



**The Letterpress Project**

**Author and Illustrator E-Interviews**

# **An interview with Joanna Harker Shaw**

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

I loved a great big illustrated book called 'The Children's Treasury' which was an anthology of classic literature and fables. In this book I found stories to fit every mood, but my absolute favourite, the one I read so many times it was the page that always fell open, was *The Miraculous Hind*. Partly it was the illustrations of magical woman dancing in the forests, their eyes full of stars, that captivated me, but partly it was the language - the story was full of words I didn't come across often and words that were lovely to say (just the title gives me delicious shivers to say aloud).

Those stories consumed me. Opening the pages of the treasury was like opening a huge door into another world, indeed, into a great many other worlds....

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

There was no one thing that inspired me, it is just something I have always done. I grew up in a small cottage in the country, the only child of a single parent, and I was physically and emotionally miles from anyone. So I wrote stories. I never decided to write stories, I just did it. I had no idea of 'being a writer,' I just wrote stories. And because I agree with Alice that a pictureless book is a dull thing, I drew pictures to go with my stories.

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

What is the spark of life that makes a book magical? It's not something we can easily catch or define. If we could you know publishers would be bottling it and selling it high!

I'm personally glad there isn't an easy formula for a great book. The mystery makes it all the more exciting when you do find one.

The most important thing, I think, is that, somehow, you make a connection. There are books where I love the characters as fiercely as if they were real people, and sometimes books where I love the authors as much as if they were people I knew. Sometimes a book shows you a place or an idea, but whatever it is, if the book is a good book, it will stop the breath in your body for just a second... And when your breath starts again, a moment later, some tiny bit of you is changed by that connection you've made.

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

Sometimes it starts with the thing that needs to be written, with whatever's inside that needs to come out. But sometimes it's very strongly for someone else. For a lot of someone else. When you see so many people thinking a certain, harmful way and you want to reassure them that this isn't the only way to think... then you write without ego, pouring out the words to fill the hole.

**Q5. What future do you think the physical book has? For example, do you think the electronic book will replace the physical book?**

While I praise the convenience of an ebook (or an audio book which is something I love), the physical object of a paper book is something profoundly beautiful that will not disappear. I'd imagine we'll turn to ebooks more and more for disposable books - for textbooks for courses we never actually wanted to do, for that novel you pick up one time by an author you've never read and who it turns out you don't like, for something we're mildly embarrassed to be seen reading...

Physical books may, like vinyl, become the domain of the bibliophile, but their presence in a home is immense. I love to glance around my flat and see all the old familiar covers, and as I do, am reminded of them, and smile at them, as I might at pictures of old friends.

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

I am most certainly a book collector. Every now and then I take great satisfaction in rearranging them and counting them up. Most of all I love books with pictures. This means I collect a lot of children's books, but that's only because there aren't enough adult's books with pictures in them.

I also love old books. A smooth uncracked spine has no appeal to me. I'd far rather have a book that showed its previous reader than a first edition. A note in a margin, a peculiar bookmark... they remind me that other people are taking this journey with me, and that is a very comforting thing.