

1998/Nov MICHAEL ROSEN - Publishing News

Michael Rosen can probably best be described as a force of Nature. He is the embodiment of enthusiasm, the sultan of rhyme, a genuine star and a bit of an all-round hero, really. The last bit's true in my house, anyway. All of which explains why Walker Books asked him to select the contents and be the front man for their new *Classic Poetry, an Illustrated Collection*. It isn't a huge book, but it spans over 400 years of ideas and imagination - from William Shakespeare and Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Robert Frost and Judith Wright.

"The world of children's publishing has changed, something has shifted," says Rosen. "It used to be that most books were unsolicited, but now publishers prefer to commission - and to be honest, they're as able to choose what's good for kids as we are - and I was delighted to be asked to do it." The project took Rosen, and his collaborator Paul Howard, a long, long time to complete, three years in total "...mainly because they're such brilliant editors and designers at Walker and Amelia Edwards is a perfectionist," he says, "but that's why all her books are like jewels.

"From a raw script we talked long and hard as I very much wanted this book to be something different...it was the whole point of doing it. Other people always seem to put poets on a pedestal, but I wanted to talk to the reader about the poets - who they were, what was their history, what was their situation when they wrote the poem."

In his introduction, Rosen describes classic poetry as "poems that have lasted for many years...they've remained popular; they've gone on mattering to people; many people have thought they said important things in a memorable way." He started to voluntarily write poetry at the age of 16, with what he describes as a "crude adaptation" of DH Lawrence's *Bat*. "I had these things I thought were worth reading, and I wanted to have a go," Rosen tells me. "Poetry was accessible, cheap, portable, instant yet permanent, and fairly easy to do. I liked the potency of poetry, the lasting impression...and the magic of it is you know it's only words, but you don't know how it works, what makes them linger."

It might be hard to imagine now, but there was a time when Rosen used to do the standard poet's thing of just standing and reciting what he'd written. That was before he met Sean McErlaine, Head Master of Princess Frederika School in Kensal Rise. "It was back in 1976, just after *Mind Your Own Business* came out, and schools had started to ask me to come in and read the poems," he recalls. "I stood there - a solemn twit, not the massive clown Sean had been expecting - muttering away, and then he took the book out of my hands and literally danced my poem in front of the kids and they roared! I thought so that's what it's supposed to sound like, and it taught me to take poetry to the kids...make it real, make it tonal."

In this collection you'll find evidence of extraordinary times: times when poetry was a political force, times when it was the way of telling stories, others when it spoke only of love. *Classic Poetry* does a lot more than just lay words on the page, but then Rosen himself does a lot more than write; he's become a one-man, grand original show, in which, he says, some see him as Billy Connolly, some as Charlie Chaplin.

"What I do might look off-the-cuff, but it's quite studied really," he admits. "It's all about timing, acting, performance, art...it's everything. And it's what people have done since the time of Beowulf - the geezer who got up then had to grab the audience, and I like to think I'm doing something similar." Occasionally, he says, someone spots the basically small family relationships that he enacts in large format in front of the kids. "They're small, but they're important," says Rosen, "because they create a form of contagiousness that allows discussion, unlocking important things that need talking about."

I defy anyone not to find something in Rosen's new collection that doesn't hit an emotional target - it might just be a title, an ill-remembered first line, it could be an undiscovered gem, but it'll be there. And then there's the way it looks, which is to say, gorgeous. As Rosen's son, Eddie, now world-famous through his appearance in *Quick, Let's Get Out of Here!*, once remarked about food "The first bite's with the eye, Dad", and Paul Howard has certainly put heart and soul into work that is definitely a feast for the

eye. “I was stunned when I first saw the proofs,” says Rosen, “but then we all really did care about what we were doing.”