



The Letterpress Project

Author and Illustrator E-Interviews

An Interview With Anne Fine

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

When I was three, my mother had triplets, so the Health Visitor fixed it up with the nearby infant school that I would go along, even though underage. (Different times!) So I learned to read before I was four. We learned with phonics and I still remember pointing to the large clear black letters and saying the sounds.

I took to books at once. I made scribble books for myself and my sisters. By the age of six I was haunting the local branch library. I read all the time. The primary school refused to take me because I was too young, so at seven I had a sabbatical year. The infant school made me repeat all my arithmetic classes, but otherwise I was simply let loose on the school's reading shelves and the head teacher's book case. (I still remember the very scary *judder* that its glass front made when I slid it to the side. I always feared that it would shatter.)

For a long while my favourite books were Enid Blyton's Faraway Tree series, then the Famous Five and her other Adventure series. I adored all Anthony Buckeridge's Jennings books, and after that my passion was for Richmal Crompton's William books. (After William books, I was ready for anything.)

Reading was such a comfort and a joy to me that I believe my decision not to study English at university was largely the result of never wanting any of my reading to become a chore, or to have to read anything with an essay title in mind.

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

I was perfectly happy reading. But one day there was a blizzard in Edinburgh, and at home with my first child I could not make it to the library. Bored to death during her nap, I started to write a novel. No preparation. No thought. I just sat down and started to write.

The snow cleared, but I kept on with the book, and have never stopped writing since.

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

As so many writers have said, a book often starts with a sort of nudge in the author's mind ("Write me. Write me!") and the topic may come as a real surprise. You start to write, and go in deeper and deeper. So it has to be about something that interests you enough to make it worth the effort.

But there are two remarks that really echo with me. The first is by Philip Larkin, who said, "Write the book that you yourself would most like to read, but nobody else has written for you." And Susan Sontag said, "I think that the most useful thing that I can do with my fiction is increase the sense of the complexity of things."

What I do believe is that if an author writes a book at a publisher's suggestion ("I'll tell you what's selling really well this year...."), it is likely to be the sort of churned out book that is easily forgotten.

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

As a children's writer, I most certainly do. I write for me age 5, me age 9, me age 11, etc. I try to bear in mind the intellectual and emotional level of the child, but also remember that childhood is very different now. (Children themselves, less so...)

I have written eight novels for adults. There, I simply write for myself as a reader. I follow Philip Larkin's advice, and hope that there are plenty of others out there who like the same sorts of books as I do.

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

No, I don't. I think electronic books can be enormously convenient. But I can't see them ever taking over.

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

I'm not a collector in the sense of caring which edition of a book I have, or looking after them properly. I leave them gathering dust, I read them in the bath, I turn the pages with chocolatey fingers. I even lend them out, though I keep tabs, and have absolutely no compunction about asking for them back after three weeks. (My assumption is, if someone hasn't read it by then, they can't be that keen, and I just get in touch and say someone else wants to borrow it.) And if I see copies of books I adore in charity shops, I'll often buy them just so lending one copy out doesn't make me anxious.

I do know that I find it very difficult indeed to weed out my books. Some come in and go out to a charity shop as soon as I've finished them. But those I like, I keep, knowing that my poor daughters will have to deal with them some day.