

***“There is joy in catching
a wave... My work
expresses the wonder
of life and nature”***

Artist, author, award-winning children’s illustrator
and keen surfer Maia Walczak is deeply inspired
by the ocean and the bounty of nature

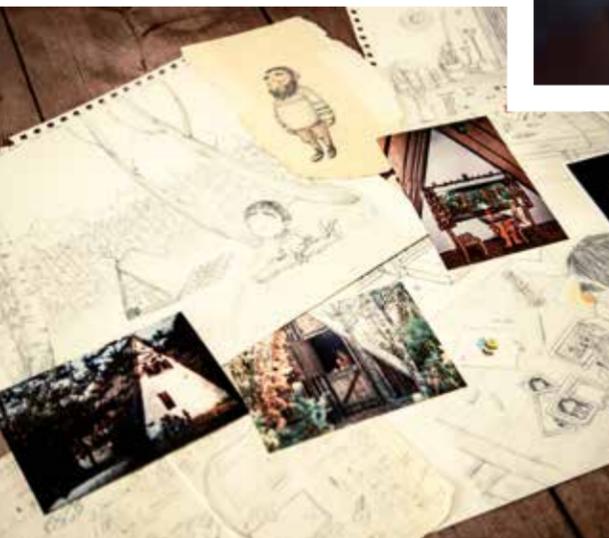
WORDS ELLEN TOUT PHOTOGRAPHS ADJ BROWN



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"One of my doodles sparked the inspiration for my first silent book. My friend is a composer, so we combined the two and uploaded it to YouTube. Little by little, things escalated and I began illustrating and writing"



THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE
Maia is well-known for her paintings on surfboards and her award-winning books; sketches are made before digital editing. Her grandad's cabin provides inspiration

FAR RIGHT Creating a mural for a beachside cafe in Newquay, where Maia often surfs



Maia Walczak's childhood summers were spent in Poland in a cabin in the woods built by her grandad, Czesław. 'I was born in London, but the memories and nostalgia that I have from my childhood are wrapped up in that cabin,' says Maia. 'That way of life stayed with me. We had an outdoor compost toilet and the running water for bathing was so cold! We would heat it over the fire to wash outside – pouring buckets of water over ourselves; if it was warm enough and we felt brave, we would bathe in the stream, and we would wash our clothes by hand. We bought produce directly from local farmers. It was supposedly a less comfortable way of life but it stuck with me and is still an inspiration. It was such a divide, like I was living two different lives – London city life and the cabin.'

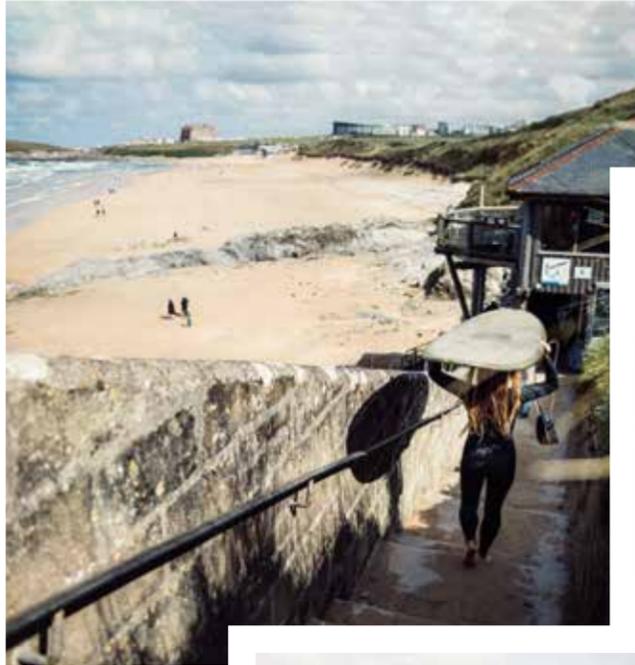
Those memories have strongly influenced Maia's work, most recently in her new children's book, *Wylder* (self-published, £6.99), a 'silent', or wordless, book in which the story is told solely through illustration. Why a silent book? 'The idea was born when I realised that silent films exist, so why not silent books? I didn't know at the time that there

were already a few silent books, so I started experimenting,' she says. 'It's about the atmosphere, emotion and feeling. For example, when I hear a piece of music without lyrics, it can speak to me more deeply. With silent books... I had a sense that sometimes words can take away meaning or muddle it. As they say, a picture speaks a thousand words!'

My soul in pictures

The illustrations in *Wylder* are deeply personal. 'I've always had an obsession with forests. The book was inspired by our cabin hidden in the pine trees but it is also about gentleness – showing compassion towards nature and one another. I knew I wanted it to reflect that and encompass the things that I love, such as foraging and growing food,' she says. 'It's like I poured my heart out into the book and then released it. It's so special to me.'

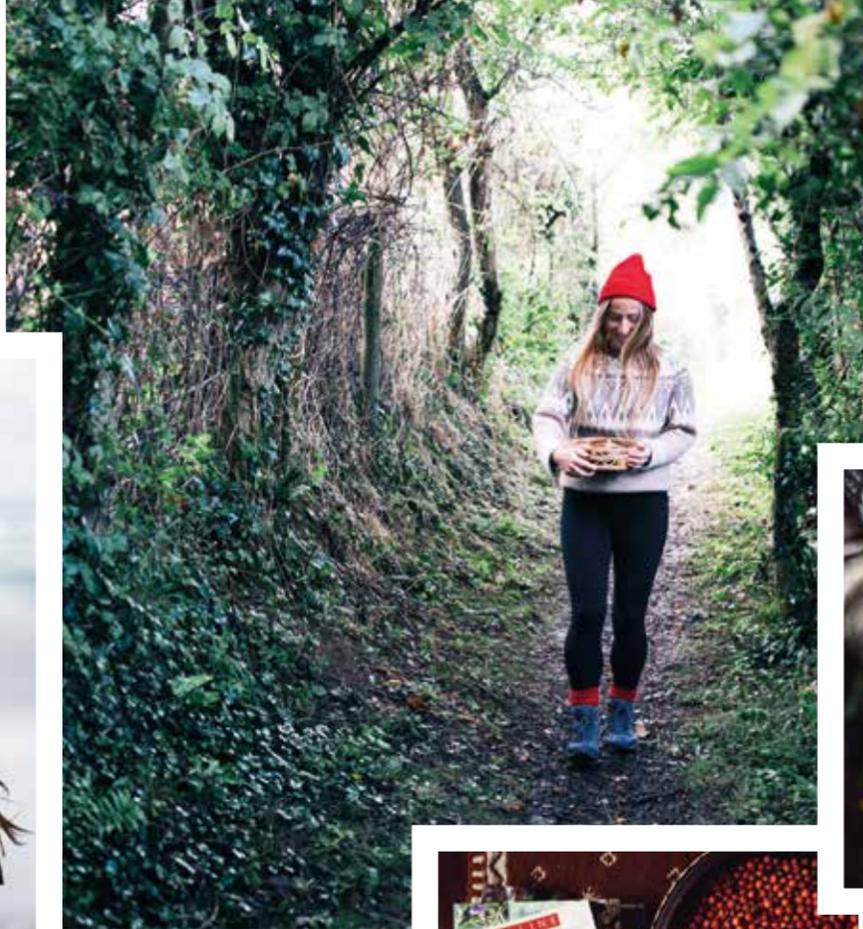
Maia's silent books have been used in ways that she never expected, in particular by primary schools and language therapists. 'There are many benefits but books like this cross language barriers. At first, it was an experiment in >>>



ABOVE AND RIGHT Maia has lived in Cornwall for four years and surfs as much as possible; with her beautiful custom surfboard. She also paints surf fins, skateboards, longboards and print illustrations

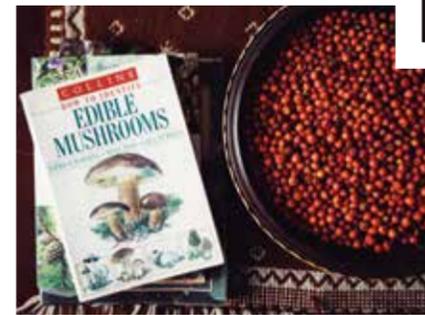


"Surfing is good for the body and brain. It takes you out of normal life; it gives you perspective and time to disconnect"



LEFT AND BELOW Foraging is part of Maia's family heritage and she loves the mindfulness it fosters

RIGHT Maia supplements her diet with homegrown and foraged foods, and is fascinated by sustainability



"I wanted the book to encompass the things I love - foraging and growing food. It's like I poured my heart into it and then released it"

what I could say without words; I never realised [it would speak to children in those contexts].'

Artistic Maia always felt connected to nature but, in contrast, read Hispanic studies at university. 'I travelled but eventually ran out of money, so I returned to London and ended up working for a travel company,' she says. 'Every day, I would wake up early to do some form of illustration. I challenged myself to do a doodle a day and I began to develop my style.' That was seven years ago.

'I realised how much I enjoy my art and that I wanted to draw more. One of those doodles sparked the inspiration for my first silent book. My friend is a composer, so we combined the two and uploaded it to YouTube. Little by little, things escalated, and I knew I wanted to write and illustrate. I had temping work but began illustrating books and writing a novel.' Maia also creates original artwork and beautiful, dreamlike paintings on surfboards and skateboards.

While living in London, Maia was drawn to a nomadic,

outdoor lifestyle, seeking out the countryside and coast whenever possible. 'I struggled with the city and would plan escapes to work abroad for winter. I organised many camping trips and visits to the park!' she says.

A landscape to call home

'When I was travelling in Chile, I got into surfing. In the end, I couldn't cope with London and I have lived in Cornwall for four years. I was self-employed and loved surfing, so what was I doing in London?'

Maia lives a 10-minute walk from the beach. 'When I moved here, I slipped so easily into the way of life. At first it felt like I was travelling again but now I don't feel the need to get away so much. In London, travelling was escape, but here I feel more at home and like I fit. I feel so lucky. The coastal path is within reach and I will often do two-day hikes and wild camping. Things like that nourish my soul.'

When the waves are good, Maia loves to surf. 'Surfing is

good for the body and brain. It is time spent in nature and it takes you out of normal life. You are immersed in the water; it's unusual and different to everyday life. There is joy in catching a wave and it gives you perspective and time to disconnect,' she says. 'My artwork is very much influenced by surfing and nature.'

Foraging is also one of Maia's passions. 'Every weekend as a child, we would go walking, camping and foraging for mushrooms. My love of foraging started at the cabin and you do it every day in Polish culture,' she says. 'My mum, Julita, taught me, in the same way that my grandad taught her, and we would all go together. As a child, I didn't eat mushrooms, but I loved finding and picking them! Self-sufficiency interests me. I'm inspired by nature - animals and the wilderness. It's been a dream of mine for a long time to build a place of my own, like my grandad before me.'

At home, Maia spends much time in the garden. 'I try to live slowly and have started growing my own food. Growing

and foraging supplements a lot of what I eat. I'm fascinated by it and I want to keep learning. It gives me so much pleasure,' she says. 'It helps me to switch off and focus on a sea of green, picking what is edible. The feeling it gives me is the hugest part of why I do it. We used to do it for survival and have moved away from that but it just feels natural to me.'

Nature's show-and-tell

What does the future hold? 'I want to focus on children's books. I engage and connect with those in a more profound way; they are more challenging than a single piece of art and take more out of me,' she says. 'My work is about expressing the wonder of life and nature - how incredible and awe-inspiring it is that all the elements exist together. I want to represent a gentler, slower way of living and of appreciating life, the world, nature and animals.'

For Maia's prints, artwork and books, see maia.walczak.com and etsy.com/uk/shop/MaiaWalczakArt. Follow @maia.walczak. 'A Silent Book: Wylder' by Maia Walczak is out now