



The Letterpress Project

Author and Illustrator E-Interviews

An Interview With Julian Sedgwick

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

My earliest reading memory (I think) is of my mother reading *Swallows and Amazons* to me. Arthur Ransome was an inspiration for many years after that - and a little bit of his *Missee Lee* probably crept its way into my recent *Ghosts of Shanghai* trilogy! I also remember a rather scary illustrated book about jungles that fascinated me as much as it un-nerved me, and a home made book drawn by my much older half-sister, re-telling a story that my dad used to tell about tractors on a farm. Another early favourite was Ezra Jack Keats' beautiful *The Snowy Day*: the images of a life and environment (snowy New York City) very different from my own captured my young attention. (Publishers note: many kids *like* difference, it does not put them off!)

After all that it was probably *The Hobbit*. And then aged around 11 or 12 I started to devour non-fiction books about the Far East, such as *Seven Years in Tibet* and anthologies about Zen Buddhism. A weird kid. As well as that a lot of comics and cartoons, from Charlie Brown to 2000AD... all of those influences have made their way into my own books in one form or another. And Dad's limited edition facsimile of Blake's *Jerusalem* presided over our childhood rather like a family Bible. When as children we glimpsed the gorgeous pages inside the big blue/grey box that contained them I remember being thrilled.

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

It's hard to say for sure. I used to think it was a form of escapism: I was having a difficult time at school (very traumatic in fact) and reading about far away places helped me cope. The ability to create and control my own worlds obviously appealed, but I believe now that it was more genetic than that. My father was a born storyteller - after WW2 he would

organise storytelling evenings in his arts centre when he would spin a tale on the spot. And my brother is a writer, of course. So maybe it's simply in the blood.

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

I suppose beyond immediate beauty or entertainment or thrill, I really want a creative work to show me a new angle on the world, to make me think, to provoke a response. And really - as a reader or viewer - I want to have to do some of the work myself and not just be passive in that experience. I rather like the Reithian BBC principles: inform, educate and entertain. A book should open up new worlds or thoughts and not just confirm what we bring to them.

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

I think it's quite dangerous to be too conscious of writing for a particular audience - and certainly not a good idea to be trying too hard to please a certain group. Probably I am always writing for my younger self - spinning the stories that I know my 11 - 16 yr old self would have love to have consumed, and that would have helped him to come up with some slightly better coping strategies than the ones younger Julian devised. If I was to broaden that I suspect I am writing for the misfits, loners, outsiders - and anyone struggling a bit with the transition from childhood to adulthood.

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

I firmly believe the physical book has a very solid future. Looking at music and seeing the resurgence of vinyl shows that there is an appetite for the physical in this ever more digital world. eBook sales - particularly for children and young adults - seem to have plateaued. Whilst the eBook has its place, the sheer versatility and utility of a printed book still wins out for me - and excitingly there is a push to make physical books more beautiful, well crafted and appealing as objects. If we take care of that process, the physical book will be with us a long time yet.

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

Probably more of a hoarder than a collector. Twelve years a bookseller didn't help, and the overflow still lurks under the stairs and in the attic! I have a wall of art books that I refer to all the time, and collect editions of certain favourite books. At the moment I am taking care of that facsimile of Jerusalem.

I'd love to have an early edition of Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*, and there are some Japanese classics of photography that would be good to tuck away on the art shelves. Going to look for them soon in Tokyo...