



The Letterpress Project

Author and Illustrator E-Interviews

AN INTERVIEW WITH ALI SPARKES

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

I was a slow reader and really only got going when I was about eight and picked up my first Famous Five book (Five Go To Smuggler's Top, since you ask). Enid Blyton definitely lit the sparkler – but it was the many other authors that followed who kicked off the Cowes Regatta Fireworks. Joan Aiken (*The Wolves of Willoughby Chase*), Clive King (*Stig of the Dump*), Jean Craighead-George (*My Side of the Mountain*), Douglas Adams (*The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*). We used to have some lovely fairy tales books too, I remember, and I adored the illustrations and the smell of the paper; they were a real comfort blanket for me and I would read and re-read and generally inhale them...

Q2. What inspired you to become an author?

All those books I read. In my teens I started writing quite lengthy stories for my own entertainment – and then showed some of my full-length (ish) adventures to my art teacher – Mr Tucker – who brought in his Writers & Artists Year Book and encouraged me to send them off. I duly despatched Webster Week Out, Websters On The Warpath and Websters On Water (tales of me and my two best friends) to Penguin Books Ltd. I still have the rejection letter... I show it off at school events. So Mr Tucker, too, was an inspiration along with other lovely teachers and, of course, my mum and dad and siblings who all thought I had a bit of a way with words.

Q3. For you, what makes a successful book?

It needs to grab me quickly, as I have the attention span of a hyperactive gnat. Then it needs to deliver on character and plot and humour and emotional pull... and some thrills. A really good book is one that never leaves me once I've read it; a story and characters and scenes which haunt me forever after.

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

Sometimes, but mostly I write the first draft for *me*. I don't worry about the reader. In a later draft I might, because obviously, if it's a book aimed at age 7+ I may need to tweak the language at times. I think it's a mistake to dwell on it too much, though; you'll mess up your groove.

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 keep both. Recent trends suggest the eBook thing is waning a bit and settling down. I prefer the tangibility (and the smell) of a real book but I do occasionally download one for my iPad, when I'm in a hurry. I would love to see a little bit of subtle augmentation in the eBooks – would be fab to have colour illustrations which slightly animate – or a bit of atmosphere setting music. I wouldn't want it to get too game-y, with pop ups and interactivity because I think a book has another purpose and travels another road through our minds. We need the quietness and the focus which only comes from reading the printed word and, sometimes, gazing at the illustrations.

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

I have loads of books and often try to prune them and pass them on because there's just not enough space for them all! But I wouldn't mind a first edition of Five Go To Smuggler's Top by Enid Blyton or The Whispering Mountain by Joan Aiken... or any of the books I adores as a child. A first edition Jane Eyre would be something too...