



The Letterpress Project

Author and Illustrator E-Interviews

An Interview With Denise Hayes

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

One of the first memories I have of books is of sitting on my mother's lap while she read to me. I must have been only two or three. I can't remember which books she read but I do remember how - warm and secure in my mother's arms - I felt the real world fade away and other imaginary worlds open up. My mother would run her finger along the words as she read and I guess this is how I gradually learnt for myself how to connect the black squiggles and lines with meaning. This epiphany or - more accurately - slow dawning of light is experienced by all who learn to read. While I was still at Primary School I read 'The Story of my Life' by Helen Keller in which she describes the very first moment she connected the letters traced onto the palm of her hand with the external reality they represented: her teacher, Anne Sullivan, had placed Helen's hand under a water pump and spelled out 'water': Keller writes: 'the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that 'w-a-t-e-r' meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free!'. Whilst not so dramatic or life-changing, learning to read, for me, was also a source of joy and freedom. There was no stopping me! Before I ever went to school I could read the headlines on newspapers. When I travelled on the tram into town with my mother I shouted out loud the slogans on the advertising hoardings we passed. There were no bookshops near our terraced streets but I had free and easy access to a public library and as soon as I could, I began to choose books for myself. 'The Tale of Peter Rabbit' was the very first book I borrowed and I simply loved how naughty and daring Peter was. My tastes were pretty eclectic: I remember - when I was about eight - being told off by a teacher for reading Anne Frank's 'The Diary of a Young Girl' which was, he said, not at all suitable reading for a young girl. I didn't actually own many books, only comics and Christmas annuals, but when I was ten I was given the whole set of Arthur Mee's Encyclopedia by a friend before she emigrated to Australia and these alphabetically arranged tomes were a wonderful repository of poetry and classical tales.

Q2. What inspired you to become an author

A very early inspiration was the book 'The Story of Babar'. It wasn't so much the tale itself that inspired me or the illustrations, wonderful though they are, but the rather unusual use of a cursive font for the text. This looked for all the world just like my mother's handwriting and for the first time ever it dawned on me that stories in books were written down by real people. *I could write stories too.* And I did. Lots of them. Some in school exercise books, some in tiny books I made for my dolls and bears. At night, snuggled in bed with my two sisters, I told Enid Blyton-inspired adventure stories about my invented heroine, Jennifer. My favourite primary school teacher, Mrs Metcalf, also played an important part in encouraging

me to write. I was a poor speller by the standards back then but Mrs Metcalf never really focused on that. 'There'll be time enough to sort that out,' she told my parents, 'Denise loves writing and that's what's really important.' There was no set curriculum back in the sixties and I had the freedom at school to write for hours at a time, often filling my exercise book with just one story. Mrs Metcalf used to let me read my stories to the other children at story-time and sometimes took me across the road to the infant school so I could read to the younger children. Can you imagine! I was an author and still not nine years old.

Q3. For you, what makes a successful book or story.

I love to read books and stories that take me to worlds beyond my own experience: I guess that's why I enjoy writers like Ray Bradbury, J.G. Ballard and Jorge Luis Borges (the latter's anthology 'Labyrinths' is an endless source of inspiration). Whatever the genre, a strong storyline that keeps surprising the reader is also, for me, an essential ingredient and I'm an avid reader of thrillers and mysteries. But above all else, I think a reader needs to be able to engage with key characters. A brilliant writer can win our sympathy even for 'bad guys' like Alex in 'A Clockwork Orange', and Raskolnikov in 'Crime and Punishment'. And of course we all love Emma despite her being described by Austen as 'a heroine whom nobody but myself will much like'.

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

The first complete book I wrote was a children's book and it was written especially for my daughter as a present for her eighth birthday. I tried to incorporate all the kinds of things I knew she would find funny or exciting. This book has never been published, although the editors at Puffin considered it for a while, so it's hard to know if it would appeal to a wider audience! Most of the stories and poems I've had published have been written for an adult audience and to match a certain theme or to fit in with a certain publication. As a writer I quite enjoy the challenge of writing to a brief. My most recent pieces of writing are four flash fiction stories to be published in the Fantastic Books anthology '666'. The brief here was to write a horror story in exactly 666 words - that certainly focused the mind and the pen! Whatever the project, however, I think one should always try to write from the heart. One should never write down to an audience. I always aim to write something that I myself would enjoy reading.

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

Given the practical advantages of electronic books in terms of storage and portability I think that people will inevitably become much more selective about the physical books they add to their home. Books with strong visual elements and books that are beautifully produced and presented can never really be replaced by electronic forms. I like the dip-able-in nature of real books. Poetry anthologies and other collections of smaller items such as James Lough's collection of aphorisms in 'Short Flights' work best if a reader can physically browse through the pages. And nothing can replace the page-turning magic of reading a real book with your child or grandchild on your knee.

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

At one time I had hundreds of books in my office at work as well as on my bookcases at home. Retirement and moving house meant many books - some well-thumbed and much-loved - had to go. Now I tend to collect hardback editions of books by author friends or browsable, re-readable non-fiction books like the wonderful 'Landmarks' by Robert Macfarlane or Jeff VanderMeer's inspirational 'Wonderbook: The Illustrated Guide to Creating Imaginative Fiction'. I also collect poetry magazines and collections, especially

ones that are beautifully illustrated like Popshot magazine and the magazines and pamphlets published by Crystal Clear Creators. Other than that it's cookery books of all types: I keep promising myself I won't buy any more but when I'm in a bookshop they're just too appetising to resist. As for a book I'd love to own, I have a tiny facsimile copy of William Blake's 'Songs of Innocence and Experience' but it would be wonderful to have one of the first few copies! My family once had an ancient pop-up bible in the attic and I was fascinated by that when I was little: it has long vanished but I'd also love to see that one more time!

Thank you very much for taking time to do this for us. We will advise you when we publish it on the website - www.letterpressproject.co.uk. Please return the completed interview to:

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