



**The Letterpress Project**

**Author and Illustrator E-Interviews**

# **An Interview With Philip Ardagh**

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

I still own some of the very first books I read. MY ABC was printed on material ("A Dean's Ragbook"). The first spread reads: "Alan has a Balloon and a Car. Diana has an Elephant and some Flowers." Given the choice, I would have settled for Alan's balloon and Diana's elephant; a bit of a mix and match. My latest book, STICK & FETCH in BARKING UP THE WRONG TREE (illustrated by Elissa Elwick) features a balloon, and I'm a huge fan of David McKee's Elmer the Elephant. (I even get invited to his publisher's parties as 'Friend of Elmer')... so maybe MY ABC inspired me!

I also still have H.A.Rey's WHERE'S MY BABY, a spiral-bound board book WITH FLAPS. What's not to love?

"Mother's cow child/Is Baby Calf./Just turn the page/And see her laugh!" And you lift the flap – not, in truth, turn the page – and, hey presto, Mother Cow is joined by Baby Calf in the picture. Magic.

MILLIE MOUSE'S WASHING DAY (an extremely small-format book) is another winner. Poor Millie Mouse's children are sick, so she can't leave the house to collect the washing. When she falls asleep, exhausted, the birds fly around collecting it – led by good ol' Bill Blue-tit -- and they put it in her laundry baskets. Brings a lump to the throat.

LITTLE ROGUE by Mollie Clarke is about a naughty elephant who ends up Doing Good Deeds – after a lot of spanking – but it's the strange style of illustration that stayed with me!

One book I don't have any more, sadly, featured another elephant and a kangaroo going for a picnic. They know you're supposed to boil the kettle, so that precisely what they do. Once boiled, they eat it...

I enjoyed Tintin, not Asterix; Winnie-the-Pooh and Teddy Robinson being read to be by my mum; the Moomins, buying them with birthday & Christmas book-tokens over time; Narnia, read to be on Saturday mornings by my dad; Alfred Hitchcock & The Three Investigators; The Famous Five... I love 'em all. (I have always preferred stories for younger children in which the characters are animals, whether toys, anthropomorphic or 'real', rather than children.

I mustn't forget Beatrix Potter, of course; not only in that great small-format but with such thick, shiny pages... and the smell! Heaven.

I closely associate books with presents, book tokens, special trips to bookshops, and visits to our tiny local library and, occasionally, the HUGE library in Bromley (the building long since gone). My father reading to me was something very special though my mother must have taught me to read long before I went to school and must have read to me a gazillion times. Not fair, really, is it?

Ours was a household where there were shelves of books everywhere and both my parents read for pleasure.

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

I can't remember a time when I didn't 'write'. I wrote with squiggles before I learnt actual writing, imaging the story in my head. I suspect that I was born a writer and became a better one by constantly writing. The very best piece of advice I can give anyone who wants to become a published author is to write, write, write.

Don't talk about what you're *going* to write. Don't spend hours coming up with the title of your yet-to-be-written masterpiece. Don't blog about your writing space, choice of pens and the best writing beverage. Don't practise your signature for your signing sessions or ponder for hours over pen name. Don't create mood boards that best express the atmosphere you wish to create with your writing... JUST WRITE.

I wrote stories and rhymes and comics and pretend newspapers and, as I grew older, longer stories and manuscripts. This was in the pre-Internet, pre-social-media age. Writing was a solitary business, first in longhand, later with a manual typewriter, then an electric typewriter, then a golf-ball typewriter, then an electronic typewriter, then an Amstrad with its green writing on a black screen, then a huge, clunk computer with a cathode-ray-tube screen, then with a flat screen and now with a laptop. Cut-and-paste used to involve physically cutting out a pasting strips of new text over old, changing the order with the aid of Sellotape and other sticky situations.

I worked alone. My better thoughts and ideas made it into the manuscript or became an anecdote for another time, not fuel for a tweet or a Facebook posting. All the highs and lows had to be kept to myself or shared with a loved one!

It suppose it helps that I have absolutely no interest in any sport, watching, supporting or playing. I've never picked up and strummed a guitar, followed bands nor collected vinyl. My DIY is very basic (repairing the electrical wiring I have drilled through when trying to put up a shelf), and I have no interest in cars and can't drive. Not being able to drive and living too far away from anywhere that's a comfortable walk away, I'm usually stuck in the house... so I might just as well write!

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

Success can mean so many things. In one sense, a successful book might be a book which achieved what the writer set out to do. They had a story to tell which they believe they did full justice to by telling it in the best way they could. A reader might not view it as a success because they might not be interested in what the writer set out to achieve in the first place.

A successful book might be a book which is a critical success: enough reviewers 'get it' and like it.

It might be a commercial success because it sells in gazillions. Most authors want a wide audience and untold riches. My Eddie Dickens books are in over 35 languages. That makes me happy.

But what makes a successful book? A book that I enjoy or can clearly see that other people will enjoy when it's aimed more than them than at me (as with children's books for example); where you can't imagine the text with any other illustrations: Julia Donaldson's *Gruffalo* without Axel Scheffler's drawings; Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* without Shepard's pictures? Never. And that's true of some lesser-known author and illustrator marriages.

But I wouldn't really use the term 'success'. Like most things in life, when it comes to books there are good ones and bad ones.

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

My most popular book so far is *AWFUL END*, and I wrote that as letters to my nephew Ben, with no plans for publication. But, even then, I was probably writing for me. I don't write for an imaginary child of a certain age, or for me as a child, or for some child trapped inside me. \*Burp!\* Pardon ME. I write – and have been published for 27 years – primarily writing to satisfy my need to write and to create stories that make me happy in the process.

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

The tide has turned. There will always be physical books and, now, there will always be e-books in some form or another but I really don't think that e-books will swallow up the physical book market as originally feared. Just look at Robert Macfarlane and Jackie Morris's *THE LOST WORDS*. It's in an enormous format with Jackie's amazing wildlife paintings living off the page. There's no way you get the same experience looking at them on a screen, however large. And traditional publishers are bending over backwards to produce physical books of extraordinary beauty; books that are glorious objects in their own right before you've even read the title.

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

I collect Sherlock Holmes books. My maternal grandmother died in Wyndlesham Manor, the house in which Holmes's creator, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, used to be buried in the back garden. My editions include one illustrated by Doyle's father; one in Pitman's Shorthand English; and a school editions with rather po-faced questions at the end of each story. ("What is a seven-percent solution?").

I also collect early Penguin Books and have quite a few low-numbered 1<sup>st</sup> editions. My rule is that I can only buy them from second-hand shops, not off fellow collectors to fill any gaps.