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I’ve been asked to write about how it feels to start a new project, in my case, a new nonfiction picture book about bugs, kind of a follow-up to “Hatch!” (out from Marshall Cavendish in Feb 2011). The new book is due in April 2011, and will be published spring 2012.

Well, as Hemingway once said, when asked how to write a novel, “First you clean the refrigerator.” In other words, even the most disciplined writer procrastinates. Maybe that’s why one is given deadlines and financial incentives.

But in my case, I kind of do first clean ...that is, my studio. I really do a thorough job, because as my project - be it a series of oil paintings for a show or a book - progresses, my studio gets messier and messier, with uncleaned brushes and dirty palettes, stacks of notes and books and drawings, boxes from supplies shipped, etc.

I have already spent a couple of months this summer working on the proposal, sketches and dummy, so have done quite a bit of research, and bought books or checked them out (renewed several times) from the NYPL Science Library. But until I get the okay, and then the contract, it isn’t officially a project. So, got and signed contract, and spent a week wrapping up a couple other small jobs. Gave myself a starting date. On that day, I actually did start - cleaning the studio that is.

Sports, or even military, metaphors occur to me - I’m “in the trenches”; “getting to first base”; even, “shifting into first gear.” Because it is a slow warming up. You feel guilty that you’re not plowing ahead full steam. But, knowing oneself, that accelerates toward the end of the book. And not necessarily because of deadline pressure, but because of momentum - you’re then in 3rd and 4th gear, warmed up, in the “flow.” I start dreaming about the subjects in the book - colors, images, patterns - about the dinosaurs, the birds, the bugs.

For me, images come first, the writing second. So, although I do make notes about the text all along, only after the sketches are okayed, and the art well on its way, do I write, shape and refine the text.

The hardest part is now, beginning - creating the approach, solving visual problems, research. I do rough, and then increasingly detailed, sketches. Each page may have three or four stages. Midway through I show them to the editor and art director, and make whatever changes we decide upon. Usually there are few, because I spend a lot of time on the final detailed pencil sketches. The EASIEST (and most fun) part is actually executing the paintings in ink and colored inks. Although I often have to go through another round of more detailed research to find out everything about the subject (angle of hind toe on a particular bird, exactly where color may shift in the tail feathers), the major conceptual and artistic decisions have been made in the earlier sketches. There’s still plenty of unknown left though - each painting must “sing” - be elegant, beautiful, informative, fun, and one hopes, a little surprising.

Then, I get serious about writing. Research mostly done, everything gets rewritten/edited by me, and my writer husband Bo, many times before I send the first draft to my editor. She does her thing - queries, grammar, more explanation, info we can cut - and then I get it back. We usually go back and forth at least half a dozen times. Then the copy editor gets it and that too takes several passes between the editor, the copyeditor, and me. Same with design - the art director sends a preliminary concept, which I weigh in on, and that continues for a month or two. BTW, the cover comes last, although sometimes they need it halfway through for the catalog.

Then, as with most nonfiction, we send art and text to an expert, well known in the field, to vet it. I rarely have to make changes, but do them now, with the editor's input.

So - all of this is ahead of you, when you sit down on designated day one, to start a book. No wonder we sometimes find many other things to do - answering e-mail, checking Facebook, paying bills, dash to the gym, writing this piece - before we actually sit down and attack it!