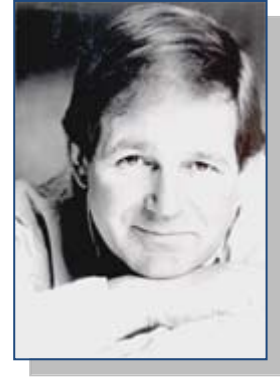


Michael Morpurgo Interview

11 September 2007, Auckland



As a primary teacher I read that you enjoyed reading stories to children – what type of books inspired you?

Children inspired me. There were lots of books that the children were not responding to. It was a happy incident. I was reading a story to a class of 35 children and I looked up and saw they had switched off. This depressed me. I went home and talked to my wife about it. She suggested I write a story for the children. I stayed up and wrote a story overnight. The next day I read the story to the children. Within ten minutes of my reading, the class was transformed. The 35 children were completely focused and cared about what happened to the story and characters. The power of getting children concentrating and being so quiet so there was an echoing silence – is one of the most amazing experiences I've ever had. I decided to end on an exciting note. Word got around the playground that I was telling them a really exciting story. The Principal sat in the next reading to see what I was up to. At the end of the story the children clapped. The principal congratulated me and told me to write the whole story over the weekend and hand it into him on Monday. She sent it to a friend of hers who worked for Macmillan.

Which writers inspired you?

As a child I was a reluctant reader, mainly reading comics. Then I discovered Robert Louis Stevenson and loved 'Treasure Island'. It was the first time I had ever felt in the midst of the story. The story is complex, it has a convincing pace, and the descriptions of landscapes were wonderful.

I got the joy of books from my mother. She had a wonderful voice.

Then teachers trod all over my love of reading. I began to associate books with tests and failure. Books began to take a backseat.

Later when I went to University, I discovered the music in words. I read 'Sir Gallegan and the Green Knight'; a complex, compelling and interesting book. I began to read more widely after that.

The best gift you can give your child is the joy of reading.

I read that you do not like to be put into a bracket as a writer – why is that so important to you?

I believe not every seventh year child is reading at the same level or same type of books. I feel that if you write to an age group you fall into the trap of writing down to them. If I constantly think of an audience I will spoil a strong story because I will worry if I should use that word, if this word is too difficult for him/her, whether I am PC etc. It can influence your story. Publishers have fixed notions about what is not suitable. I believe that needs challenging. Books and publishing houses need a format but you should not be told what to put into that format.

Michael runs three farm experiences for children (2 in UK, one in USA). Tell me about that.

It all started 30 years ago. Children come for a week and work 5-6 hours a day. The farms are nearly self sufficient. It teaches children they can make a difference, where food comes from etc.

As a writer I gain a lot from it too, such as the joy of doing it. But as a writer, working alongside children, watching them co-operate (or don't), see their anxieties, how they communicate and interact with animals, other children and teachers. This is all wonderful fodder for my stories.

Michael recounted a story of a boy called Billy who had been through a few foster homes, who had an appalling stutter. The teachers warned him not to ask him a direct question as he would run home. At the end of the week, Michael went outside and walked past the horse stable. He heard a voice, and framed in the light, stood Billy in slippers talking fluently to a horse. His tongue was unlocked because he was talking to a being that did not judge or mock him.

When you first started writing what mistakes did you make in those early stories that other beginner writers commonly make?

My first stories were too concerned with moving action along (and being exciting) not nearly focused enough on people – letting them be the motivators of the story and plot line. I learnt that I had to let my characters determine their own destiny. When I write now, I do not have a preconceived idea. I create a landscape, place, single character – and everything evolves from there.

Young writers push relationships – push people away same with readers – be relaxed about it – let story flow.

Write about what you are interested about.

Before I wrote 'War Horse' I wrote stories so they were exciting and meant to entertain and educate children but during that book I spent a lot of time researching, and with my love of animals I wrote about something I really cared about.

Take risks and find your own voice.

What advice would you give a beginning writer?

Take your time – don't be in a hurry. Do not think you can get rich from writing. For instance the Harry Potter was good in that it encouraged a lot of children to read but the public have this misconception that all writers are rich and earn lots of money – not true.

Live life first, do all the things that interest you – fill yourself up with memories and impression. Then when you are ready to write find a particular subject that interests you to write about.

When I write, I find my subject, research it, then I wait and savour the developing story. Ted Hughes told me to dream it so intensely ...

When I am ready to write the book the voice comes through. I write it by hand and like I am speaking it. I make lots of mistakes but I do not stop to correct. My wife

types it for me. Then I spend quite a bit of time revising it – fiddling with it and revising it six or more times.

Lastly, don't worry if you don't get published...

I asked Michael how an author should balance their life with writing, promoting books and author visits.

Some authors detest reading and meeting children. Some are shy. Writers should not feel obliged to do the author and promotion talks. I leave it all up to the publisher to organize. You need to be careful you don't overdo it, as it is exhausting and then you are too tired to write. When publishers do events they make sure there is a large crowd to make sure it is worthy of your time. When a child meets an author they have prepared a question in their head, and for some children this experience can be a life changing event and something that they will remember all their life. For some children it inspires them to write, as it teaches them 'I can do it'.

I said that a few of his books touch on loneliness and find companionship with animals - is he drawing from his own childhood experiences of this feeling.

A little bit but mostly I write about something that touches children's hearts. It is wonderful for children to feel they are not the only one who feels alone in the world. They learn to become empathic with characters and learn about different cultures.

Any last writing tips?

You've got to be honest.

