



Authorgraph No.153: Mick Manning and Brita Granström

Article Author:

[Ted Percy](#) [1]

[153](#) [2]

Article Category:

Authorgraph

Byline:

Mick Manning and Brita Granströminterviewed by **Ted Percy**.

Mick Manning and Brita Granström interviewed by **Ted Percy** <!--break-->

Wednesday being Market Day, the usual town-centre parking is full of stalls, which means an invigorating ten-minute walk up, over, round and through the walls of windy Berwick to arrive at Mick and Brita's early Georgian stone terrace. Admiring the splendid Siberian wallflower by the front door and the painted curlews over it, I ring. Now, although I've no idea what either Mick or Brita look like, the smiling man who opens the door is entirely familiar, and I exclaim as much. I've come to find out how this partnership works, and here's a clue ? Brita must have drawn Mick (for it is he) in one of their books.

Through a picture-filled passage, I'm ushered into a big bright light room with an expansive scrubbed and chair-girt table. Neither kitchen nor studio, this is obviously a room for meeting and eating. And so it turns out ? Brita (rhymes with ?Repeater?) bounces out of the kitchen with a giant coffee pot and an impressive ring of yellow cake. ? *Sockerkaka* ? Swedish for sugar cake? she explains, and though sugar isn't my thing, it's very good. With coffee comes conversation ? roots, backgrounds, influences.

Mick, now 45, grew up in the Brontës? Haworth which gives him a love of wild country and of Leeds United. Ten years younger, Brita was born near Eskilstuna ? the ?Swedish Sheffield?. Their partnership started in 1993 at Glasgow School of Art, where Mick was Head of Illustration and Brita arrived on an exchange visit from Stockholm's *Konstfack*. Brita began illustrating (cookery and travel) for the *Herald*, and this grew into their combined creation of ?Nature Spotters? for the Saturday back page. Mick's first book ? **A Ruined House** ? a ?Read and Wonder? for Walker Books, appeared to wide acclaim in 1995, and the eagle-eyed can find Brita's name among the credits for she did all the hand-lettering. To me this comes as a shock ? so well does the precision of the lettering agree with Mick's linear control that I'd always believed them to be from the same hand. Their first book together ? **The World is Full of Babies!** (1996) ? won the Silver Smarties Award, rave reviews and kicked off their Franklin Watts ?Wonderwise? succession good style. So who does what in this seemingly seamless team? ?It's not that simple,? says Mick, ?but you could say, for a start, Brita does the people, I do the animals; I do the words, Brita hand-letters them. So *we* are the text, the pictures and the initial design, we discuss everything until it feels right.? Their latest brilliant offering ? **Yuck!** , for Frances Lincoln, is a good example; Mick and Brita both did the early drawings, which Brita then developed into the artwork.

I'm curious to know where it all began ? for either of them. For Mick, it was an early interest in natural history, fostered not least by Ladybird Books? original non-fiction and in particular their wonderful illustrations by C F Tunnicliffe. ?He's still the best for me,? says Mick. ?He did people and animals equally well and entirely naturally. I've collected all the early Ladybirds ? lots from the Oxfam shop here where they save them for me ? and they're still brilliant examples of children's non-fiction.? Being a Tunni-freak myself (I chose his ?Bird Portraiture? as a school prize) I cheer inwardly. Alan Sorrell also rates highly with both Brita and Mick. His historic and pre-historic reconstructions combine

scholarship, accuracy and atmosphere. 'His books of the '60s were the first to show that 'History' was a place with grit, grime and smoke, and that life was a grubby business,' says Mick. 'Our 'Fly on the Wall' books are, in a way, a homage to his inspiration ' and the flies are real, too.' Mick describes himself variously as 'an illustrator' and 'an animal artist'; he probably wouldn't say he's a painter. Brita is a painter, who, after four years of training as an illustrator and a study of hand-lettering, emerged a Master of Fine Arts. Her aptitude for illustration descends directly from her primary school teacher-mother's early love of Tove Jansson's Moomin books and Ilon Wikland's work for Swedish chart-topper Astrid Lindgren.

We've booked a lunch table at the Maltings Arts Centre. 'We come here for the view,' says Brita, and I can see what she means. Sea, harbour, lighthouse, boats and Tweed are all on sparkling form this bright breezy day. Talk turns to Berwick as a home and work base. 'I've always wanted to live here,' says Mick 'since I came to Bamburgh as a kid on holiday, and Brita feels closer to Sweden than when we were in Glasgow.' 'Not just that,' adds Brita 'this is a great place to live and paint ' there's so much wonderful sky, the beaches are huge and empty and it's a fine place for the boys to grow up.'

Ah, yes, the boys. This partnership has been fruitful in all aspects and has produced Max, now eight, Björn (six) and Frej (rhymes with Milk Tray) who will be two on Friday (Frej-day, Brita explains). So where are they now? 'With Margaret,' says Brita. Margaret is the gifted child-manager who engages the boys (Frej every week and the other two during school holidays) each Wednesday and Thursday, so their parents can have two predictably uninterrupted midweek working days. Other days the two take turns on 'pram duty'. The boys will, it seems, be back at teatime, and I look forward to that.

Meanwhile, back at the house, I ask about its history. Dating back to 1706, it's been everything, including a tannery. The family's research has discovered a succession of characterful occupants, many now portrayed by Brita on the panels of their front room door. Amongst them are James and Elizabeth Hogarth, whose niece was Brontë biographer Elizabeth Gaskell ' the Haworth connection again.

Through to the kitchen while the kettle boils. It's spacious, full of light, stainless steel, and rock-solid wooden fixtures. 'Brita's dad put all these in,' says Mick. 'He's really a policeman and a farmer. I made the shelves, though, from an old piano!'

It's time for us to find the studio. 'We made it in the attic,' says Brita, forging ahead up the stairs, coffee-pot in hand. There are a lot of stairs and, hung as they are with pictures ' I recognise a favourite from **Ruined House** ' they take ages to climb. Eventually I arrive in what seems to be an upside-down boat. Timber-lined from end to end and painted white throughout, it's lit by big skylights which afford a different aspect of the splendid lunchtime view. We sit at a table long and white enough for St James' Infirmary. 'We cleared it specially,' says Brita, 'usually it's full of everything we're doing.' 'Everything' turns out to be a huge and varied lot, but their main preoccupation at the moment is a third member of their 'Fly on the Wall' succession. This one's devoted to the Vikings (Brita pronounces this with an authentic Swedish sound somewhere between V and W). This will succeed the excellent **Roman Fort** (2004) and the soon to be published **Pharaoh's Egypt**. 'We're trying to show the positive side of the Vikings,' says Mick, 'the way that Viking warriors became peaceful farmers and the many innovations and lifestyle improvements they brought with them.' Nothing new about IKEA, then. 'We do a lot of the 'Fly on the Wall' research ourselves,' they say. '**Roman Fort** rests heavily on what you can see at Vindolanda ' luckily quite near here, and Brita went to Egypt for **Pharaoh**, but for each one we always work with a known and trusted expert in the field through whom we filter everything we put in. **Pharaoh**'s expert was Egyptologist Bill Manley of Glasgow University who, at peak consultation time, was away digging in Egypt, so it was all done by e-mail.'

'Anything else on the stocks?' I ask, and they produce an early proof of **Snap!** ' a follow-up to **Yuck!** Based loosely on the 'Old woman that swallowed a fly' it involves, among others, a fisherman and a bear. I'll say no more.

A stereo in the studio and an impressive array of discs prompt an inquiry as to their working listening. '*Nothing*, for crucial drawing,' says Brita emphatically, 'otherwise it's mainly jazz ' Nina Simone, Esbjorn Svensson, Ella

Fitzgerald. For the Viking work, though, they've been accompanied by medieval traditional Swedish music (really very helpful) and some Sibelius.

'Did you want some pictures?' asks Mick, handing me a smart digital camera. This is my first fumble-fingered experience with such a thing but I manage (or don't? I never see the results) a few shots of the sky-lit duo in their workplace. Then there are noises below and parental galvanisation up here. The boys are back. We meet downstairs and, again, these are faces I already know. Health and good humour bursts out from the three of them and from Margaret who's unzipping Frej from his weatherproof all-terrain buggy.

The boys make their excuses and move off to watch **Jurassic Park** and we three sit and ramble on. Nordic word-roots come up. I find out that 'Ball' is a Swedish word meaning, roughly, 'celebratory bonfire'. So, when I say I had a Ball with this fine family, then you know what I mean.

After working as a children's librarian in Lancashire, Ross & Cromarty, and North Buckinghamshire, **Ted Percy** has now retired to Kirkcudbrightshire.

The Books a selection

From Frances Lincoln:

Yuck! 1 84507 088 7, £9.99 hbk (as featured on our cover and reviewed on page 18)

Snap! 1 84507 408 4, £10.99 hbk (June 2006)

'Fly on the Wall' series: **Roman Fort** (1 84507 050 X) and **Pharaoh's Egypt** (1 84507 100 X, September 2005) are £10.99 each hbk, with more titles to come, including one on Vikings (August 2006).

From Franklin Watts:

'All About Me' series, 4 titles including **What's My Family Tree?** (0 7496 5664 6) and **How Did I Begin?** (0 7496 5661 1), £5.99 each pbk

Dinomania , 0 7496 4704 3, £5.99 pbk

Voices of the Rainforest , 0 7496 5117 2, £10.99 hbk (winner of the 2005 English Association's English 4-11 Picturebook Awards, Key stage 1 Non-fiction; see also page 5)

'Wonderwise' series, 14 titles including **The World is Full of Babies!*** (0 7496 5689 1), **Stone Age, Bone Age!** (0 7496 5864 9), **What's Under the Bed?** (0 7496 5685 9), **My Body, Your Body** (0 7496 5862 2) and **Yum-Yum!** (0 7496 5687 5), £5.99 each pbk

'Wonderwise Readers', 8 titles including **I Feel Sick!** (0 7496 4788 4), **The Seed I Planted** (0 7496 4789 2) and **Watch Out! Builders About!** (0 7496 4786 8), £3.99 each pbk

From Walker:

A Ruined House , 'Read and Wonder', 0 7445 6271 6, £4.99 pbk (currently o/p)

Zed's Bread , 'Reading Together', 0 7445 6877 3, £2.99 pbk

***The World is Full of Babies!** is also published by O'Brien Press, 0 86278 479 4, £5.99 pbk

Website: www.mickandbrita.com [3]

 [Brit Granstrom and Mick Manning.JPG](#)

[4]



[Brit Granstrom and Mick Manning.JPG](#) [5]

Page Number:

15

Source URL (retrieved on Nov '19): <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/153/childrens-books/articles/authorgraph/authorgraph-no153-mick-manning-and-brita-granstr%C3%B6m>

Links:

[1] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/ted-percy>

[2] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/153>

[3] <http://www.mickandbrita.com>

[4] [http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/Brit Granstrom and Mick Manning.JPG](http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/Brit%20Granstrom%20and%20Mick%20Manning.JPG)

[5] [http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/Brit Granstrom and Mick Manning_0.JPG](http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/Brit%20Granstrom%20and%20Mick%20Manning_0.JPG)