



The Letterpress Project

Author and Illustrator E-Interviews

An interview with Jon Blake

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

*The first books I remember were rather bleak Ladybird books, Moldy Warp the Mole and some tedious learn-to-read books. Then, on Christmas Day 1959, when I had just turned five, my mum and dad gave me *The House At Pooh Corner*. I was hooked from the first page. "The more Pooh looked inside, the more Piglet wasn't there" still amuses me today. But I couldn't understand why, amongst all the fantastic animal characters, there was this totally boring boy called Christopher Robin. I couldn't relate to him at all.*

I was living above a dry cleaning shop in Reading at the time, and one of the first things I learnt about the English language was that 'Reading' was pronounced differently to 'reading', despite being spelt the same. Crazy.

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

I was a very confident little boy, especially when it came to writing. I always expected my stories to get a gold star, and if they didn't, I drew one on myself. I wrote a lot of stories about witches, because I had bad dreams about them, so writing was always a form of therapy for me. The idea I would become an author was planted in my head, probably by my dad, very early on. However, it was also impressed on me that it was hard to make a living as an author, so I decided to become a journalist or prime minister instead. Eventually, I perversely decided to become a teacher, but I was always writing, hundreds of thousands of words, and when I started sending stories to publishers it did not take that long for an editor to spot my potential.

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

For me the greatest stories, even though they may contain tragedy, are always fuelled by positivity and love. For me the egalitarian spirit is fundamental to this: that's why the children's writer who influenced me most was Mark Twain. I despise mean-spirited establishment-minded writers like Roald Dahl, who of course the establishment love!

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

When I started as a children's author I always thought of those kids, usually working class, who were bright and rebellious but not that literate: the pupils I taught who didn't like many books but loved Barrie Hines's Kes. As I moved to writing more for juniors I suppose I became more guided by what readers responded to, and in particular what my own kids responded to, once I'd belatedly started a family.

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 it's already clear that e-books will not replace physical books. I'm more concerned about how one bookshop has wiped out all the opposition in the UK and how books like Thimble Monkey Superstar or The Last Free Cat don't even get seen by the public. If this doesn't change then it's all downhill.

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

I'm not that bookish – I don't have one of those studies which is like a womb of books. I do have some prized books, but they're not special editions, just books I value. Besides a few childhood books, including Pooh, which I still own, maybe my most prized book is one which Robert Leeson sent me not long before his death: a signed copy of his fantastic history of children's fiction, Reading and Righting. That's 'reading' not the city of Reading, btw.