

1997/Aug SHIRLEY HUGHES - Publishing News

We're in Holland Park in west London in a house that, when you meet the person who lives there, you know suits her to a tee. It's stylish, but not grand, it's friendly without being effusive and it's a place filled with art - but it's no museum. People work here, things get done, ideas and plans are hatched and then brought to fruition. This is Shirley Hughes' house.

You already know a lot about her. She's illustrated scads of books for other people and sold squillions of her own; she's in many ways the illustrators' illustrator, someone who draws, designs, lives her pictures and stories onto paper with a passion that belies the fact that this year she'll celebrate her 70th birthday. Born near Merseyside in 1927, she can hardly remember a day when she hasn't drawn.

"I had a wartime childhood, with nothing to do," she tells me. "We didn't go on holiday, there were no cars and so we drew, read books and mucked about," she smiles (something she does a lot). "I remember endless time...no pressure, ideal for an artist."

She always knew she would be involved in a narrative art form, spending fascinated hours in local galleries, lost in the stories the pictures on the wall were telling her. "All illustrators are actors manqué, really," she says. "Ardizzone said the page is like a stage...picture books dramatise the scene, the text being an important thread, but with the pictures being everything else, there to be discovered - with the accent very much on 'discovered'. Illustrators are engaged in a series of images that flow, which is not like being a painter at all."

Here we have someone who can expound about her work without sounding pompous, someone who was trained, in that 'Old School' way to really draw. "At that time drawing was essential to all the applied arts, everyone had to do it," she says. "If you draw every day you get a terrific visual memory, an eye for a gesture, the way people move and you remember what people look like - running, jumping, standing still. What you do is observe a lot, then go home and make it all up!"

Hughes makes it all sound so simple, and her work does have a deceptively easy style, an openness and candour that conceals her consummate artistry. The thing of it is, she doesn't need to show off. "Drawing underpins everything, and no amount of fancy colour can do that," she goes on. "I don't think of this as a conservative attitude, because stories are about human behaviour, and to illustrate that you have to be able to *draw* the emotion, express it in the figures." Her work, she says, has always been rooted in reality and she's always wanted to make her audience believe in the reality of what she does. "I want to beguile the child, and the adult as well with a memory of their own childhood - then you've done the hat-trick: pleased the buyer, pleased the child and pleased yourself."

"I see myself as - no, I *am* a passionately innovative person," she declares. "My use of the page is innovative, but people don't see me in that way because I'm doing children's books. Children's books get a very perfunctory response from the adult literati, they tend to miss the painterly aspects."

Nonetheless, she likes her industry, mainly because the audience she works for has, she says, such a fantastic visual memory, one that's so much better than most adults. "Children are inundated with moving visual imagery in a way that's unique to our time," Hughes continues. "To slow a child down to look at a picture is hard, but you have to do it so they can learn to look. When they *do* look at still pictures they look very, very hard at images with layers and layers of ideas...you're giving them theatre, at its most complex level, and imagery at its simplest."

Theatre, art, drama. Highbrow stuff, but Hughes is also a devotee of the yellow art of comics, a back-street world she discovered very early and fell in love with. "I had all the classy gift books as a child - Rackham, Dulac - but I had comics as well, almost all of which came from America. They were exotic and graphically riveting and reading them undoubtedly helped me learn narrative art."

Comics are where words and pictures are at their most symbiotic, with writing and illustration almost indivisible. That it took Hughes so long to

begin writing her own books is a bit of a mystery as she's so obviously good at it; she started, in 1960, with *Lucy and Tom's Day*, and then waited over a decade before writing her second book, *Lucy and Tom go to School*. Why the gap? "It was partly because not much was going on in picture books, and partly because I was busy with my family and other work," she says. "Just meeting deadlines was hard enough without trying to do new things." Her big breakthrough came in 1977 with the publication of *Dogger*, a book that took off here and in the States and is still her single-title best-seller. "It touched a chord somewhere and has carried on doing so," smiles Hughes. "I hit my stride with *Dogger*, discovering that I really could make them cry...bring that lump to the throat."

And then along came Alfie. If anything typifies her work it's his impish little face, though, like *Dogger*, he too was supposed to be a one-off - but, as with all great characters, he demanded more. "He developed, and so did his world, getting bigger, opening out from his detailed, small domestic base. And I think people like him because his is a *real* world that's chaotic, but reassuring."

Hughes has been quoted as saying she grew up in the golden age of illustration, which is always deemed never to be the present. I asked her whether she would still agree with that. "Maybe I should say *one* of the golden ages, and also that I saw it, rather than actually grew up in it," she says, after a moment's thought. "Now could well be another one - there are a lot of terrific illustrators around, and my daughter, Clara Vulliamy, does have a lot of work." That her daughter is also an illustrator is something she's very proud of, but, like Mrs Worthington's advisor, she wasn't that keen to see her following her footsteps into a career as uncertain as publishing.

"Illustration is much better than painting, though," she says. "Because your technique keeps you going, it doesn't hold you back - a technique, if it's flowing through you, is like jazz, you get better at it and you don't have to agonise about your work." So does she ever envisage stopping? "Good heavens no! I hope not!" she replies, almost shocked, it seems, at the very

thought. “My problem is staying alive long enough to do all my ideas - I have a drawer full of ones that’ll probably never see the light of day.”

It is a fact that, if the dice had rolled a different way, Hughes could well have been a dress designer (fashion’s loss, our gain), though she’s very glad she didn’t go into the rag trade. When she left the Ruskin in Oxford she was told she’d never make a living as an illustrator “...but I’m completely unemployable in any other capacity.” She smiles again. “Although I was once offered a job by Marcus Morris to work on the *Eagle* doing *Dan Dare*, but I would have had to go and live in Liverpool, and as one who had just fought their way out I wasn’t going back.”

Having passed up the chance to draw the Mekon, Digby and the spaceship *Anastasia*, 40 years later Hughes can look back on a career that has seen her become a doyenne of children’s illustration, but one who has her eye firmly set on the future. As I leave her house I notice a series of framed woodcuts by William Nicholson, her “very favourite artist” and the man who designed the Heinemann colophon. It reminds me that Hughes is published by Puffin, Random House, Reed and Walker, and all four have joined forces to help celebrate her birthday. A fitting tribute for a creator whose passionate innovation has touched so many lives.