



## The Letterpress Project

### Author and Illustrator E-Interviews

# An Interview With Alexis Deacon

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

My first steps as a reader began at school with a series of books about characters with names like Roger Red Hat, Jennifer Yellow Hat and Billy Blue Hat. A quick search shows me that they were from a series called *One, Two, Three and Away* written by Sheila Mcullagh and illustrated by Ferelith Eccles Williams, set in a place called The Village with Three Corners. The books were designed to progress a child through the early stages of reading. I remember finding the simple shapes and colours reassuring. There was a tactile quality to the images that pleased my child brain. I couldn't tell you any of the stories mind you. I remember an awareness of being taught 'stuff'. The way you levelled up through the books reinforced this sense: I am a level three child now; I can read and comprehend the concept of yellow. There was a pleasure in it, certainly.

My first self-initiated reading was at my best friend's house, with back issues of the Beano. He had the local news agent reserve him every copy and had a huge stash of them as a result. I was fascinated by them. They seemed like some exotic, forbidden fruit compared to the books I was reading in school. I read them avidly, skipping through challenging and mysterious words in the hope that one day I would understand them. Without realising it, I gained far more knowledge from what seemed a guilty pleasure than the path that had been carefully laid out for me.

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

I have loved drawing since earliest childhood, doing it as much as I could in the spare time I had available... and sometimes secretly in class when I should have been concentrating. Like many other children, what I was interested in when I drew was what was *happening* in the pictures. There was always some sort of a narrative going on.

One day I was reading an issue of *2000 AD* and it had a feature on the people who had made it. I suppose I always knew on some level that illustrators were people but this was the first time it occurred to me that this was in fact a job. The people featured seemed more real somehow. Maybe it was because they complained of being poor and overworked! That was the moment I realised it was what I wanted to do too. I assumed I wouldn't be one of the poor and overworked ones... but then I was quite young.

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

Book illustrations are there to tell a story; they exist to communicate. For me, a successful book illustration is one that communicates its message efficiently, with power and conviction. For the most part I like work that appears emotionally honest and not over laboured.

What makes a good book is an almost impossible question to answer. From years of teaching I do have some idea what I don't like in a story though. I prefer stories that appear to be told with the author's authentic voice, not trying to homage or pastiche another. I do not like archness or knowingness in a story. I like my stories to believe in themselves, to be earnest, even if they are comic. In my opinion a story should always respect itself! I also prefer stories that are lean and focused, where everything within supports everything else.

These are all personal preferences of course...

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

I do consider my audience when writing but who that audience is will vary. This is something that I have begun to do later in my career. In the beginning I was just

writing for myself... but I was closer to childhood then so perhaps the difference was smaller.

**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 we have been around digital books long enough to know that they won't replace physical ones, not entirely. Particularly in the case of picture books, the experience is far more enjoyable on the page than on screen. I would be in bed with a migraine for days if I tried to play *Where's Wally* on screen. Apologies to the creators of those Apps but I'm sure I'm not your target audience anyway!

There is still a place for the physical book. At least for now. Perhaps it is worth remembering that cheap, mass produced books have been around for a mere fraction of our history. They came along relatively suddenly and may disappear in much the same way. If that is the case it will be because we found something else that did their job better... at least in the minds of those prepared to let them go. As I said before, books exist to communicate ideas. If we can communicate more authentically in a different form then books will struggle to survive. We are still a long way away from that day though!

The urge to draw and make images will not go anywhere. Of that you can be sure. They are ingrained in us, right to the very core.

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

I do collect books. Among my favourites are early printings of Tintin. The print process used at that time makes such amazing colours. The colourists working on Tintin were also extremely talented people. Those books feel like treasure.