



The Letterpress Project

Author and Illustrator E-Interviews

An Interview With Ken Preston

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

Thinking about this question automatically generates memories of my childhood library in a small town called Rawtenstall in the North West of England. It was a vast, high ceilinged, old building with towering shelves crammed full of books and it had a particular, evocative smell which I can still remember to this day.

My father introduced me to reading because my teacher was failing in teaching me to read and had put me at the back of the class where she could ignore me (I can still remember her name, but I won't say it here). I was a quiet, shy child so I didn't complain. It was only because I was coming home with the same reading book day after day, week after week, that my parents noticed what was happening (or rather what wasn't happening).

So my father took me to the library and introduced me to the books of W.E. Johns (Biggles), Robert Louis Stevenson and H.G. Wells. My father was a complex man, a heavy drinker and prone to fits of anger. He died thirty years ago and I still have a complicated relationship with him in my memories, but he introduced me to a wonderful love of literature and that is something precious I will always remember.

From that introduction to books I went on, as I grew up, to read Watership Down, The Lord of the Rings, The Phantom Tollbooth, Paddington and much more. By the way, all those books I just mentioned, I still own them and have been encouraging my two boys to read them.

As a teenager I moved on to rather more 'adult' books. Drawn by their garish covers I began reading The Rats, Night of the Crabs, The Shining, and became a fan of horror at the rather tender age of twelve or thirteen.

This was the 1970s and the category of 'Young Adult' hadn't been invented, so there was no Harry Potter or Cherub series. And I just needed to read! Give me a book! Now! Add to that need to read a mother and father who didn't seem to be bothered by the suitability of my reading matter and I was off, reading whatever I could get my hands on.

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

I don't know that I have been inspired to write, but I have always been driven by a need to be creative in whatever discipline took hold of me at any particular time. As a teenager I wrote and drew comics. I then went on to study Fine Art to degree level. I became a professional photographer, and I now design book covers and teach creative writing to adults and young adults. That is on top of writing books myself!

I absolutely love living the creative life and I also love inspiring that passion in others. If I'm not creating in some way I become fidgety and depressed. I always need a project to be working on. Unfortunately I have 'shiny object syndrome' and I have to work hard to keep my focus on one project at a time.

I currently volunteer with Writing West Midlands and their Spark Young Writers Groups, teaching creative writing to teenagers. Their creative output never fails to astonish me, and always inspires me to write more.

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

More than anything else I have to care about what is happening in any book I read. I have to care about the characters. That doesn't mean they have to be good people, or even nice. I like complex characters with shades of black and white. Just like real people!

I think this idea particularly fits with our complicated times. Just look at some of the great television shows we've had recently. Walter White in Breaking Bad, a man with terminal cancer who resorts to cooking drugs to fund his family's welfare after he has died. Or Dexter, a serial killer who channels his psychopathic impulses into killing only those who 'deserve' to die. We shouldn't love these characters and yet we do, in a complicated love/hate fashion.

So I need to care about the story and about the people in the story, and what happens to them. Then, for me, genre disappears and I could be reading any kind of book.

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

For the most part, no. I write to please, to entertain, myself. If I'm not in love with my writing then how can I expect anyone else to be? But I do write for a specific market on some occasions. I have written a couple of romance novels for the My Weekly Pocket Novel range, and so tailored my writing style to suit that audience's needs and expectations.

I also write for Young Adults, and so I have to keep in mind certain limitations in the use of language and the representation of violence and sexual desire. I certainly don't agree with the idea that young adults or children should be shielded from these subjects as they will come across them as they grow

up, (my ten year old and thirteen year old already know most swear words, even though they don't use them) but it does need to be done appropriately.

When I am writing my books and stories aimed at adults I let my expression run free and use my own, internal sense of what is beyond suitable boundaries. I also have a friend who is the first to read my manuscripts and she is always honestly critical of my work and will let me know when she thinks I am going wrong.

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 physical book has a great future! Lots of people seem to be very worried that the physical book is going to die, and be replaced by ebooks. I think they are wrong. I firmly believe that ebooks will live alongside physical books quite happily for a long time to come. Both have their benefits. Ebooks are much more portable and immediate, whilst physical books have a sensory aspect to them that ebooks can never have. I regularly switch between reading in both formats, and I love them both.

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

Yes, I'm a book collector in the sense that I have bookshelves groaning beneath the weight of books piled on them. I love walking into somebody's house and seeing a well-stocked bookshelf. I always take a look, have a read of the titles, and often end up making a snap decision on the character, or lack, of the person I am visiting. A very bad habit of mine.

I love collecting signed books. A book signed by the author, especially if you met that author and they signed it to you, is very special. I also own a hardback, illustrated and annotated collection of Sherlock Holmes stories which I still fully intend to read from cover to cover one day, annotations and all!

I can't think of a particular book I would love to own, but I am always tempted by special editions of books when I see them. Actually, come to think of it, I can never walk past a bookshop without a quick browse and I usually end up buying one or two, special editions or not!

Thank you for the interesting questions on a subject I love more than any other – writing and reading.