



## The Letterpress Project

### Author and Illustrator E-Interviews

# An Interview With Ally Sherrick

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

My earliest memories of books and stories are joyful ones. I have very vivid memories of listening to my dad telling me and my younger sister his made-up tales of a magic coach called Charlie, and to my mum reading from A.A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* and Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories* – my favourite was 'The Elephant's Child' and his 'satiabie curiosity'. My mum was great at doing the voices too. This combined with the power of the storytelling and the undercurrent of gentle, and in Kipling's case often darker, more subversive humour, kept me hanging on her every word.

Sadly, my earliest experience of trying to read was a different matter. I was what was termed 'a slow reader' and in the first year or so of going to school, struggled to make sense of the knots of black squiggles on the page. I was even less happy at the school itself, convinced that the headmistress was a witch – I had a vivid imagination even then! But then, as luck would have it, my parents decided to move house. The approach of the teachers at my new school – including the lovely head teacher, Mrs Branson who invited every child who finished a book into her office to tell her about it in return for a Smartie and a sticky shape – was like a breath of fresh air. With their support and encouragement – and no doubt because I felt more settled too – the words began to untangle themselves, and slowly but surely, I transformed into a voracious bookworm.

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

I can't honestly say that I grew up wanting to be an author from an early age. For quite a while I was very keen on becoming an Egyptologist. I loved learning about the discovery of the tomb of the boy-king, Tutankhamun – I suppose this was around the time of the great exhibition of treasures from his tomb at the British Museum in 1972. And I was fascinated by mummies – of the bandaged variety!

However, I always enjoyed writing stories for what was called English Composition and I remember my English teacher at secondary school, Mrs Laub, responding very positively to a rather dark descriptive piece I once wrote about autumn trees in which I likened their bare branches to the hands of giants poking up through the soil from the underworld beneath. A bit on the melodramatic side, but her praise for this, and other work, certainly encouraged me to think that I might just have what it took to become a writer one day.

Rather satisfyingly, my original passion for treasure digging has managed to find its way into the plot of my latest book, *The Buried Crown*, which is all about a priceless lost artefact linked to the burial of an Anglo-Saxon king.

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

I guess it depends on the genre, but for children's books, I think it's got to be all about telling a compelling story with irresistible characters that keep you rooting for them – in spite of their faults – all the way: the sort of book you can't bear to put down. There's a special place in my heart for the books like that from my own childhood – *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase* by Joan Aiken, *The Ghost of Thomas Kempe* by Penelope Lively, *Carrie's War* by Nina Bawden to name but a few.

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

I hope my books are enjoyed by people of all ages. My main focus when I write them is on telling the best story I possibly can. But I suppose when I focus in on the younger members of my audience, I think of them as being an extension of my twelve year old self – who is still very much alive inside of me, even though I'm a good deal older than that now!

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

I was fearful when e-books first came out that they may replace physical books. But now, a few years on, it's clear that what I would term 'real' books are holding their own. And publishers are spending more time and effort in making them things of beauty, with gorgeous covers and brilliant illustrations. So now, I'm much more optimistic that they'll be around for many more years – hopefully thousands – to come.

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

Reading is like breathing if you're a writer, so I think it would be odd if authors weren't collectors of books. I'm a bit of a serial book buyer myself and whenever I come across an independent bookshop, I always make a point of going in and buying at least one book, sometimes more.

The Japanese have a word to describe the habit of buying more books than you can actually read in a lifetime: tsundoku. I confess to being guilty of that, but I doubt I'll be changing my ways anytime soon!