram at Little Door Books, put Alex and I together as he believed we would form a good creative partnership. He ensures that we travel in the same direction, while steering the ship to avoid the rocks and get us into safe harbour!



I know you used to be a TV scriptwriter and I wondered how you thought this influenced your picture book writing?

I see images as I write. Alex may interpret things slightly differently and needs the space to do that. Sometimes I have a clear joke or scenario in mind and I make written notes alongside the text.

Writing for television gave me the ability to not worry if things are cut or edited. It may be my idea, but I'm part of a team who are there to help make the book a reality. So there has to be some give and take. I do explain my reasoning as clear as I can, and that clarity is essential. I go by my gut feeling about whether something is funny and hits the mark. Experience counts for a lot.

My process for creating a picture book story is to place sticky notes on 12 or 14 double page spreads. I'll sketch out a rough plot and sequence of events. Picture books are all about action, plus energy. I work out where the most effective page turns will be. None of this is seen when I send the story to a publisher. At that point I offer up a written summary, then page by page text with a few notes.

What children's books have you enjoyed reading recently that you could recommend to us?

I prefer books by authors who don't have a celebrity brand to push. Check out a simply beautiful series of books written by Dom Conlon and illustrated by Anastasia Izlesou, including 'Leap, Hare, Leap!' and 'Swim, Shark, Swim!' I also love anything by Philip Ardagh and Vivian French.



You’ve written over 60 books for children, which is quite an accomplishment! What’s your advice for aspiring authors?

I’m nearly sixty so that’s over one a year! I don’t know where the time has gone. But I’m still here creating and sending out ideas & submissions. The key thing is not to give up.

I have written in many genres; Radio plays, TV scripts, stage plays, published plays, anthologies, musical books, slot books, an annual, TV tie-in titles, a joke book, chapter and picture books, etc. Plus various teaching and writing guides.

I think, if I had my time again, I would find a genre and stick more closely to that until I was consistently successful. Publishers couldn’t always pin me down! I’m now concentrating on picture and chapter books for the Primary age range.

Regarding helpful advice, I have a writing guide available called ‘Stuff About Writing, Writing About Stuff’ that writers like Jackie Kay and Vivian French say is very useful; for those new to writing and more experienced authors.

It is full of tips, techniques and things to try – and draws inspiration from my 37 years as a published writer. Everything is tried and tested and will work across genres. Just dip in and see what sparks your imagination. Available as an ebook and physical book here (<https://www.amazon.co.uk/STUFF-ABOUT-WRITING-published-author/dp/0957269277>)!

Finally, can you describe MY DOG MAX in three words?

‘Heart, Hope, Home’.