

2000/Nov MICK INKPEN - Publishing News

Asking Mick Inkpen if his name is real or not is about as unoriginal as you can get, but natural curiosity won out. And it's a mark of the man that he didn't groan or anything, simply said that, yes, it was his given name and that, apart from definitely being his most frequently asked question, it roughly translates from the Anglo-Saxon and Celtic as bog hill.

Inkpen would no doubt hate to be called an institution but, along with his one-time associate Nick Butterworth, he is synonymous with a definably English style of pre-school publishing that's found a place in homes all over the world - and he got there quite by chance. "I had no formal training," he says. "I was offered a place at Cambridge to study English, but spent a gap year working in Nick's graphic design studio and decided to stay on." It was during that time that they produced their first children's characters. *Upney Junction*, about mice in a deserted railway station, was done as a strip for the *Sunday Express*. "Most often when we worked together, I'd write, Nick would draw and I'd come back in to colour," Inkpen explains.

Those with long enough memories might remember that the names Butterworth and Inkpen were once as conjoined as Morecambe and Wise, so why the split? "There was no real split - Nick and I still live 10 minutes from each other, and play tennis every week," says Inkpen. "We'd done a lot of work together but it was just more rewarding to do everything yourself. We'd produced a Nativity title for Hodder & Stoughton's religious arm, which did well in the mainstream; I stayed with Hodder and Nick went to HarperCollins."

It's often the case, where people take an unexpected turn in their careers, that they end up somewhere they had no intention of being - was Inkpen actually doing what he always wanted to do? "My favourite subjects at school English and art, and I was never sure which to follow. Picture books gave me an outlet for both. In hindsight, I would have benefitted from the experience of Cambridge, but it would be churlish *not* to be happy with a situation where my time is my own and 95% of my ideas come to

fruition...the only real downside is that the profession is a very solitary one.”

There’s one thing that intrinsically connects artists and writers - the emptiness of a blank sheet of paper or a computer screen. Either can be seen either as breathtakingly exciting or the exact reverse. Inkpen sees it as the former. “But there’s always a tension between the prospect of a new idea, the blank sheet of paper and the commercial imperative to build on the success of a familiar character.”

While Inkpen has done lots of other things, his signature character is Kipper, the dog who made it out of a bit part in a book called *The Blue Balloon* and into the stratosphere of licensed character stardom. Was he fed up with the commercial necessity of him? “No, I haven’t got to the ‘oh God, not *another* Kipper book!’ stage yet, and I still enjoy drawing him. In fact, he’s just gone up for another BAFTA for the TV show.”

Kipper on TV is something of a phenomenon. There have been six series in all, a grand total of 78 ten-minute shows, which is an achievement of saga-like proportions. “I’d resisted TV for ages because it takes a huge amount of material to fill the schedules and this is often at the expense of the quality,” reflects Inkpen, “but it’s actually been a happy relationship with HIT, who produced the films, and Grand Slamm who made them. There was no attempt to sideline me - and I started off heavily involved during the first year. I wrote the initial series, edited the rest, worked with the storyboarder and director to establish the style of the films. I even got to choose Martin Clunes to voice Kipper!”

Inkpen tried out over 20 writers in order to put a successful team together for the TV programmes. “It was only after that experience that I realised the simplicity of what I do is actually quite difficult to achieve,” he says. What he does, both written and drawn, can best be described as an extraordinarily complex simplicity, driven along by nuance. Just turn to the ‘A is for ant’ page in *Kipper’s A to Z*, for example. See how fascinated Kipper looks? And how surprised Arnold appears? Genius at work.

“It was a real challenge to make the A to Z playful, and to give it a narrative,” says Inkpen. “It’s very tempting to write an ABC as if it is some

sort of code-breaking device, as if language is mathematically precise. But neither language nor learning work in a tick-box kind of way. The idea is to give children the feeling that words and letters - their sounds and shapes - are things to be played with rather than merely committed to memory for the sake of their educational souls. The learning rubs off along with the enjoyment.”

As a creator, Inkpen has a fantastic amount of freedom, and loves every minute of it. What he’s not so glad about is having to do personal appearances. “They’re not my favourite things. I’m much happier to have the person in the Kipper suit out there instead of me,” he allows. “And anyway, most of the kids prefer to see Kipper, rather than me!”

This year will see a lot of Kipper publishing, as well as a new Wibbly Pig, but what of the future? “I’m looking forward to getting back to that blank sheet of paper and some new ideas,” smiles Inkpen, “I want to carry on playing with my imagination!”

