



The Letterpress Project

An Interview With Chris Priestley

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 are not of reading books myself but of teachers reading them in class: Dickens' A Christmas Carol. 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' by Coleridge. When I started choosing my own books, the ones that stick out are 'The Cat in the Hat' The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, Rosemary Sutcliff's The Eagle of the Ninth, Henry Treece's Viking books and Leon Garfield's historical adventures, like 'Smith'. Sutcliff & Treece both often featured Charles Keeping illustrations and that was all part of the appeal for me.

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

Other writers and illustrators: Charles Keeping in illustration, definitely. I was a huge Marvel comic reader as a teenager, so Jack Kirby has to get a mention. There's no one writer who inspired me to become a writer. They all did. It's an ongoing thing. Every so often I discover a new (to me) and I get inspired all over again.

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

A perfect book feels like it was written just for you. I felt like I discovered Rosemary Sutcliff, Henry Treece and Charles Keeping, but of course I didn't. But those books

felt like they were sitting in the library waiting for me to come along. And in a way they were.

I think as writers and illustrators we can only really try and make books that are successful in our own terms. Everything else is out of our hands. Some good books fail horribly. Some awful books thrive. I just try and write the best book I can. When I illustrate, especially if I'm illustrating someone else's work, I try to add something that isn't there in the text - I tend not to do illustrated scenes. I leave that to the text. I try and do little filmic moments. I try and add atmosphere or catch the mood of the writing. For that reason I don't always work in the same way.

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

Yes I do. I write for young people and so first and foremost I want young people to enjoy my work. I have adults reading my work and it's nice when they praise it, but that praise would not offset the disappointment I would feel if the target audience did not enjoy it. That said, I don't have a specific reader in mind - apart from maybe a younger version of myself. I don't want to confuse or bore my younger readers, but neither do I want to talk down to them.

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

The physical book was meant to be dead and buried years ago and yet it's doing fine. I think there are room for both versions. They each have their place. Personally, I spend enough time looking at a screen. I much prefer paper. I actually find it easier to read. I like to flick back and re-read. I find that simpler in a book. But then I did not grow up with e-books. The biggest crisis facing books is the neglect and destruction of our network of libraries. It's a national disgrace. I would not be a writer or an artist were it not for libraries.

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

I wouldn't style myself a collector, although I do have a lot of books. I don't seek particular editions or anything like that. There are illustrators I can't resist if I stumble across them in a second hand book shop. My wife has been gifting me old copies of books by the wonderful Alice and Martin Provensen for a number of years now. If I see a Charles Keeping illustrated book, I always buy it (if I don't have it already). I like British illustrated books from the middle of the twentieth century when illustration mirrored movements in fine art. As a painter myself, I'm jealous of the ease with which painters and illustrators were able to move between disciplines. But there are a lot of really beautiful books being produced today.

A first edition of Frankenstein has just sold for a million dollars. I'd like one of those. I have a bit of an obsession with that book. Although if I had a million dollars I'm not sure that's what I'd spend it on.