



The Letterpress Project

Author and Illustrator E-Interviews

An Interview With Oisin McGann

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

We always had books in the house and were read to almost from birth, so I can't remember a time without them. Growing up, we had over a thousand books on the shelves in our sitting-room, mostly non-fiction and academic texts. But we had plenty of children's stuff too. Books that stand out in my memory would include Dr Seuss's *There's a Wocket in My Pocket*, Beatrix Potter's books, *Each Peach Pear Plum* by Allan and Janet Ahlberg, and particularly Richard Scarry's books. My mum can probably still recite *There's a Wocket in My Pocket* by heart now, she read it to us so often. The desire to be an illustrator probably came over me sometime around starting school, when I realised that *actual human beings* made the pictures in these books. I'm not sure when I decided I wanted to write, or even if I ever actually made a decision – the thought of creating stories was always there, probably just evolving out of imaginative play. Every book I read was a chance to create a different world in my head.

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

You mean apart from all the books? An interest in life, I suppose. I'm rarely bored, the world is just so fascinating. Writing and illustrating makes you look at life, to notice its quirks and features, to look for the interesting stuff. I think we all have a need to express what's in our heads, whether it's just having a conversation, telling a joke, telling other people about something we've seen or trying to convey an idea or a problem to others. Stories give shape to our thoughts, they force us to make them understandable and appealing to others. Everyone uses the skills that make writers and illustrators what they are, though most people might be less interested in making a finished product. These days, kids write almost as much as they speak – sometimes more. If you've ever chosen to text a friend rather than call and speak to them, you're *choosing to write*. Think about that decision, about the advantages of *writing* a message, and you'll start to understand why people write stories. I have a busy head and I want to share what's inside it, but I have to make it something people will

want to look at and think about. That's the deal between creators and their audience. They let us project stuff into their imaginations, and in return, we provide entertainment.

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

If it gets read and provokes some thought, it's successful. I count looking at illustrations as reading – it's a visual language intended to convey thought, and it's the only *universal* language we have. It's so good for communication that we use pictures to teach words, but we don't make a real point of teaching kids how to *read pictures* in school. They just pick that up along the way. At some point, in Ireland and the UK, it was made to seem childish, a mere assistant to reading, the stabilisers on the bike, but I think we're starting to take it more seriously again. Whether it's writing or illustration, if you're communicating your thoughts clearly and getting people's attention, you're doing a good job.

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

I write books for different ages, and have a rough idea of the age group I'm aiming each story at – you have to, if you're to get the levels of language and comprehension right for younger readers. Reading words and understanding them are two different things. But I don't think too specifically about the audience. I think, for most writers, we're writing for the readers we were at a particular age. That said, most writers were keen readers when they were kids, and sometimes you want to aim for more reluctant readers, which is when an understanding of reading levels is very important. Sometimes a publisher will commission a book for a particular project or series and you have to match the writing to that, but that's all part of being able to work as a professional writer.

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 of it this way: we didn't get rid of all the horses when we started driving cars. We just kept horses for specific purposes. A book is the most successful technology humans have ever created and even now, there are still types of reading that are best done with a physical book. Things like news, education and instruction manuals will eventually all be electronic, but I don't think books will be going anywhere for a long time. They will probably become more focussed on being beautiful objects, but people will want real books well into the future. Bear in mind, that printed text has one major advantage over electronic records too; it can be read by anyone. The more we rely on electronic means of storage, the more trouble we could end up in as that format goes out of date and we no longer have the means to read it. This is already happening with obsolete discs and hard drives, which are only a couple of decades old. Valuable knowledge is being lost. With text on a physical page, if it's stored in the right conditions, it can still be read a thousand years later. Books are the ultimate long-term storage device.

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

I can't think of a specific book I'd love to own – there are so many, and my house is already full of books. Perhaps the notebooks or sketchbooks of a favourite writer or illustrator, but I prefer the idea of libraries; books are made to be read, not stored, and to be available to as many people as possible. Libraries should be our new cathedrals, our places of worship. And that's where all the most valuable books should be.

Thank you very much for taking time to do this for us. We will advise you when we publish it on the website - www.letterpressproject.co.uk. Please return the completed interview to:

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