

## 1997/May ANTHONY BROWNE - Publishing News

There's a world out there, full of gorillas, and you're the only chimpanzee. It looks alarmingly like a place you know well, but different in the way that dreams are - recognisable, yet disturbing. *Willy the Wimp*, which documented that world, was published in 1984 and introduced us to one of Anthony Browne's most enduring creations, though at the time neither he, nor anyone else, had any idea that this would be the case.

"Willy came, I suppose, from my own childhood," says Browne. "I was a younger brother and constantly felt less good at everything from football to drawing; Willy's very like I was then." Browne is no longer in the shadows, hasn't been for a long time, but those childhood experiences continue to have their effect, still infusing his work, still haunting his psyche. And Browne has always been a surrealist, a mixer of the real and unreal, blurring the edges between them in his work to create powerful, but at the same time charming images.

*Willy the Wimp* was a very quick book to do, only taking three months to finish - but that, says Browne, has always been the way with him and he's always elicited a big response from children, right from the start. "I think a lot of kids feel they're never going to get there, to attain the next level - just like Willy in the world of gorillas," says Browne, when I ask him why children connect so strongly with the character. "If I was to really try and analyse why, it wouldn't work any more, I would become too self-conscious and the books would lose whatever it is they have."

Browne never saw Willy as an on-going character, but ever since the second book he found he was having ideas that didn't appear to link in any way. "But Willy sort of ties them together," he says. "I wanted to do a book about dreams, which became *Willy the Dreamer*, and he gave it all sorts of reasons to exist, as well as giving it humour. I don't try and make this happen, Willy makes it happen."

There are now five Willy books, so, Mr Browne, do you still like him? "I used to think of him as a bit of an albatross, and have been accused of putting him down when talking about my work," he replies. "For a long time

I thought he was the lighter side of what I do, not part of my serious stuff...but he is a part of it and I do like him, he's not really autobiographical at all, more of a universal character. With *Dreamer*, because it's about dreams, I could do anything I wanted, it was a deliciously childlike experience and terrifically liberating."

His influences come not from graphics, the discipline in which he trained, but from the worlds of painting and film, specifically René Magritte, Luis Bunuel and Jean Cocteau. "I did try and deny the Magritte influence," he says, "but children relate to it because it is a strange world out there." Movie-making has also affected the way he works as doing a picture book is very like planning a film, with 28 pages becoming 28 scenes, and a lot of his decisions coming down to answering the question 'Where's the audience sitting?'. And, much like the Surrealists, Browne has never seen himself as a commercial creator. "I do what I do because of children, not because of sales figures and the American market."

Coming from a background that didn't have much money, and no tradition of buying books, Browne, like so many others, found libraries a great inspiration and it saddens him that they've become so much more marginalised. "When I started out 80% of all children's books went to schools and libraries," he says, "and now that's reversed, which is a problem, as the 80% of books that now go into shops are chosen because they'll sell, not because of their quality and their ideas. And we should never forget that there are innumerable other reasons for a book to exist than simply its ability to sell."