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Michael Morpurgo and Michael Foreman originally met each other at a Collins editorial meeting, but 25 years were to pass before their paths crossed again. Two years ago, as Foreman was leaving a school after giving a talk, he bumped into Morpurgo, on his way in.

The author, now one of our top children's writers, enquired whether the artist, arguably one of the best living water-colourists, would be interested in illustrating a picture book text of his. His answer was a qualified "No", but some time later the artist phoned the author and asked him if he'd like to write a book about King Arthur. "I was very flattered to be asked, and agreed straight away," says Morpurgo. "I had no real background knowledge and went away and read all I could find on the subject. "

After much research, Morpurgo still couldn't find the angle he needed to make the project more than just a simple reproduction of a 'best-loved' tale. "I realised the story had to live for people in the Nineties who only have memories of the Disney version," he says. "So I pared the story down, back to it's original, taking away the layers each generation had added and which only succeeded in clouding the real story of a young guerilla fighter."

What he found was a tragedy of truly Greek proportions and what he then understood was that he had to identify with Arthur and to some extent lose all the peripheral characters. "I decided, " he says, "to let Arthur tell his own autobiography".

Following in the footsteps of Tennyson and Holman Hunt - who had gone to Cornwall and stood on the beach that Arthur left from, deciding he must have travelled on to the Scilly Isles - Morpurgo and Foreman went looking for him there too. "I have no idea what Tennyson found," says Morpurgo, "but my wife discovered a tiny place called Arthur's Island just off the coast, created some 1,500 years ago, about the time of Arthur, by the last great movement of the Earth's crust in that area."

That piece of serendipity set Morpurgo and Foreman off on the trail that led to the creation of *Arthur, High King of Britain*. Both men had a common

aim in doing the book; they wanted, to use Foreman's term, to de-Hollywoodize the subject and make it as real as possible.

For Morpurgo that meant rescuing the stories of the last native resistance to the invading Saxons from the embroidery draped over them by first the Church and then the overly sentimental and romantic Victorians. For the other Michael there were different problems. "I had to try and reconcile the correct historical period with the accepted text," says Foreman. "And you can't be historically precise and give the legend its due image. There had to be something of a compromise."

The two creators seem to have worked almost as one to fashion a unique rendering of a story that is as universal in its theme of human hope and frailty as it is English in its setting. Morpurgo, says Foreman, has made the people very real, made it a much more human story. "He's made the book worth doing," he says. "It's not just another re-telling, he's added something to the legend."

The text has removed the spotlight from many of the subsidiary characters and centred the reader's attention on Arthur and four of the 100 Knights, while Foreman, in some of his most lucid and vibrant art to date, has focused, particularly in the battle scenes, on the ordinary foot soldier: "The little guy," as he says, "who didn't want to be there in the first place."

The elements of the tale, says Morpurgo, are very simple and at its heart it is a tremendous love story. "It's full of hope and success, and bit by bit it all falls apart." He thinks that 'purists' may well be upset by the book, as it's a re-thinking of a classic in which he's sometimes had to ignore the original to "make the book sing a bit more for people now."

The two Michaels' next project will be to do the same for Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. "We'll be attempting to tell it in a different way," says Morpurgo, refraining from further elaboration on an idea that will take some time to complete. If the end result of their labours on *Arthur* is anything to go by, the wait will be well worth it.