



**The Letterpress Project**

**Author and Illustrator E-Interviews**

# **An Interview with Maudie Smith**

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

My father read a lot to me when I was little and I loved listening to him read the rhyming stories of Dr Seuss. The Cat in the Hat was a slightly scary character for me and I was fascinated by that pink ring he left in the bath - the one that grew! Horton Hatches the Egg was a huge favourite for us both and we were very fond of Horton the very faithful elephant. I reckon those Dr Seuss stories are hard-wired into my head and have exerted their influence on my own stories.

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

Simply, all the books I read when I was a child. I read in the most concentrated way when I was young. I think children are a bit like sponges, and stories and the language of stories can soak right into them.

I didn't start out writing in a formal way. My first career was as an actor and much of my time was spent devising plays through improvisation, or adapting well known books for the stage - all good training for a becoming a writer - but the desire to write my own children's book was always parked at the back of my mind. Later I read heaps of books to my two daughters and it was when they were about 9 and 7 and I was thinking about what type of story might suit them next, that I came up with the character of Opal Moonbaby, who was the subject of my first published book.

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

I think for me it's all about the characters. Whether it's a picture book or a novel, you want a central character you can relate to and root for. And that usually means they need to be quite flawed and make a few mistakes along the way. It's not just the hero either. The other characters all need to be understandable too, even the baddies – maybe especially the baddies! We need to know exactly where they're coming from.

I don't illustrate my books, but when publishers send me suggestions for illustrators for my stories I find myself gravitating towards the ones who produce the most convincing facial expressions. That's about character too. You're looking for style but you need believability.

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

I don't generally set out with a firm intention to write a picture book, an early chapter book or a middle grade novel. The first thing that comes is the spark of an idea for a character or maybe a setting. It might be very slight at first, perhaps coming from a photograph or a snippet of conversation overheard on the bus. Once I've played around with an idea for a little while, the likely age group fit tends to become clear quite quickly.

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

I hope not. I think we've already seen a surge back to paper books, haven't we? In terms of children's books I think it would be a very sad and retrograde step if we were to lose them as actual objects. The physical book is a very valuable tool - for me it was a vital part of parenting. It's something you can snuggle up with and share. For a small child, poring over a book with an adult or an older sibling is often the most focused and enjoyable for both participants! It's the top 'quality time' of the day.

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

I don't know about collector, but I am a bit of a hoarder. Our shelves all have double rows of books which makes finding anything pretty difficult. The good thing about that is that you come across all sorts of interesting things while you're searching.

The book I'm most proud to own is a set of Imperial Shakespeare from the 1870s that my grandpa bought at a sale for a shilling and gave to me because I was so interested in drama and plays. The books are huge and heavy, red and gold with fabulous engravings on steel. At university – when I was doing my drama degree - we were told to make sure we brought a complete works of Shakespeare in to lectures. I was very tempted to turn up towing them all behind me in a wheelie bag!