

## 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 a seven year old I went alone to the imposing building that is Rathmines Public Library in Dublin (parents of large families didn't have time to accompany their children on such ventures) requested an application card; took it to school and asked the teacher to sign it; back to the library, handed it in; and received my precious membership card. Then came the really scary part, I had to confront the thousands of books on the well-stocked shelves. Overwhelmed by the magnitude of it all I grabbed a book, had it stamped and ran for home. "What's the name of your library book?" my eldest brother asked. "*Jane the Debt-or-Mind-ed.*" "There's no such word." "There is so." "Gizz a look." "It's *Jane the Determined*, you dope." Things could only get better, and they did. My next visit yielded an author whose books would give me hours and hours of pleasure.**

**Posh kids nibble on chocolate and munch on crispy apples as they carry out their nocturnal investigations away from the inhibiting presence of adults. This scene is played out over and over in Enid Blyton's Secret Seven series and from the moment I first encountered it I was hooked. As a young child from a materially impoverished home I was transported to another world. The children who peopled the books had a freedom that I could only dream of *and* had endless supplies of goodies: along with the aforementioned chocolate and crispy apples they enjoyed doughnuts, ginger buns and biscuits. Yuuuuummm! When I had children of my own I couldn't wait to share the joys of Blyton with them. Although they read the Famous Five series they soon abandoned it on discovering the wonderful, rude inventiveness of Roald Dahl. In recent times Blyton's books were criticised for a variety of reasons. They were said to be sexist, racist and of poor literary quality - not something I noticed as a seven**

year old. Several commentators have now challenged this reading of the texts which continue to sell millions of copies each year.

On remembering my love of Blyton's books the first question that raised its niggling head was, how did an Irish seven year old from my background come to be in such thrall to the English middle-class milieu depicted by Blyton? After all I borrowed her books from Rathmines Public Library. Surely there were Irish writers of children's books I could have read? Probably not, I thought. But the niggles persisted. The helpful librarian whom I contacted in Dublin assured me that, yes, there were several Irish authors of children's books at that time – Eilis Dillon, Padraic Colum, Rosamund Jacob, Patricia Lynch, C.S. Lewis and more. Apart from C.S. Lewis I had never heard of any of them and he only came to my attention when I was searching for books for my own children (and, no, they didn't take to the Narnia books.) I have decided I must contact all those I know who lived in Dublin and who might have been reading children's book in the 1950s and find out which writers they favoured. Was I the only one reading Blyton? Was that because I lived on the South Side – a bastion of Englishness when the British ruled Ireland? Was I subconsciously, covertly a 'Jackeen'? (Jackeen is a derogatory term for Dubliners. It derived from the name given to the flag of the United Kingdom – Union Jack. 'Jack' was an English man: 'Jackeen' was his inferior, his lickspittle.) As my entire identity has now been called into question it is an investigation which must be commenced immediately. Delay is not an option.

Just look at what you've started!

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

In 1984, my university tutor, historian Dorothy Thompson, asked if I would like to contribute to, *Chartist*, a publication which explored the history and contemporary concerns of the working class. I was delighted to oblige and wrote articles and reviews. However, producing referenced, academic articles is time-consuming and, unfortunately, the demands of working as a lecturer in Further Education put paid to my writing career before it really took off. I was saddened by this as I had enjoyed the process of writing immensely.

Several years later, having experienced a particularly unpleasant encounter with a student I was left with a number of choices as to how I should respond. I could smack her in the gob: a risky and possibly impossible choice as she was 6 ft. tall to my 5ft. 1inches and, as we were standing in the middle of a corridor, clambering onto a chair to launch the attack was not an option. I could report her to the powers that be: an unpalatable choice for one who was brought up in a family where snitching was the worst of all sins. Or I could ignore the whole sorry affair. In the event, I decided to sleep on it, except, sleep eluded me. I tossed and turned until finally, I was forced out of bed, took a seat at my

typewriter and produced a short story based on the incident. The experience was cathartic and rewarding. Over the next few years I wrote a novel set in a college of further education. Though unpublished, the writing of it kept me sane during what proved to be a very difficult time in that educational sector. So thank you, young woman, wherever you are. Because of you I started writing again.

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

The basics haven't changed over the years. I still hope that, like my seven year old self, when I open the pages of a book I shall be transported to another world; that I will find something of myself in the characters and something of them in me. I want to be challenged, emotionally and intellectually and to learn something of the world. I want a writer who has insight, knowledge and compassion, one who can explore the frailties and strengths of her characters and deepen my understanding of the world in which we live. At this moment in time the writer who does it for me is Marilynne Robinson. Her style is poetic, clear, immediate, and she writes with a deep humanity that is intensely moving and enlightening. Edna O'Brien (for me, another exceptional writer) in a recent article wrote that the 'inundation' of language used by some modern writers, in an often vain attempt to explain the horror of the modern world, obfuscates rather than clarifies. Consequently, truth and the relationship between reader and author are diminished. There was a time when inundation of language appealed to her but now she favours a sparser, more direct style. I feel an empathy with O'Brien on this point. Perhaps, as we grow older, the essentials of our literary requirements do not change much but our preferences on how they are delivered to us does.

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

Beyond the fact that the readers will likely be adults I have no readership in mind. However, meeting the readers of your books is enlightening on this score. When writing my collection of short stories, *Gilded Shadows*, I became gradually aware that regardless of the settings and the characters, there was a very strong underlying theme of the need to belong. Whether within a family, a relationship, a community, a country, all the characters are searching for acceptance. When reading my stories to members of literary groups throughout the country those who were immigrants or strangers to the place were drawn very strongly to this element of the work. The same theme is present in my novel, *Niamh Takes Ulysses Home*, in my trio of short plays and other plays. My preoccupation with this theme, or at least my handling of it, probably stems from the fact that I am an immigrant. That said, I think that however depicted and explored, the need to belong is an innate and universal need.

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

To refer, once again, to Edna O'Brien's article, she ends on a note of uncertainty, wondering whether the very act of reading literature will have faded away in twenty or thirty years' time. It is, I think, a notion which unsettles many of us to the point that we choose not to give voice to it. Instead, we focus on whether e-books will replace paper books. And I will do the same because the idea of a world without literature cannot be countenanced. I was delighted to read the recent reports in the press claiming that the sale of e-books was declining and that the sale of paper books was recovering. However, almost immediately, other articles gave the lie to this claim, asserting that the statistics had been skewed. But another hopeful voice offered reassurance. In the Autumn Edition 2015 of *The Author*, (Journal of the Society of Authors) Douglas McCabe makes a persuasive case for the survival of local bookshops (and thus paper books) providing they offer what good bookshops always offered: committed, knowledgeable staff, reader events, launches, book clubs, etc. They need, he avers, to build services with which Amazon cannot compete. As books are the source, the starting point of so much of our culture, such as television drama and films, perhaps it is time for publishers to step up and subsidize bookshops. In France, the government provides millions of euros in grants to independent books shops – perhaps our government could do likewise. The ravings of a lunatic? Pie in the sky? Maybe. But it sounds good to me.

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

I collect books only in the sense that I cannot part with a book once it's in my possession. Consequently, as space on my shelves has diminished, I rarely buy books now. I have returned to first base – the public library. That said, I wouldn't say no to a signed copy of James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

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:

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