



The Letterpress Project

Author and Illustrator E-Interviews

An Interview With Mimi Thebo

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

My mother says I wasn't quite three when she told me that was enough of *Wind and the Willows* for the evening and I took the book out of her hand and kept reading it for myself. I'm not certain if that's strictly true, but I do know I could read before I went to Kindergarden – or Reception as we'd call it here. I read everything and had quite good taste, actually. I loved Winnie the Pooh, all the Frances Hodgson Burnett books, and *Black Beauty*. But I also loved the Nancy Drew mysteries...and something called The Bobsey Twins (rather Enid Blyton mysteries but American). That said, I was always drawn to British writing – I used to get regularly told off at school for putting the 'u' in 'colour'.

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

When I was 14, I died in a car accident. I was dead for quite a while; about eight minutes they think – my larynx had been crushed. While they patched me together for the next few years, I wrote to communicate. I soon learned that if I wrote entertainingly, I got more things; more painkillers, more food, more hours with the light on. I know this sounds like something a bit too neat to be true, but I had been a singer before the accident and had loved the theatre. I had already been writing songs, and I felt I needed to do *something* with those creative impulses...so I started writing, playing with words.

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

I have to believe in the character and the world. The writing has to be good enough that it won't take away from my joy in the story, but if the writing is absolutely beautiful, then reading it becomes an amazing experience. I want to still think about the story for years after I've read it, I want to remember the experience of reading it like I'd remember eating an exquisite cake or hearing a musician play a wonderful song. I can remember where I read some of my favourite books, remember what I was wearing, where I sat, the taste of the apple I crunched.

Reading is *important*.

If a neuropsychologist hooks up electrodes to your scalp while you watch a film of someone running, your brain looks as though you are watching a film. If a neuropsychologist hooks up electrodes to your scalp while you read a good description of someone running, your brain looks as though you are *running*. Because of the engagement in the process of accessing the story, because we make half the story up ourselves, we are experiencing fiction as if it was really happening to us.

That means that reading good fiction is a way to cheat death. I can live whole other lifetimes and learn from the mistakes my characters and I make together in those narratives. I can learn and grow and become a better person – all from just reading a well-written, engaging story.

And that's what I ask from the fiction I read. I don't want to pass the time with something interesting. I want my life to be saved. I want to be permanently altered. I want to be transformed by my encounter with the text.

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

I usually have to think about my readership when I write. That's because I'm so strange. I'm a British/American, kind of disabled, a bit intellectual, marginally rural. Some of my friends and colleagues can write just for themselves; and there are enough people like them in the world - or at least enough people that understand people like them in the world – that their readers can meet them where they actually are. My situation isn't like that. I always have to think about who would most want to read this particular story. I have to ask, 'Is this for Americans? British people? Both?'. And, once I've done that, it's not a huge leap to wonder, 'Is this for children? Teens? Adults?' So, I think I'm always thinking about my readership.

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

I have a Kindle and I read on my phone. And that's convenient sometimes, when I'm travelling, for instance, or when I want to read late at night and don't want to wake anyone with a light.

But you can't take those into the bath. And you can't walk around with them, like a badge that will give you entry into a secret club. Going into a party with a book title facing out is like having a mate that introduces you to other people. Sitting in a café holding a book in front of you is like putting up a little fence to keep other people away. Waiting in a doctor's office, or enduring a long journey, or hiding in a corner while people you love argue...a book can become a comfort...a cuddle...someone who understands you. I have hugged books and felt that they hugged me back. You can't do that with your Kindle.

And I think that's why books for young people – physical books – are such a buoyant product. It's the very 'artefactness' that makes them so desirable. Our music is in the cloud and our photos are online and our mates often exist electronically, too. But a book is solid in your hand and huggable in your arms. It's there in your world actually *with* you. God, I love books. They are my most faithful friends.

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

I am in the process of divesting of some of my books. Of COURSE there are special books I'd love to own. If I started telling you all of them, I'd probably never stop. But right now, I am trying to cut down my collection. When we built our library, we thought we'd always have shelf space – but we couldn't even get everything on the 300 feet of shelves. I have an additional 36 feet in my bedroom and that soon overflowed as well. It's an *illness*. I am now recycling everything that doesn't actually make me cry to put in the box. If I burst into tears, it stays on the shelves...everything else must *go*.

Thank you very much for taking time to do this for us. We will advise you when we publish it on the website - www.letterpressproject.co.uk. Please return the completed interview to:

Karen Argent

Project Director Karen.argent@btinternet.com