

2006/Sept CHRIS RIDDELL - Publishing News

It's difficult to know how to begin to describe Chris Riddell. 'Very good' hardly seems good enough, while he'd probably agree that 'genius', often a disproportionate and somewhat overused term, wouldn't be right either. Although he has won the UNESCO Prize, the Nestlé Gold Award and two Kate Greenaway Medals. Unique, I think, is more appropriate.

He has been hard at it, producing everything from biting political cartoons to *Blobheads* children's books, for well over 20 years. He now does a day a week at the *Observer* ("it gets me out of the studio and into a different environment") and splits the rest of his time between his work with Paul Stewart, which includes the hugely successful *Edge Chronicles*, massive, lush projects such as *Gulliver's Travels*, his award-winning collaboration with Martin Jenkins, and solo picture book projects, like his latest from Macmillan, *The Emperor of Absurdia*. "Plus there's the going on tour," he adds, "which takes a vast amount of time."

Riddell likes the children's book industry because, he says, he likes working across different genres and areas. "It's important to keep questioning," Riddell continues, "because the way you approach a picture book is completely different to the way you approach, say, a series of black and white narrative illustrations, and I love that difference. I think the way one does a leader cartoon in Sunday newspaper actually has more in common with some of the techniques you would use in a picture book than you might imagine: it's all about a visual literacy, it's about metaphors, it's about using gestures, shapes and composition to communicate. I like going from one discipline to the other, from one week doing a picture book for the under-fives, to the next week doing a classic like *Gulliver*, then turning my attention to illustrating poetry by Brian Patten. It's that sort of mix which I love."

And it's easy to see exactly how much Riddell loves his work. There's an intensity and an exuberance, a giddy energy to everything he does; there's obvious delight in every steel-nibbed pen line - be it the smallest piece of b/w marginalia or an all-guns-blasting, full-colour panoramic vista. While

some illustrators master one medium - Durer, Tenniel, Beardsley, exemplary linesmen one and all - Riddell's colourwork is, unusually, as vibrant and dynamic as his penmanship.

As good a case in point as any is *The Emperor of Absurdia*, the epitome of picture book craft that takes the reader (young or old) on a wide-eyed, phantasmagorical journey, at the end of which you are left with a very big, unanswered question: what is real, and what is not? Riddell plays with text like Lewis Carroll did in *Alice in Wonderland*, creates complex layouts, presents the reader with pages of stunning simplicity and populates the whole affair with a cast of mythic and surreal characters. All this in a 32-page picture flat.

"*The Emperor* is very much a continuation of my career as a picture book illustrator and writer," he says. "It's returning to a first love, one of the best areas I could work in."