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?

I loved books as a child, but I was a very slow learner, and couldn't read till I was eight. I think that made it more precious: I was mesmerised by the idea of reading, of cracking the code as it were, and used to sit around stroking books, dreaming of being able to read them. I learnt to read almost musically before I did so mechanically: I loved Seuss's famous *Green Eggs and Ham* and learnt it off by heart, understanding it as music and poetry, whilst following the actual words with my fingers. Seuss is all about sound, lyricism, rhythm. This is why I think there is a musicality about reading and writing: we understand text on a musical level as well as on a literal or mechanical level. This is also why you can't really "teach" someone to read – or at least you can only teach them the mechanics – because it's such a mysterious, strange, multi-faceted experience. I'm not a mystical person particularly, but I do find something strange, weird, poetic, musical, mystical in reading. We lose this sense as we grow up and have to read forms, newspapers, contracts; but children understand it entirely. This is also connected to my belief that all good writing is poetry: the "music" of poetry isn't a "genre", it's everywhere, in all writing. One of the greatest poets of the nineteenth century was actually Dickens: works like *Dombey and Son* are works of music and poetry, as well as prose fiction. And again, this musicality and poetry represents the slightly mystical or mysterious aspect of reading; this is why children love stories with fantasy or magical elements to them – because the very experience of reading is new, weird, mysterious, magical. That's certainly how I experienced it: my first great love was C.S. Lewis's *Narnia* books, where the "fantasy" of reading is, in a sense, mirrored by the fantasy on the surface (i.e. in the subject matter).

Q2. What inspired you to become an author?

I think reading is democratic, a participation sport (for want of a better term), whereby the reader engages with the text (and, in a displaced way, the author) in the making of a world.

Authorship is just another version of that, another step on from reading. So I loved reading as a child, and I saw writing as an extension of that (which is why, probably, I still write critically and interpretively as well as "creatively"). Writing is just an extension, that is, of the participation involved in reading – or so it seems to me. This is why I'm always deeply suspicious of people who say "Oh, there are too many writers in the world." How can there be too many writers? Shelley dreamt of a world of poets (as opposed to corrupt politicians, bankers, stockbrokers, tyrants, murderers ...). Writing and reading are both participation sports, and everyone can be involved at different levels.

Q3. For you, what makes a successful book ?

I think all books – all good books – should have two things: a musicality in their style or subject matter (as I mentioned above), and an imperative behind them. Maybe, at some level, these two things can be the same. As regards an "imperative," I think there needs to be a *raison d'être* somewhere in the background, even if it is hidden, abstract, almost unconscious. There are lots of different imperatives: clearly Primo Levi's memoirs (such as *If this is a Man*) have a very obvious imperative about them, while with some lyric poetry, the imperative is more hidden. But it's still there, lurking, half-conscious. It might be inherent in the subject matter, research, style, characterisation, subtext, context, politics, history, emotions – it might be something extrinsic to the work, or, indeed, something in the work itself. Even the Aesthetic movement's motto "Art for Art's Sake" implies an imperative within the work itself.

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

I think all my books have slightly different audiences, which overlap – but clearly, given that I write in different forms (non-fiction, fiction, poetry), these forms imply slightly different readerships. I don't really have a specific audience in mind – above and beyond some obvious aspects of this (for example, my memoir is partly about Parkinson's disease, dementia and care, so clearly implied a readership interested in these things). But I am aware that I often deal with difficult subjects, such as death, loss, memory, illness – so I don't write what might be termed "fluffy" or "escapist" fiction (though I think there's all sorts of things to say in favour of "escapism," given the state of the world). Understandably, there's a lot of escapism and compulsory optimism around in our society, and I think it's important for some writers also to deal with the darker and more distressing aspects of life – to stare, as it were, the gorgon of reality in the face. There's a place for escapism, for optimism, of course; but there must, in any society, also be a place for realism and for acknowledging and trying to understand the elements of life which don't fit into a positivist outlook. Without acknowledging trauma, it might just drive us mad. That's not to say that what I write is all dark and gloomy: I actually don't really like monotonal "serious" books. I want people like Dickens and Shakespeare from my reading, who knew how to mingle seriousness and comedy, tears and laughter, horror and beauty.

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

I think most book lovers still have huge physical book collections, and there will always be a place for physical books. Electronic books can co-exist with physical books, and will continue to do so. This is the myth of technology and progress: that one form of technology replaces another, supersedes another. Now and then this happens; but for the most part, forms of technology overlap, negotiate with one another, modify one another. So the electronic book has had a big effect on physical books, in that the latter have become more beautiful, more "physical," since the advent of e-books – as publishers have recognised that the product itself must be worth owning. In the end, as long as people are reading, how they do it is of secondary importance: the enemy is by no means e-books; rather, it is texting, social networking, the media, political rhetoric, the endless drivel of modern society, in which language is reduced to mere vacuous and unmusical instrumentality.

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

Of course. I own thousands of books – our house is full of them. It's my hobby, my love, my vocation and, as a lecturer in literature and Creative Writing, my job as well. I love books of all genres and forms. I sometimes wonder if the most overlooked genre is non-fiction, and some of my most prized books are works of non-fiction (memoir, history, etc.). For example, I love the personal essay form, and think it's hugely underrated. The word "essay," for various modern, political reasons, strikes fear and horror into most people's hearts, because of its association with a faux-objective, faux-academic style of writing. But the real heritage, the real tradition of essay writing is the personal essay, going back to Montaigne (and arguably beyond). The personal essay is not academic, but opinionated, subjective, emotional, an entertaining form of memoir. I love lots of non-fictional essayists – and particularly some of the nineteenth-century essayists, like Charles Lamb, Thomas De Quincey and Thomas Carlyle. I once saw a complete edition of De Quincey's works in a wonderful higgledy-piggledy bookshop in Shropshire. I didn't buy it at the time, and have regretted it ever since. Everyone has – or should have – their reading holy grails.

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:

Karen Argent

Project Director **Karen.argent@btinternet.com**