



**The Letterpress Project**

**Author and Illustrator E-Interviews**

# **An Interview With James Mayhew**

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

My very earliest memories are reading books like the Ladybird books, and a big art book my parents had, "Art Treasure of the World". But my first really cherished book memories are of a some little known books: Chester the Worldly Pig by Bill Peet, Ferdinand the Bull by Munro Leaf and Robert Lawson, and The Big Clean Up by Harvey Weiss. Beyond those, it was Tove Jansson's Moomins that inspired me, and illustrators like Brian Wildsmith, John Burningham and Edward Ardizzone.

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

It never occurred to me that I would write. I had always been told at school I wasn't good enough. (I had a horrible time at school, and absolutely hated my time there). So I had zero confidence. Initially I wanted to be a set designer, but I got cold feet and chose illustration for my undergraduate course. Within the course, covering all aspects of illustration, was one short module about children's books. I loved it. I found I enjoyed the writing and that's when I wrote my first book, "Katie's Picture Show". Looking back, I was clearly inspired by the authors and illustrators I had grown up with. I think they were very strongly imprinted on my mind.

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

In terms of an illustrated book, there needs an element of cohesion. It needs to look like everything belongs, in terms of design and lettering and image. Some books try too hard

and are over complicated or distractingly embellished. I prefer a cleaner look. Of course the subject matter is very personal, but ultimately I'm drawn to books with integrity, books which are clearly created by an author with something to say or a real purpose. I'm not a fan of endless bandwagoning books about farts or pants or poops. That's never going to appeal to me. Humour is important, but for myself, I want to produce books that express a little piece of my world, and are sincere and honest. This has nothing to do with "success" in a commercial sense. For THAT we are back to farts and pants, unfortunately!

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

Not at all. Illustratively I do what I feel is right for the text, whether I've written it myself or not. When I write, the story tends to go it's own way. One can usually manipulate it to make it younger or older, and the publisher may influence that. But I prefer to create a story first and then find an audience that fits second.

**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 illustrated book will survive as a physical object. Digital sales of picture books have never really been resolved because the different platforms cannot accommodate a fixed illustration shape/design, each has to be redesigned. In any case, I think younger children come to devices for a different experience. Much research has supported the feeling that the physical properties of a book are important for learning and dexterity. Besides, digital sales seem to have levelled off. I think physical books will evolve, however, and I hope production values and design will become better so books are more desirable. But their survival ultimately depends of the business model of publishers which, in many cases, is unworkable currently. High discount sales and the symbolic devaluing of books in our society is far more damaging than any digital revolution. Author's incomes are falling and books shops closing because of what publishers call "special sales". THIS is what will destroy books. Publishers have made a deal with the devil, fixated on short term returns rather than the longevity of the industry.

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

I am. I have first editions of all of Tove Jansson's books, and an Imperial Russian first edition of The Tale of Tsar Saltan, illustrated Chromolithographically by Ivan Bilibin. Those are the prizes. But I have many other interesting books, often quite obscure. As for something else? I wouldn't mind the illuminated Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, the legendary one that went down on the Titanic!