



The Letterpress Project

# An Interview With Martin Impey

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

I remember my mum reading Ted Hughes' *'Iron Man'* to me when I was young (around 5 years old I think), as I was too young to go with my dad and my brother to watch football. I felt very lucky to have a little stroll to the local sweet shop, grab some pic n' mix and when we got back, I could pick any book from the shelves at home... who needs football!

Re actual reading, I think one of my earliest reads was *'Little Nose'* by John Grant, I would read them in the voice of John Grant himself no less, with his thick Scottish accent as featured on BBC's Jackanory. *'Stig of the Dump'* was a firm favourite and then as I got a little older and more confident with my reading, I found Roald Dahl and my favourite *'Danny Champion of the World'* Oh how I loved the thought of sneaking around in a woods at night!

My absolute favourite though was Phillippa Pearce's wonderful *'Tom's Midnight Garden'*, this captured my imagination and has never left me. I was captivated by the anticipation of the adventures awaiting the coming night and the discovery of a world long since past. This book, without doubt is why I love to paint night scenes in my artwork both professional and personal - *I have wanted a Long Case or Grandfather Clock ever since...* one day I WILL get one! I even named the boy and girl in my latest book *'BLITZ One Family's War'* 'Tom' & 'Hatty' as a nod to that story and what it meant to me.

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

I suppose my mum & dad originally. Dad was a wonderful artist but hardly drew or painted once my brother and I came along, which was a real shame. He was however, fully behind my work as was my dear mum... You know the drill – a family friend would come around and my mum would insist that I went to get my sketch books or latest piece of artwork – which I reluctantly did and would initially stand cringing as they ooow'd and aaaahhh'd at my doodles and ideas, eventually though I quite enjoying the fact that others had seen my work and actually liked it!

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

Well, if we start with illustration (my first love), I think what makes one 'successful' is by how much it engages the viewer. Also, something I think – as an illustrator – that is very important, is if the illustrations tell their own stories alongside the text they are enhancing, by illustrating in a way that invites the reader/viewer to wonder what else is going on. As a child I always used to imagine what was through that door? or what was going on outside that window in the back of the image? simple things that are easily missed, but to the book lover never so!

As an author (which is new to me as my new book – mentioned earlier – is the first story to be published that I have written & illustrated), you have to give enough to capture the imagination and yet leave enough for the reader to create their own version of what you are describing or seeing. That way, they are literally 'there' in that imagined space with you, experiencing what the character is feeling. I also think connecting via emotion is very important as well, if you care about the character, then you are invested in their story and what becomes of them.

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

Yes, I have to if it's a book for younger people (but not specific groups of children – I hope everyone feels welcome to enjoy my books and stories), but I do try and appeal to both the main audience (in my case children) but also put enough 'grown up stuff' in it so the parent or teacher is also kept on board if reading or studying it with someone. This can be subtle and is better if it is, for me those are details that children might overlook, but if they are of an age to understand then the older person can point these out often relaying memories and stories of their own. This comes about by adding that extra something following your research. I do mention this a lot during school visits, *'Research and detail are the key that will separate your project or story from everyone else's!'* not to mention passion. If you are passionate about a subject then you will write about it better or illustrate it better than any other subject you can do. "DO WHAT YOU LOVE = LOVE WHAT YOU DO!"

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

I really hope not. There is simply nothing like holding a book in your hands, turning a page and being in awe of what you see right there in front of you. The feel and weight of it, the smell of a book, especially an old book, with foxing on some pages and a distant hint of dust from it's last resting place. Books are time machines, they're dream makers, wilderness tamers, mystery solvers, havoc creators, a bound bundle of wonder. They are a snapshot into the minds of others, seeing what they see or what they intend us to see, they are totally unique. Have you ever held an older book and wondered who else has spent time holding these pages of this most fabulous of things?

In contrast, electronic tablets do not change from book to book, they are sterile and consistent in a way that I cannot connect with. I do not own a reading tablet. Yes, to the minimalist there is an attraction in having your whole personal bookshelf or home library in one tiny place taking no space around you, yet they belong in a throwaway time of megabytes and downloads. This is simply not for me. The effort that goes into the stock that a book is printed on - will it have a lamination or foil on the cover or both? Will it be cloth bound? Will it have a dust jacket? How does it feel in the hand? Owning a book is more than reading it, it is an experience that all book lovers are familiar with and it is for that reason books will always be needed and cherished.

In between the two choices is of course the Spoken Word book or dramatized book, these I do listen to. This enables me to continue to work, drawing or painting while still consuming a wonderful story, but being a book lover, I nearly always have to own a 'hard copy' of the book too in the hope that one day I will find the time to pick it up and read it properly and experience the magic all over again.

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

Yes, I do collect books. In fact Emilie (my partner of 34 years) and I had an extensive library of illustrated children's books long before we started a family! We have old editions, first editions, signed editions and just standard for the love it editions, all loved, all cherished.

A book I would most like to own, would be a first edition of POEMS by Wilfred Owen – Posthumously published by Chatto & Windus in 1920.

Reason - I have always loved poetry and especially the war poets and I have been a huge fan of Wilfred Owen's work, but since I was asked to illustrate a book showing my vision of his masterpiece 'Dulce et Decorum Est' published by Strauss House Productions, this was taken to a whole new level. I have a copy of 'Memoirs of An Infantry Officer' signed and numbered by another famous war poet and hero Siegfried Sassoon, but the nearest I could get to Owen would be that 1920 edition.

Or (*I am being greedy here*) a first edition of PETER PAN in Kensington Gardens illustrated by my favourite Arthur Rackham, published by Hodder & Stoughton in 1906.

Reason – Peter pan, another stunning story set in London at ‘night time’, my favourite time! Who could not be captivated by the line “Second star to the right and straight on ‘til morning.” JM Barrie was a wonderful descriptive storyteller, but more than this the 1906 edition is a thing of beauty with Arthur Rackham’s stunning illustrations bringing to life words in a way I could only dream of doing.