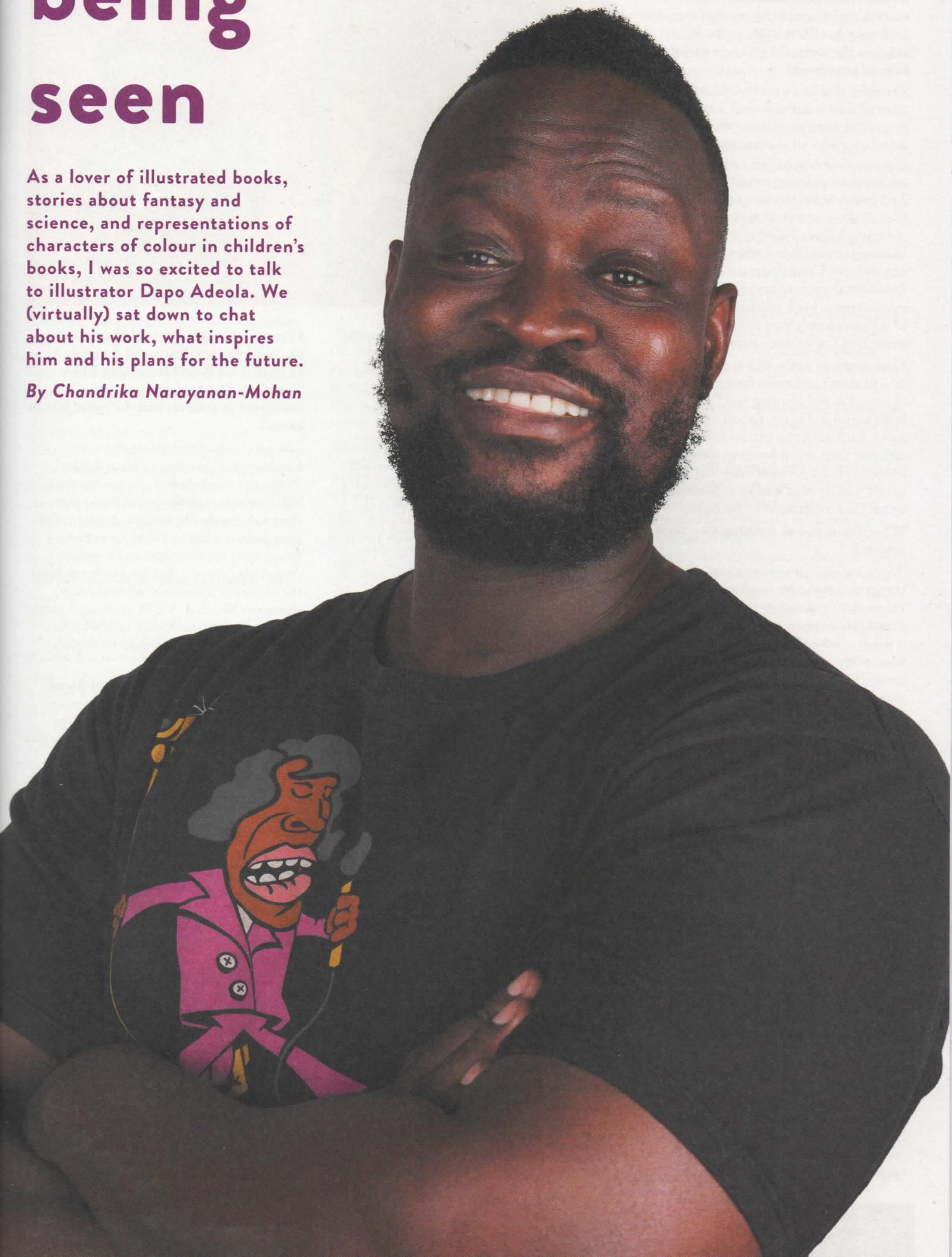


# being seen

As a lover of illustrated books, stories about fantasy and science, and representations of characters of colour in children's books, I was so excited to talk to illustrator Dapo Adeola. We (virtually) sat down to chat about his work, what inspires him and his plans for the future.

*By Chandrika Narayanan-Mohan*



**Hello! First of all, congratulations on *My Dad Is a Grizzly Bear*. It's a gorgeous book – it has such beautiful colour and texture and warmth. So my first question is about your illustration style. What inspires the style, the textures and the look of your work?**

This style that you see with the children's picturebooks is not my natural style. This is very much a style in flux. What you're witnessing with all the textures and things that you mentioned is me trying to figure out a way of working, experimenting. And colour is a nightmare because it's so final. Colour denotes that you've finished the work. My natural style is doing characters in black and white. I just love pen and ink; I love shape and form. *Space Detectives* showcased my ability to work in monochrome, but I still feel like that part of my work hasn't been seen yet and it's something I'm working towards.

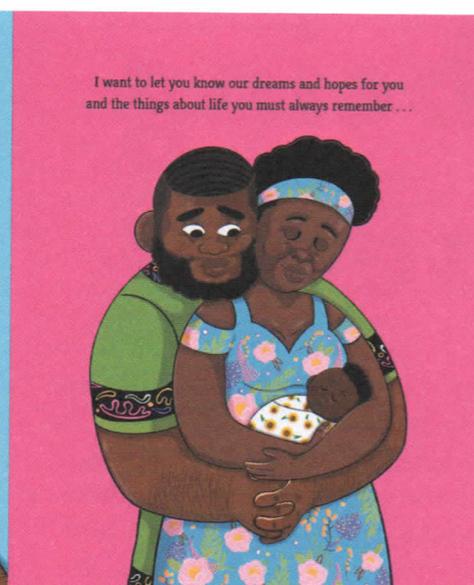
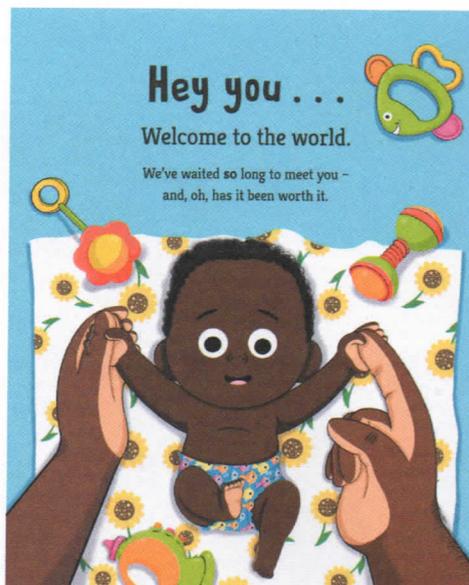
I am very, very new – this is my third year in – so there's still room for growth and change. I'm still learning and I'm still building on it. I'm not fixated on style any more. Each project requires something different from me; it becomes about trying different things for each story that I'm trying to tell, and treating it as an individual story rather than a catalogue of my style.

**What draws you to working on a certain project?**

When it comes to picking a text, I look for things that make me laugh, things that give me an ability to convey the fantastical in an otherwise normal setting. I love to give a touch of crazy fantasy sci-fi to a normal kind of setting so you can almost envision yourself in that story. I'm looking for things that don't pigeonhole me. If I'm going to be pigeonholed, I'd like to do it myself – I don't want the industry to do that for me. So if you become the Black guy who's going to be drawing Black kids, guess what you're going to be drawing all the time? Black kids. I love drawing Black kids, let's just establish that first. But I always want it to be my choice. I don't want it to be because that's what the industry needs or wants me to do. I want to tell the kind of stories I want to tell. I want that freedom because it allows you to enjoy what you're doing.

**What is your process of building a character?**

I need the text first, and I need a few descriptors. I don't need too many because then there's no room for me to do anything, I can't add to it. So, just a few descriptors like personality, height, hair type, facial skin tone, ethnicity and stuff like that. Then I can just build on it. It helps sometimes if you have an example of a real-world person that the character is inspired by, then I can just jump off there. What I try to pull out is the essence of the character in terms of their personality, so when you look at them, you



feel you know someone like that. Someone that gives you a certain energy without saying anything – whether it's in the eyes, the gestures, the mouth – something that makes you feel like they remind you of somebody.

And that's what I love about *Space Detectives*. It gave me an opportunity to push myself outside of my comfort zone, even though I still managed to find my way back in. It's a constant ebb and flow, a constant push and pull. The more tired I get, the more I start to slip back into my comfort zone, and I have to rest, relax and then push myself back out again. That's what I'm trying to do with the characters and the design work.

**Let's talk a bit about characters of colour in STEM roles, with a curiosity about science and space. What is your personal view of the impact that has on readers?**

I think the impact is limitless. You cannot measure that. What is the impact of being seen? Rocket, for example, when I was illustrating her, I based her on my niece, who was five at the time. Her energy is very self-assured and very curious. And I wanted to put that in there because when we see portrayals of Black women, especially in STEM, there's a weird stereotype around them, the 'nerdy Black woman'. And there's nothing wrong with that, by the way. But I just wanted to show that within that there's a variety. And what is nerdy? I don't see it as a negative thing at all. But societally, I feel like it's a negative stereotype. And Rocket is nerdy, but she's also many more things. Like the kids in *Space Detectives* – we've got Connor and Ethan, and Connor is the Black kid. And he's the more intelligent, more smart kind of detective, the more logical and practical out of the two. And I wanted that to come across, but I also wanted him to look cool as well. You can tell he's the brains of the outfit, but then he wears that with grace. He's not bumbling. He's just this cool kid.

**I saw on your Instagram this amazing photo of a young Black girl dressed as Rocket for World Book Day. I love that she got to dress up as a young girl interested in science, and she could just be herself.**

Last year we had something like two-hundred-plus kids dressed up as Rocket! This year I think we had about a hundred kids. It was incredible. It just shows that there's obviously not enough characters for these kids to relate to. So when someone comes up that's so unique and wonderful, they're like, that's it. But hopefully the more the market gets saturated with relatable characters like that, it'll be amazing. I mean, you can achieve the Rocket look without being Black, but it really does land when you're Black.

**I've seen you speak about the sci-fi and fantasy books you read when you were younger. In what way did those books influence your illustration style and topics now?**

I'll be honest, that hasn't come through in the stuff I'm doing at the moment. I did read sci-fi, but I've read more fantasy than sci-fi. So, like, your *Lord of the Rings*. That stuff really shaped me as a young adult. I was having a conversation this morning with a friend of mine who's an author as well. We were talking about doing scary stories, dark, a fantasy for young children, and publishing them. It's risky. But that's the kind of stuff we were reading growing up. We were reading books that were scary, just a notch above the horror of *Goosebumps*, stuff that makes you watch that shadow in your bedroom.

**Do you think you'll work on darker fantasy projects?**

That's the kind of stuff I want to work on next. I want to touch on the fantasy elements, drawing werewolves and vampires and all those kinds of weird creatures. And I don't have to make everything I work on

'Black', for want of a better way of saying it. But I don't think that we're represented in those lanes, especially in children's literature. So it would be interesting. I have a couple of stories that I'm batting around in my head with some interesting characters and spins on existing tropes in fantasy. I think that's the next stage, because so far people are like 'space, space, space'! So I'd like to step out of space for a bit and do something a bit more fantasy. You guys are going to be so shocked when I flip the table in a couple of years and come out with my own debut stuff! You guys are going to be like, 'Rocket, give us Rocket!'

**Like Rocket in chain-mail, riding a dragon?**

Exactly! She's slaying goblins!

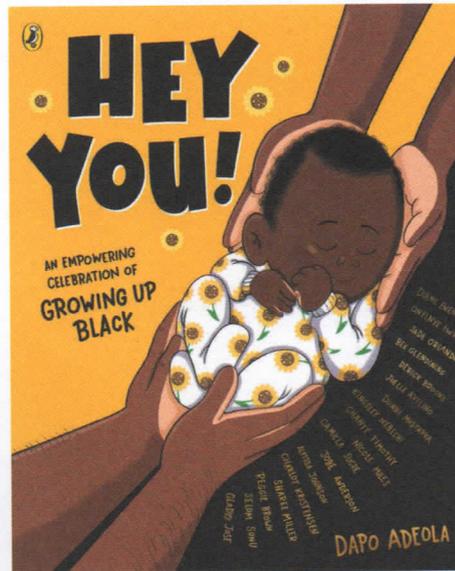
**So then, what is your dream project?**

I guess my dream would be for me to write, illustrate, self-publish, have as an animation a project of my own. That would be an absolute dream to do. To write, illustrate, have it as something that I own outright and do it on all kinds of platforms. That's a great dream, right?

So what I'm looking at is finessing a situation as soon as I possibly can in my career where everything, or the majority, is mine. But I am very aware that I'm still learning a lot of things at the moment. I'm still learning how to be a better storyteller, be better at my craft. So I don't want to rush that process either.

**Tell me more about your next book, *Hey You!***

*Hey You!* is a picturebook written by myself and illustrated by eighteen Black illustrators. It's the first picturebook of its kind. This book came about off the back of last summer's protests and the Detroit incident. It came about as a result of the tragedy. In children's books we get to talk about a variety of things, but we rarely give race the kind of attention it deserves. And we don't talk about it in a manner that addresses the way that Black people have to talk to youngsters so they can come home at night. The Black experience is not monolithic, and we try to give an account of what it is to grow up Black in the world. We talk about ancestry, about shared struggle and shared joy. We talk about support and love and multiple different things. And we also try to have a book that represents us as much as we can in eighteen spreads. So we've got a variety of skin tones and different kinds of Black people from the diaspora in there. And that's even reflected in the people that we put together to make the book. There's a wide variety of representations from across the diaspora making it. We've got the LGBTQ+ community represented in there as well because, again, we have Black people in that community. So it's this huge project that's wonderfully contained in this one small book.



We've got this thing in the industry in the UK at the moment where there aren't enough Black artists. So this book not only spotlights the artists in the UK, it also allows for me to do a book that offers us all the same level of visibility, because there is a trend in the industry to market and highlight the author, not the illustrator, in children's literature. I feel like illustrators are storytellers in their own right and the playing field in terms of the hierarchy on the front of a book should be the same. No one's name should be bigger than anyone else's. I insisted that we put all eighteen illustrators on the cover, which is a feat in itself. It's an absolute feat. And we did it and it's a beautiful, beautiful cover. And everyone's name is on there.

**So talk a bit more about your motivation for change-making within the illustration sector.**

It stems from selfishness because when I came into the industry, I was one of the only prominent Black illustrators at the time. There was a gentleman called Ken Wilson-Max, and Ken is a lovely, brilliant guy. But there was a lot of noise around my entry into this industry. CLPE had done a report which highlighted representation of Black and minority ethnic people in creative industries, and it was less than four per cent. And in that four per cent, there were only two Black illustrators. This statistic absolutely shocked me because the excuses they were coming out with were, 'Oh, the talent just isn't out there.'

In 2018, I put a tweet out asking for Black illustrators to come forward and share their work with us and let us know who they are. And the tweet went a little viral and loads of people added their work to it. It was great to see and I just kept in touch with those people and I kept sharing opportunities, sharing resources that I had. Macmillan, who published *My Dad Is a Grizzly Bear*, saw this and they called me in, and they wanted to know how they could help me. So off

the back of that, we liaised and we put on the first Black British illustrators meet-up in 2019. And it was just such a great event. So many people turned up, and we sold out. It basically could have been double the size it was. It then resulted in what's now a Black British illustrators network, which is a closed group I have on Facebook, where I share opportunities and work with different publishers to do portfolio sessions for members of the group.

I'm proud to say there are at least six or seven of the group in *Hey You!*, which was a great result for them and for myself as well. It was great to see the group feed into something like that. And I'm currently working on another anthology which has yet to be announced, which I'm going to again try to get more people from the group into.

I can't help myself. I have a big mouth, and if I see something, I call it out. And that often leads to an opportunity to address the thing that I'm calling out, which at this stage I'm not ready to turn away from.

**One last question: what advice would you give to someone who wants to become an illustrator?**

Aside from the really corny stuff – like draw, draw, draw and learn about the craft and learn about the industry – to know what your reason is for wanting to do what it is that you do, because that will always inform the choices and the decisions that you make. It can be as simple as wanting to tell really cool stories. But it's not the easy lane. A lot of people think it is. Maybe this is just me coming from my background of being self-taught and having to piece together things myself. But there's a lot to learn and there's a lot that happens. Knowing what your 'why' is helps you immediately have agency or a sense of it. It's easier to navigate your path, your direction that you're going in. So keep it fun, keep it interesting and also give yourself some agency.

**Chandrika Narayanan-Mohan** is an arts manager, writer and spoken word performer, living in Dublin.