



**The Letterpress Project**

**Author and Illustrator E-Interviews**

# **An Interview with ANNIE MURRAY/ ABI OLIVER**

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

My earliest memories are of my father reading to me at bedtime – always sea stories like *Robinson Crusoe* and *Treasure Island* (I was terrified of Blind Pugh and thought I could hear him tapping his stick along the street outside my window.) He also used to make up his own stories about two children who lived in a little cottage up a white, zig-zag cliff path. We travelled a lot and Mum read to me in the car before I could manage much myself – favourites of our 60s generation like *Heidi* and *What Katie Did*. Dad used to complain – ‘are those girls howling – *again?*’ (They weren’t sea stories!)

I remember being on a beach in Italy, aged about nine and drawing a circle to try and see if there was an alternative route into Narnia – cupboards full of fur coats being in somewhat short supply in that context. But I can’t remember a specific book that inspired me to write. I grew up as an only child so drew on the world inside my head quite a bit – reading and writing were what came instinctively.

**Q2. What inspired you to become an author?**

I’m really not sure, other than that reading and writing stories has always seemed to me the most natural and compelling thing to do – that gives you that sort of curl of excitement inside. It still does!

**Q3. For you, what makes a successful book?**

I prefer books that are what I call ‘in the round’ rather than ‘issue’ books. A good book, for me, has to be about human lives in emotionally compelling, insightful and multi-layered ways and contexts. I like characters to be complex and interesting. The setting is also often

– though not always - important. We are all drawn to some places more than others, I suppose.

Although there are many small scale gems of novels, written with almost poetic economy, I do find my favourite books tend to have a large canvas, encompassing all sorts of people – a reason I devoured *Gone with the Wind* in my teens and I love Dickens. One of my lifetime favourites is Paul Scott's *The Raj Quartet* – four volumes of fascinating, complex and interlinked characters towards the end of the British colonial rule of India – full of insights and history and beautifully written.

#### **Q4. Do you have a specific audience in mind when you write your books?**

When I write my books about Birmingham I suppose I have mainly Birmingham people in mind, who have told me interesting things over the years and who enjoy reading stories I have already written. But also, really, just anyone who might enjoy them.

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

It's becoming very clear that this will not be the case at all.

I am just back from visits to local independent bookshops in my area – Berks and Oxon, with my other writing hat on, as Abi Oliver. The signs are that sales of the physical book are much on the increase and the electronic sales are sliding down again.

One thing the digital era has done is to focus minds even more on making the physical book a thing of great beauty and physical pleasure, and there are more and more really beautiful editions out there. Even the cheapest commercial fiction paperbacks are far more alluring than they ever used to be – lovely covers, better paper. And the hardback classics that have been produced recently are just gorgeous. It's a great time for book illustrators and cover designers – I'd say there's a real renaissance in that.

Also, as with vinyl records versus digital downloads, people often enjoy possessing their reading 'journey' in physical form. It's comforting and enjoyable and a means of self-expression. It's one more way to make the world textured and beautiful instead of stuck somewhere inside a computer chip – useful as those can be.

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

Well – I do buy a lot of books, though I also sell some back as well. In terms of collecting – there are very precious books of mine that I would never get rid of – part of my 'journey' I suppose. My old hardback of *Jane Eyre* for example, printed in the 1940s and the first adult novel I ever read. But lately I have been tempted by those lovely editions I mentioned above. For example I bought one of the cloth-bound Penguin classics of *Wuthering Heights*

the other day, and also an Everyman hardback of P.G Wodehouse's *Very Good, Jeeves!* - both beautifully produced. I can see myself investing in a few more of these – even looking at them makes me happy!