



The Letterpress Project

Author and Illustrator E-Interviews

An Interview With Margaret Bateson-Hill

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

I have always been surrounded by books and stories. My dad read a bedtime story to my sisters and me every night. We were huge Enid Blyton fans – most especially the Famous Five (I had my first crush on Julian!) and the Magic Faraway Tree. I can still remember the suspense and excitement of my dad finishing the chapter and closing the book on a cliff-hanger moment... Perhaps best of all were the stories my dad made up for us. They always featured a little girl called Mary-Louise and her friend Tinkerbell the fairy. My dad always wove in incidents from our day. My favourite was when Mary Louise and Tinkerbell found themselves in a bird's nest being fed worms. The stories always finished with Mary Louise falling down only to wake up having fallen out of bed!

We also had some extraordinarily beautiful fairy tale books and a huge Alice in Wonderland with tissue between the pages. I also read comics – Robin, Bimbo and Judy (especially Sandra of the Secret Ballet). I also have very clear memories of story time at school. In reception class we had stories three or four times a day. We all had to sit on the green and white story mat and Mrs Finch would read to the class, and not always from a picture book. I clearly remember listening to Sam Pig and the Dragon by Alison Utterly. In year 1 and 2 Mrs Fletcher used to read us lots of poetry; I can still recite 'O Dear Me' and 'The Horseman' by Walter de la Mare and I love Rachel Field's 'Something told the Wild Geese. It was also from Mrs Fletcher that I learnt the importance of reading aloud well - how that can draw listeners into a story.

I also listened to stories on records - Peter Rabbit and Mrs Tiggy Winkle read by Vivien Leigh, as well as various fairytales. And there were songs to go with them, or classical music as background music. 'The Little Mermaid,' is forever linked with Grieg's Piano Concerto! I loved them. Books fed into music, fed into new stories, which I would act out with my sisters.

My favourite books included 'A Wrinkle in Time' by Madeleine L'Engle, (as soon as I'd finished it I started reading it again), all the Narnia Books by C S Lewis, the Lone Pine books by Malcolm Saville 'The Swish of the Curtain' by Pamela Brown - I *so* wanted to be a member of the Blue Door Theatre Company and as for Anne of Green Gables – we were kindred spirits!

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

When my children were small I worked for Lambeth Libraries as an under-fives storyteller, taking bags of books into preschools and nursery settings. It was a great apprenticeship. In reading and telling stories I had to spend time unpacking the subtext of the picture books.

I was also introduced to the world of telling stories without books. I started revisiting folk and fairy tales only to realise what an important part they had played in my childhood and how much I loved them, especially Cap O' Rushes, The Snake Prince, Long, Broad and Sharpsight and Beauty and the Beast. As my own children were then starting school I began to think I'd like to tell stories in schools and it would be easier if I had a book. I didn't really know what to do; I just wrote down a story I had previously made up to tell to a group of children. It turned into my first book, 'Lao Lao of Dragon Mountain.' Telling stories is still at the very heart of my work, and the reason I write. Having worked for Lambeth Libraries where inclusivity and diversity have always been to the fore I approached the local Chinese community to help me with the book. When the book came to be published the publisher, Anna McQuinn approached them officially to be the consultants on the book, to write a parallel Chinese text and to create the paper cuts for the story.

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

Tricky question! I think you need a main character you really care about, or associate with. Someone you can laugh and cry with. And a great villain – someone or thing who really scares you!

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

I sort of have an audience in mind – but more because I'll be asked by publishers, agents etc. I'm not too keen on this divide of books into different age ranges. I write for me – and I write for the children I have met in schools, thinking about where they are in their lives. I try and write the story I want to tell. Stories have minds of their own anyway.

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

I think we will always have physical books. I hope we do. I especially hope we do for children. However clever the technology, a full colour double page spread is not the same on a small tablet. It's also too easy for picture e-books to become more like a game or film.

I'd like to suggest that physical books make for more independent readers, and as Anne Shirley would say, 'There's more scope for the imagination.'

Having said that, (discounting picture books, which should always be physical copies,) I do like the convenience of electronic books. I love taking my library with me. I read both physical and electronic books.

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

I am a book collector; there are books everywhere in my house. I find it very difficult to get rid of books. My special books include a very large book (nearly too big for the book shelf) of photographs of Nijinsky, the Russian ballet dancer and two books of fairy tales with illustrations by Barbara Freeman. I had these as a child and loved the illustrations. I recently tracked them down online.

A special book I'd love to own? I'd love to go back in time and look at my childhood book shelves and choose something from there to bring back to the future – especially that copy of Alice in Wonderland with the tissue paper!

Having said that, it's not owning the book that's important, it's reading it.