

## 2001/Dec MICHAEL MORPURGO - Publishing News

Chance has resulted in the discovery of wonders such as penicillin, stainless steel and, supposedly, gravity. It was also the catalyst in changing Michael Morpurgo from a teacher at a primary school in Kent to best-selling author. Over 90 books later, we met in the restrained, slightly faded glory that is the Royal Over-Seas League club in London's St James's.

"The custom at the school was that every day, at 3.15pm, we had to read the children a story, and my lot were bored by the book I was reading," Morpurgo recalls. "I decided I had to do something and told them the kind of story I used to tell my own kids...it was like a soap opera, and they focused on it and I realized I could do it. Another teacher said I should send it to a publisher and by sheer luck I chose Macmillan Education, which is where Aidan Chambers was editor."

The result of this good fortune and timing was a book called *Friend or Foe*, which is still in print close to 30 years later. Then, once again, Fate stepped in. "My father-in-law, Allen Lane, the creator of Penguin, died," says Morpurgo. "What do you do with such an inheritance? Go to the Bahamas, or put your money where your mouth is? My wife, Clare, felt strongly that there was a way of reaching every child in the class - a holistic approach - and we talked to some educational experts who told us that all education is useless unless its seeds are sown in fertile ground."

These discussions resulted in the setting up of their charity, Farms for City Children. "We were young, lacked fear and put our money into a big house with a farm in Devon and invited city children to the farm. The first visitors came from an estate in Birmingham in January 1976 and became farm workers for a week. We could see, inside seven days, that we were touching children in ways schools never could."

Two years later they'd played host to 1,000 children, and Morpurgo had also found time to write *Warhorse*, which came striding home as a runner-up for the Whitbread. He is, you do get the feeling, never idle.

The charity, which blossomed to include three sites - a second at Treginnis in Wales and another at Wick Court in Gloucester - was helped in

no small way, says Morpurgo, by the Presidency of his friend and mentor the Poet Laureate Ted Hughes, and his wife Clare's phenomenal fundraising skills. She had, before foot and mouth, to fill an annual budget deficit of £250,000. Once that innocuous yet lethal disease took hold, everything closed down and the pyres were lit across the country, warning, too late, of an invisible invasion - a situation Morpurgo used as the basis of his timely novel *Out of the Ashes*. "Luckily none of our farms were bit by foot and mouth," he says rather wistfully, but thankfully. "I don't know why."

This year sees the 25th anniversary of the Farms charity and earlier this week its Patron, HRH The Princess Royal, was guest of honour at a reception in London to mark the occasion and the publication of a celebratory volume, *More Muck and Magic*. Published by Egmont, this is a collection of poems by founding President Ted Hughes and new short stories by Morpurgo and contemporaries such as Joan Aiken, Gillian Cross, Jamila Gavin, Jan Mark, Margaret Mahy, Sam McBratney and Jacqueline Wilson.

Aside from helping run the charity and writing, Morpurgo is also to be found in bookshops, schools and conferences, talking about writing "...and I go to France a lot, where I'm much more widely read," he says, heaping praise on his editor at Gallimard, Christine Baker, and her extraordinary eye for which UK books will sell in France.

"I think," he goes on, "that the French have a much stronger story tradition." Wait a sec, I say, what about Henty, Scott, Stevenson, Blyton and on and on? OK, he admits, we have one too. "G A Henty was my bread and butter when I was young and I also loved Stevenson - he was an amazing writer...I wanted to be him - and Blyton could just *make* you turn a page, the same way I think J K Rowling does, only she does it so much better."

In Morpurgo's opinion, though, things have changed a lot in fiction. "Increasingly our canvasses are smaller, and nowadays our broadest is fantasy, with reality not too well served," he says. His own canvasses are definitely realistic, *Twist of Gold*, for just one instance, using the Irish potato famine as its backdrop. Morpurgo is an inveterate storyteller, I think it's something he has to do, which is probably why both the stage and the

cinema have come knocking on his door; they recognize a mother lode when they see one.

“Terry Jones has recently bought the rights to *Kensuke’s Kingdom* and *Butterfly Lion* is to be directed by Richard Attenborough,” he tells me, “and three of my books have been adapted for the stage this year...I did none of the adaptations and have been unbelievably surprised at how good they’ve been - although, because children’s theatre is as neglected by the press as children’s books, it’s been hard to get reviews.”

This neglect is, he says, why he created, with Ted Hughes, the Children’s Laureate. “We were both offended by the thought of children being thought less of than adults,” Morpurgo explains, “and this is a situation that is still continued today by literary editors who grew up on children’s literature...children’s books have suffered from terrible snobbery.” What does he think of the choice of laureates so far? “We’ve had two very wonderful people...Quentin [Blake’s] skill is touching the heart in everyone, the child in us all, and Anne [Fine] not only writes extraordinary books, she has the ability to be angry and coherent at the same time; she can upset people, but they have to be upset if we’re to raise awareness of the best in children’s books.

“This is an extraordinary Golden Age - Philip Pullman, Peter Dickinson, J K Rowling, Dick King-Smith, Anne Fine, Joan Aiken, Philippa Pearce, Michael Foreman, Anthony Browne and Raymond Briggs...there are 20 or more great authors and illustrators *all here now* and I’m lucky enough to be working at the same time...I wish more adults understood that we’re lucky to have these people and feel they should value all these great voices, all this experimentation.” Such is his dedication to the cause, the day after our meeting Morpurgo gave up the opportunity to see England play - and as it turned out, completely stuff - Australia at Twickenham, to talk on the subject of Robin Hood versus Kevin Costner at the IBBY festival at Roehampton.

He is, he says, a writer of short books because, as he gets older he values words more and has learnt that you don’t need a lot of them to say a lot. “I would love to be a poet, but I don’t have it, so, for me, the movement of a

story is the main thing,” he says. “I also spend a lot of my time reading my stories aloud to the children visiting the farm...I love the sound of words, and it’s a great test of my pacing.”

Morpurgo describes himself as “...very spontaneous and disorganized, spending most of my time dreaming up notions”. I’d add that he’s one of the great enthusiasts, a man for whom tomorrow always holds the potential for discovery, but who hasn’t forgotten the lessons he learnt yesterday. One of those lessons is that you can never trust a computer. A couple of years ago he lost five chapters of a book to digital oblivion and now he writes, longhand, in a school exercise book. “I just write very fast!” he grins.