



The Letterpress Project

Author and Illustrator E-Interviews

An Interview With Bryony Thomson

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

Many of my strongest memories from when I was very small centre around books and reading. I didn't really have picture books when I was growing up, it was primarily my Mum or Dad reading to me and so the sensation of being snuggled up against one of them as they read aloud, creating this magical world just for the two of us, has really stuck with me. I think that experience, the almost conspiratorial nature of it, was what cemented my love of books and storytelling.

Winnie the Pooh was one of my favourites, in particular the incident where Pooh goes to visit Rabbit, eats too much honey and condensed milk and gets stuck in the rabbit hole. The characters all have such distinctive voices - my Dad did a brilliant Eeyore impression - and I think this idea of building really well-rounded characters has had a big influence on how I approach my own work.

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

My first degree was in fine art and over the duration of the course I became increasingly frustrated at the lack of importance that was placed on storytelling. For me pictures had always been about stories and so once I had finished the degree course and had some time to reflect I realised that this was where my real passion lay.

When I started the MA Children's Book Illustration course at Cambridge School of Art this love of storytelling was reinforced and it was attending the course that inspired me to want to be an author as well as an illustrator. Being surrounded by so many other amazing artists and writers who told stories in such diverse and interesting ways really made me believe that this was something I could do to.

I'm a firm believer that anyone can be an author / illustrator, you don't have to be the best at drawing or the best at writing, you just have to find a means of communicating that works for you and suits what you want to say; when it comes down to it, everyone has a story to tell.

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

For me the key thing is that a book or illustration produces an emotional reaction in the reader. If you can make your audience feel something then you have created a dialogue and level of communication with them which has to be the primary aim of storytelling. I think this is where the real power of books and illustration lies as it offers huge possibilities in expressing ideas and making the reader consider things for a different perspective. A good book can make the reader laugh, it can make them cry or feel anger or fear; to be able to do this simply through words and pictures is an incredible thing.

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

I don't write or plan a book with a specific group of people in mind as I hope that the ideas I'm trying to communicate are fairly universal but I do always try to be conscious of the age group that I'm targeting. I try to put myself inside the mind of a child when I'm writing as therefore use language that feels appropriate right from the very beginning of the process. Every time I go back and do an edit I try to refocus on this in the hope that I'll never get completely carried away with the language I'm using! Similarly when planning the illustrations I try to think about them from the child's perspective and so depict the characters and scenes in a way that will be relevant for them, either based on my memories or things that I see children doing now.

When I'm planning a new story, however, I do also try to bear in mind the parents who are likely to be spending just as much time with the book as the children. I try to put in a little something for them that they can identify with and will make the act of reading the book aloud fun. For me this is important as the child's enjoyment of the book is likely to be at least in part down to how much the adult reading it is enjoying themselves as well.

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

When I think about this question it's hard for me to separate out what I hope, from what my slightly more cynical side actually believes will happen.

What I very much hope is that the physical book has a long and continuing future, particularly within the children's market. For me the physical book offers something that the electronic book will never truly be able to replace. It is an object to be treasured and loved, to see grow dog-eared and yellowed over the years and love even more for these imperfections because they are signs of the time and perpetual use that has been invested into it. I also believe that, in picture books especially, the physical act of turning a page to reveal the next holds a magic that the electronic book can never replicate. By reducing this page turn to the click of a button, the reader loses the ability to control the pace. They can no more slow the page turn to build anticipation than they can speed through it with the eagerness of trying to see what happens next in the story.

The more cynical side of me tends to think that the electronic book is likely to become more and more popular if only because our whole society is becoming more tech-savvy. Children today are growing up in a world where technology and gadgetry are a given rather than something out of the norm and so I am not sure whether physical books can have the same sense of wonder and magic. I think the continuing existence of the physical book relies heavily on adults passing on their nostalgic love for it to the next generation and as the use of technology increases this is going to get harder and harder.

I don't believe that many of my earliest memories would surround books and reading if my parents had not had the physical objects to share with me. That physical collaboration between the two of us made the whole experience more real and more important in my young mind.

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

I'm not sure I would describe myself as a book collector in the traditional sense but having said that I do have a huge pile of picture books that I've amassed over the last few years and frequently dip into whenever I'm researching a new story or looking for inspiration. I don't really have any structure to my collection, I tend to buy books new or old that I feel some kind of affinity with or resonate with me in some way whether that be from an illustration point of view or a storytelling point of view.

Having said all that I have made a conscious effort in the last couple of years to buy the new illustrated Harry Potter books whenever they come out. I think they are absolutely fantastic and the illustrations really bring the stories to life especially when viewed in conjunction with the text. I'd like to build up the full set of these as something to pass on to my kids when they are old enough.