

1999/July GILES ANDREAE - Publishing News

No matter that the Millennium is being celebrated 12 months too soon - let's face it, they start selling Christmas decorations the day the clocks go back, and consumers are used to retail time-slip nowadays - earlier this year Nick Cross, Selfridges' Marketing Director, decided he wanted to commission a modern fable to decorate the store's windows for the event.

The man who got the job was Purple Ronnie. Or rather, his alter ego Giles Andreae. If you have to ask "Who?" you've missed one of this decade's small phenomena.

Purple Ronnie is the stick man star of a hugely successful line of greetings cards and a growing list of merchandise. Whatever you might expect Purple Ronnie's creator to be it isn't a tall, chiselled, slightly urbane figure with a wry sense of humour who looks like he could be a character from a Richard Curtis movie. In fact, when you phone Andreae's office, one of the choices the automatic switchboard gives you is an extension that'll put you straight through to the aforementioned screenwriter/saviour of the British film industry.

So how did Andreae come to be asked to 'write' a Selfridges window, a proposal which has now spawned a book, *The Story of Millennia the Angel*, illustrated by Michael Foreman, which Orchard will be promoting as a must-have keepsake of the Millennium?

"Nick [Cross] knew my publisher, Francesca Dow, was influential in the children's book world," explains Andreae. "He asked her who she thought would be right, and she thought of me - on the strength of what I've done for Orchard - books that I like to think have a sense of purpose. Selfridges were looking for a story with resonance and Francesca thought, very kindly, that I could do it."

Whatever your feelings are about the approaching thousand-year bash, it must be fairly daunting to be asked to produce a work that's going to get quite so much attention. A bit like Andrew Motion sitting down and staring at a blank sheet of paper that's got to have something meaningful about the Wessex wedding scribbled on it. How did Andreae feel when he was

approached? “Well, either you can do it, or you can’t,” comes the pragmatic answer. “Actually, I liked the idea of doing something with a fabular content.”

He went to a meeting with the Selfridges people, primed by Dow with some key words and phrases to salt the conversation with. “Things like ‘where are we, and where should we go?’” says Andreae. “It wasn’t tricky to work out where we are now - a society mechanised at the expense of the soul...not exactly an original thing to say, but it became clear where we had to go: forward. I felt we had to put some heart back.”

Before they went into the meeting Andreae told Dow about his idea for a mechanised Ice Queen who gets given a soul, but that was as far as he’d got with it. “I’d never pitched anything before,” says Andreae, “and I hadn’t *really* worked out the story; when I sat down at the meeting I saw they had a copy of Purple Ronnie’s *Book of Love* on the desk and I really did wonder whether I was the right person to do the job. But they must’ve really trusted Francesca’s judgement and they seemed to warm to the idea, just asking me to bring the celebration part in early because of what they called the ‘window factor’ - it all being seen at once.” He had, he says, a very clear brief, which he stuck to very literally, one reason why not a single word of his text for what eventually became the book *Millennia the Angel* was changed.

Millennia is illustrated by Michael Foreman because Andreae had seen his version of St Exupery’s *Little Prince* and found it hauntingly beautiful. “It sits above my desk and I thought *Millennia* had a parallel with it,” he tells me. “Michael’s illustrations are so resonant, and Francesca agreed. Luckily, he had a window of a couple of weeks and said he’d do it if he liked the story. I haven’t spoken to him, but the book’s printing very shortly, so he must have!”

This whole project has happened at breakneck speed. Andreae was commissioned in late March, early April, and when we met in mid-June bound proofs of the pocket-sized book had just arrived. What did he think of it now it was a reality? “I’m thrilled!” he says, examining Foreman’s jewel-like art, light glinting off its delicate silver fifth colour printing. “I

was always pleased at how the story came out, and I'm delighted with what Michael's done, the illustrations couldn't be better - you should see what it would have looked like if I'd done it!

"The typography, art, production is all very beautiful. I'm really excited, it's a bit of a risk for a children's publisher to agree to do a book that isn't exclusively a children's book, and then have to get the whole thing out in six months. But they thought it was good and unique and they just decided 'what the hell, let's publish!' Selfridges has just ordered 125,000 copies. More power to Orchard that a non-marketing decision was vindicated."

An obvious question is, how do you follow something like *Millennia*? "You don't," comes the short answer. "It's a one-off. Hopefully it'll go some way to persuading people I don't just do fart and beer jokes and enable me to write more fables and work with Michael again. Because I'm exclusively a writer, I like to write books that actually say something; I write in verse, and that imposes a discipline, making it easier to tell a story - having said all that, my bestseller *Rumble in the Jungle* isn't exactly high culture!"

Andreae's literary output, up till now, has been large picture books with rollicking verse, accompanied by colourfully bold illustrations - wonderful stuff to rouse the kids. *Millennia*, with its meaningful, lilting storyline and pastel-coloured art couldn't be more different. It is a celebration and it has got soul. It's also proof positive that the best things often do come in small packages, and if you want just one souvenir that'll be worth the price, this is the one. It will also be just as relevant when the real Millennium finally gets here.