

**Children's Laureate Michael Morpurgo looks back at the history of the award, and forward to what he hope to achieve in the next two years.**

Laureates don't just happen, they're created, and the idea for the Children's Laureate came to Michael Morpurgo and Ted Hughes some six or seven years ago. "It was one of those dinner table conversations that just got out of hand," admits Morpurgo. "I was regretting that the literary world considered children's books lesser things and Ted was saying he'd come across the same attitudes himself as people didn't think so much of his children's books...it was a kind of universal snobbery."

At this point in the proceedings, Morpurgo says, he suggested there should be a laureate for children and, instead of it simply being a passing thought, Hughes said they should do it, got some paper and wrote down all the people they'd have to contact in order to make such a thing happen, ending up with a list which included a sponsor (Tim Waterstone), someone to run it (Lois Beeson) and a royal personage to lift the whole enterprise (Princess Anne), as well as someone in Government to support the initiative - both morally and, more importantly, financially.

So letters were written - to Chris Smith, who was then Minister for Culture, Media and Sport and the others. "By the time we went to see all of them Ted was sickening, he was poorly, but between the two of us we knitted the whole thing together and then, very sadly, he died; the next May, less than a year later, Quentin Blake was appointed Children's Laureate. It all happened very, very fast, largely, I have to say, because Ted could make things happen. Everything fell into place, the sponsorship, the support and really because of his name."

Having dreamt up the whole notion of a Children's Laureate, and then imagined it into reality, I wondered whether he felt - as the surviving creator and now third holder of the post - that it was everything he and Hughes had thought it would be. "It's more, really...I don't think we realised

[at the time] the potential of it. Very shortly after Quentin was appointed there was some controversy, a lot of people felt this [award] was drawing unnecessary attention to one person in order to achieve something for the whole world of children's books; it's a point of view with which one can have sympathy, because if you get it wrong, that's exactly what it would be, but luckily none of the three people who have held the honour have, I hope, done that; but you can see the inherent danger.

“But I think there was a wonderful coincidence of events. Quentin was exactly the right choice as the first laureate. He's such a loved figure, for himself and for his work, and he did the job so perfectly it immediately gave the position a prestige we couldn't have hoped for. And then there was the rise of Harry Potter out of nowhere - out of the school playground, actually - and the rise of Jacqueline Wilson, Philip Pullman and David Almond, all these extraordinary writers began bubbling up. They were always there, but they just bubbled more and suddenly children's books was not this little despised thing in the corner, it was interesting and people began paying attention to it. Quentin was there at the time of this renaissance and the Children's Laureate was a part of it.”

The position is held for two years, on the one hand a long hiatus in anyone's career terms, but also a very short time in which to accomplish anything concrete and long-lasting - surely the aim of the whole enterprise. In many way it could be seen as a double-edged sword, able, if things go pear-shaped, to damage both the standing of the holder and the position itself. How did Morpurgo view the past and his own future in the post?

“The main justification for being [the laureate] is the work he or she does that makes a contribution...Quentin added an explanation of the importance and significance of illustration, and then came Anne Fine, who takes no prisoners, and that was a wonderful contrast. She's controversial, funny, hugely respected for the quality of her work and a fighter for what she believes in - she hates to see poor quality children's books, and says so. And then the baton passed to me.”

Two years, he says, is about right, although six months in he's thinking that two years is a very, very long time. How much time, I wondered, did he

have to get used to the idea of being the new Children's Laureate, and then formulate his own Big Idea? The answer came back, three weeks, and that, no, he didn't want to be seen to be following either Blake or Fine with another Big Idea. "I thought of it, but what I had was actually many ideas and I ended up with a couple of political and educational ones, which are connected by the fact that, at heart, I think I'm a storyteller rather than a writer..."

Which is where I had to butt in and ask, what's the difference, Michael? "The difference," he replies, "is that with me the story comes first, rather than the literature. I suppose what it is is that when people go on about literacy and why children are put off books, and they can't quite grasp why children don't love spelling and punctuation, you have to point out that to them what they're missing is that it's the story, stupid. The story has to come first, it's the heart of the thing. And then, of course, there's the telling of it, which is the literature."

And here we come to the nub. What Morpurgo wants to do is bring the joy of the story, the joy of simply listening, back to what's done in school and at home in order to get children enthusiastic about reading. "There are three stages to this; one is to encourage parents to read, because if you miss out on that it's like missing out on your mother's milk - the substitute's all right, but there are many teachers who don't read.

"So the next group are the teachers and I'm going to spend a lot of time trying to get them enthusiastic *themselves* about reading - and trying to persuade people in Government that what *all* teachers need as part of their training is a course on children's literature. I want every teacher at the beginning of their career to have read Anne and Philip and Jacqueline and all these extraordinary people, so that when they go into the classroom they'll have a knowledge and a love of books and be able to read with passion and conviction. And finally there are the children themselves and I'm going to be talking, reading and telling a lot of stories."

There's nothing new or revolutionary about creators going into schools, he says, but it doesn't happen enough and most children in this country still never get to see and hear a writer or an illustrator. "I'm totally convinced

that extraordinary things can come of this...it can be life-enhancing and life-changing. What we are trying to do is set up a project with Arts and Business [a not-for-profit creative network] to take this idea of storytelling and poetry reading to big cities around the country this year - to try and make storytelling and writing into theatre. I've already done some trial runs up in Manchester and I've been to Wales with the Hay Festival."

2004 will see a series of 'concerts', under the collective title of StoryFest, taking place, ending with "a great big jamboree" in the Albert Hall next autumn. Morpurgo will not be doing this alone, though, each event featuring a number of writers with his job, he says, being to head up the show and introduce it. "I'll also be doing an outreach programme through the Scottish Book Trust and Arts and Business, going into communities where they don't see writers...not inner city areas, but the islands and villages, the remote place where no one goes."

Storytelling, posits Morpurgo, is not just for children; we all know the power of it but tend to lose the connection as we grow older. Has this meant problems getting the grown-ups behind his scheme? "I think the Government's behind us, I've been talking to Tessa Jowell [Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport] who's very sympathetic and really understands what we're on about - and she's the right person to be talking to. It's no good having all these extraordinary people out there talking to children if, when it comes to teaching practices, literacy is reduced simply to an exercise in school to pass SATS." Test the mechanics, he insists, *not* the creativity.

"We need to recognise the power of the storyteller, and how infectious that power can be, right the way across the range," says the new Children's Laureate, "and there are a number of us in this country who can wave the flag and bang the drum. So, give me the drum."