
ILLUSTRATOR SPOTLIGHT



Anca Sandu on *Gnu and Shrew*

ABOUT THE BOOK

Opposites attract—but can they work together?

When Gnu says that there's a cave filled with diamonds across the river, Shrew is intrigued. But Gnu seems to be all talk, fantasizing about riches yet dismissing all of Shrew's suggestions. As Gnu dreams his days away, tossing out one big idea after another, Shrew spends his nights trying to make those dreams a reality. Can Gnu's big ideas and Shrew's hard work make something remarkable happen?

Q: *How did you imagine Gnu and Shrew when you first read Danny Schnitzlein's story?*

A: Gnu seemed to me like a larger than life, great storyteller type of character. He was someone whose dreams are big, and his personality charming. Shrew, on another hand, seemed like the small, unnoticeable character who is easily dismissed, but what he lacked in stature he compensated for in determination.

Thus I immediately imagined that the contrast should be reflected in their sizes, in how much space they take on the page.

Q: *What is your illustration process like? Do you alter your process depending on the project?*

A: Since every project is different, so is the process. I enjoy finding that specific visual language that's most suited for that particular story.

Q: *How was working on this project different from Lana Lynn Howls at the Moon?*

A: The biggest difference was technique. Where Lana Lynn is rendered entirely digitally, *Gnu and Shrew* are drawn in pencil and colored digitally. Also, most of the sketches for *Gnu and Shrew* were drawn while I was traveling through Europe. Every page is connected to a place I have visited, which also inspired the endpapers.

Q: *This story has many STEAM elements with Shrew building various contraptions to help get across the river. How did you approach translating those STEAM elements into your illustrations?*

A: I did a lot of research and possibly procrastinated quite a bit, in great Gnu fashion. At the time, that was the most challenging part.

Q: *How did you come up with the illustrations for Shrew's inventions?*

A: I was inspired by vintage technical drawings and manuals. I wanted to overwhelm the viewer with all the details so they understand how overwhelmed Shrew must have felt with such a task at hand.

Q: *What did you enjoy most about illustrating Gnu and Shrew? Which spread is your favorite?*

A: I absolutely loved drawing these huge spreads, all in pencil. The spreads are larger than the final book, and some of them are framed in my house now.

My favorite spread is the first one, where the characters, including some fancy crocodiles, are introduced.

Q: *As an artist, do you feel like you're a dreamer or a doer?*

A: Probably a little bit of both! I procrastinate by researching and dreaming, probably a little too much. I never feel like I have all the information I need before I start a project. I have to tell myself to take the plunge, and once I do start, I work for endless hours and completely lose myself in the work. It's a great feeling. My husband framed one of the drawings of Shrew working late into the night because it reminded him of me.

Q: *How do you feel illustrations contribute to a picture book?*

A: Illustrations work in conjunction with words to help children imagine new worlds, discover, and relate to characters and their stories. They should have a certain element of surprise or openness that makes children wonder, dream, and imagine further than the story. Sometimes they show less than the text does, sometimes more, but never really quite the same. I try to avoid redundancy.

Q: *If you hadn't started illustrating children's books, what would you be doing?*

A: Right now I also work in graphic design and motion graphics, so it's likely I would have only done that.

Perhaps I would have been an interior designer, although my husband can argue that buying way too many plants is not design, it's a problem.

Or maybe... a researcher?

Q: *If you were Shrew, what would you invent to cross the river and reach the cave?*

A: I'm not sure I'd be as brave as he was! Maybe something that flies over the river, far above all those untrustworthy crocodiles.

Q: *Who, or what, is your artistic inspiration?*

A: Right now I am fascinated by the works of Shaun Tan. His work on displacement and immigration speak closely to my own experience. I'm always studying ways in which to express the connection between language, culture, and identity and the great mental shifts and ruptures that happen when one is uprooted.

Q: *What can we look forward to next from you?*

A: I'm working on a story about a big fish dissatisfied with his little pond that I hope to introduce to the world soon.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Anca Sandu was born in Romania and studied children's illustration at Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge, England. She works as a freelance designer, and her children's books include *Churchill's Tale of Tails* and *Lana Lynn Howls at the Moon*. She lives in Oregon.

ancasandu.com