



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?

My earliest contacts with books taught me some valuable lessons, not least that all meanings are contestable.

I cannot remember being read to as a child but assume I was – almost certainly by my mother, there being a strict division of labour between parents in those days. It follows that what she read from is beyond recall, although I daresay Enid Blyton featured. The world of her stories – adventure-filled but safe – seemed familiar in a way that Arthur Ransome's, for example, never did. When I was four we moved to a middle-class suburb with woods to play in and long gardens. This was Famous Five territory, a leafy Eden in which no one bit the apple. Then I grew up and so did the world. The whole idea of innocence became problematic, and when the social and ethnic cleansing in Blyton's work led to its removal from public libraries I nodded sagely, but with a heavy heart. A first love of any kind is hard to renounce, even when she turns out to have been untrue.

Something similar happened with my own early reading. Once again memories have faded but the Jungle Book came into it somewhere because the first character I remember admiring in a book was Rikki-Tikki-Tavi, the mongoose which saves an English family in India from two cobras nesting in their garden. That such courage might be possible consoled me – a formative encounter with the power of imagination. Much later, viewing the tale through adult eyes, I spotted a troubling sub-text. The snakes, having been there first, were trying to expel the intruders, an allegory for resistance to imperial rule. Was Kipling trying to demonise the forces of nationalism, and if so must Rikki no longer be admired, a bloodstained sepoy on the wrong side of history? Coming to my rescue was Edward Said, whose essay on *Kim* skewered the novel's ideology while hailing it as great literature. By the same token, I decided, my childhood hero could be reinstated, his protectiveness towards

the humans somewhat compromised, the comfort and excitement I drew from his exploits a small but significant part of my own story.

Whether or not we realise it at the time, reading is a subtle, layered, potentially deceptive activity, with different aspects of ourselves engaged and new takes on what we have read forever surfacing.

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

The seed was sown at an early age, although it has taken a long time to develop. I grew up in a house full of books, my father being in the trade, and writing may have begun as a way of getting closer to him. The motivation has changed over time but if I had to identify one common theme it is the pleasure of working with words. I am useless with my hands and have limited visual taste, so it is through putting things down on a page that any artistic impulse comes to be expressed. It is at that level that I first respond to other people's writing. If an author cannot come up with sentences that work in terms of rhythm and sound as well as meaning, I rarely stick around long enough to discover what other qualities they may have going for them.

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

I read both fiction and non-fiction so it is hard to generalise beyond the texture of the language used (see above). Perhaps the marriage of function and form is a unifying factor, although I do think one's tastes and priorities change. I started out being most impressed by – and keenest on writing – poetic figures of speech (too much Lawrence Durrell at an impressionable age) and like any reformed addict I am always liable to regress. But increasingly I have learned to appreciate writing which enhances my ability to enter into feelings and experiences far removed from my own. For example, *A Suitable Boy* by Vikram Seth is a primer in imaginative identification and well worth the year it might take you to read. Empathy as a secular moral force has been linked to the emergence of the novel and its stunting is dangerous in children – boys especially – brought up not on books but on video games whose characters exist only to be killed and pornography which objectifies women.

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

No I do not. Or rather, it is probably my own tastes I am trying to satisfy. Of course it is necessary to consider the effect of one's words and make adjustments. I realise, for example, that not everyone likes long sentences with lots of embedded clauses, and I sometimes find myself weeding these out in deference to an imagined reader. But the idea of tailoring what I write to a particular interest group or market segment is anathema. Self-publication, a world I am about to enter, is full of such thinking, with authors apparently working from business plans rather than inspiration. The trouble is, of course, that the best of them sell. Pleasing oneself can easily result in an audience of one and after living with the book for months or years even he (in my case) takes some convincing.

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

The lesson of the past few years is that e-books have found their place, ousting physical books in some cases but adding to demand and therefore increasing the amount of reading going on, which cannot be bad. Recently the physical book has made a bit of a comeback, or at least its perceived decline has levelled out. The amount of effort and skill that goes into design is a positive factor which electronic platforms cannot really compete with. *What* gets published is a concern, however: celebrity memoirs, cook books *ad nauseam*, novels by people with media connections – not my stuff, in other words.

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

I collect books as a reader not an investor. If a First Folio turned up in Oxfam no doubt I would snap it up, but it is not my prime motivation. What is, then? I go through author-based fads sometimes (have I got everything John Updike wrote – is that even possible?) but equally there is nothing better than discovering a new writer. Sometimes my own work is the spur, a title promising some relevant insight or background, and books are often bought for future reference, a mood or context later arising to which the story or subject matter seems perfectly aligned. That is why, whatever the thrill of rushing home with a newly-acquired novel or biography, I sometimes wait years before turning a page. The appearance of some editions appeals to me and I covet every one produced in that style (the covers of Naguib Mahfouz's novels designed for Anchor by Anthony Russo are current favourites) but I am content to rely on chance rather than hunt them down. There is nothing to compare with the feel of a new book, although a well-thumbed copy can have its charm. However, I draw the line at something defaced by a previous owner. Their comments come between me and the words, influencing my response as a reader, and compromise that sense of possession (dreadfully bourgeois) which is an essential part of the joy. Still I have been known to rub out marginalia scribbled in pencil. There are no rules, it seems, that cannot be broken.

As for the special book I would love to own, it is by me: not an author's copy, provided by a grateful publisher and never opened, but a used paperback found in a second-hand shop, clearly much-loved but mercifully unscribed, the print slightly smudged (indulge me here) from being pored over so often. How nice to be reminded, in the middle of a busy, humdrum or disappointing day: I wrote that and it gave someone pleasure.

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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