

1995/Sept ALIAN AHLBERG - Publishing News

The voice at the end of the telephone had a soft Black Country burr; it was open, friendly and I was immediately put at my ease. I hadn't known what to expect, and interviewing at long-distance is never the method of choice if one is trying to sketch in a personality in a very short space of time. Allan Ahlberg though, like his work, was totally accessible.

He was born in London, but six weeks later was in Oldbury, just outside Birmingham, where he grew up. That era, of late 40's, early 50's Britain - post-war, you never had it, so what - is everywhere in his work. This, he says, is fairly predictable as writers can't help but draw on where they come from, it's an inevitability.

What was by no means inevitable was that two trainee teachers should meet at college and go on to become a phenomenally successful author/illustrator team with a quite enviable reputation for innovation and quality. It is a well known fact in the business that they demanded the same standards from their publishers as they did of themselves, and I asked how they managed to get what they wanted, to wield so much control.

"Control is about power," Ahlberg replied, "but power didn't really interest us - we simply noticed that things went wrong with our books if you didn't get printers and publishers to do what you want. You need decent paper! We gradually found ourselves involved - not for power, but because the job isn't finished until the book is in the shops."

The way Ahlberg tells it, he and his late wife Janet couldn't help themselves; they wanted to make good books and this involved discussing and talking through every detail of the production. "We aren't saints, we have egos, but if a book isn't right it's no good - we want William Morris books at Penguin prices, an impossibility, of course...we do have to compromise," he says. "But it has little to do with whether the publisher likes you, and everything to do with the book selling - it is a business." He's at pains to point out that he doesn't want to sound combative. Next to their own partnership, he tells me, their closest allies have always been their publishers. "In fact," he says, "we were trained by them."

Very early on in our conversation Ahlberg explained that he still found it hard not to talk as if Janet were still alive, which, with *The Jolly Pocket Postman* about to publish, is all the more understandable. The two of them had similar upbringings, similar influences and tastes. For both, comics were an important part of their early lives and a constant source of inspiration. “We read them as children - *The Wizard*, *The Beano*, *The Dandy*, they were the big thing,” he says. “They had some wonderful artwork, and I particularly liked Dudley Watkins [*Desperate Dan*, *Lord Snooty* et al.], his work was beautifully drawn, full of humanity.”

Janet, on the other hand, was a big fan of Rupert Bear and also Pooh. Quite early on in their career, speech balloons began to appear in books such as *The Brick Street Boys*, and they found little resistance to this method of telling stories with words and pictures. “Comics,” he says, “were a part of our menu, an influential but not dominating force.”

No two people ever seem to work in exactly the same way, and a successful partnership is one in which each style is complementary. With Allan and Janet it was the joint excitement of progressing ideas. “We always had a lot of them,” says Ahlberg. “It was usually me who had them to start with; I’d go to her with half a dozen and she’d come back talking about one and it would go on from there.” Ahlberg, a keen runner, would do his thinking while out pounding the tarmac, and he’d come back dripping in perspiration and inspiration in about equal quantity. “I’d ask her what would happen if...and it would be a title, like *Burglar Bill*, or a hole in a page, like *Peepo!*, or envelopes, which gave us *The Jolly Postman*. I’d write, she’d edit, sometimes sketching, and then start painting. Usually I’d written the next book before she’d finished the last one.”

Janet, says Ahlberg, would always do a huge amount of work on each book - roughs, dummies, it was, he says, like a six month game of table tennis, ideas bouncing back and forth until, in a completely shared way, they had a book. “What we took to the publisher was a finished job,” he says.

I asked if Janet ever worked with anyone else? “No!” he replied quite forcefully, “I never allowed that!” And I can’t tell, because I can’t see his expression, just how seriously he meant the comment. “She did have offers,

and I tried to be fair,” he continued, before I had time to enquire, “but she always had another book waiting for her, she always wanted to be on to the next one and got fidgety if she didn’t have a job going.”

Ahlberg, of course, has worked with other people - but then, as he says, the writing takes so much less time. “If our rate of work had been the same I would not have worked with anyone else,” he tells me. “I write light comedy, she draws light comedy; we fitted. What we seemed to be doing was adding books to what we’d already done - making a whole shelf. It was a collaboration, a shared pleasure with no competition.” The person Ahlberg wrote for whom Janet most admired was Fritz Wegner; she thought he was especially good and always said she could never do what he did.

While it is true that the art always took longer than the words, one project among all the ones they worked on did seem to have taken an extraordinary amount of time. *The Jolly Postman* was five years in the making, the idea first gelling when their daughter, Jessica, was two years old. From playing around with envelopes - as they’d noticed Jessica doing - the pair went on to work out a provisional format, which they took to a publisher. It was turned down. “We then took it to Heinemann and they accepted it,” says Ahlberg. “A production dummy was produced in Singapore, which wasn’t right, so then we did a second one - and a third and a fourth...it took ages to solve the physical business of actually making the book. Then we had to do the artwork, which took a while. By the time it got into the shops, Jessica was seven.”

The sequel, *The Jolly Christmas Postman*, was easier to create because of all the work that had already been done. “Although,” says Ahlberg, “there was never *meant* to be a sequel - they’re usually dodgier than the original. But *Christmas* allowed us to extend the idea.” One would have thought that by the time they came to *The Jolly Pocket Postman* everything would have been a breeze, but it was a much more complicated idea and had its own technical problems, particularly with binding and paper engineering. Had it been too easy, the Ahlbergs, one has the impression, wouldn’t have wanted to do it.

Of all the books they produced, there must, I thought, be a favourite amongst them. It was a question which gave Ahlberg pause in what, till then, had been a fairly breakneck conversation. “It could be *The Jolly Pocket Postman*,” he said finally, “it’s actually quite different from the other two, denser and more complicated. But I’d probably say *Bye Bye Baby*. It’s Janet’s best work, and I quite like the story...and the paper, the leaf size, the jacket, the blurb!” With Ahlberg it’s often easy to forget you’re talking to a writer, his interests are so wide-ranging and his comments frequently so visual. “I *am* a picture book writer - I think in pictures, I often do layouts as I go along...I leave spaces for pictures.” So, on to another question that makes him pause: what is his favourite book someone else has done? The ‘phone line is quiet for some time, and then he says, “I think I’d choose Russell Hoban and Quentin Blake’s *How Tom Beat Captain Najork and his Hired Sportsmen* - it’s wittily written and beautifully illustrated.”

With a canon of work such as they have, and a method of working like Janet’s, there must, I thought, be a fantastic amount of material produced over the years. Had it all been kept? It turns out that Janet, like her father before her, was something of a squirrel. “She was a keeper,” says Ahlberg. “There’s thousands of separate pieces of artwork, as well as roughs. In time I hope to put together a small book, a memento of Janet’s life and work - just for family and friends. So, in recent months, I’ve been working my way through her plan chest, drawers and so on.”

It will be a celebration of a life spent putting dreams on paper, where imagination has come bursting to life off the page. And, though it is one book we shall never see, there are all those others, each a vivid reminder of their marvelously fertile collaboration. “We always had more ideas than we could complete,” says Ahlberg. “But then the great fun for us was the playing around *before* we started to work.”

The great fun for us, their audience, has been having those ideas delivered to us so beautifully and with such obvious joy. All I can say is, thank you.

