



The Letterpress Project

Author and Illustrator E-Interviews

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this series of Letterpress Project e-interviews that we are undertaking over the coming months. The Letterpress Project is a not-for-profit initiative that exists to promote the value and pleasures of the physical book and we are keen to get the thoughts of authors and book illustrators about their own influences, experiences and love of books. We are happy for you to make your answers as long or as brief as you are comfortable with and we will undertake not to edit or paraphrase any of your comments without your explicit permission.

Q1. What are your earliest memories of books and reading? For example, did you have a favourite or inspirational book?

I was lucky enough to have books like Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass read to me at a very early age. I loved the absurdity of it all and I especially loved the pictures which brought it all to life so vividly. (It's still my gold standard of what a children's book can and should be.) My grandmother had a copy of the German children's book, 'Struwwelpeter' which contained cautionary tales so graphic and bizarre that you just had to laugh. I also loved Dr Seuss books—the nonsense ones, not the message ones—and, my very favourite, Enid Blyton. She really knew how to tell a story ... get rid of the parents as early as possible and plunge her child heroes into a world of delights and dangers. Her Faraway Tree series went very deep for me and I think you can see its DNA in my Treehouse series, along with the aforementioned books as well as a healthy dash of MAD magazine.

Q2. What inspired you to become an author / illustrator?

From a very early age I just loved picking up a pen and drawing and writing things that got a reaction from other people. Whether what I wrote made people laugh, or gasp with surprise, or groan with disgust didn't matter ... I just loved doing it. By the age of ten I was keeping a writing journal and had learned to touch type and produced a regular joke magazine that I would sell to the other kids in the school for 3 cents a copy to cover the cost of production. You can see the influence of everything I was reading in my early writing ... these days it's still there but I've got better at covering my tracks.

Q3. For you, what makes a successful book or illustration?

I generally judge whether a children's book or illustration is successful by whether it causes a strong reaction amongst the young readers it's intended for. It should make them either gasp with surprise, squeal with delight or simply fall in love with the act of reading. This doesn't necessarily require the writing/drawing to be particularly fancy or literary ... it's much more about the sensibility of the writer/illustrator and whether they are in touch with their own childhood and have the ability to convey this to their audience.

Q4. Do you have a specific audience in mind when you write your books / plan your illustrations?

When I write my ultimate aim is to evoke the same fascination for the experience of reading a book that I experienced as a child. You'll never find a lecture about the power of books in my stories ... I prefer to just immerse them in a world of excitement, scariness, surprise and fun and let the experience speak for itself. I guess the first audience is my inner ten year old and the next audience is my wife and editor/co-writer Jill. If she's engaged with it then I start telling Terry the main ideas and he starts sketching characters and key scenes. Our main aim is to tell the most powerfully entertaining—and silly—story that we can and trust that if we are engaged then other people will be. I think we've gotten better at writing books that entertain a very wide age range ... part of this is no doubt because Terry's illustrations do so much of the work of description. We are aware that many emerging readers will be attempting to read the books and we try to use the least amount of words we can to tell the most complex story possible. This process means that it takes a year to write each book.

Q5. What future do you think the physical book has? For example, do you think the electronic book will replace the physical book?

There was a time when I wondered if that might be the case but I think people just really enjoy the physical tactile qualities of the book ... and being able to easily flip back and forth between the pages seems to be a unique and irreplaceable pleasure of the printed book.

Q6. Are you a book collector? Is there a special book you'd love to own?

I love collecting odd and unusual books of all types. They don't necessarily cost much ... I'm usually happier fossicking in an opportunity shop than an antiquarian bookseller. I did, however, purchase a quite expensive and fairly rare collection of Windsor Mccay's 'DIARY OF A RAREBIT FIEND' cartoon strips. This magically wild and utterly astonishing collection of fantasies and nightmares predates both Freud and the surrealists and I still can't quite believe I was lucky enough to find a copy. Just google 'Diary of a rarebit fiend' and you'll see why I am such a happy man! (And don't even get me started on his 'Little Nemo in Slumberland' strips which Taschen produced a magnificent colour volume of two years ago. Pure inspiration.

Thank you very much for taking time to do this for us. We will advise you when we publish it on the website - www.letterpressproject.co.uk. Please return the completed interview to:

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