

An Interview With Adrienne Mayor

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

Books and stories were lifesavers from an early age. I couldn't do without them and my heart goes out to anyone who can't read or doesn't care to. I was lucky to have parents who read to me and instilled a love of books. In my family, we used to exchange weird, obscure words we found in our reading as gifts on holidays and birthdays. I still reread my childhood favourites, A. A. Milne's Winnie the Pooh, Kenneth Grahame's Wind in the Willows; Edith Nesbitt's Five Children and It, The Phoenix in the Carpet, The Wouldbegoods; Eleanor Estes' chronicles of the Moffat family, Little Lulu comic books, and the marvellous treasure trove of vividly illustrated My Book House volumes (edited by Olive Beaupré Miller, 1920), which introduced me to classical myths and world folklore. Growing up in a small town in South Dakota, I spent Saturday mornings in the Public Library where I was a member of the Bookworm Club. The arrival of the Bookmobile on Fridays after school was a highlight of my week. I was such a voracious reader that I pored over the backs of cereal boxes, dictionaries, and even my arithmetic textbook just for the problems in story form.

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

My mother was an artist and I always loved to draw. For me, art was a wonderful way to tell stories. I saw myself as an illustrator long before I thought of writing anything. After college, I worked as a freelance copyeditor for a dozen trade and university presses and kept up independent research in classical antiquity, cryptozoology, history, archaeology, and other subjects, mostly as fuel for my imagination and art. Meanwhile, I learned how to make etchings and sold my prints of Amazons, Griffins, mermaids, and other fabulous creatures in several galleries. While living in Greece in the 1980s, I wrote and illustrated articles for The Athenian,

the English language magazine. It was fun having my research and artwork come together. Then, suddenly, in 1996, I did something rash--abandoned my print studio, stopped copyediting, and decided to propose a book about ancient discoveries of remarkable fossils. I was fortunate to find a visionary editor at Princeton University Press who took a chance on me. *The First Fossil Hunters: Dinosaurs, Mammoths, and Myth* was published in 2000 and I just kept on researching and writing ever since.

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

I've always been drawn to books with a sense of discovery and adventure and a narrative that sweeps me up, makes me lose track of time and space. And if a book has illustrations or drawings, even a single frontispiece, decorated endpapers, or a map, all the better. This also explains why I am a fan of graphic novels.

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

Maybe it's a bit embarrassing to admit, but the first audience I have in mind is myself. My topics are always a deep dive into subjects that I want to know more about and understand. I'm attracted to historical mysteries that no one else has solved, questions that I feel compelled to untangle. I'm delighted when it turns out that the questions I want to ponder and answer also appeal to others, whether they are scholars or ordinary people. So when I'm writing, I keep in mind a broad and varied audience. I hope what I write is accessible and exciting to regular readers of all ages and also clearly supported by evidence and fully documented for specialists. My books have a lot of endnotes and big bibliographies. As for illustrations, finding the perfect images for each chapter of my books is one of the most enjoyable and absorbing parts of the process.

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

I've never owned a Kindle or iPad or even an audiobook. When I read for enjoyment, I want the tactile, visual, and sensuous pleasures of physical books. The texture of the dust jacket and the paper pages, the heady fragrance of a new book, the musty scent of an antique book, the act of turning each page and noticing one's progress in the narrative, the ability to page back to reread a particular passage. Even used books have their delights: old bookplates, author's autographs, margin notes or doodles, forgotten bookmarks, library stamps. I'm not ready to give up

these traditional pleasures to scroll through an electronic novel. For efficiency when I'm researching material, I do sometimes read reference books online, so I guess understand the appeal of ebooks. But I would like to believe that enough people will resist the total replacement of real books by books in the ether.

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

I have many shelves of old books that hold memories or special significance, but I'm not a book collector. The one book I'd love to possess is one I've never read and, unfortunately, it is unlikely to turn up. It was lost millennia ago, sometime after the Roman natural historian Pliny the Elder described it in about AD 77. The book was written in the fourth century BC by the Greek natural philosopher Theophrastus, a friend of Aristotle. Theophrastus lived on the Aegean island of Lesbos, known for its petrified forest and other fossils. The lost book I desire, "On Petrifications," was a two-volume treatise on plant and animal bones transformed into stone. This unique work, the earliest inklings of "paleontology," has vanished into the abyss of time. One can always hope a papyrus copy will come to light someday, perhaps wadded up as stuffing in a newly discovered Egyptian mummy or tucked into a clay jar in Pompeii.