



The Letterpress Project

Author and Illustrator E-Interviews

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this series of Letterpress Project e-interviews that we are undertaking over the coming months. The Letterpress Project is a not-for-profit initiative that exists to promote the value and pleasures of the physical book and we are keen to get the thoughts of authors and book illustrators about their own influences, experiences and love of books. We are happy for you to make your answers as long or as brief as you are comfortable with and we will undertake not to edit or paraphrase any of your comments without your explicit permission.

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 reading stem from my love of stories. My mum and dad were great storytellers and often told me about the place where they were born, Dominica, which they referred to as 'back home'. Dominica is a Caribbean island between Guadeloupe and Martinique (not to be confused with Dominican Republic). I was born in England and I didn't visit Dominica until I was twenty one. They would tell me about real life characters they knew and also about magical mythical characters like Ti Bolom and Sookooyah and about how carnival songs were made about them. I was intrigued by their stories and I think my love of their stories led to my love of books.

I have older brothers and sisters and so I learnt to read before I went to school. I remember reading the Topsy and Tim books in my Infant school and then the Ladybird Peter and Jane books. Later, I discovered the Faraway Tree in 'The Enchanted Wood' by Enid Blyton. It was my favourite book. I loved (and still do) reading. I come from a big family (six sisters and three brothers) so home was always a busy and noisy place. I discovered that when I was reading, despite of the hustle and bustle around me, I could disappear into my own mind space and have my own private time in another world and I loved it. Wow, there really is nothing like a good book!

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

As a child, I enjoyed reading comics like 'The Beano', 'Beezer', 'Topper' and 'Dandy'. In them I discovered fun characters like 'Sid the Copper's Kid' and two of my sisters and I would act out the stories to our friends on the street. I enjoyed the reactions from our audience. I think I've always had the story telling

bug in me and when my older sisters had children I began to tell my nephews and nieces stories. With my captive audience I was able to practise and see what worked and what didn't. I've always been a bit of a performer and we had a great theatre space at my secondary school. I would spend hours in there after school with a group of friends improvising. When I left school I did a Performing Arts degree and combined my storytelling skills with acting and became a professional actress and scriptwriter.

It wasn't until I was thinking about having a baby that I started to think about writing books for children. It was around 1987, I had just finished performing in a play at the Liverpool Playhouse and I decided to go through all my personal writing and I sent some of my work out to see what response I would get. I wasn't brave enough to use my real name and wanted to remain anonymous. I sent my plays to some theatre companies that I had worked with and I sent some of my children's stories off to publishers and competitions I found in magazines. I got a lot of rejections but also some useful feedback. My first play 'Back Street Mammy' was picked up by Temba Theatre Company for the Lyric Theatre in Hammersmith and my first book 'Mammy Sugar Falling Down' was published by Century Hutchinson. At the same time the BBC employed me as a Children's presenter for a new programme called PLAYDAYS. It seemed everything was happening at once and to top it all I became pregnant with my first child. Things could not have been better. When my baby was born, picture book ideas just spilled out of me. At the time there weren't many picture books with black children in them and though growing up I was not conscious of our absence in books, as an adult I noticed the void and how this could impact on my son. It was a personal knee jerk reaction and I wanted my son to see himself in my stories so I made stories up for him. When I sent the stories to publishers, they weren't that keen to begin with, saying that there was not a market for them. Then things turned around when I had an offer from Penguin and Walker Books at the same time. Penguin wanted to put all my stories together in one book with black and white illustrations whilst Walker Books offered me a four book contract with full colour page illustrations. I went with Walker Books who were fantastic. They took me under their wing and allowed me to learn about picture book writing with them.

So what inspired me to become an author? I always find this question difficult to answer and I usually say my family inspire me and they do but it's more than that. Writing is something I *have* to do. I can't help myself. It's something I have done ever since I learnt how to put words on paper. Taking the step to let others see my work was scary at first but when I see other people enjoy my work, it feels amazing.

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

If I knew that I would be a millionaire! I know what I like when I am reading a book though. I like a book that makes me want to turn the page to find out what is going to happen next. I like a book that I never want to put down but I never

want to finish either and of course one that leaves plenty of room for the imagination. When I am reading a book, I like to fill in the gaps myself so in regards to picture books, I suppose the same list applies. I like to leave room for the reader or listener to participate. Having a theatre background helps. For me creating a picture book is very similar to creating a stage play.

I would say a successful book is one that children and parents can read over and over again and continue to have fun reading it together.

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

Yes and no. It depends. If I am working to a brief then of course, I will work to make sure the book is written for the target age group. Other times, I just write according to the idea I have in my head and in the process I discover who I am writing for. When I am writing a picture book or writing a family show I have to entertain both adult and child. Keeping the adult interested is very important as without the adult on board you can't reach your target age group. After all they are the ones who take the books off the book shelves initially or accompany the child to the theatre, so there has to be something in it for them too. I like to add humour on different levels to my stories and that's a good way of keeping the adults involved.

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

I hope the physical book continues to be on our shelves. I'm from the old school and so I haven't been seduced by the electronic book yet. I am a sucker for the feel of pages and the look and smell of a book is all part and parcel of my reading experience but who knows... I think for travelling, an electronic book is great as it will keep your luggage weight down but otherwise I prefer hard copy but there is room for both.

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

I am not a book collector as such but I do have a lot of books. I find having books around me comforting.

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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