



The Letterpress Project

Author and Illustrator E-Interviews

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this series of Letterpress Project e-interviews that we are undertaking over the coming months. The Letterpress Project is a not-for-profit initiative that exists to promote the value and pleasures of the physical book and we are keen to get the thoughts of authors and book illustrators about their own influences, experiences and love of books. We are happy for you to make your answers as long or as brief as you are comfortable with and we will undertake not to edit or paraphrase any of your comments without your explicit permission.

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

My earliest memories involve being taken to a local library by my father, who couldn't read in English at all. He was inspired by people he knew, who urged him to make his children readers so that they might do better in life. I had no particular favourites as such, until I first read 'James & The Giant Peach' by Roald Dahl, when I was about seven or eight years of age, but I loved books nonetheless and read all the time. My biggest early inspiration came at the age of eleven – which is when I first got my hands on 'Adrian Mole'. Sue Townsend was by single biggest influence.

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

First off, it was all the books that I read, and then, after Adrian Mole, it was the idea of Sue Townsend. Not only was she writing about my home city, her characters were like the next-door-neighbours and I realised that it was perfectly acceptable to write stories about the world I saw all around me, and the people populating it. I wanted to follow in Sue's footsteps, to add my voice to the regrettably few stories written about real, everyday British lives in regular cities like Leicester.

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

It's always the strength of the characters and their story first. You can have great ideas and great passion, but if you can't write a great story, none of it matters. I also think a good book should challenge and inform sometimes, too. For illustrations, I'm not sure. I know what I like, but it's all so subjective. I prefer colour to line drawings, for example, but also adore the work of Chris Riddell. I think the illustrations should match the feel of the story, and grab the reader's attention. But, as you can probably tell, I'm no expert!

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

Not really. I write predominantly about British teenagers' lives, and I know they will form a large part of my audience. But the editors, reviewers, bloggers etc... are all adults and they form part of the audience too. The only people I think about with my teen/YA stuff are the characters themselves. As long as I'm true to them and their worlds, the rest is out of my hands. I will say that I'm more popular with teens than adults – I've never won any award voted for by adults but a sack full where teens were the sole judges. I think that statement says much about how accepted my style of writing is, as British social realism, and about the state of British teen books and publishing in general. It seems to me that adult audiences have become more important than teens in YA fiction, and I cannot welcome or condone that.

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 that warnings of the paper book's demise were greatly exaggerated and have proven to be little more than knee-jerk babbling from supposed publishing experts. Go into any school, any library, any bookshop, and watch people buying paper books. The look, the feel, even the smell of them, is part of the experience. Holding a book in your hands is something special and e-books cannot compete with that. I think e-books have their place, but the paper book is here to stay because it is the most loved and cherished of the two formats. I genuinely believe that the "death" of real books, if it ever occurs, will be the death of reading culture. I also believe that reading from screens is detrimental to eyesight, attention spans and processing power in humans. But maybe I'm just a Luddite...

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

Bizarrely, I'm not. I have a huge book collection, as in I keep many books that I buy, but I'm not avid collector in the same way as I am a collector of reggae music on vinyl. There are certain authors whose work I love and buy regularly, but on the whole I read anything that grabs my attention. My most cherished books are my first ever copy of Adrian Mole, my battered "Of Mice and Men/Cannery Row" book and an original copy of "The Outsiders" by S.E Hinton, which I picked up in a second hand bookshop in North Dakota! Of course there are many others that I would be sad to lose, but the wonderful thing about books is that there's always another brilliant one around the corner.

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:

Karen Argent

Project Director Karen.argent@btinternet.com