



## The Letterpress Project

### Author and Illustrator E-Interviews

# An interview with Jim Kay

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

The earliest books I remember were Ant and Bee stories by Angela Banner, and Richard Scarry's brightly coloured volumes. Scarry's books in particular I found fascinating as they demystified the adult world of work and busy towns and cities. They demonstrated with clarity and humour how things work, what they are called, who uses them; everyday objects like post boxes and fire engines. I found it fascinating, and I think that was the gateway for the enormous illustrated encyclopedias of dinosaurs and natural history that began to fill my shelves from a young age. I always saw illustrations as visual explanations back then, and would pour over cross-sections of buildings, robots and planets for hours.

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

It was a choice between studying ecology or studying art. Spending two years intensively drawing with other art students sounded wonderful, and so I enrolled on a General Art and Design course in Nottinghamshire, followed by an Illustration degree in London. I still don't really feel like an illustrator, particularly as I took a break of ten years from drawing while I worked in Libraries and Museums after graduating. It was a fascinating period, because working at The Tate I had first hand contact with the correspondence and artworks of artists I idolized, and at The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, I could indulge my fondness for natural history. It was an agonizing decision leaving those jobs to try my hand as a self-employed illustrator, and it took ten very difficult years to really make any progress in that field, but I felt I had to at least try. I didn't want to look back in years to come with

a sense of regret that I hadn't at least attempted it.

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

It's difficult to know what works with your own illustrations, but it's easier to see in other people's books. Illustrators are never happy with their own work, I think because there are so many ways of approaching the same text, so many options to explore. But when I see books that I believe are the perfect marriage of text and illustration (like Alexis Deacon's work) it should look effortless. You mustn't detract from the text, rather give credence to the author's world by adding to its scope; give depth and atmosphere. Emotionally you can help submerge the reader in the story, and create tension, in the same way a music score does through a film.

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

When I started working on Harry Potter I barely slept for the first year worrying about what people would want or expect, but the stress of it almost gave me a breakdown. You simply cannot work like that, because second guessing pulls you away from what is important, and that is your emotional, and very personal, response to the text. You have to then try and do the best you can to please yourself (almost impossible for illustrators, as I mentioned before), and secondly try and do your best by the author. I think if you really care about what you do, if you try hard to do the author's words justice, then that's the best starting point. If other people like it, then of course it's a bonus. I think it shows when you try and please everyone, it loses something - believability perhaps.

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

As far as I understand it, the electronic book sales have plateaued, meaning everybody who is going to use those methods of reading, have chosen to do so. I think digital books have been incredible at reaching new audiences, and the convenience of holding hundreds of titles on a remote device is obvious. What is surprising, however, has been the response to high-end production physical books. There still seems to be a great demand for books that are well made, and have a pleasingly tactile quality to them. Readers may not realise the amount of trouble that publishers go to with regards to the physical appearance and tactile quality of their books. It's reassuring to see many beautifully designed books still using foils, varnishes, embossing, unusual papers and interesting fonts. Publishers such as Flying Eye really understand the impact of a well designed book, which is great for

both book shops and libraries alike. For children in particular, I want book shops and libraries to continue being absorbing and inspiring places to be - you just don't get that 'walk in' experience with digital books. So particularly for the younger reader, the physical book is alive and well. The dichotomy is that such beautifully crafted books have a higher environmental impact in terms of their production, which publishers also have to consider, but I like to think that such publications will remain on book shelves through several generations, because they feel special, and because good design is timeless.

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

I'm currently at 'peak book' having no more room to store anything printed, but I'd certainly try and make room for Robert Hooke's first edition of *Micrographia*, published in 1665 - a real game-changer in terms of scientific illustration. I have been lucky enough to work in some amazing libraries (the smell of parchment, leather and paper is something you never forget), and there are so many books I'd love to possess, particularly early scientific publications; anatomy, botany (some of the early books on ferns were beautiful). The Enlightenment was a wonderful time for book collectors, to own those hand-printed, hand-coloured books would be a dream come true.