



The Letterpress Project

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

Amongst my earliest memories of books are probably me taking my felt tip pen collection and deciding to, uh, embellish some of the paperbacks lying around the house.

I do not recall having a favourite or inspirational book. Though my elder brother had a copy of the Guinness Book of World Records, which I suppose I found inspirational.

I can recall some picture books that left an impression.

One picture book that I can recall lying around at home was called something like 'the White Witch'. I refrained from 'embellishing' this book because my sister liked it (I think because most of the characters were female). I also found the block colours and simple line drawings of the illustrations relaxing to look at, more so because it was set on a coast or beach. I remember the plot line being something about a sailor whom some witches shipwreck. He drifts ashore where a lone white witch takes care of him, only the sailor doesn't care for her attention and wanders off, leaving the white witch looking worried and distraught. Maybe there was more to it, but for some reason I did not care to read to any further.

There was yet another, somewhat bizarre-seeming picture book lying around at home, which baffled not just me but my elder siblings too. I recall that it had almost photo-realistic illustrations of the darkened, cross-section of a very cluttered house. Amongst the items was a rocking horse, which caught my notice in particular because it seemed so antique. A lone clown or jester was seen in some of the rooms. I do not remember this book having any text or plot. It seemed to imply that the solemn looking clown/jester was very lonely but somewhat happy and content. I can feel that almost haunting sense of the book very strongly even today. (If anyone recognises this book from this description, please let me know the title!)

At a slightly older age, I picked up my elder brother's copy of 'The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe' (which in retrospect doesn't seem like the most thrilling of book titles). Of course I was confronted by a single felt tip line going across the front page (oops!). Yet I found this book very readable and somewhat wonderful. The idea of a docile, talking lion being your best friend was really agreeable, as was the idea of a wonderful land beyond the back of a cupboard, though I was somewhat angry and perturbed by how Lucy was treated as a liar and a fantasist by her elder siblings when she first tried to tell them about it (though looking back as an adult their reaction is now somewhat understandable). I also found the interspersed illustrations, especially of a centaur in a billowing scarf wondering the snow, quite interesting.

My elder brother also recommended 'The Twits' by Roald Dahl. I found this book quite distinct in content but also unsettlingly cruel. The illustration-to-text ratio however was very agreeable to my lazy mind. And I have always loved Quentin Blake's illustrations, especially the facial expressions.

I had a headteacher in primary school called Ms Raven. She looked a little like Angela Lansbury, albeit with more angular features and even shorter hair. Ms Raven often read to us from a particular paperback book about dragons (I cannot remember the title). Though her reading was more like a thrilling exposition (she spoke to us about the book and its details), leaving the whole class spellbound. I think we all wrongly attributed our responsive wonder to the book itself, until some friends and I eagerly tracked that same book down, only to find it disappointing and boring (and that was when I realised that it was her narrative talent that made it interesting to us). A short aside- after Ms Raven left the school, my cousin (who was in the same class as me), wrote her a letter and to our astonishment she responded (to us this was like receiving a personal letter from Jeff Bezos or something).

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

Whenever I had any special ideas I would (and still do) note them down. Some of these ideas would be for picture books. Hence going in that direction...

I've always liked picture books for their brevity of expression, especially the more abstract books.

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

I suppose when it's good in a way that I was not expecting.

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

No not at all, I just concentrate on the work itself, because I feel that inspiration should be received and communicated untempered. I also think that good stories have universal appeal (both in style and content), so I would worry that tailoring a story to suit a specific audience may spoil or impair the expression of it.

However the publishing industry very much does have specific audiences in mind when considering manuscripts (publishers need to earn a stable and predictable profit), so an author should keep this in mind when thinking about where to submit them (i.e. in terms of which publishers will welcome the manuscript based their ethos or interests).

Please note, I said to consider these things when submitting, not writing! In my opinion writing should be fresh and not calculated.

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

Well, looking at how the phones and mp3 players replaced CD's, I would think so. However, reading a physical book is a very different experience from using an e-reader.

I suspect that picture books and 'coffee table' books in particular will remain in publishing because people like to own the physical prints of the artwork.

I also think that picture books will continue to be printed because the education systems always start children off on an elementary level, for example with paper arithmetic before using calculators. Plus, it's nice to have reading activities away from electronic screens.

With regard to paper publishing in general, you can read a physical book during a power shortage or in a remote area, hence for this reason (their independence from technology) I think that they will remain popular.

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

Quite the opposite- I do not like to hold on to or accumulate books, unless they are reference books, though I do like the idea of keeping out-of-print books, or old books that I think no one else will appreciate, safe. And I do appreciate that there are private book collectors and private and public institutions out there that keep historical books safe.

There are many out-of-print non-fiction books that I would like to own, for example books about health, healing and learning skills.