



The Letterpress Project

Author and Illustrator E-Interviews

An Interview With Nicci French

(aka Nicci Gerrard and Sean French)

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

Sean: When I was little, I read books in a completely different way from anything since. It's not quite right to say I just *read* books like Astrid Lindgren's Pippi Longstocking and Karlsson on the Roof; the Moomin books; the Narnia sequence; Dr Doolittle; Biggles; Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass; the Sherlock Holmes stories; the Hobbit and Lord of the Rings. I read them over and over and over so that they felt like a part of my brain. All of those, in very different ways, were worlds to get lost in. Some of them I still love as much as ever. Others (Biggles, most notably) I have to remember through my ten-year-old eyes.)

Nicci: The absolute immersion in a story, a self-loss that feels dreamy, that happens when you're a child is something I wish I could recover as an adult. My earliest memory of books is that: not the actual books but the feeling of reading, of going into a different world, of hiding under the sheets at night with a torch because I couldn't bear to stop... My mother used to read to us every day when we came back from school, novels but also poems – and some of these I can still recite by heart ('I Must Go Down to the Seas Again...'). I remember loving the Moomin books (something Sean and I share – and which we've passed on to our own children, weeping as we read), the Winnie the Pooh stories, Elizabeth Goudge's *The Little White Horse*, Laura Ingalls Wilder's *The Little House on the Prairie*, *Little Women* by Louisa M Alcott (all these 'little's' are slightly worrying). I used to go to the library every Saturday morning and take out my allotted six books and devour them through the week. Bit by bit, I read books like *Iane Eyre* (which is perhaps my favourite novel still), Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*....

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

Sean: I grew up in a house full of books. I've always wanted to do something involving stories. It could have been movies or plays or books. It's just been my main way of making sense of the world.

Nicci: That's so hard to answer. It's the only thing I ever really wanted to do. I'm bad at a lot of things, or not good at them. To write is my way of being at home in the world, which is a scary place for anyone to be

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

Sean: There's a simple but great line in a Stephen Sondheim song about the ambition of a writer to 'tell them things they don't know.' It can be a tiny observation, a couplet or it can be a vast universe, but it needs to give you something you weren't expecting, a pickpocket who puts something *into* your pocket.

Nicci: I think readers have a really acute sense of the inauthentic: they know when the author hasn't fully imagined the world they are trying to describe; they're not on safe ground. Then also, a writer needs to have their own voice, something fresh and distinctive. And they must have something to say and somewhere to go.

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

Sean: When writing as Nicci French I have three audiences in mind. Firstly, you write the sort of book you want to read but it doesn't exist yet, so you're writing for yourself. Secondly, I write for Nicci, something that might spur her on, shock her, or surprise her – but not *too* much! And thirdly, any kind of writing must be about communication. At any point you're constantly asking questions about an imaginary alert reader: will this confuse her? Will this be too obvious? And many others. What you must try not to think about is the sort of book you think your reader might want for you. I want writers to give me their view of the world rather than what they think my view might be.

Nicci: No. When I write, I don't think about an audience at all. When I read what I've written, then I try to be dispassionate about it and look at myself from the outside. But I agree with Sean (for once): you have to write the story that you are compelled to tell. Once you start trying to calculate what a reader wants from you, you're done for.

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

Sean: I think there are a few inventions that so virtually perfect that they will never be superseded. The bicycle is one, the book is another. The electronic book has its uses. If I'm going abroad for a few days, it's nice to have a reader with two hundred books on it. And when I run, I listen to talking books. It's been a wonderful way of getting through some very long Victorian novels. But I'm absolutely sure that nothing matches up to the chunkiness, the heft, the feel of a book in your hands. Reading is inseparable from the turning of pages, the ability to flick forwards and backwards, the tactility of paper and print. Just as bookshops have outlived record shops, I'm convinced that we will still have physical books when e-books are ancient history.

Nicci: There will always be books.

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

Sean: I'm not really a book collector, though over the years, unsystematically, I've accumulated a few signed books. I'm tempted by the idea of owning one of the great books by William Blake that he printed himself and then coloured by hand. They occupy a wonderful utterly unique place where craftsmanship, literature and illustration overlap.

Nicci: We have many thousands of books – but we don't collect them. But I'd like to own a set of Virginia Woolf's books printed by her own printing press and designed by her sister Vanessa – so I'll know that she didn't just write them, she *made* them.