

1999/June MICHAEL FOREMAN

Unusual man, Michael Foreman. A bit of a paradox. On the surface he's quiet, bordering on the shy. His work, on the other hand, is an ecstatic, vibrant rainbow of colours and textures, his pictures placed on the page with a delicacy and an ease that speaks eloquently of equal measures of dedication and innate talent. He makes it look so easy, like it all happens somehow by chance.

That he became an artist at all is very much a matter of chance. Because his Mum ran a village shop he had access, at a time of severe rationing, to supplies of biscuit tin lining paper - corrugated on one side, smooth on the other. "The paper was four-and-a-half-foot long," Michael smiles, "and so I did lots of long drawings of crowds at stations, at football matches and of the army fighting."

He grew up in the small village of Pakefield, just outside Lowestoft, and although he drew he didn't have any idea that he was in any way gifted. "It wasn't until a teacher called Miss Palmer asked us to draw a highwayman, and then held up my drawing as a good one, that I knew," says Michael. "Some people took exception to this. Billy Botright said he didn't like my bushes...they were too scribbly, but Miss Palmer said that was what real artists do, draw impressions of things."

Not surprisingly, his favourite lesson became art, where they'd listen to Bible stories on the radio and then draw pictures. When foreign fruit started to appear in his Mum's shop he became fascinated by the pictures on the boxes "...I used to draw them, and the reason I bought the house in St Ives was because it had palm trees in the garden," grins Michael.

Michael was lucky enough to have an art teacher at the secondary modern he went on to who also recognised his talent and recommended that he and another boy should paint the school's new mural. "Otherwise we were just treated like dunces," he says. "No one taught us anything, we didn't take any exams and we were just supposed to stay there until we were strong enough to become a builder or a fisherman."

The boy who should have been a local builder or out casting nets in the North Sea was, by the age of 15, full time at the local Art School. “I liked it, but I often wanted to leave because all my friends had jobs, and had money to go to parties,” says Michael. “But my two older brothers, both car mechanics, told me to stay and then I started a jazz band and we got invited to all the parties too!” The other reason he stayed at Art School, getting two years-worth of extensions to study commercial art, was National Service. “But by the time I’d finally finished, it had finished to,” Michael carries on, “and I’m very glad I didn’t do it!”

By now living in London, Michael decided he wanted to work in publishing. “Although,” he says, “I’d never read any books, so I sat down and wrote my own...a pacifist thing called *The General*, and did a cover for it.” As luck would have it he had a Hungarian friend who only knew one other person in London and she was married to a publisher. “Colin [Franklin], who was at Routledge, liked the drawings and the idea...he said that if I went away and finished the book he’d publish it. True to his word he did, and it was the first children’s book Routledge had done since the original *Struwpeter*. It didn’t sell very well, but got astonishing reviews, and in the US it was called ‘a communist tract for the nursery!’”

And then he didn’t have another idea accepted for six whole years. “So I got into doing book jackets, magazine work and jobbing illustrations, mostly for the US,” Michael goes on, “and when the *Observer Magazine* started the art editor, Romek Marber, asked me to do a story for their first Christmas issue.” He wrote and illustrated one, and not long after it appeared Hamish Hamilton wrote to him, asking if they could publish it as a book. Michael was back in the world of book publishing once again.

He thought of it at the time as a pleasant diversion, and certainly not one that he’d ever be able to make any money at, but he found he liked it so much that he began planning his work to give himself time to do a book a year for his new publisher. There was, Michael tells me, no one book that made him as an illustrator, it’s been more a case of lots of long-sellers than best-sellers, he

says. “There’s a book I did in 1972, *Dinosaurs and All That Rubbish*, that just keeps on going in all sorts of formats, including a musical version they do in schools!” nods Michael. “Best-sellers can be a bad thing...they can give you a completely false impression of what life’s going to be like.”

The biggest surprise of his career to date has been the success of *War Boy*. “I thought that would be the remainder book of all time,” Michael says, “it was only Colin Webb’s persistence that made me write down stories I thought would only be of interest to my family. He publishes books of mine no one else would, and then afterwards people come along and ask me to do one like it for them!”

Writing *War Boy* was, for Michael, like taking a cork out of a bottle. “It allowed more ideas to come out,” he says. “I then wrote *War Game* because when I was doing my research for the first book there were only my aunts to talk to; all my uncles had died in the first war...their names were all on the village war memorial. And to finish the story I did a third one called *After the War was Over*.” These books are like diaries and scrapbooks and sketchbooks all rolled into one fascinating piece, and it is their simple intimacy that makes them so special and ultimately so successful.

Michael has just come back from France with ex-Python Terry Jones where they were receiving the as yet untitled sequel to *The Knight and the Squire*. They’ve been working together since the very start of Pavilion Books, their first book together, *Fairy Tales*, being on the company’s launch list. “The new book follows the 100 Years War, particularly a band of brigands who’ve broken away from King Edward III’s forces,” explains Michael, showing me the route he and Terry had taken through the French countryside. “Terry’s a medieval scholar, so the books are all based on fact...the first one was supposed to tell the whole story, but we didn’t get past Calais - this one’s stuck in France and even Book 3 probably won’t get to the Holy Land!”

Travel has been a very special ingredient in Michael’s life and work, “I don’t just sit at home and make it all up,” he says, explaining the attitude that has led to such books as *Seasons of Splendour*, written by Madhur Jaffrey, *Land of*

the Long White Cloud, by Kiri Te Kanawa and the Native American Indian collection of stories *Songs My Paddle Sings*, by James Riordan.

So how far ahead does he plan his working life, I wondered. Pointing across to the corner of his austere decorated studio he indicates a 2-3-foot high pile of paper: manuscripts, ideas, books in gestation, some of which won't be lucky enough to see the light of day. Many of them will because Michael loves to work. "I actually work non-stop...evenings, weekends...every day's the same, and I love it!" he says. "This year I've got a new book with Michael Morpurgo, called *Billy the Kid*, which is much more than simply a football story, and there's also a Christmas Treasury coming out...I chose all the entries, all my favourites from Laurie Lee to *Wind in the Willows*. And I'm also working on *The Wizard of Oz* - it's the centenary next year."

You'd have thought that re-illustrating a classic would be a nerve-wracking business, but Michael doesn't feel at all pressured. "A lot of people don't know the Denslow illustrations," he says, "and one of the big advantages I have is that I didn't read any of these books when I was a child, I just looked at magazines, comics and newspapers, so I come to them fresh...I just treat them like a story."

He often works in a variety of different mediums - and often uses lots of them in the same picture. "I've been through it all and I still use it all," he tells me, waving at his desk and the table next to it; the table is covered in tier upon tier of ink bottles, there are pencils, coloured pencils, pastels and pens and acrylics. "I got an identity through using watercolours, but it was limited and it was limiting...I was beginning to repeat myself," says Michael. "A continuous narrative, like *Oz*, needs continuity, but something like a treasury requires a mixture and I need to be able to do both."

Is he now in the position of being able to do exactly what he wants? "No...well, yes," he replies, "I can, providing it's in a form that works, and I've had a number of ideas over the years that I've never been able to get to work." And what about ambitions, does he still have any he has yet to achieve? "Thwarted ambition comes with every picture," he smiles. "Sometimes they

look better than I expected, but things happen that you can't predict and they can come up a bit short. But I'm not searching for the perfect picture...I just like doing it and I like the fact that, at the end of the day, I've done something."