



## **The Letterpress Project**

### **Author and Illustrator E-Interviews**

#### **AN INTERVIEW WITH**

**Hilary Robinson**

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

My earliest memories of books and reading goes way back to the mid 1960s when I was growing up in Zaria, Nigeria. My parents were lecturers at the university there and we lived among several people from different countries including America, Switzerland, India, New Zealand and Malta. We attended school with them and with local children from Zaria too. It really was a global community in one little hot spot.

Our friends, local missionaries, had introduced us to a series of books and a particular author who was popular in the United States then, but had yet to achieve wide acclaim in the UK. This author was to have a profound effect on me and protected my mind from some of the dangers that were erupting.

It was a difficult time in Nigeria then, post-independence, as we were living in a war zone.

Civil unrest had broken out and escalated into what became known the Biafran War and we were bang in the middle of it.

This meant we had to be careful where we went and when.

Our nanny, Grace, had been attacked and my parents took the difficult but sensible decision to hide her in our house. I remember her clearly, kneeling up at the window, her ankle bandaged, peering out as a rampaging group of young warriors raced by, chanting and wielding weapons. The original plan was that she would sleep in a walled courtyard outside the back of my parents' room but my father then considered that to be unsafe, so she slept on a camp bed in my baby sister's bedroom. After a few weeks she returned to her family in another, safer, part of Nigeria.

It was a frightening time but our parents and the good people around us shielded us from their fear.

There was a curfew in the evenings which meant no one was allowed to go out. The police and the army patrolled the area to try and keep everyone safe. My means of escape was to read! The books, kindly left to us by an American family who were returning to the US, changed my life.

*The Cat In The Hat* and *Green Eggs and Ham* by the brilliant Dr Seuss were perfect stories to transport a young mind into an imaginary universe full of chaos, fun and uncertainty yet with underlying moral message. They showed me that imagination had no bounds and simple yet effective vocabulary was a powerful tool. Everything turned out alright in the end and I began to think that life would be like that too.

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

. I was already working in children's television as a researcher and scriptwriter when I thought about writing a children's book. My father had written text books for university and a bestselling book about economics – *The Commerce of New Africa* - so I understood about some of the process. I think that meant that I knew it was achievable and understood some of the terms such as 'proof checking' and 'editing' and 'royalties'! We always got a new dress when the 'once a year' royalty cheque arrived.

My daughter was just two when she developed a chronic fear of spiders and I couldn't really understand why. I wondered if it had something to do with the nursery rhyme – *Little Miss Muffet* – so I decided to write a story about a dancing spider. So I suppose you could say I always loved writing, I wanted to write children's books but Sophie's phobia was the catalyst! It took some time though to find a publishers – I got over thirty rejections before it took off and went on to become a series of four books – The *Sarah The Spider* series.

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

There are no easy ways to explain what makes a successful book or illustration as there are no rules and if everyone knew they answer to that I guess we'd all be bestsellers!

My main aim is to try and encourage everyone to read, whatever their ability, and I consider several factors.

*Mixed Up Fairy Tales* is my bestselling book and *Where The Poppies Now Grow* not far behind – yet they could not be more different. One encourages readers to create their own wacky stories, the other focuses on World War 1, peace and Remembrance. *Jasper Space Dog!*, my new book, is also doing well and that's a funny story about a dog with cosmic ambitions. It combines fact with fiction and is a novel way of imparting essential information in a fun way.

If I were to distil the key elements, I would say accessibility is key and narrative driven by emotion with sympathetic illustrations helps a book on its way!

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

I usually write for children between the ages of 3 and 11 although *A Song for Will and the Lost Gardeners of Heligan* is aimed at 8+ and appeals to adults too. I don't usually 'age- band' books – but this one is about war so I need to consider the audience and be sensitive to that. I do think about the language, vocabulary, style, design and layout. *Jasper Space Dog!* is deliberately small – compact and portable. I tell children that 'a book is a friend' and Jasper can be taken anywhere with them.

**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 last few years has proved that the physical book is here for keeps. The electronic versions don't have the same feel about them, are difficult to take on beaches or leave in the garden or by a pool. Physical books are more attractive– the shape, the quality of the paper, the cover all work together to create a comforting reading experience. Physical books don't need to be charged up and it really doesn't matter if biscuit crumbs stray into the creases! My next book *Jasper Viking Dog* will be out next year – in traditional physical form!

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

I do collect books and am keen to get my hands on a first edition of Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth*. Vera Brittain's brother and fiancé died in the First World War and her story creates a vivid and emotional picture of the time.

I realise though, that books take up space, so I only keep those that I know I will treasure and I still buy picture books for myself even though my daughters are grown up. I think picture books are complete artforms in themselves and a joy to behold.

