

1998/Oct RAYMOND BRIGGS - Publishing News

Twenty years ago this month, when fair number of *Publishing News*' readers were of the right age to be its intended audience, Hamish Hamilton published *The Snowman*. Since then it's become a classic of children's literature, even though there's not a word of text in it, a staple of Christmas TV schedules in its animated guise, and this year will see a stage version at London's Peacock Theatre.

"Am I bored with it?" asks *The Snowman*'s creator Raymond Briggs. "Well, I'm getting slightly fed up with *talking* about it...in fact I refused to be interviewed by the *Radio Times* last year. They were a bit peeved, but I had nothing to say, really." Not surprising, I suppose, when you've been asked questions about the same thing for the last two decades, but that comment did send a shiver down my spine. Was Briggs going to turn out to be the curmudgeon certain interviews had sketched him as? Thankfully, he was not.

Briggs is a generous interviewee, letting on straight away that he'll talk to me about anything, even *The Snowman*. So I asked him if he'd ever thought of doing a version of the book that included all the new scenes from the animated version. "I've never been asked, but I really couldn't bear to do it. There's a book of the film anyway, and none of the extra stuff was my idea...I never had anything to do with the film, which I thought at the time was a bit odd, but film makers seem to be like that, they act as if it's all their own idea. I would like to have co-operated, but maybe I'm just difficult to get on with." Briggs has never had anything to do with any of the projects based on his work, but is adamant that if the planned animation of his latest book, *Ethel and Ernest*, comes to fruition he will be involved as it's so personal.

The Snowman was the book that followed Briggs' hugely successful and groundbreaking *Fungus the Bogeyman*. He's quoted as saying that he wanted to do something which was "clean, pleasant, fresh...and fairly quick, too", so he picked up an idea that had been simmering on the creative backburner for some six or seven years and ran with it. This change of pace

also brought about a quite distinct change of style as well. “Friends had been telling me that my pencil drawings were much better than my inked stuff,” says Briggs, “and it’s true that something does always seem to go out of the work in the process of inking...using pencils lets the colour come out of the drawing, as well as being a lot quicker - a bit of a dodge, really.”

Briggs is a man who often appears to be taken by surprise by the turn of events. He’s amused by the irony of being most famous for books set around the festive season, while actually not liking Christmas much at all, and thinks of himself as being resolutely uncommercial, only to find he has a massive hit on his hands. “I didn’t think *anyone* would want Fungus,” he admits. “I kept phoning my publisher, Julia McRea, and telling her she wouldn’t be able to put it out, but she did - with patches stuck over the worst bits of muck and slime!”

We could almost be talking about a strip in the *Beano* or the *Dandy*, except that Briggs doesn’t see himself as a strip cartoonist. “I’m an *illustrator*,” he says. “Don’t get me wrong, I love cartoons - I grew up admiring all the usual *Punch* people: Pont, David Langdon, Fougasse, as well as Garth and Jane in the *Daily Mirror*. But that’s not what I do...cartoons are more linear, more comic.” There’s always going to be, he continues, a lack of respect for cartoon strips in England because of our literary heritage “...especially in children’s books - my Kate Greenaway medal for *Father Christmas* was called a ‘junior’ award by the librarian giving it to me! Cartoons, while held in huge esteem in Europe, aren’t looked upon here as a serious medium, which is a shame.”

There’s no reason to suppose that his new book, *Ethel and Ernest - A True Story*, will, all on its own, be able to effect a permanent change to this antediluvian attitude, but for it to be treated as anything other than a masterpiece wouldn’t be a shame, it would be a crime. Pick it up and it has the look and feel of a novel. Open it up you’re in archetypal Briggs territory: densely packed pages (the more so because of its small format) filled with exquisite pictures and text, all fitted together in a complex and absorbing jigsaw.

It's a book to taste and savour and one that, while it appears on the surface to be an elegantly crafted biography, also seems to say a lot about the author. A comment which surprised Briggs. "I tried to keep myself out of it as much as possible," he tells me, "although I had to be there as I was so important to them, particularly my Mum." The book spans the four decades of his parents' relationship, from 1929 to 1971, and it took him three years to produce, although he says it shouldn't have; he is, he claims, getting older, tired, lazier and can't go plodding on till midnight like he used to.

"I knew most of the story," says Briggs, "and I imagined much of how they felt about things, like moving into their first house...my Dad used to talk on the allotment as well - the place where the buzz bomb came down." Read the book and you'll find yourself immersed in a fascinating world of incidental detail, and a true labour of love. So, Mr Briggs, what next? "I've been fly fishing a lot, it's my latest craze," he replies. "And I read this marvelous quote from Gustav Holst... 'Never create anything unless *not* creating becomes a positive nuisance'. Brilliant. But it does stop you in your tracks. It means you've got to be obsessed by *something*...it's got to be powerful."

Powerful. A word that surely describes everything Briggs has done, from the mundane horror of *When the Wind Blows* to the assured and emotional storytelling of *Ethel and Ernest*. He doesn't sound tired, lazy or plodding, so the chances are that something will come along that demands to be written and drawn, and out will come the pencils again.