

Barefoot Books in Beautiful Bath: a conversation with Tessa Strickland

As Barefoot Books is a children's publisher that is well known for its emphasis on aesthetics, it seemed very appropriate to be meeting Tessa Strickland, the recently retired editor in chief in the tea room at the elegant and imposing Georgian building, The Holborne Museum in Bath.

I have always loved these distinctive books that celebrate the importance of art and story. I know that Tessa Strickland and Nancy Traversy who founded the independent publishing company share *The Letterpress Project's* commitment to promoting the value of beautiful printed books. As they explain on their website, both were committed to producing books that '*capture the imagination, spark curiosity and instil a respect for cultural, social and ecological diversity.*'

Tessa had initially contacted me some time ago to say how much she liked *The Letterpress Project* website and the principles behind it. So before even meeting her, I guessed that she would probably be a kindred spirit. As already mentioned, the charming ambience of venue was very appropriate and, although it was very busy, we managed to grab a comfortable spot overlooking the lovely gardens. We bonded further after making the same 'healthy' choice of lunch – an expensive spring green salad which was so fiddly that it was almost impossible to talk and eat at the same time as the rocket leaves, fresh peas and other bitty ingredients kept tumbling from our forks and mouths, despite attempting to be ladylike. The salad certainly looked exquisitely arranged, but there the satisfaction ended as it even tasted a bit bland and I got rather bored with mine after a few mouthfuls! This is far from the case with the books published by Barefoot, many of which I have bought and enjoyed very much over the last thirty years. Every single one of them looks gorgeous with a dramatic cover to entice and then continues from the first turn of the page as a triumph of design, marrying exquisite illustrations with carefully placed poetic text throughout. The compelling stories are carefully drawn from a wide range of different cultures from around the world. They are all densely packed little works of art that can be pored over and shared time and again by book lovers of all ages.

Despite the potential difficulties with civilised conversation, Tessa answered my many questions in great detail.

What makes Barefoot so special?

She explained that co-founding the publishing company in 1993 arose from a strong belief that even the youngest children deserve the very best in book production. Tessa believes that all children are born with good taste that is slowly eliminated if it is not encouraged and fostered. This positive view of childhood has its origins in the Romantic Movement whereby, in the famous words of Wordsworth:

*Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!*

As the mother of three small children, Tessa found that all too often, children's books were produced for maximum profit, with little regard for high quality illustration, language and production values. She also felt keenly that the multicultural dimension of contemporary culture was notable for its absence.

Barefoot Books was going to be different in every way. The children experiencing these books were going to be encouraged to immerse themselves in something beautiful that they would instinctively recognise. The strapline to the Barefoot logo is 'step inside a story' and this is what every book that they produce encourages children to do. The guarantee of a beautiful artefact is only part of the company trademark because the kind of fictional world that is represented is also significant in shaping children's perceptions of the real world. When I asked about the specialness of Barefoot Books, Tessa told me that her son Francis had perfectly captured the essence of what had driven her to keep producing high quality multi-cultural children's books when he gave an affectionate speech at her recent retirement party, and gave me permission to quote from this:

'Mum founded Barefoot to share stories from different cultures around the world, not in an attempt to explain away the differences between those cultures, or to pretend that we're all the same, but to celebrate the differences between cultures, to see them as something mysterious and attractive.

Rather than see humanity as some common denominator that can be arrived at by a process of subtraction, she saw it as one of multiplicity and uniqueness and that it was the intimate aspects of life that give us a shared humanity'.

Over the years, the company has grown to become an international movement and the founders are proud to be recognised as a successful grassroots organisation that values books that inspire creativity, adventure, imagination and compassion.

Can you tell me about any books that have influenced you and your philosophy?

Tessa graduated from Cambridge in 1980 in Classics which perhaps explains an enduring interest in the academic subject and after this, in the rather lovely words of

her son: *departed the dreamy meadows of Girton for the gritty bad lands of Penguin Publishers and Random House.*

Tessa's immediate response when I asked this question was to tell me how reading *The Uses of Enchantment* by Bruno Bettelheim was a pivotal experience. Through her own love of books and as a mother of three young children, she had already recognised the importance of fairy tales. This seminal book helped to make the connections with her developing interest in Jungian analysis, which continues to influence her current work as a psycho therapist. She remembered that apart from being an inspirational read, it also helped her to see a gap in the publishing market – one which would make the heritage of fairy tales, folklore and traditional stories from across the world come to life for adults as well as children. At this time in her life, she was involved with the English publication of *Women who run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype* by the American Jungian analyst, Clarissa Pinkola Estes, a book that also proved to be very influential and confirmed her convictions about the deep power of stories.

She loves reading poetry and confessed that she always carries a poetry book in her handbag. She has many favourites including T.S. Eliot, Mary Dorcey, Frances Williams, Kim Moore, Michael Longley, Mary Oliver, Alice Oswald, Louis MacNeice and George Mackay Brown – far too many to mention, but all ones that she would return to time and again. Her love of poetry has influenced her choices about commissioning books for children because of the strong and important relationship between music and language. One of my favourites is *The Barefoot Book of Classic Poems* compiled and illustrated by Jackie Morris. This sumptuous anthology has an introduction written by Carol Ann Duffy that commends the breadth and beauty of the collection *'that reflects every facet of life with a thoughtful blend of humour and playfulness, poignancy and nostalgia.'* Tessa went on to explain that Jackie Morris was a close friend of hers and one of her fellow early advocates for the importance of beautiful books. She is now an illustrator with a well deserved reputation but in the past she has had to battle to convince publishers that children deserve the best in design and production. Tessa has also commissioned many picture books for younger children with strong familiar rhymes at the centre, including songs like *The wheels on the bus go round and round* .

She told me that she is always impressed with what she termed as *the shape of stories*, for example the picture book classic *Harry the Dirty Dog* by Gene Zion, illustrated by Margaret Bloy Graham is one that she admires. She described it as an example of one that was complex and multi layered despite appearing to be simple using economy of language, but never simplistic which is the key to a story that works well.

She rates plenty of contemporary picture books and particularly noted that Andrea Beaty and David Roberts are a fabulous double-act (I agree). She also admires the delicate illustrations in Satoshi Kitamura's books, and Chris Haughton's *'Shhh! We have a plan!'* She enthused about a beautiful picture book by the American author and illustrator Claire A. Nivola, *'Orani : My Father's Village'*. Born in 1911, her father grew up in a small village in Sardinia and this story describes in exquisite detail about the age-old rituals and customs of the villagers, all of them now much changed. Tessa explained that it is a beautifully crafted tribute to a traditional way of life. Another new picture book by Rod Biddulph, *Odd Dog Out* was described as being witty and delightful. I think that these few choices show her to be pleasingly eclectic in her tastes because the range of different illustrative styles in these few examples are all wonderful in very different ways. We agreed that children deserve to have a wide and varied diet of picture books if they are going to develop their own aesthetic preferences. Like me, she also devours fiction aimed at older readers and after some thinking chose *Tales of the Otori* by Lian Hearn, a series set in a fictional world based in Japan as a current favourite.

It was perhaps unfair of me to ask her about citing so many books as potential influences but it is always so interesting to find out what other people read. For instance, she is a huge fan of novels by Marilynne Robinson for their spiritual depth and for the beauty of the language and *The Shardlake Mysteries* by C.J. Sansome for the unputdownable action, the historical accuracy and the way they make you feel you are at Shardlake's side in the melee of life in Henry VIII's England. She also loves anything by Ahdaf Soueif; Irene Nemirovski and Jon MacGregor, especially *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things*.

I think that it can be safely said that she is an avid reader as she also enjoys plenty of non-fiction mentioning the work of Annie Dillard (especially *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*); Pema Chodron for her ability to relate the insights of Tibetan Buddhism to the everyday dilemmas of everyday contemporary life; Cees Nooteboom for his travel writing and the way it evokes the history of Europe; Iain MacGilchrist for *The Master and his Emissary*— a magnum opus about the interdependency of the left and right hemispheres of the brain and the social, cultural and psychology; Robert MacFarlane for his soaringly lovely prose about the landscapes of the British Isles, and Helen MacDonald's *H is for Hawk* as examples.

Do you have a precious book that you couldn't bear to be without?

When I asked this question, I could see that she was really torn, so she asked to be given some more time to think about it. A few days later, she sent me this e mail:

'I think the book I would take with me is The House above the Trees by Ethel Cook Elliot. This book was published before the First World War. It was given to me by my great aunt when I was about 8 years old. It tells the story of an orphan with the almost unbelievable name of Hepatica. Hepatica can't bear the family she has to live with so she goes into the forest, where she makes friends with Cloud, a wind sprite.'

Cloud teaches her to fly and introduces her to Tree Mother. When Tree Mother has to go away for a while, she leaves Cloud and Hepatica in charge of the forest, and no sooner has she gone than the forest witch steals the littlest of the forest babies and they have to rescue her. I adored this book as a child and re-read it countless times. I still take it down from its shelf from time to time. I haven't been able to find out anything about Ethel Cook Elliot; a small paperback edition of the book is in circulation in North America but I don't think it's available here'.

How do you select authors and illustrators?

Quoting again from her son's speech:

'She has brought together artists and writers from across the globe, but often drawn from the UK. Jackie Morris, Niamh Sharkey, Debbie Harter to name a few. In bringing them together mum helped weave a narrative and a company with a distinctive ethos and a distinctive style'.

She has developed so many creative partnerships with authors and illustrators over the years that it was difficult for her to untangle how some of these had started. Then after some reflection, she explained that the impetus for many of successful Barefoot Books had originated with spoken word storytellers because they had such a fund of traditional tales to draw upon. She gave the example of *The Story Tree* by Hugh Lupton which uses seven iconic pitch perfect tales.

What do you think about the future of children's books?

This question caused a look of momentary consternation as she sighed and talked about how the development of technology worried her. Although confident in the wonderful array of physical children's books that are now being produced by many publishers, she couldn't help but notice how many very small children, and the adults with them were constantly looking at screens. We discussed how schools needed to find better ways to tell parents about the importance of physical books and to encourage them to spend time enjoying books with their children.

Which Barefoot book would you like everyone to know about?

Tessa reflected that her most successful books have been ones that fuse the words, pictures and stories in a way that can't be disaggregated, 'the art is to conceal the art'. She found it very difficult to choose a favourite and again referred me to her son's speech in which he talked about *The Mountains of Tibet*:

'It follows a small Tibetan boy who likes to fly kites. It follows his life, marriage, old age and eventually death, at which point there is an illustration of a terrified old man floating in the middle of a universe of sparkling galaxies. This moment represents a conversation with God in which the boy has to decide whether he would like to

return to lead another life or not. He does, and he is given the whole universe to choose from. Of course, in rather nice narrative circularity, he is particularly drawn to a specific galaxy that catches his eye and a specific solar system and a particular planet and particular people that happens to be the very same that he just left. But this time, touchingly, he decides to be reincarnated as a girl. I think it is the illustration of the man swimming in the middle of the universe that impressed me most as a child. It's a sort of reminder that you can only ever make your own way in the world'.

She was however tremendously proud of her latest publication *The Barefoot Book of Children* written by Tessa Strickland and Kate DePalma, illustrated by David Deane. She described it as being impressively imaginative with lots of variety in layout. When she reached into her bag and pulled a splendid new signed copy for me to review, I had a big smile on my face. Having spent some time looking at it since, I can see that it is as innovative, life affirming, beautifully designed and carefully crafted as ever. The authors' note towards the end says it all: '*One world, many children. One world, many stories. What's yours?*'

It was a great privilege to spend time in conversation with such a like- minded book lover. I am full of admiration for what Tessa has achieved in terms of forging a brand of picture book that shines out amidst all the other competition. The underlying principles must have been difficult to stick with at times but they never wavered. Let us hope that there will be lots more beautiful books to be published by Barefoot in the future building on the foundations of a splendidly successful partnership. I am pleased to learn that the now retired Tessa continues her work as a psychotherapist but also works as an advisory specialist with Scholastic Publishers and, as part of this role, teaches creative writing at The Golden Egg Academy. It is good to know that her special expertise will continue to be influential in the world of children's books. We celebrated this rosy future together by sharing a piece of delicious almond and orange cake as a small reward for ploughing our way through the disappointing salad.

Karen Argent

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