



The Letterpress Project

Author and Illustrator E-Interviews

# An interview with Metaphrog aka Sandra Marrs and John Chalmers

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

**Sandra:** Being brought up in France, as a child I loved reading *Tintin*, and was addicted to a series of books called *Fantômette*. As there were 49 titles in the *Fantômette* series I was never short of a book to read, and often trailed the second-hand market stalls to find any one I didn't have. I still read both series to this day. Fairy tales also held a fascination, especially with their beautiful illustrations and *The Little Mermaid* was a particular favourite.

**John:** I remember always reading and was fortunate that even though my parents didn't have much money they believed in education, in reading and in books. So growing up in Greenock on the west coast of Scotland in the 70s I was happy to be occasionally bought books and comics and each year would receive alternately *The Broons* or *Oor Wullie* annuals along with a satsuma in a Christmas stocking. I remember also being able to borrow books on a small, green library card, which seemed fairly miraculous. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was inspirational and a favourite that I regularly return to. I also loved the *Tintin* graphic novels, created by Hergé, and as child I was fascinated by the poems of Edward Lear and William Blake and the illustrations that went with them. Through reading I developed a love of libraries and of books in general.

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

**Sandra:** Meeting John was the catalyst to becoming an author/illustrator. I have always drawn and painted and never imagined myself doing anything else, in fact, I was determined to be an artist, but hadn't specifically chosen to make graphic novels. As John

had always wanted to write, we decided to combine our efforts and naturally took the path of graphic novels.

**John:** I feel very lucky to have been a child that enjoyed reading and developed a love of books. And as far back as I can remember, I dreamt of being a writer. As a young reader the practicalities of doing this probably didn't really cross my mind but as a teenager I read authors like Henry Miller and imagined what it would be like to be a starving writer. At that age, between 14 and 18, as well as going out and living life I still read and, even though I studied engineering and science, I didn't lose touch with or lose a passion for music, film, art and literature.

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

**John & Sandra:** For us a great book is one that is genuinely transporting and thus has the capacity to transform the reader. Good books make us think and make us look into ourselves as well as empathise and sympathise with others. They can be beautifully written, sad or funny but in general, like any great art they should speak to some basic human truth and interrogate a fundamental philosophical question in an interesting aesthetic manner.

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

**John:** Initially I am writing a script that I hope will inspire Sandra. So I hope that as a first reader of the basic first draft of the script she will be inspired, excited and amused. But in creating the books and the ideas contained within them I think I am always imagining an ideal reader. That is someone who will understand or make the effort to engage with the story and characters and ideas. In creating a believable fictive world for a story, then developing the characters and working out the narrative to build the workings of a book one then needs a careful reader, not someone who only gives a cursory glance or quick read through. Anybody reading a book brings it alive and becomes the author in a sense – they bring their own mirror and lamp to the reading and what they take from the book says a lot about themselves at the particular time of reading.

**Sandra:** I try to create a visual world that will draw readers in, a place they can spend time in and which hopefully can bring out a sense of mystery and atmosphere. In order to do this I can only have the images and the story in mind rather than a specific audience, but of course keeping in mind that there will be a reader (it's a two way street!).

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

**John:** I think the physical book is safe: it will always have a future. Too many people find it is important to read and to spend time reading with an actual physical book, that is, an object rather than an e-book or article online, read on a screen.

**Sandra:** Perhaps physical books will have more importance as beautiful design objects as reading on screens becomes more prevalent. Interacting with a physical book is an experience in itself and takes you to a different place than reading on a screen. When you

walk into any bookshop you can already see that publishers are placing more emphasis on the design side of things now. Certainly, with our fairy tale graphic novel adaptations we wanted the physical object, the book, to feel enticing to encourage immersion with the hope that readers would spend time in the books.

We're hoping that both print and screen will coexist.

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

**John & Sandra:** We love books and have a fair number but wouldn't describe ourselves as collectors per se.