



The Letterpress Project

Author and Illustrator E-Interviews

An interview with Michael Rosen

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

I can see my mother sitting on the end of my bed reading 'The Little Red Engine' and 'Peter Rabbit'. I think I must have been about 3 or 4. 'Peter Rabbit' and 'Squirrel Nutkin' are in their own way 'naughty boy' narratives and I think I identified with these and so later when we read 'Mischievous, the Squirrel' (a French book) and a version of the 'Till Eulenspiegel' stories from Germany there is a steady flow of the naughty boy motif feeding into my mind!

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

Books, theatre and song were central to the way my parents talked, worked and thought. They passed that one, involved my brother and me in that kind of culture. My brother was himself a great talker, and story-teller and he was great at making the everyday seem funny. From all this I took it that literature, storytelling and singing were high status. They seemed important and fun. I wanted to be part of that both as someone who could write or tell stories that had already been told but also to make new ones.

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

A successful book is one that offers readers possibilities. Because I believe the world can be changed for the better and indeed must be or we face a cataclysm in several different ways, then for me I look for those possibilities to be ones that can assist us to change the world for the better. Some people might take that to mean that it's the book itself that offers these 'improving' possibilities but I'm someone who takes it that even when books appear to describe the awful, the terrible, the undesirable, the effect on the reader might well be the feeling of 'never again', or 'not that'. I think that's how and why Kafka is such a great writer.

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

Sometimes I do, yes. I wrote a book called 'A Great Big Cuddle' illustrated by Chris Riddell. I definitely had in mind for that the situations in which carers and educators of the very youngest children could share that book. My 'Uncle Gobb' books are at heart satires on the present education system. I hope very much that children between the ages of 7 and 11 will find them funny but at the same time I hope that parents and teachers will see clearly what it is I'm satirising.

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

I'm rubbish at predictions. When electronic books appeared I was a) gratified that I had predicted they would happen as a few years earlier I had owned one of those electronic organisers and so made the prediction that one day people could and would put books on to such portable devices! b) certain they would replace virtually all kinds of books apart perhaps from the picture book. I now see that adults, teens and children down to about 5 are not particularly excited by e-books though they are still popular. I also see under-fives with digital devices in their hands in their buggies, playing games and pushing buttons etc. So I'm pretty well completely wrong on what I thought in the past, so I'm not going to dare to make a prediction now!

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

I am a book collector. My dream would be to find and own what was a revolutionary book: 'Tommy Thumb's Pretty Song Book' volume 1. It's never been found. This was the world's first nursery rhyme book and marks the point at which the established book trade first produced a book for children that was not moralistic or didactic in any way whatsoever. Many (not all, by any means) of the nursery rhymes are dangerous, subversive, surrealist tales made accessible to audiences to all ages. The efforts of the last 350 years by publishers and critics to soften and sanctify nursery rhymes have not succeeded. It would be wonderful to find this first volume.