Q&A with Corinna Luyken, author of The Book of Mistakes

1. What was your inspiration for The Book of Mistakes?

It started with a series of mistakes.

For years I drew with pens because I liked the fluid feel of ink on paper. I liked how, with pen, a line can take on a life of its own. But often that life would lead to shapes and marks I hadn’t intended and couldn’t erase. Because I loved to draw—and loved to draw with ink—I learned to deal with those accidents. If I messed up something in a face, I’d add glasses. If I didn’t like the way I’d drawn a hand, I might add gloves. And somewhere along the way I learned to enjoy how each mistake forced me to find a new way of looking at the world. And I began to wonder if celebrating mistakes was something that could be taught. In my years working as both a teaching assistant and artist in residence in elementary schools, I started to notice a pattern. In every class there would be one or two kids who, within minutes of starting to draw, were raising their hand asking for another piece of paper. They didn’t like what they were seeing. They wanted to start over. They wanted to make it perfect. It became my job to help them see the possibility in that mistake, to see how they could keep going and transform their drawing or painting into something that they still might love.

This all came home for me when my daughter was four years old. At that age she loved everything she drew. She didn’t see mistakes, only pattern and line and color and texture. And she LOVED to draw. Then one day, while drawing, she burst into tears and threw her paper on the ground. She had made a mistake. She couldn’t fix it. And it broke my heart. Not yet, I remember thinking. Not her. Not already. Not now.

So I wrote this book. For her. For them. For me. For anyone who has ever made a mistake.

2. Which artistic materials do you most like to use?

I’ve always loved to draw with ink and watercolor. But through the process of working on The Book of Mistakes I’ve fallen in love with pencil as well—especially the smudges and streaks that are left behind when you erase or draw over pencil with ink. While I’ll sometimes use a lighter pencil to sketch out a face, I like dark pencils that are hard to erase (from 5B to 8B) for the rest of the body. That way, I never completely get rid of the history. The energy of those first marks and thoughts will always be visible in the background. I love that.

3. What do you hope readers will take away from The Book of Mistakes?

I believe the best books leave room for each reader to have their own experience. I really don’t want to tell anyone what that should be. That said, for me, this book is about perception. And possibility.

And maybe some questions—How do you see yourself? How do you see the world? What do you see when you look at other people—do you see their imperfections, their mistakes? Do you see their possibility? Can you see both, simultaneously?

And behind those questions, other questions—How do we change how we see? How do we move from the mistake into a place where transformation can happen? How do we learn to see potential? How do we access a vision for what could come next?

And finally—can that change in perception be taught? I think that is a very interesting question!
4. Have you ever made a mistake that turned out to be good thing?

Almost every time I draw, I make a mistake. Often the mistakes are small, but even then they require an adjustment. First, in my head, then on paper.

Recently, I was making an ink drawing of a lady. She had beautiful, dark, arching eyebrows. I thought the ink was dry— but it wasn’t. And when I went to add detail to the drawing, my hand rubbed over her face and made an enormous streak across her forehead. So I turned her beautiful, dark, arching eyebrows into beautiful, dark, arching glasses.

This is something I’m doing constantly when I draw. When I’m working with kids and they get upset over a mistake I always tell them to turn it into a bush. You can turn almost anything into a bush. Or a tree!

5. What first made you excited about art?

I’ve always loved to watch the emergence of something from nothing. To explore the shape of what is possible, but still unknown. It’s a dance. And it’s endlessly fascinating to me. Also, I love color. Mixing color, for me, is pure play.

THE BOOK OF MISTAKES by Corinna Luyken
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