



The Letterpress Project

Author and Illustrator E-Interviews

# An Interview With Nicky Singer

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

The first book I remember reading was *Ant and Bee*. I read it (actually, I rather think I declaimed it...) to my father as he lay tinkering beneath a car one day when I was about four. He was much more interested in the car. But I didn't mind. I loved that book. I'm still pretty much word perfect on it now. As for being read to – we had giant copies of *Babar the Elephant*, with sublime pictures. And *Struwwelpeter* – which was TERRIFYING. I also had an incredibly well-loved edition of *Little Black Sambo*. And yes, it was called that then. For me, that little boy was an absolute hero, outwitting the horrible tigers and coming home to mountains of pancakes. Despite all the racial controversy around the book, I think it had a positive influence on me. It certainly influenced the hierarchy I imposed on my dolls – where I chose my black doll to be the 'chief' (over four whites...). Later on, I came to love Enid Blyton, who it is also fashionable to sneer at now. But her storytelling rocks. I learnt everything I know about pace from her. And then of course there was Narnia and Billy Bunter (yes, Billy Bunter!). Writing this makes me feel enormously old and old-fashioned – but there were so many fewer books for young people then. One went straight from Billy Bunter to adult books. I graduated (aged about 12) to Dickens and the Brontes. The one I loved most – and still love - is *Wuthering Heights*. Eat your heart out Twilight guy, Heathcliff will always be the sexiest man in British literature.

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

I think writers are born but also made. So, you probably have to have a natural inclination (I remember winning my first bar of chocolate for a story I wrote about a giraffe when I was about six) but many of us who choose to spend a life in writing have also had a traumatic 'trigger' event in our lives. For me, it was the sudden death of my father when I was

fourteen. Everything I had previously taken for granted (eg that I was safe, that our family was happy, that people I loved would live) was pulled like a rug from under me. Writing is a form of control. You can't always make Disney happy endings for your characters but you can pit them against the odds and watch them survive. You can tell them – and yourself – that things will be Ok, that you'll be OK.

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

For me, it's all about two things – emotion and truth. Does this story/character move me? Do I care about what happens to him/her? And do I believe, not just the story, but the intention of the writer? Is that writer telling me the truth as they understand it – or are they just jiggling to someone else's tune?

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

No, never. That way madness lies. I tell the story in the way the story needs to be told – without concessions... It's got me in some trouble over the years but I believe young people are a lot smarter than the gate-keepers give them credit for.

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

If it does, I hope to be dead by then. But actually no – I think there is something really visceral about the physical properties of a book, its look and feel and smell. I can't ever imagine loving an electronic book the way I love my battered paper library.

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

All my books are special!! But they are special not because they would be special to anyone else (eg a signed first edition) but because they are my friends and companions. I know exactly where they sit on my shelves. I know that the quote I'm looking for is in this book on that shelf, approx half-way through the text on a right-hand page about five lines down... And because my books are my personal friends I also do something that people find despicable – I write in them. Yes – I scribble all over my books, put my thoughts in, have a conversation. Thus all my books will all have to be burnt on my death. Perhaps they could be my pyre.