



Michael Morpurgo: a celebration

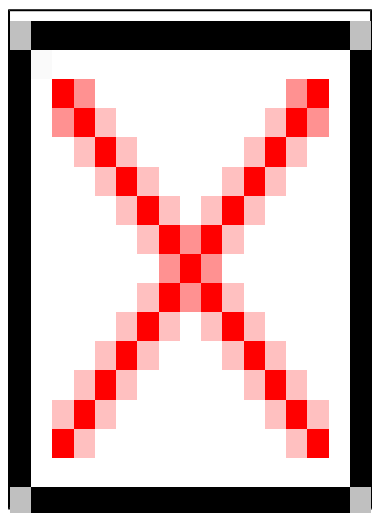
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[Kate Agnew](#) [1]

[203](#) [2]

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An appreciation by Kate Agnew



Michael Morpurgo is one of our best-known and genuinely best-loved children's authors. As he celebrates his 70th birthday, **Kate Agnew** examines what it is about his writing that makes children love his books so much.

Michael Morpurgo celebrates his 70th birthday this autumn and, with well over 100 books and multiple awards to his name, not to mention an OBE, the Children's Laureateship both inaugurated and executed, and an acclaimed National Theatre production, Michael has a very great deal to be proud of. Children, however, as they eagerly browse the Michael Morpurgo shelves in the bookshop, avidly discussing which of his books to read next, are rarely conscious of this illustrious pedigree. They make their choices based on the prospect of certain enjoyment – along with the appeal of 'lots to think about?', as our book club members told me recently when I asked them just what it was they liked so much about his writing.

It's little wonder, perhaps, that so many young readers enjoy Michael's work. One of the hallmarks of his novels is their empathetic depictions of young protagonists, and the animals they love, as they face seemingly impossible choices and often unimaginable horrors. Whether it's facing the devastating barrages of the First World War, the stench of Belsen, or the desperate last moments of the Titanic, characters are tested beyond endurance. Yet they come through with integrity, moral courage and physical stamina. 'No matter what we are made of,' narrator Pinocchio says in Michael's latest book, 'We all have an exciting and difficult time growing up.' Michael's creations, both human and animal, are at once very much of our world and figures that children aspire to; they allow child readers to experience new worlds and to explore their own reactions to testing times and historically momentous events.

Sometimes readers ask Michael about the sadness in his stories; he answers that children shouldn't be talked down to, that they deserve the truth. His child readers respect that honesty, though an observant adult might spot that Michael often also affords his readers a little distance from the traumas he depicts. Another hallmark of his work is the book-ending of the main narrative within another story, a device that allows readers to travel across generations in the often quietly reassuring company of an adult who has lived to tell the tale. It's a device that speaks of the enduring

relationship between young and old, as well as of the timeless power of a great story.

That, though, is by and large not what is on young readers' minds while they're caught up in a Michael Morpurgo book. Instead they, and the parents, teachers and grandparents who equally enjoy his work, are more likely to be revelling in Michael's capacity for writing punchy, page-turning narratives that keep them on the edge of their seats. As one book club member succinctly put it, 'his stories flow nicely'. They are compellingly told tales that in generations past one could imagine being told around a fireside, listeners born along by their rich mix of physical adventure and moral dilemma. When a child himself, Michael wasn't a great reader. Later, as a student, his imagination was captivated by the medieval tale of **Sir Gawain and the Green Knight**, a story he subsequently retold in a version now accompanied by vibrant illustration from Michael Foreman, whose evocative artwork partners so many of Michael's best-loved tales. The themes to be found in **Sir Gawain** - the testing of loyalty and integrity, the difficult journey in an unfamiliar landscape, the need for courage and physical endurance - are all elements which have come to feature in many of Michael's novels as well as in his re-workings of traditional stories.

In fact, Michael began his writing career as a storyteller when, as a young teacher, he saw how little his class was inspired by the afternoon story he was reading them. Encouraged, in this as in so many of his later ventures, by his wife, Clare, he set about telling them a story of his own creation, a story to which they listened avidly, 'hushed and still and attentive' like the child listeners in **I Believe in Unicorns**. They paved the way for the millions of eager readers to come and his stories still have the immediacy and freshness of tales told as if for an audience expectantly there in front of him.

Michael certainly has no shortage of children around him from which to gather both listeners and inspiration. In the 1970s he and Clare founded the charity **Farms For City Children**, using her inheritance from publishing father Allen Lane. The charity was set up to provide city children with an insight into country life but over the years has also provided Michael with an eager audience for his stories. It also offers anecdotes which sometimes make their way into his books, like that of the urban child who told Michael how his dog had come to be called Stella Artois after a throwaway comment from an exasperated father. The account is now there for all to enjoy in **Kensuke's Kingdom**, its gentle humour, sad undertones and animal-related optimism part of the powerful mix that will go on to create countless more child fans to admire Michael Morpurgo's work in the next 70 years.

The owner of the Children's Bookshop, Muswell Hill, Kate Agnew is also co-author with Geoff Fox of **Children at War** published in Continuum's **Contemporary Studies in Children's Literature** series at £12.99.

Pinocchio, illustrated by Emma Chichester Clark, HarperCollins Children's Books, 978-0007339693, £12.99 hbk

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, illustrated by Michael Foreman, Walker Books, 978-1406348880, 192pp, £5.99 pbk

Kensuke's Kingdom (Heritage Edition) illustrated by Michael Foreman, Egmont, 978-1405267373, £10.99 hbk

Page Number:

8

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