



The Letterpress Project

An interview with Kate Wiseman

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

The earliest memories I have of books are related to their size. I adored tiny books – they seemed so special, almost magical. I especially remember a collection of tiny fairy tales in a little cardboard sleeve. I treasured them.

I also remember the Ant and Bee books by Angela Banner. I loved them and read them for years, even when I was also reading much more complicated things. For a long time I treasured a beautifully illustrated hardback book of fairy tales. I realise now that one of them was the story of King Lear, but it took me a long time to cotton on to that. I also remember my brother having a birthday party and someone giving him Orlando the Marmalade Cat by Kathleen Hale. I was green with envy. The illustrations were stunning.

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

Quite simply, a lifelong love of reading. Books have always transported me to other worlds, other bodies, other centuries. From an early age, I thought that being a writer was the pinnacle of human achievement. I still do! It took me ages to gather the courage to try, though. I thought it was beyond me, that people would laugh at me, that I was too sensitive to take the inevitable knocks. I'm glad I overcame my terrors!

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

I love that rare feeling of reading a book and realising that it's connecting with you profoundly, and that you are going to love it and reread it for the rest of your life. It doesn't happen often: once or twice a year if I'm lucky, but that, to me, is what makes a successful book. When I do come across one, I buy it for all my friends and enthuse about it until they're sick of it. I have a shelf on one of my bookcases that I reserve for my special books. It's quite an honour when I add a book to it.

If I could ever effect a reader so profoundly, I would be ecstatic.

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

I usually think that I'm writing for people like me. People who love history and mystery and quirky humour and a little darkness. I don't specifically think in terms of a target age. I'm keeping my fingers crossed that there are other people like that out there.

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

Electronic books have their uses, of course, but I can't imagine anything ever replacing the physical book. It's the weight of them and the smell of them and their accessibility – you can flick through them and look back with ease and even (shock horror) peek at the end. It's the way you can line them up on bookshelves and sort them out and then re-sort them. It's much more than the joy of reading them, although obviously that's considerable. It's a sensory experience.

Can you imagine a collector carefully curating and arranging a shelf full of electronic books? I can't.

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

I do collect books, as you've probably guessed by now. I have no idea how many I have, but I keep getting extra bookshelves and I still need more. When I find one of my special books, I like to acquire a signed edition of it, if possible. I love the thought that the author has touched it, however fleetingly.

I prefer hardbacks and sometimes get them in charity shops. Apart from books that I give as presents, I hardly ever throw or give them away. They are too special. Off hand, I can only think of two books that I disliked enough to cast out of my collection: one because I thought most of the characters were badly written, and the

other because the violence in it was revolting, even for someone with gothic tendencies, like me.

A special book I'd love to own? A book of Wilfred Owen's poems, signed by the author. It will never happen. Very little of his work was published in his lifetime, and if such a thing does exist, it will be completely out of my price range. I can dream though.