



## 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?**

As the youngest in my family I was eager to learn to read and show off to everyone. When I was about four I memorized a little book called *One Kitten Too Many*, and upon discovering this accomplishment one afternoon I yelled up the stairs to my mother that I could read. "All right, come and read to me, dear," she said tiredly (she was about 50 at the time and I'd probably caught her during a nap). I read her the thing and she just smiled. "I think you just have it memorized, dear," she said. I wanted to chop both her and the book to bits, but I kept on working away until finally I really did know all the words.

I count myself tremendously lucky that my mother read to me at bedtime, and I think this definitely instilled in me a love for reading. My mother was also a writer, and I have a very clear picture of her sitting with a notebook on the couch most evenings after the dishes were done.

I have a few strong positive memories of teachers reading to us at school, but not many, considering the huge influence reading aloud has on children. Mrs. Gaston, my grade 5 teacher, read Marguerite deJong's *House of Sixty Fathers*, and until that time I had no idea one could travel to other places and times through books. I was captivated by the differences between Tien Pao's life and my own.

Based on my mother's influence, I read to my own sons from birth and for as long as we could gather together until their evenings became fully their own. Reading and enjoying contemporary titles with them kept me current in terms of new books in the field as well as offered us a really excellent context for talking about the kinds of things that just don't come up very easily without a book to generate the topic.

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

I have always enjoyed writing, but it was a children's literature professor when I was taking my B.Ed. who offered the epiphany that children's literature was an art form equal to literature for adults. I loved the reading I did for that class, and was inspired by terrific writers to consider how they wrote what they wrote.

I did make up a lot of stories in high school, but they were supplied as book reviews to an English teacher that asked us to read and summarize a book per week. I didn't know what to read, so I made up titles and authors and wrote about those. In those days teachers didn't have the internet to check on things, so nobody caught me. I wish I could say that those summaries each became best sellers, but they didn't. They stunk.

As a classroom teacher, I didn't find much time to write, but I was lucky to be home with my children when they were small and then I managed to find moments here and there, and particularly after my husband and I had tucked them into bed, to create my own work. One goal other than simply creating art was to stay in shape as a teacher, and hopefully make myself a strong contender for jobs once I was ready to get back into the profession.

I remember catching a few minutes to write while my sons played, and how one of them would catch me and come to get his back scratched. This didn't pose too great a problem, because I could just write with one hand and scratch with the other. Soon, however, a second son would discover us. Scratching with two hands, I could still think, so the work went on. When the third son joined us, however, and I had to scratch them in turns, keeping track of who was sitting out, there was no room for writing at all. If they hadn't been so itchy I would probably have written twice as many books.

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

I look for work that is character driven, that touches the heart as well as the mind, and that comes from a place of knowledge about childhood. I also look for a story that breathes with such life that after a short while its readers forget we are breathing alongside and become one with the tale. Coming back to reality then leaves us a bit breathless for a minute.

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

I generally think of the character first, and then the character helps me find the story, and somewhere in that process the audience comes clear. It is important to me to envision the audience because that helps me with word choice, sentence structure, and the kinds of deep truths I hope matter most to that age group.

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

I am not at all worried about the future of the physical book. I have the good fortune to work now with university students and at the beginning of each year, I survey all of them to discover their opinions and preferences related to books. I have not yet had anyone indicate on these anonymous surveys a preference for digital reading vs handheld reading. I see

opportunities increase for more and different types of reading, and reading that supports people with exceptionalities, without losing our current connections to physical books.

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

I am a library collector. When I visit new places, I usually locate the nearest library and go there. I'd much rather borrow than own, and I really want to support the future of libraries as truly the heart of a literate community. Libraries are essential.

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](http://www.letterpressproject.co.uk). Please return the completed interview to:

**Karen Argent**

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