



A Life in Pictures: John Burningham

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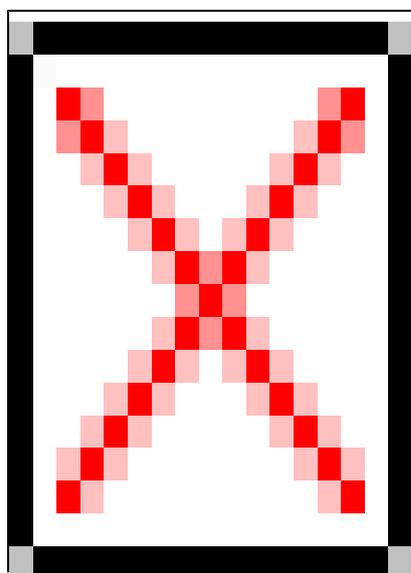
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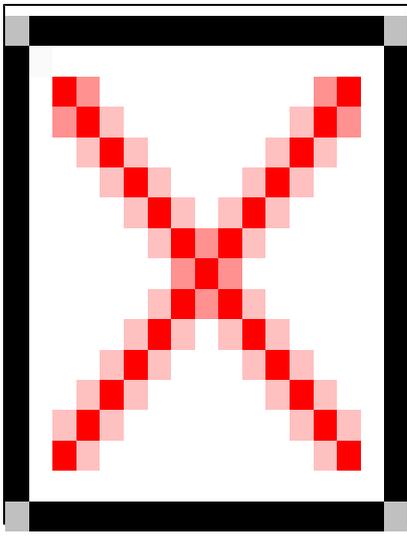
A Life in Pictures: John Burningham interviewed by **Clive Barnes**

A LIFE IN PICTURES

It is fifty years since publication of **Borka: the adventures of a goose with no feathers**, the book which began John Burningham's career as one of our most distinguished and distinctive illustrators. As celebrations begin, Clive Barnes talks to John Burningham for **Books for Keeps**.



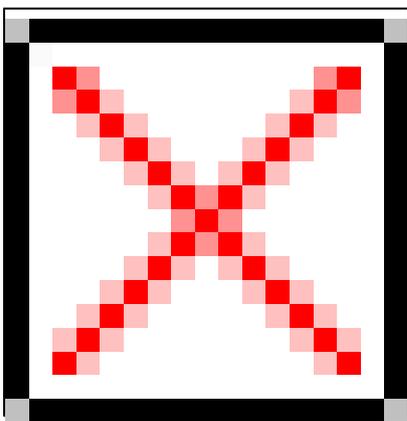
Each time I have had the privilege of talking to John Burningham about his work, I have had the feeling that it's not something that comes easily to him. He is unfailingly courteous, even more so for this interview since he was still suffering from a cough, which he assured me sounded worse than it was. He says he is not given to reflecting on his past work: 'I wave goodbye to it and I am thinking about the next thing. Sometimes, I'll think, oh God, I wish I'd spent more time on that drawing. But the next thing is the problem.'



The work, of course, speaks for itself, although there are now goodness knows how many words of appreciation from the best minds in children's literary criticism to add to it. John is, after all, one of those who can be said to have made the picture book an art form, while never losing sight of its primary function as a story to share with children. Random House is marking the 50th anniversary of *Borka* with a new paperback edition and a hardback anniversary edition, both in the original format. There is now also a paperback edition of **John Burningham: Behind the Scenes**, first published in hardback in 2009, a sumptuously illustrated summary of his life and work to date, offering lovingly reproduced reminders of his more than forty published works for children and adults.

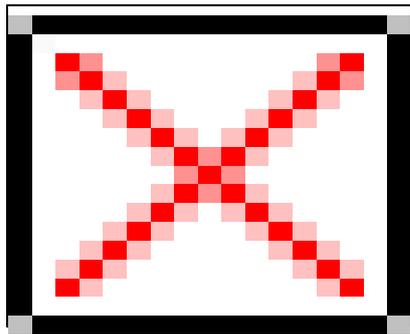
John, now in his seventy seventh year, is still at work. He recently completed two children's books, and he is working on two books meant for adults, one on French windows (as in windows in France) and another on Champagne (the drink). He says, "It is terrifying when you get people who come up to you and look at you and say, "And what did you used to do?" I am not in that bracket. It's all leasehold, and one's got to get on with what one's capable of doing."

He remembers sketching out the story of *Borka* in a small ring-bound notebook. "I had no idea what lay ahead, and I still don't. It's all a big adventure." He had his first break-through with a series of classic posters for London Transport. Then *Borka* was picked up by pioneering publisher Tom Maschler at Jonathan Cape and subsequently carried off the Library Association's **Kate Greenaway Award** for 1963, instantly establishing John as a children's illustrator. He says he was lucky that this beginning coincided with a transformation in colour printing technology, which meant that original artwork could be reproduced on the page more easily, "There was Michael Foreman's **The General**, the year before, and then there was *Borka*. They were the first big full colour picture books that were not hand separated. I couldn't have worked if someone had said you've got to make the yellow plate and then the blue plate and that will make green and so on. I couldn't have worked like that."



Borka was followed by four more exuberant tales about eccentric animals and their equally eccentric human companions, all of which are still in print. Then, in 1970, came the ground-breaking **Mr Gumpy's Outing**, which won John his second **Greenaway**, and has never been out of print since. It must be one of the best-loved picture books of all time. It featured a new kind of picture-book narrative, that the critic Brian Alderson has called "elastic-sided

storytelling?, in which the straightforward progression of a sequence of events with a beginning, middle and end, is replaced by a narrative that relies on interrelated patterns or rhythms that can be stretched this way or that, and whose form can accommodate the very different themes and purposes of books such as, for example, **Would You Rather** (1978), a jokey list of horrendous fates from which children and adults are invited to make a choice; **The Shopping Basket** (1980), in which weedy Stephen outwits a succession of bullying animals; **Granpa** (1984), a delicate meditation on the relationship of childhood and old age; and **Oi! Get off our Train** (1989), a fable that can encompass the conservation of endangered species and, as John has written, 'the social hierarchy of young children and the need to ease themselves into a group.' In such works, stories can be conjured from fragments of overheard conversation (**Granpa**) or two very different versions of the same experience (**Come away from the water, Shirley**, 1977 and **Time to get out of the bath, Shirley**, 1978). It is a way of storytelling that may have been suggested by his illustration of an African folk tale, **The Extraordinary Tug of War** in 1964 (republished this year with a new text by John as **Tug of War**).



John typically describes each book as a 'problem'; with new challenges to be met. As an aside, he says 'God knows what the rules are to all this.' And it is probably true to say that he has never known what the rules are, and, in consequence, he is one of those few picturebook creators that, while exploring their craft, have revealed its possibilities. He says that typically he has several projects 'rattling around' in his head at one time, and not all of these will work up into published books, and those that do sometimes emerge only several years after they were first thought of. Text and illustration are worked out together: 'I don't write a story and then do the illustrations. I have to know what's going to be on every page. I do endless little sketches which represent pictures and text.' Although each book has an eventual integrity, John may vary the media and the techniques he uses within a single book: 'You mustn't be visually boring. It isn't enough to say that you'll fill it with lovely bright colours. Visual images don't work like that. You've got to have a tension between the pages.'

Although John has been drawing since he was a child, he isn't someone who always has a sketchbook with him or does a lot of drawing from life. He has said in the past that he is really more interested in applied arts than fine arts, something that is reflected in his long-standing passion for collecting and salvaging old furniture, fittings and building materials and reusing them in his own homes. He says, 'It is very rare that I am turned on by a picture by itself.' John's beautiful lullaby picture-book **Husherbye** (2000) was intended to be accompanied by a music box, an ambition that has yet to be realised. His commission for work for Expo 90 in Osaka produced not only **Oi! Get off our Train** but also designs for a railway carriage and two station buildings, still in use in Japan.

The words that John works with are usually his own. He has not illustrated very many works by other authors, only Ian Fleming's **Chitty Chitty Bang Bang** (1964) when it was first published, and **The Wind in the Willows** (1983). He thinks he might now do another children's classic but says that it has always seemed to him to be 'an unnecessary thing to do - if, instead, you have something new to bring out.' John's work, for all its variety and changes over these fifty years, reflects a singular vision. He may not sketch compulsively, but what he says he does is 'look?'; and he feels that our capacity to look closely at the world for ourselves may be being diminished in an age of constant technological visual stimulation. His next children's book, **Picnic**, due out in August, has a hide and seek theme which is intended to get its young readers looking very closely at the page.

The intensity of John's own gaze can be appreciated from his books. Landscapes and skyscapes recur throughout his

work: in, for example, the gentle pastoral of **Mr Gumpy's Outing** and **Mr Gumpy's Motor Car** (1973); the whirling storms of **Oi! Get off our Train**; the threatening night skies of **Harvey Slumfenburger's Christmas Present** (1993); and the mysteries of **Cloudland** (1996). But he has always been more than an observer and interpreter of light and landscape. He resists discussions of his work that suggest he has a particular social viewpoint to put across, justifiably arguing that he wants to entertain not preach. Nevertheless, his work reveals a consistent interest in social behaviour, from his portraits of family life and the relationship of parents and children, continued in **Where's Julius** (1986) or **Courtney** (1994) to his adult books, **England** (1992) and **France** (1998), where he tackles how whole nations see themselves and are seen.

Whadayamean (1999), written for the Japanese Expo, in which he imagines the children of the earth confronting its adult leaders about their neglect of the environment, is his most obviously polemical work, but generally he approaches such subjects obliquely, with humour, with an eye for injustice and absurdity, and some tenderness. The tenderness may be related to the fact that John often draws on his own family for the subject of his stories: **Granpa**, certainly; and **Avocado Baby** (1982), which was prompted by his youngest daughter's favourite food. Family pets, those repositories of so much love and fun, figure frequently as transformed heroes and heroines of Burningham books: from **Cannonball Simp** (1966) to **Courtney** (1994). In his darkest book, **Aldo** (1991), it is a rabbit who acts as an invisible friend for a lonely, neglected and abused child.

His eye for injustice is most apparent in **John Patrick Norman McHennessy, the boy who was always late** (1987), and **Edwardo, the Horriblest Boy in the Whole Wide World** (2006), both firmly on the side of children in the face of adult authority that will not listen or understand them. When I ask John about his own childhood, he touches on this theme. Moved through a variety of experimental private schools, he ended up at *Summerhill*, where no one was required to go to classes, and children were free to pursue their own interests. He remembers this gratefully, 'I was not pressurised as a small child, forced to take tests, or crammed with information. I was very privileged. Even though I had this batty sort of life, at least I was out and about, doing things.'

One aspect of John's present family life is, of course, that John has spent almost fifty years married to another noted children's illustrator, Helen Oxenbury. They have had separate careers – John has a studio in the house, Helen goes out to hers – and have worked together only once, very recently, on **There's Going to be a Baby** (2010), for which John supplied the words and Helen the pictures. I wondered whether, otherwise, they had influenced one another. John says only in the sense that they have been each other's arch (and art) critic: 'I'm better at perspective and she's better at anatomy. It's useful to have somebody who hasn't seen something develop so that when you show it to them, things stand out. And you can say this is working or that's not working. I like this colour and I don't like that colour.'

At some point in the interview, I ask John a probably impossible question about what might have been the highlights of his career. It's a question he struggles with manfully but can't really answer. But later, as I am packing up the recorder, and we are talking about the humour in his books, he returns to it again: 'I am glad to be doing the things I do and I hope to be doing them for some time to come. There's a wonderful photograph that somebody took last year at a literary festival in Norfolk. It's just me talking to a family, and I don't know what I'm saying to them and I don't know what they are saying to me, but the photographer has perfectly caught the moment of 'well, they're just having a jolly good laugh, actually.' And that scene of shared enjoyment, which words alone cannot quite convey, seems a fine summary of the pleasure that fifty years of John's books have given to all of us and the real satisfaction that he derives from simply that.

Clive Barnes has retired from Southampton City where he was Principal Children's Librarian and is now a freelance researcher and writer.

Borka: the adventures of a goose with no feathers Jonathan Cape 978-0857550835 £19.99 hbk

John Burningham: Behind the Scenes Red Fox 978-1862309715 £19.99 pbk

Mr Gumpy's Outing Red Fox 978-0099408796 £6.99 pbk

Would You Rather Red Fox 978-0099200413 £5.99 pbk

The Shopping Basket Red Fox 978-0099899303 £5.99

Granpa Red Fox 978-0099434085 £5.99 pbk

Oi! Get Off our Train Red Fox 978-0099853404 £6.99 pbk

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