



The Letterpress Project

Author and Illustrator E-Interviews

An interview with Michael Heath

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

I read extensively as a child - in fact I still have the copy of 'Winnie the Pooh' that was given to me on my fifth birthday – and I covered all the usual children's stories. I read all the Blyton 'famous five' and the classics such as 'Robinson Crusoe' and 'Children Of The New Forest' and soon moved on to Dickens. I remember reading both 'David Copperfield' and 'Oliver Twist' and being totally engrossed – and I would never have believed it possible that 40 years later I would play Mr. Sowerberry in Polanski's feature film of the book. Dickens remains one of my favourite authors. His has an extraordinary ability to create characters that, although frequently larger than life and verging towards caricature, are always totally believable and engaging.

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

I became an author 'by accident'. Having been an actor for many years, I wrote my first screenplay and, by a somewhat circuitous route, it was eventually optioned by an American producer. In the event, as these things so often do, the film production never came to fruition, but the feedback on the story was extremely good and it was suggested to me that it would make a good novel. I had always toyed with the idea of writing a novel- although unsure I had the necessary talent – but this prompting from other people caused me to give it a try. The result was 'The Albion Conspiracy'. The book was well liked and reasonably successful and I was asked for a second novel. That's how it all started. I now have six published novels and another that I have just finished that is due for release next year.

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

I frequently give lectures and talks about writing and being an author and this question often arises during the Q&A. I won't go into too much detail here because space does not permit but the key element is how you define 'successful'. If you measure success merely in terms of popularity (or sales) then some of the greatest writers would be firmly in the 'not so successful' bracket. I often ask students to consider what would have happened if Jane Austen's first manuscript had not been published. Would it have been any less successful as a piece of work – as art – if it had remained in the drawer and not become a world-wide classic? It was actually published with the author listed as 'A Lady' – because it was considered socially unacceptable for a woman to write commercially – and it was not until later, after much success, that the name Jane Austen was revealed. Yet had that first book not sold well, the name would never have been revealed and the manuscripts that followed never published. So one must firmly differentiate between "success" as defined by sales and popularity and "success" as piece of work or art. For me, the definition relates solely to whether or not the novel 'touches' the reader. If a reader is moved – whether it be to laughter or tears or merely to be entertained and thrilled – then the book is a success. If a book causes a reader to think and reconsider his/her views of the subject matter then the book is a success. I would never deny that all authors need sales of their work – and the higher the better – because earning a living as a writer is extremely tough and far harder than people realise – and if a writer identifies a market and continually caters to it then why not? But sales in themselves define 'commercial' success and do not equate with artistic success. To illustrate what I mean, I will quote one example from my own experience. I have on occasion received mail from readers who have told me they read a novel of mine in one sitting – straight through without a break – because they couldn't put it down and needed to keep turning the page. That, for me, is a huge success. It has nothing to do with the sales figures for that novel but everything to do with what I set out to achieve. For me, that is what makes a successful book.

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

I think most authors will tell you that they write for themselves. If you think about it, they cannot avoid doing so. All writing is subjective because it comes out of one's experience. Even when dealing with controversial issues and trying to be even handed, one writes from one's inner view point. My novel 'Legacy' is a thriller but, in essence, deals with the problems of PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder) in those who have been through the horrors of war. I know some writers believe that all writing should be political - and that is a valid viewpoint – but I don't agree. I see it as my task to cause the reader to think – not tell them what to think. So, in the case of 'Legacy', I constructed a thriller with a plot that twists and turns and, hopefully, engages and entertains the reader to the final page and I wrapped the issue of PTSD within the story so that its horrors might be understood and appreciated – but I was not preaching to a specific audience or trying to reach a particular group of readers. I was writing a novel to entertain that hopefully also made its points. So, as with all stories, I was writing what I myself enjoy reading – and I think all authors do that.

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

It's an interesting issue. Certainly the introduction of the electronic book has turned the publishing world somewhat on its head – but, as with all technological advances, the publishing world will adapt and adopt and continue. I don't think the physical book will ever be totally replaced – and I believe I am right in saying that the latest statistics show physical sales are still healthy and progressing alongside e-book sales and not being replaced by them. A physical book has a personality. It has a smell and a feel. It holds a tactile experience and, above all, it has an intimacy with the reader. As I mentioned at the beginning, I still have the copy of 'Winnie the Pooh' that was given to me on my fifth birthday. To hold it and look at it is an evocative experience, full of memories and feelings, and one will never feel that way about an e-book file sitting within an electronic reader – so no, I don't believe the physical book will disappear.

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

I do hold a fairly extensive collection of books – and it would be marvellous to have a big enough house to incorporate a large library! – but space does not permit owning as many books as one might wish. As for something special that I'd like to own, I would love to have an original Dickens manuscript. To be able to see and read those magical words in their original hand-written form would be quite something.