

1997/May MARC BROWN - Publishing News

Celebrity comes in many guises, and while I knew that the creator of the *Arthur* series was famous, the sudden arrival of dark-suited men with conspicuous armpit bulges and tiny earphones threw me momentarily. “*That famous?*” I thought. I was interviewing Marc Brown on the Random House stand during this year’s Bologna Children’s Book Fair at the exact same time, as it turned out, that Mrs Mubarak and a squad of heavily armed associates were checking out what Egyptian children might be reading next year

So, even with his books selling better than *Goosebumps* and the TV show knocking *Barney* off the No. 1 slot on the small screen in the States, Brown doesn’t yet need more protection than RH’s dapper publicity manager, Justin Somper, can easily provide him with. Arthur, as you may or may not know, is probably the world’s most famous aardvark, the result of Brown telling bedtime stories to his then four-year old son some 20 years ago. So, how did it all come about

“The Boston college I was teaching art at closed down,” said Brown, “and I was trying to figure out what I loved to do most and found it when I drew the character in the story I was telling my son. My main problem was how to make a living out of it.” He put the first story, *Arthur’s Nose*, into a dummy and took it to Emilie McLeod at Little, Brown. “She accepted it, even though it needed a lot of work, and proceeded to teach me how to write picture books - six months later we had a manuscript!” says Brown. “And then came the illustrations. I studied as a painter, but Emilie gave me the best advice I’ve ever had - strip away all the heavy technique and concentrate on simple lines and expressions.” One other very important lesson he learned was from his son, he goes on: “He allowed me to have fun with the books; I saw how much he liked the humour in Dr Seuss and I wanted him to have the same fun in mine.

The time being the mid-Seventies, pre any kind of digital technology, apart from the calculator, Brown had to learn how to do his own 4-colour separations on acetate “...which sure slowed me down,” he says. “I’m doing

three times as many books a year now I don't have to do that!" *Arthur's Nose*, published in 1976 was says Brown, a modest success and he put it away and went off to do other things, never imagining the book would become a series. Four years later, and with a new editor at Little, Brown, he was asked to do another *Arthur* story.

"It came from real life," says Brown, "where all the best ones are. *Arthur's Eyes* was about a boy who wouldn't wear his glasses at school and it became successful in the US, which was when the publishers started to advertise the books - why do they do it that way round?" A question always worth asking, but one I doubt will ever be answered satisfactorily. From then on Arthur just got bigger and bigger and by the mid-80s Brown was getting 100,000 letters a year from children; and with the advent of the Internet the response from his audience has mushroomed to an average of 400,000 'hits' a week on Arthur's website. "Kids really connect with him," says Brown, who has now brought someone to help him, as every letter gets a response. "I've been getting letters from handicapped kids who share with me intimate details of what their life feels like."

As if working on Arthur weren't enough, Brown and his wife Laurie (they have separate studios in the same Massachusetts barn) also produce non-fiction books like the successful *Dinosaur's Divorce*. "I've always had too many ideas," he says, "and not enough time." This situation has changed somewhat since the idea of a TV programme has become a reality. At first, says Brown, the notion of Arthur on television didn't seem right.

"He had no weapons and wouldn't have lasted long on the Saturday morning schedules," he continues. "But when PBS came to see me I liked what they were talking about - their goals were to help children learn to read through a TV show. Public TV is very responsible about what they produce and didn't keep me at arm's length, I'm involved with everything and cause all sorts of trouble!" This last comment from the man who was sacked from his job as a TV art director for suggesting the weather lady be dressed as a fairy and fly onto the set.

One of the problems with the kind of success he's now having is that all sorts of people now want a piece of the action as well. "I keep a tight

control because no one will care the way I do,” he tells me. “I’ve seen what happens to other properties not controlled by the author, and my agent fields 60-70 calls a day from companies wanting licenses.”

Some of the money from the licenses that do get granted is ploughed back into the animation, which, he says, costs £13 million per series of 30 half-hour shows - each with two stories with a live-action link. “I used to think I had a hundred new ideas I’d never get round to using, but the TV people have really gone through them,” smiles Brown. “And they’re writing new ones as well, good ones, too; it’s just like an adult sit-com, except the characters just happen to be kids, which makes a real difference to the show.

There is about Brown an air of mild surprise at the spin his life has taken recently. He’s lived a long time with Arthur, his sister DW and the world they inhabit; it has always been a small, contained world with horizons that aren’t too far away, a place eight-year-olds can understand and feel comfortable in. Although a lot of that has changed - for Brown, at least - he still seems at ease with what has happened. “Arthur hasn’t taken over my life, although he could,” he says. “I can see how he could swallow me up because it’s now three full-time jobs - books, television and licensing. But I’m not tired of him, particularly his strong connection with kids...I never write down to them, I feel I’m on an equal footing when I talk to kids. I’m honest and I always get honest answers back from them.”

Brown remains an enthusiast, albeit an introverted one. “If I was a bumper sticker,” he says, “I would read ‘I like all kids - and some adults!’” And you do get the very strong feeling that this is one grown-up who never forgot what it’s like to be a child.

