

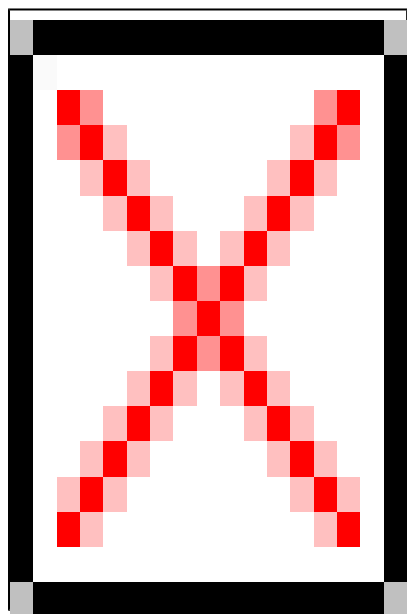


# Jim Kay Q and A

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Byline:

Jim Kay on illustrating Harry Potter.



## **How did you feel when you found out you would be illustrating the Harry Potter novels?**

Scientists say the Big Bang is to be followed by the Big Crunch, I feel I have firsthand experience of this theory, for hearing the news that I'd got the commission was an explosion of delight, followed instantly by an implosion of brain-freezing terror. From my point of view it is, without doubt, the best commission you can be given - I'm a bit of a control freak, so to be given the opportunity to design the characters, the clothing the architecture and landscapes to possibly the most expansive fantasy world in children's literature, well lets just say I'm extremely excited about it. However, I am also mindful of the huge responsibility this represents, I just want to make sure I do the best job I possibly can.

## **Is there a particular character or scene that you are looking forward to illustrating?**

It's like trying to choose the shiniest object in Aladdin's Cave; you pick up one treasure, and another gem catches your eye. I couldn't even pick a favourite creature at the moment (maybe a Thestral, or a Bowtruckle, but then the goblins are wonderful characters, mind you there are trolls too - you see my problem!). It's been lovely thinking about creating the characters, but at the moment my favourite task is creating Hogwarts - it's the first time I've thought about building something supported by magic - it's harder than you'd think.

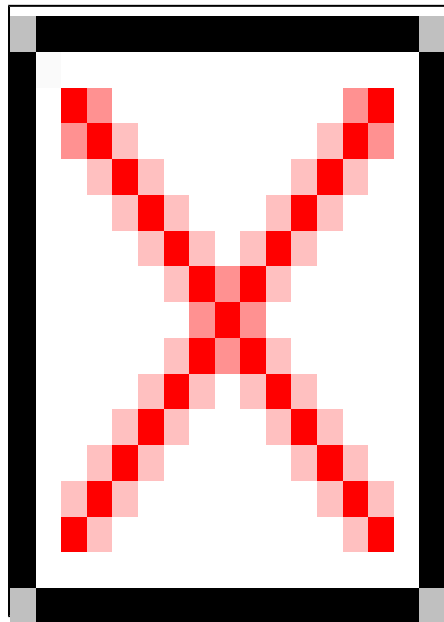
## **How do you as an artist approach such a large job? Where do you begin with such a wide range of possibilities?**

It sounds obvious but you start with the text. The story is everything, and so I want to bring what I can to really show the depth of Rowling's stories, to their best. Then it's a case of research, and lots of it. The books have made me look at people differently, I'm always scanning crowds for interesting faces. For an illustrator there's no such thing as an ugly or odd looking person - they are all interesting. Luckily for me, Kettering is home to some very interesting people indeed. Museums and libraries are my favourite places for inspiration. You might see something, it could be a medieval shoe, an old clock, or a stuffed monkey and immediately it gives you ideas about the characters in the story, the things

they would do, the way they walk. The tricky thing I've found is my annoying habit of reining in the more fantastical elements of my sketches when working them up, it's taken a while for it to sink in that for this commission I can go a little bit crazy. Above my desk, the words 'It's Fantasy, Stupid?' are now a daily reminder to have a bit of fun.

### **Are you a Harry Potter fan? If so, what are your first memories of reading the books?**

I AM a Harry Potter fan, although true to form, I arrived a little late to the party. I actually heard Stephen Fry's wonderful audio book of *Philosopher's Stone* before reading it, initially because I'd sat on a tube train full of school children who were chatting about Potter with great excitement. It was actually the recollections of starting a new school that really connected with me (we moved house when I was young, and I had to start at a big school where I didn't know anybody). As an adult I'd forgotten how hard school actually was, and it all came flooding back - particularly when reading **The Order of the Phoenix** - the dread of exams! It's amazing to think, all of Potter's world, the streets, the shops, the creatures, the characters, all of these wonderful things come from the brain of one person. To me, that's magic, some grey matter in someone's head inspires others to read, play, and create ideas of their own. It's like a spell that jumps from person to person, recasting itself as it goes. I want to keep that spell going, perhaps adding my own little twist, if possible. I hope over the years we will see lots of different illustrators having a go, in the way that **Alice in Wonderland** has inspired artists for over a century.



### **Who is your favourite character from the Harry Potter universe?**

This is like trying to choose your favourite record, it changes all the time. I have a soft spot for Neville, particularly because of his awkwardness, but you have to admire Hermione, because she puts the hours in at the library, she's the cement really that holds it all together, well it would be a different story. I want to know more about Severus, there's so much depth there. Visually, though, it has to be Hagrid; he's got a wonderful heart, clothed in an enormous, shabby body. Hagrid's hut is, for me, like an extension of his physique: it makes him a part of Hogwarts, but keeps him at a distance too.

### **What were your favourite books as a child?**

I remember sitting up in bed, with a copy of one of Willard Price's Adventure series in my hands, and on my lap a colossal book of facts such as *The Encyclopaedia of Natural History*. You see, Willard's books were ripping yarns about two brothers who got into all sorts of scrapes searching for rare and exotic animals in far-flung places. So I'd read about their adventures, then swot up on the animals they found. Those fact books were so heavy, I couldn't feel my feet after a few chapters, but I was in nerd-heaven, nonetheless.

### **Who are your favourite illustrators (either classic or modern)?**

Crumbs, so many, Eric Ravilious for his paintings, Edmund Dulac for his exquisite colour, I think Alexis Deacon is an astonishing draughtsman, possibly the most gifted illustrator around, and I love the work of Ian Miller too, who produces wonderful illustrations of castles, knights, goblins and orcs. I'd love to see his version of **Harry Potter**; it would take a brave child to enter Miller's Hogwarts I reckon.

### **How would you describe your own art style?**

I tend to change my style to fit the story, which makes life very difficult, but it's good to keep pushing yourself. If something's not a little bit frightening, then it's probably not worth doing. I'm still learning about illustration, and I still feel pretty new to this (this will be my third book), and I hope I never stop learning, because there are so many things I want to try - I feel I haven't scratched the surface yet.

### **What tips would you offer to young people who are keen to become artists/illustrators?**

I've met a lot of children who say they can't draw or paint very well, and believe that a life as an artist or a designer is therefore closed to them. It's tragic because the ideas they have are often incredible, and I think ideas are the most valuable possession of anyone in a creative industry. Drawing and painting is a bit like playing the guitar; if you practice enough you will get better with time, so don't worry about that side of it, just concentrate on getting your ideas down, because that's what makes you different from everybody else. And don't forget, if you have a great idea, it will shine through the crudest of drawings, in the same way a great song might only need three chords on a guitar to bring it to life.

### **Do you have a daily routine when it comes to illustrating?**

Well, it's remarkably unremarkable: Get up, walk the dog, draw all day and all night, throw all of the days work in the bin, and go to bed hoping tomorrow is one of those days where something stays out of the bin. At the moment the bin is winning 3-0, I'm hoping tomorrow I'll score a couple of away goals.

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