



The Letterpress Project

Author and Illustrator E-Interviews

AN INTERVIEW WITH ANTHONY MCGOWAN

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

When I was young, my obsession was natural history. I read whatever I could find about birds and animals, and had a collection of Ladybird books on the subject that consumed all my pocket money. I don't really recall my parents reading to me, but my dad used to make up bedtime stories for the five McGowan kids. I've passed some of the same stories on to my children. Because of my 'fact' obsession, I hardly read any children's fiction until a teacher gave me a copy of *The Lord of the Rings* – I was 8 or 9, I think. It took me three years to read – in a sense I had to learn how to read fiction – but at the end of it I was a different sort of kid – one who read, and might one day write, novels.

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

From the age of 15 or so I began to write poetry, in a failed attempt to impress girls. Perhaps that's still at the heart of what I do – a failed attempt to impress people. But the love of reading I developed post-*Lord of the Rings* also played a part. For me there's a continuity between reading and writing. And it helps that I'm not much use at anything else. If I'd been more numerate I might have been an accountant; less hefty and I could have been a professional hot-air balloonist.

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

There are simply no rules that apply to all great books. Except, perhaps, the avoidance of clichés.

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

I think a lot about my readers. I deliberately write 'for' teenagers in my teenage books, and 'for' younger readers in my younger books. Other authors sometimes say that they just write for themselves, but I think they're deluded, or saying it because it makes them sound like an artist rather than a hack. Writing (for me, at least) isn't like laying an egg, i.e. an 'internal' process, a matter between the artist and his or her soul. It's a public conversation – there are two of us, me and the reader. Both have to bring something to the book.

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

I almost think that moment has gone – a while back I thought that most books would soon be read in digital form, with e-readers being handed out more or less for free. But it seems the physical book has survived the onslaught. It appears that most people just prefer having the real thing. Personally, if I feel like reading some trash – the sort of thing I'd give straight to Oxfam after reading - I'd tend to go down the e-book route. But anything serious has to be made out of paper, so I can scribble in the margins.

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

I do collect books – I've got a reasonable collection of rare modern first editions. I'd love a first edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, but that's ten thousand quid ...