

## 1998/Aug QUENTIN BLAKE - Publishing News

He looks just like his self portrait. Slightly crumpled, the suggestion of a smile almost permanently on his face, a preoccupied demeanour about him. If you didn't know who he was, you probably wouldn't give Quentin Blake a second glance if you passed him on the street.

But millions of people, young and old, do know who he is and can recognise his work instantly. Not bad for someone who read English at Cambridge. But then he's also someone who got his first cartoon published by *Punch* at the age of 16 and can reasonably be described as a bit of a renaissance man.

We're sitting in the gloriously untidy studio of his London flat, overlooking one of those garden squares you so often discover by accident and wonder who has the good fortune to live there. "I was very interested in English at school, even though I was better at art," says Blake, sipping his tea, "and I thought that if I went to Cambridge and read English I'd end up doing art anyway, and probably the reverse wouldn't be true. I don't regret my decision, because I work in an area where everyone is some kind of hybrid."

Unusually for a creative type, Blake admits that he actually likes working on other people's texts. "When I was doing Dahl," he says, "it was great because, as a writer, he varied from book to book, and I've found that even a book I think is going to be the same as an author's previous one turns out to be different to do." The evidence of Blake's urge to work is all around us as we talk, and drawing is something he seems to be driven to do. It took him two years of badgering to get the august organ that was then *Punch* to accept one of his cartoons. "I eventually asked them if it would make any difference if I brought them in personally - which, as it turned out, it did!"

At the age of 19 he went off to do National Service, most of which was spent teaching English to enlisted youths in Aldershot. "I never went anywhere, and even managed to sidestep the Suez Crisis," grins Blake. "After that I went to Cambridge and it was there I met Rory McEwen. He was the one who recruited me onto the *Spectator* and that was how I began drawing for them." It was, he says, a terrific training for an artistic English

student, and he drew covers under the aegis of editorial luminaries such as Brian Inglis and Bernard Levin for some ten years.

His decision to go to Chelsea Art School to bone up on his life drawing was one, says Blake, that affected the next 30 years of his life. "I went looking for an artist called Brian Robb, and found him," Blake goes on. "I went to work for him at the RCA, and then took over when he retired." With his twin careers of art and teaching going well, his ambitions lay in humour and painting - not in children's book illustration. But Fate has a way of twisting career paths.

"I was getting bored with doing cartoons, and I thought it would be nice to do a book of my own," explains Blake. "I decided to try a children's book because I hoped they'd like the jokes, and my first one was written by my friend John Yeoman and was called *A Drink of Water*." Thirty or so years later an idea from that long out of print volume is gestating on his drawing board as his next book.

Blake is thought of, even after producing an extraordinary canon of vibrant colour work, as a black and white artist. But that's what he is, a penman. Nothing he does could be done with anything other than a nib and pot of China Black. Nothing else would transmit his *joie de vivre* and quizzical, enquiring vitality onto paper so successfully. But colour is seductive.

"I did *Patrick* because no one would give me any colour work to do," Blake tells me. "So I wrote a book that *had* to be done in colour!" From there he went on to do more of his own ideas, continuing to illustrate other people's texts when his books didn't seem to be going anywhere in particular. "And when I illustrated *Great Day UP* by Dr Seuss, that kick-started me again - *Mr. Magnolia* was the result, and it wasn't a story, it was an illustrated rhyming text. I saw that, for me, it might be better to approach a book from another direction rather than the story - subvert it somehow, make it unnecessary to have an obvious narrative."

Think about it: *Cockatoos* is, as Blake puts it, nominally a counting book. "But it's also jokes and dressing up, and if you're small and not behaving perfectly you identify with the birds. I don't go looking for humour...it's

there in my work. I know I can do it and it just happens naturally, without me thinking.”

For all the apparent simplicity of his images and storytelling, there’s a hugely complex mind at work behind it all, sifting through a universe of ideas until it all comes out just right. “The pictures used to come first,” says Blake, “and they still do, in a sense. But I used to have to draw them before I could start the story. That’s not true now. Now they come in my head and I can write from that.” Reaching over to a haphazard pile of notepads he pulls out a small bound sketchbook and there, in shorthand scribbles, is the whole of his latest book. *Zagazoo*, bubbling with vitality, just waiting to be realised.

“Now I don’t do so much Dahl - who really was a passport for me - and now I’ve stopped teaching, I’ve got more energy for my own stuff and can do more with it,” he says. “It’s great to be able to go from *The Green Ship*, which is naturalistic, to *Zagazoo*, which is, in a way, slightly surreal and graphic. I suppose what I had was an apprenticeship, not a training. You get better by doing more...nowadays I just make better marks on the paper!”

For Blake, the act of drawing is his work. “The colour is the mood and the atmosphere,” he says. “Colouring it metaphorically as well as physically. I do several drafts of each of my books...do lots of roughs, put them on my light-box and then *don’t* trace them! I take a lot of time and a lot of trouble - I don’t read them a thousand times, but I know a lot of people do.”

And they do it all over the world, recognizing and connecting with that certain intangible something in his work that makes it as damn near perfect as anyone’s allowed to get.