



The Letterpress Project

Author and Illustrator E-Interviews

An Interview With Shoo Rayner

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

I remember my mother reading Jemima Puddleduck to me. She Norwegian and it was her favourite book, though it was often pronounced Yemima or Chermima! Enid Blyton's Noddy was my first, firm favourite. I think it was the pictures I liked best. Then I became a little obsessed with Jane Pilgrim's Blackberry Farm. I collected them all. Sports Day at Blackberry Farm was the first book I read all by myself – I remember the day and the thrill as if it was yesterday. As I got older I loved Enid Blyton's "Adventure of" series and, of course, Narnia. I was obviously a lover of series books – maybe that is why I came to write so many. Oh, let's not forget A.A.Milne and Pooh and all those wonderful Observer books.

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

I did a lot of jobs before I went to art college – printing, signwriting, map-making and screen printing all the while writing songs and wanting to be a rock star! When I got to college I was lucky to be taught by the picture book author and illustrator, Colin McNaughton. He suggested my skills lay in children's illustration. I don't think it had occurred to me that someone actually drew the pictures as a job! He sent me to the college library to look at picture books. It was there that I first discovered Maurice Sendak and Where the Wild Things Are. In a moment I realised all the strings came together in this wonderful art form.

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

A successful book is one that sells and allows me to carry on in my chosen profession! There is a trade-off between Art, craft and business. Personal artistic projects can be very fulfilling and personally successful, but not commercially successful.

The reader book should be the most important person. It's an editor's job to champion the interests of the reader and not let the author/illustrator become too self-indulgent. What really makes a successful book is one where the words and pictures marry to grip, enthrall, entertain or educate the reader. With picture books, that has to be on two levels, one for the child and one for the adult that is reading it for the 100th time! I suppose a successful book is dog-eared, well-read and well-loved.

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

Loosely, I've always tried to write with easy language but with high interest. I suppose it would be for the slow but determined reader I was (and still am). I'd like to think younger readers are easily reaching up and older, struggling readers don't feel they are reading baby books.

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 the eBook has had its day for a long while. Learning to read is a serious business and cannot be achieved while the text is glowing or sings songs and bounces up and down. The book is a brilliant technology, eBooks are great for technical and reference works, but fiction is different. Each new book is an adventure from the smell of the paper to the texture of the cover. eBooks have a terrible homogenising effect. They also keep children up at night rather than sending them to sleep!

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

Not really. I nearly spent my first year's college maintenance grant on a Baskerville Bible. It was so beautifully printed and I was amazed to think that Baskerville himself had actually made it. I loved a book when I was a child, called something like "the concise Natural History" it was really thick and full of wonderful engravings. I've found copies in second-hand books shops, but never with the cover that I had!