



Author Spotlight

James Mayhew chats to Graham Marks

James Mayhew is the award-winning author and illustrator of some forty books, including thirteen about his ever-popular character, Katie, the girl who really can get inside famous paintings; he also devises and presents concerts incorporating music, narration and live illustration. Here he talks to **Graham Marks** about his love of illustration and the fact that it is twenty five years since *Katie's Picture Show*, the first book in the series, was published.

Would I be right I thinking that you moved quite a lot as a child?

I know why you're thinking that, because my father was in the Air Force, but not as much as you might think...we lived in a few places, but not that many. I was born in Stamford, [Lincolnshire], and when I was four we moved briefly to Norfolk, for less than a year, while my father changed jobs – he left the Air Force around that time and went into banking.

Then we settled in Suffolk, in a tiny village called Blundestone, which is famous because that's where David Copperfield was born in Dickens' book. There was nothing there, just one bus a week to Lowestoft and back on a Friday, otherwise you were completely cut off.

Sounds like being in prison!

It was – and funnily enough that's Blundeston's other claim to fame - it also has a high-security prison! Occasionally a prisoner would escape, one every five years or so, it was terribly exciting.

Did you always draw?

Yes. Always, always, always.

And was art always what you wanted to do when you grew up?

[Pauses] Of some kind, yes...I wasn't sure exactly what area I wanted to go into, that came much later, but it was always obvious that art was going to play a part. A few people tried to put me off, teachers, and some relatives...the old story that you couldn't make a living as an artist. That rather strengthened my resolve, to be honest, made me want to prove them wrong!

I thought it interesting when I read that people said it was 'glaringly obvious' you were going to be an illustrator rather than an artist, and I wondered what made them make that differentiation?

I think that there were two principal things: Firstly, all the techniques and materials I used, and my whole visual language, was very traditional and art schools at that time, and probably still today, if you're going down the fine art route, are looking for something much more interpretive and they want to see people who are going to bare their soul. Which I wasn't doing. I needed, in that sense, a subject matter to inspire me...it didn't come from in me, it came from somewhere else, the need to draw. It came from stories and things like that.

And I think the other thing was that most of the images I made were very narrative, they were stories in image; I did go off and paint landscapes for a while, and I thought it that was enough to do a fine art course...it wasn't. I got far more pleasure from narrative image making, simple as that.

Was 'story' also a very big part of your life?

Yes, I think it was, but not in the obvious sense that I was an avid reader – because when I learnt to read at school, when I was very young, aged four or five, I struggled a bit...oh, we had a *horrible* teacher!

Do you remember their name?

Yes, Miss Moffat, like in the nursery rhyme...[general laughter]...it's true! She had this ghastly system whereby you could only borrow a book from school if you could find your handwritten library card, which I never could; so I was rather put off the whole idea of books at that stage. Fortunately, we had books at home, otherwise...who knows? And she also confiscated my beloved Chitty Chitty Bang Bang, for talking in class; the car was eventually returned, but Truly Scrumptious was lost in the depths of her handbag for all time. An unforgiveable crime to a five year-old!

And this is also a true story: my first teacher, at my first school that I was at for only one term, was Miss Love, and she married a man called Mr Darling. You couldn't make it up, could you?

I overheard an interesting discussion today, with one artist telling another that the only difference between a commercial artist and an artist is that the former knows how much he's worth and the latter doesn't. Do you think that's true?

[Laughs] In reality it's not that simple...when I was at art school there was always this tension between the Fine Art and the Graphics departments, and I was studying illustration by that time and illustration was firmly in the Graphics department. The fine artists did like to look down on us, there was definitely that sense; it was frustrating for me because, having looked at the history of art, so much of it has been driven by commercial thoughts and needs, so much of it is narrative and illustrative.

It's only really when we get to the 20th Century that art starts to become so much more personal and so much more altruistic, I suppose, so much less about communicating in the traditional way. It's very much a modern preoccupation to divide the arts in this way...I was speaking to the wood engraver John Lawrence about this – he's in his 80s now – and he says he can remember, in his opinion, the moment the schism between fine art and commercial art, in the 60s.

Everything became separate, in little departments. Before that, an artist was an artist, they covered all the fields: theatrical design, posters, sculpture, murals, the whole lot, and people didn't draw distinctions, saying 'you're a great painter, you can't illustrate, that's not what you should be doing'; nowadays, because of the way art is taught, you have to choose a niche and you're not encouraged to move sideways. And there's also a snobbery, fine artists thinking they're better because they're not bound by to brief, they can do whatever they want.

Katie – the character, not your sister – has been in your life for a very long time, I gather some of it shut away in a drawer; did you always know there was something special about her?

[Pauses] No...I don't think so. It was a college project, and was originally written as part of the general illustration course [I was on]; the project was only two or three weeks long and it was the *only* time we really talked about children's books in the whole three years. Which is quite ironic, as all three tutors on the course were children's book illustrators, as it happens; they *never* spoke about their work, they never showed their work, they never talked about their processes and were very guarded about what they did. I think it was because children's book illustration was actually not very fashionable during the 80s...most people on the course were headed towards the advertising end of illustration, because there was a lot of money to be made [there].

Going back to Katie, as a special character...not really...but the idea of a book which introduced children to art was something I'd thought about for some time. It went back 30 years, to when I was doing my Foundation Course at Lowestoft [Art School] and I'd been a pavement artist one summer and drawn various paintings in chalks; I'd watch children come and watch me and they'd seemed genuinely interested and I wanted to do something to encourage them to go to art galleries and enjoy art. So that was the beginning of it.

The character wasn't Katie to start with, it was just a little girl. She had several names, she was Rachel, she was Abigail, various names and none of them seemed right; they either seemed too middle class or too stuffy, and they didn't feel like the character I had in my mind's eye. Even though I hadn't worked out how to draw her yet, I knew the name was wrong. And then I tried Katie, and it just fitted. I think, subconsciously, I probably had my sister in mind all along, particularly as I then recognised that the memory which was really supporting this idea was going to galleries with our grandmother as children.

How does your sister feel about being immortalised like this?

[Laughs] You'd have to ask her, I think! I don't know...she is pleased. She's quite reticent about it, and not one to milk it in any way, but of course she pleased, really.

What's it like to have a character who can never, ever grow up? Do you want her to?

Not really...I think that would spoil the magic, the illusion she has. It is strange, having a character stuck at one age, I think *anybody* who writes a series must feel that. What's strange for me also is the fact that I can never grow up as an artist; one of the downsides of a series that's lasted for twenty five years is that each book has to be reasonably consistent with what's gone before. So, although in twenty five years I've learned and I've grown and I've matured, I can't really do anything completely different, I can't break out of that. If I'm doing a Katie book, then I have to look backwards rather than forwards, I suppose you could say.

Do you think in a subtle way, in your mind at least, Katie had changed from the girl you met all those years ago?

Yes, she has, definitely. When I first wrote the first story she was much more feisty and naughty and troublesome...and the publishers weren't happy with that side of her character. Unfortunately, but probably wisely. She has changed, I think I've got to know her better, and it is a dialogue between myself and the publisher, it's not just me saying 'This is Katie, this is what I want her to do'. They have a lot of input into the stories and the characterisation, and she's changed for all those reasons.

Who's idea was it to update Katie's Picture Show?

That was mine...going back to what I was saying earlier - that the style hasn't been able to change very much - the very first book, which was my first book, of any kind, looks very inconsistent. I did learn a lot on that first book, and even by the time I started the second, which was *Katie and the Dinosaurs*, and the third, which was about the Impressionists, I'd learnt a lot and my technique had become better as an illustrator and my knowledge of how to structure a picture book had improved. Lots of things had improved. I learnt so much from that first book, and I was never really very happy with the illustrations and didn't feel they did justice to the paintings I was trying to create an homage to.

But beyond that, I think that the decision the publishers took last year to enlarge the scale of the books was what really clinched it, because they'd blown up the illustrations by about ten, fifteen per cent, to a larger format. With the more recent books, because the work is more intricate and more detailed, it looks OK, but when you blew up the illustrations in that first book they look incredibly crude and I just wasn't happy with that at all. So I requested that I re-illustrate it, they didn't want me to, so I offered to do it for *nothing*...and then they agreed!

So that's how it happened, but in the end they did feel slightly guilty and offered me a small fee. But I think it was the right thing to do, because I'm trying to look ahead and think of the next twenty five years and I want the book to have a new lease of life; I wanted it to feel like a celebration this year, but also, most important, I wanted it to be consistent with the rest of the series.

Generally speaking, creative types don't like repeating themselves, so how did it feel to revisit something you did twenty five years ago?

It was quite a good thing to do, in a sense, because obviously I'd wanted to for some time, so there was that side of it, but also it was quite a nice feeling of rounding things off. I could remember doing those illustrations the first time, I could remember where I was sitting, I could remember the frustrations with certain things, things I'd found difficult and struggled with. I could remember *everything*, every detail, so it was quite nostalgic to go back; it was like one of those moments where you look at a picture of a child and say 'Oh, I wish I could go back to that time', and, for a moment, I was able to do that, I was able to go back twenty five years.

In that sense it was positive. But it goes back to what I was saying before, about how, illustratively, I do feel trapped by Katie, if I'm honest. I've got so many other things I would love to do and try that I can't do with Katie.

She's not the only thing you've done, though...

No, she's not, absolutely...that's one of the reason why I have other avenues; with each Katie book I think I can honestly say it gets a little bit harder.

Is there another Katie book bubbling away in the background of your imagination?

Well, things have been discussed...[the publishers] would quite like me to take Katie to other locations; she's been to Scotland and to London, and this Christmas we have *Katie's London Christmas* coming. Beyond that, they've wafted Paris and New York in front of me, which sound like exciting subjects.

I don't know, there are lots and lots of wonderful paintings I would still like Katie to visit – I've always loved Vermeer and his period Dutch art – and if we wait a bit of time, hopefully some more interesting modern artists will come out of copyright, because I have to use artists who have been dead seventy years.

Do you still have the original *Katie's Picture Show* artwork?

Yeah, ninety per cent of it...I've given the odd bit away, here and there, to friends, but I've never sold any.

Did you have it there in front of you, when you were painting the new versions?

No. No, I didn't need it. I knew what I wanted to do...I'd been thinking about for a *long* time.

This is maybe a slightly redundant question, but now you've done re-illustrated *Katie's Picture Show* are you glad you did?

Yes, now I can draw a line under that particular demon.

And does that beg the question: What about the next book, the second one, is that now good enough?

None of my books are *ever* good enough!