



The Letterpress Project

Author and Illustrator E-Interviews

An Interview With Lavie Tidhar

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

I remember my mum's copies of *Lord of the Rings* and reading the cover blurb about hobbits and not being sure if hobbits were real or not, you know? I mean, the cover didn't say "This is all made up"! And I didn't know... I mean there could have been hobbits, right?

One of my favourite childhood books I still own, actually. It's called *The Wonderful Pumpkin*, by Lennart Hellsing, illustrated by Svend Otto. It's about these two bears who discover a seed that grows into a giant pumpkin, and they end up travelling the world inside it. I think it's one of those books that inspired me to go travelling when I grew up, so I could have adventures too. I never quite found a giant pumpkin to ride in but I did ride the trains across Africa and the Trans-Siberian route, went around in small planes and outboard motor boats in the South Pacific and rode camels through the Gobi Desert, so I feel very strongly that books really *do* shape young minds!

Q2. What inspired you to become an author?

Probably just a life ill-spent in the library! It always struck me as the coolest thing you could do. I remember trying to write when I was young and doing a paragraph and then, you know, not really being sure what's supposed to come after *that!* Then I got into poetry for a while, which is still a huge influence on my writing, went travelling for a few years, you know, then one day kind of made the decision to sit down and write properly, and never really stopped!

Q3. For you, what makes a successful book?

I think a book's successful if it does what I hoped it would do. If I managed to satisfy myself that it did what I wanted then I'm happy. I try to only work on books that mean something beyond the story, that have – to me, at least! – a wider relevance, something to *say*. So I never think in terms of, you know, "Will this sell?". That seems to me something you can't control anyway. So I've been very happy with my last few books, that they satisfy my own expectations of what I wanted to achieve with them. Everything that comes after that – awards, reviews, foreign sales, TV deals or what have you – is just a bonus.

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

Not really. The problem is the books I write are pretty idiosyncratic – I've even (honestly!) seen them referred to now as "Tidharian", which is weird but also wonderful. So I am usually aware that I'm not exactly writing to fit a certain mould, and I might as well just write what I love, for myself, before worrying if anyone else would like it. It does make it difficult in today's market, with its strict categorisation of everything, but you know, it seems to have been working for me so far? So I think I'll stick with it!

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 for children's books, for sure, print is tremendously important. You can't really replicate the experience of reading to/with children on a digital device. For adult books, well, clearly the e-book *has* changed things a lot. I much prefer having a Kindle these days, or even reading on my phone, which I do quite a lot. I still buy research books only in print though. I think really what we're seeing is the paperback declining because the e-book serves the same function – a quick, cheap read. So I think it's actually an exciting opportunity to think of print books as much more than just the content, but it's the physical object itself as an objet d'art, the design and binding and everything else. It's an opportunity to treat the physical book as something worthy and long-living, something to be proud to have on the shelf. So I don't see print books disappearing any time soon! But I do see the mass-market version of them very much declining in the long-term.

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

I am! Less so now maybe than I used to – once I started publishing books they start piling up on the bookshelves and take up too much space... I was lucky enough that many of my adult novels came out in collectors limited editions, mostly from the British PS Publishing, so I do have some gorgeous editions of my own books – the limited of *Central Station*, in particular, is really gorgeous (100 signed in slipcase)...

My collection is a bit eclectic. One of the most remarkable books I own is a chapbook about the "Titanic Omar" – the priceless hand-bound copy of the *Rubaiyat* that went down with the *Titanic*. The second copy was destroyed in the Blitz(!), and the grandson of the original binders finally finished a third copy after he retired. To commemorate it he released a letterpress chapbook with gold tooling on the cover that tells the story. I think my copy belonged to Princess Alexandra. It's limited to 110 copies if I remember right! The third *Rubaiyat* itself is now in the King's Library I think.

There are too many books I'd love to own (even as I try and fail to renounce material things!) – the one I'd really love is a first edition of *To Kill A Mockingbird*. I have a UK first I found years ago, missing a dust jacket. I'd love to have the dust jacket for it! But it's still a nice thing to have. I'd also love a signed Philip K. Dick. I have a lot of signed books or books inscribed to me, which is nice – I used to have a large Terry Pratchett collection, including some of the early (rare) first editions, but I had to let some of them go (though I still have more than a few of his!).

Probably the nicest thing I own though is a copy of my own book. I won a literary prize a while back (The Jerwood Fiction Uncovered Prize), and instead of a trophy they gave you, well, a cheque, which was nice(!), but also, which was even nicer, a hand-bound copy of your own book. So I have a single copy of *A Man Lies Dreaming* hand-bound, and it's nicer than any trophy! And it's of course a limited edition of one... I think I'll keep that one!