



The Letterpress Project

Author and Illustrator E-Interviews

An Interview With Andy Seed

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

My earliest memories are of nursery rhymes, probably at school. They have a peculiar magic which taps into something deep in the human psyche. We didn't have many books at home but I loved the Richard Scarry picture book compendiums of busy animals and vehicles and jobs – those were definitely inspirational. Other early favourites were Dr Seuss rhymes (oh the joy of silly wordplay!) and we had an ancient and very creepy copy of Belloc's Cautionary Tales for Children with those satisfying macabre pictures. It was shocking, hilarious and brilliant, and still is.

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

I've always enjoyed wordplay in its various forms and found myself as an adult jotting down little ideas for jokes, rhymes, funny names of characters and fragments of poems. When I was teaching in a primary school I was inspired by the great stories I read and at the same time I would come across books, particularly factual ones, which were just not very good and which made me wonder if I could do a better job.

My mind was made up when a poet visited the school and performed wonderful workshops, capturing the children and inspiring them to write. The excitement and sense of fun in the classroom that day made a huge impression on me and I spoke to the poet at the end and asked him what it was like working as a writer and if he actually made a career out of it. He told me that it wasn't easy but it was also a joyous thing to do, especially working with children. He passed on a few tips for an aspiring poet and I began to seriously consider writing at that point.

As well as poetry I renewed my boyhood interest in non-fiction and decided to blend humour with facts, finding it immensely enjoyable to write and to share. I reached a moment when creativity was unlocked and I realised that I needed to write what I enjoyed first and foremost. Going into bookshops and libraries and reading more great books was and still is a huge part of what inspired me.

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

Good question. I think everyone who works with books knows some part of the answer but nobody can explain how certain ideas, words and pictures can almost combine chemically to create something memorable or funny or moving or capable of capturing a reader with an emotional significance. Sometimes very similar approaches appear and they just don't resonate. I suppose it's like giving ten people ingredients for a plum pie and the same cooker. You will get ten different pies and some will be delicious, some will be so-so and some will be hard to eat at all. The fractions of approach and the subtle know-how of certain makers of things allow them to build together parts in a harmony which quite often they cannot explain themselves. What they do reflects who they are.

But a successful children's book is plain to see. It's vibrant in the simple strength of language or it's funny. It encapsulates some aspect of the world from the child's point of view, whether adventure or frustration or the peculiarities of people or the strangeness of places or simply the daftness of absurd, impossible scenarios. It draws us in, toying the reader into thinking they know what is going to be next and then adding surprises and wit and satisfying conclusions. Or perhaps it's a factual book that reveals some beautiful aspect of the poetry of the natural world, or brings alive an astonishing set of stats with visual verve or humour that tickles a particular age.

But it's also a mystery and depends on so many small things combining in just the right way, like the plum pie.

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

Yes, and I think that's important. Books need to work for you first, your typical reader second and everyone else who is part of your audience too (for example the parent that buys/chooses the picture book for the toddler).

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 printed book will always be with us. For a start it's an attractive object. Secondly it's collectible, sharable, accessible (needs no device) and the carrier of nostalgia. I also think there's already a concern growing about the negative effects of excessive screen-time on young people in particular and a realisation that there are important disadvantages to reading electronically. For me, the biggest concern is the distraction-factor: early Kindles were just book text viewers but today's young people do everything on smartphones or tablets which are connected to games, messaging, chat, photos, noises and indeed every kind of limitless distraction that the internet can conjure.

Concerns about rising mental health problems among young people and the negative effects of social media are beginning to make people re-think e-books. Reading is something best done in a quiet environment, free from distractions, where the reader can enter the story or fully digest the facts or hear the harmony of the muse in poetry or become beguiled by the splendour of an illustration.

To be surrounded by printed books read is to be amongst old friends. They warm the soul, they bring the world closer, they make our walls wise. And they don't try and sell me pills or insurance.

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

I have lots of books but I wouldn't call myself a collector. I just think it's lovely to have good books around to recommend, to lend, to dip into and to re-read when the time is right. A copy of the Lindisfarne Gospels would be nice to find at a car-boot sale, though...