



# Authorgraph No.1: Quentin Blake

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**Quentin Blake** interviewed by **Pat Triggs**.

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Quentin Blake is a freelance artist and illustrator. He has illustrated over one hundred books for children and adults. He also draws for journals and magazines like the **Spectator**, the **Listener** and **New Society**. His latest picture book is **Mister Magnolia** (Cape). Three days each week he teaches at the Royal College of Art, where he is now Head of the Department of Illustration in the School of Graphic Arts.

## At home

Quentin Blake lives in London in an Edwardian block of flats with elaborate bay windows and decorated stone and brickwork. The white marble steps to the front door have the address set in them in black marble and inside red-carpeted stairs and corridors lead to each flat.

Quentin Blake works in a large white room with, at one end, a bay window looking down onto trees and grass in the gardens of the square outside. A pinboard, covered in letters and drawings from children, is propped on top of a cupboard. The mantelpiece is covered with things: a Japanese fan, a stone bird, some pebbles, wood blocks for printing Q in different styles ? ?not really a collection?. Every surface is covered with books, magazines and drawings and some are in neat piles on the floor. In one corner, near the window, is a big drawing table covered with an organised clutter of pens, pencils, paint boxes, inks. There are two green plants, a couple of cushion-filled wicker chairs, a huge waste paper basket: it all adds up to a quiet working atmosphere.

## ?I qualified in drawing by always having done it?

Although Quentin Blake now teaches illustration, he has had hardly any formal training. (Just eighteen months at Chelsea College of Art, part-time, on the painting course ?to get some basic technique?.) At Sidcup Grammar School, after World War II, he was ?always drawing on my exercise books? but went on to Cambridge to study English Literature. ?It?s hard before you?ve been to a university to know what it means almost; and, particularly then, not many boys from where I lived went to university.? His decision had a peculiar logic. ?I knew if I went to an art school I would never read English, whereas if I went to university I would still do art.? After national service and a year of teacher training ?I knew I was going to do drawing. I?d been doing jokes and sending them to **Punch** and getting work accepted so I thought now I must try and see whether I can make a living.?

## ?Cartoons are not really the way my mind works?

There was plenty of work: cartoons for magazines like **Punch** and the **Spectator**. The trouble was ?I found I was spending ages trying to think of funny things. When I had thought of the funny joke, it wasn't necessarily anything very interesting to draw and I was spending time thinking when I could be drawing.? For Quentin Blake, what is funny is the drawing not the joke; he decided, ?I don't want to do cartoons all my life.?

## ?I just want to draw and it tends to come out funny?

Quentin Blake is not often asked to do something serious. ?I'd be delighted if I was. But I suppose it's natural because that's the way it comes out. I just want to draw and it tends to come out funny.? But he won't do just any book. ?People offer you work and they think it must suit you because it's funny; sometimes it isn't the kind of humour you can relate to, so you have to say no.? What does Quentin Blake find funny? ?Things in life are funny ? people's gestures, reactions, the way they do things. You don't have to fall over to be funny; maybe the way somebody doesn't fall over is funny. Even if you are doing stories that seem like complete fantasy, they are really about life. Russell Hoban's stories are about life ? they are just got up to look different.?

## What sort of a person is Quentin Blake?

He enjoys his work ? both drawing and teaching ? and he takes it seriously. He likes to work regular hours, 9 to 5, and occasionally into the evenings but sometimes, in the morning, he has to ?edge up to it?. His main other interest is the theatre. He's ?no good at any games at all? but enjoys ?sloshing about in mud? and ?wallowing in the sea?. His favourite kind of place is ?a sort of marsh ? a flat place where there is sea? and he has a house at Hastings. He likes to eat lots of things but perhaps especially bacon sandwiches and fish when he has bought it fresh from the fishing boats in Hastings. From his childhood reading, he remembers **Treasure Island** and comics, especially American comics, which had a particular smell of their own. He would take Dickens to a desert island.

## ?Perhaps I could do that, perhaps the sense of humour would be appropriate?

It was almost by accident that Quentin Blake became involved in children's books. He was mistaken for a children's illustrator because of some drawings he had done for a weekly. He thought ?perhaps I could do that, perhaps the sense of humour would be appropriate.?

Not being someone who leaves things to chance, he got a friend, John Yeoman, to write a book for him to illustrate and they offered it to Faber; it was published as **A Drink of Water**, eight short stories. After that there was quite a lot of work doing black and white line drawings in children's books. But Quentin Blake likes variety and, taking the initiative again, he created his first picture book, **Patrick**. ?I wrote it so that I could do a coloured book because nobody had commissioned me to do one.? It was published in 1969 by Cape, the first publisher who saw it.

## Quentin Blake likes to illustrate different kinds of books.

**Patrick, Angelo, Jack and Nancy, Snuff** and **Mister Magnolia** (all Cape) are picture books for which Quentin Blake provided the story and the pictures. ?The pictures come first. It's not writing at all really ? it's a picture and then making a story out of a picture. You get the idea of a thing you would like to draw and the story is an extension of that.?

Making a picture book from someone else's story is different. ?Some illustrators really only like doing their own books. I like doing other people's stories because I don't know what is going to happen in them. You're given the script and you're given an opportunity to interpret it. I read the story and I start getting messages from it. It's like acting it or producing it.?

## How Tom beat Captain Najork and his Hired Sportsmen

?Reading **Captain Najork** for the first time was very exciting. It really gave me a lift, a sense of surprise. I did the

rough drawings for the whole book straight off. My editor suggested I might like to meet Russell Hoban. I felt I didn't need to; I thought it would be confusing. The script was all you needed ? it was like a complete set of instructions. I thought what can he tell me that isn't already there. When I was doing Sneedball and the other games I thought they ought to look as though you could play them; but I didn't want the pictures to show exactly how you played them so I put the elements in and left a bit for the reader to guess.?

## **Sixes and Sevens**

?John Yeoman is a friend but he refused to tell me anything about it till it was finished. When I read it, I thought ? it's all the same picture! Then I thought but that's what it's all about. The thing is to make all the pictures look different and you start thinking about different scenes, different weather, things going on.?

## **The Enormous Crocodile**

?In this story the characters are not so unexpected. It's more what becomes of them that is interesting. The thing that gets you is that crocodile and the story. That's what I liked about it ? telling the story in the pictures, interpreting it. There are lots of ways of drawing a crocodile, depending what sort of crocodile it is. I had to decide how this crocodile, in this story, should look. How do you give the crocodile the right sort of character? How do you get it to do those sorts of things ? some of which crocodiles just don't do??

## **Longer books**

?In a picture book you illustrate practically everything that happens. In a longer text you have to select the bits you illustrate. You're collaborating with the author in a different way. There are places where you don't give the whole story away. If there are too many pictures, it doesn't give the text a chance to take on a life of its own. I don't think the illustrator should take the book over ? in longer stories the text ought to win. You have to give the reader a chance to be alone with the text. You don't want the illustrator breathing down your neck every minute. The illustrator perhaps helps with an introduction to the text or with creating the atmosphere but there must be bits where you let the author get on with it.?

## **Covers**

?These are almost the most difficult thing there is. You want to find a scene that represents the flavour of the novel but at the same time stands for it; but it mustn't totally give away the story. Then there's the problem of getting the balance between the typography and the drawing. It's very hard to do a good cover.?

**Lester and Flap-eared Lorna are two of the characters Quentin Blake created for Jackanory where he drew and told stories simultaneously.**

?It grew out of drawing for children in libraries. I thought it might work on TV and they said come along and try. I invented characters you could draw quickly. If you draw for children live, you draw something that changes as you go along. When you first meet Lorna, you don't know about the ears. I made it so the ears came last. You have to draw backwards. You have to think of visual jokes; things where you can't see what it is until you've drawn it.

Drawing for the camera is strange because it's not the way you're used to working. When you do a drawing, if you get it right, you're satisfied; if you get it wrong, you do it again. It might take an hour, it might take all day, or two days. You go on until you get it right. In **Jackanory** I rehearsed the drawing three times and then I did it, and the last one was it! It's very unnatural. But I liked working on **Jackanory** because you see someone else's craft. There are twenty other people doing their job and you're doing yours. It's very satisfying. When it's happened, it's finished, and the way that it's different from doing a book is interesting. I liked it as a change; I wouldn't want to do it all the time.?

## **Creating a Book**

?I was pleased to do the Michael Rosen poems (**Mind Your Own Business, Wouldn't you like to know**, Collins/Lions) because they relate to everyday life in a way that, say, a book written by me wouldn't. So you draw it in a different way.?

For picture books, the outline comes first. ?After that, it's just colouring in? using watercolour pastels or paints. The important thing is the line. ?You have to ?feel? the drawing so that it comes off the end of your pen. Sometimes I find myself making faces while I draw; I'm sort of being the characters.?

There's more to creating a picture book than just drawing the pictures. ?Doing the roughs means really designing the book, deciding where the text should go, giving the reader a surprise when the page is turned, matching the words and the pictures.? When things are going well, the roughs for a book will take two or three days and the book itself about three months.

How to tell the goodies from the baddies: ?Eyes that are dots are usually good; dots in circles can be bad ? not always but quite often. You see you can't give a character an evil expression, or make him peer around a corner with just a dot for an eye.?

?It's very satisfying to see a book finished and ready for its readers.?

### **Using the Authorgraph**

Get children more involved with the people who create books and the books they create.

Quentin Blake is an artist whose work is instantly recognisable to a great number of children and appeals over a wide age range but about whom surprisingly little is written or known.

Here's an opportunity to introduce Quentin Blake. ?Knowing the author? certainly affects the way we relate to books (even if it shouldn't). For children ?meeting the author? can mean realising for the first time that books are written by real people (not machines); it can arouse curiosity and new interest. If you know something about how a thing is done, you look at it in a new way.

Look at Quentin Blake in a new way. Try:

- \* looking at the eyes to spot the goodies and baddies
- \* seeing how the pictures in **Mind Your Own Business** are drawn in a different way
- \* comparing picture books with longer books
- \* looking at how covers and books are designed
- \* ?doing the roughs? for your own picture book, designing some covers.

Try this out with Infants, Juniors, Secondary groups doing Art or English, students in teacher training, library borrowers, bookshop customers, children at home.

The Authorgraph is designed for pulling out and pinning up if you wish in bookshop, library, classroom or at home.

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