



Authorgraph 208:Tony Mitton

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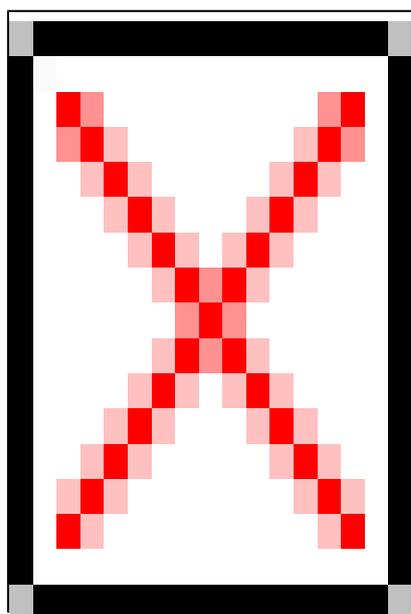
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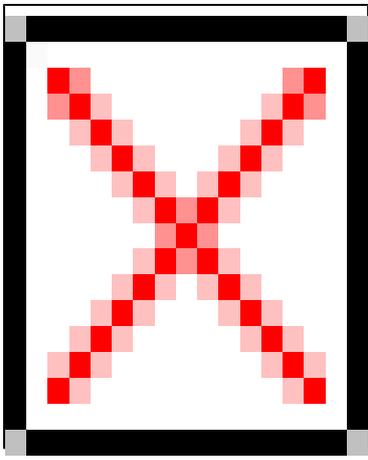
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Tony Mitton interviewed by Nikki Gamble.

Tony Mitton is the most recent recipient of the [CLPE Poetry Award](#) [3] for his master work **Wayland**, a long narrative poem about the myth of Wayland the Blacksmith. Looking at the large collection of well-loved favourites displayed in his writing den, the **Amazing Aeroplanes** series, rhyming picture books such as **Down by the Cool of the Pool** and **Bumpus Jumpus Dinosaurumpus** and his outstanding first collection of poetry for children, **Plum** (1998), it is surprising that he hasn't received the award before now (or the **Signal Award** as it was in its previous incarnation). However, it is fitting that he should receive it now for a book that is so clearly dear to his heart and perhaps comes closest to embracing the vision of the poet.



Mitton was 40 years old before he had his first collection of children's poetry published. He explains that he had been undergoing a long apprenticeship. Having trained as an English teacher, he worked fleetingly in a grammar school but was disappointed by the experience and elected to work in primary schools, which he felt was the ideal environment for teaching. The opportunities afforded by being able to combine writing with other curriculum subjects held great appeal. ?If we were looking at wildlife, for instance, the children could write poems and stories about things they had experienced, rather than rely solely on the imagination.?

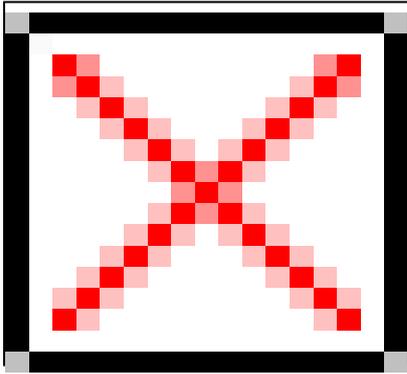


For Mitton, the transition from teaching to writing for children was a natural one. In the classroom, he was interested in helping the children discover themselves as writers. He would model and draft with them, demonstrating by thinking aloud how to make changes. Together teacher and pupils would create proto poems, followed by a period of silent writing for the children to hone their own poems. Later, when his own children arrived on the scene, he relished the word play that would grow from reading stories to them and he started to make up little poems for them.

Listening to Mitton recalling this experience with such fondness serves to highlight one of the characteristics of his verse. It is simultaneously child-centred, yet holds within it sentiments that many adults will respond to with recognition and sympathy. To me, it seems that the poems are written as much to please the poet as they are to appeal to a child reader. It is an assessment that he affirms, "I am glad you see that. I feel that a lot of the poems in **Plum** are readable by children, but they are not poems for children – they are simply poems."

I suggest that his poetry puts me in mind of Charles Causley. He concurs, "When I wrote the poems which were collected in **Plum**, I had been reading Causley and it struck me after reading his verse that it was permissible to do the things that I had a natural intuition for. I love the textures of English verse: the rhyme, rhythm euphony and scansion. I also absorbed a lot from Ezra Pound who described three aspects of poetry: the idea or subject; the imagery what you see in your head and the sound - the musicality. I think I would add a fourth – the feeling."

I am keen to explore how these ideas come together in his most recently published book, **Wayland**. The Judges of



the CLPE award cited "the mastery of the form, its epic nature and its beauty as a complete piece of art, poetry and legend" as the qualities which made it stand out.

He tells me that the book had a long journey from genesis to publication. The poem that appears at the end of the long narrative ballad had been included in a submission of some 150 poems to the publisher David Fickling. 50 of those poems were chosen for the collection, **Plum** but David had seen something special in the Wayland poem and asked Mitton to tell him the story. "He was captivated and wanted me to write a long narrative version as I had with **Saint Brigid's Cloak** and **The Selkie Bride**." The poem was duly written, but it was more than ten years before it was published.

The story of Wayland is one that has special resonance for Mitton. He identifies closely with the Smith. The poem is, he explains, "A heart cry of the maker. It is about greed and wealth in relation to creative work. It is about how artists create their own freedom. A message that needs to be said loudly and clearly."

The ballad form in which it is written is germane to the subject of the poem, but unlike the traditional ballads, the verse is finely wrought and I wonder if the form had been his first choice. I tried other forms, variations on the ballad, even free verse, but the ballad felt most appropriate. The interesting thing is that we usually see the ballad rough cut, when you read it the scansion drops, or perhaps because it was originally in dialect the rhyme is now a half rhyme. I want my poem to rhyme perfectly and the scansion to be exact. I have always attempted to write scanned verse so that the natural speech rhythms glide into the scansion. I think of it as a natural expanding corset, which supports the body rather than a tightly laced Victorian corset which constricts it.

It is a testament to the fine crafting of the verse that the poem reads aloud with ease. I ask if it was equally effortless to write. I'm not going to pretend that it was terribly difficult because writing in patterned form is something that I am very practised at. However, there were a couple of knotty bits, a word that was too vernacular, too much bathos. When that happens I usually take two or three lines and recast them rather than try to replace the single word.

It is the attention to finding the exact word that leads us on to a provocative discussion about word choice. I ask him to explain why he chose to use 'slake' when 'quench' could potentially have been used instead. 'Quench is a lovely strong word,' he muses. 'I do know that I would have instinctively reached for the word that was slightly archaic and evokes a past era. When I was young I probably encountered the word in books about King Arthur when knights in armour would slake their thirst. It's interesting that there's a lake hidden in slake. And it's worth thinking about the music of the word - you slide into the word 'slake'. I think also that there is sexual tension in this scene and the word is more intense and closer to the primal need.'

Mitton talks animatedly about poetry as a site for testing and pushing language to its limits. He points to an example where Wayland 'Flew off in the vast of the sky.' 'There isn't a noun 'vast' but I like the way it echoes waste. I suspect the words vast and waste are cognate. That's poetic.'

The afterword includes a reference to Wayland's Smithy, a Neolithic chambered long barrow in Oxfordshire. I ask him if landscape is important to him as a poet and as a person. 'Absolutely, especially the Celtic places, Scotland, Ireland, the Scottish islands: Bute, Arran, Mull, Skye, Iona and more recently the Norfolk coast with its large skies and flocking birds. I love walking and coming unexpectedly upon ruined crofts. Once we came upon an entire village that had been abandoned in the Highland clearances. The cottages were still there, though the roofs were gone. Sometimes there are pieces of old farm machinery. In those places you get a strong sense of lives lived in the past. These are the places that have inspired poems like **Cottage by the Sea** and **The Hag of Beera**. I love the way that poetry through lyric can evoke that feeling of landscape.'

The final image of Wayland soaring into the sky, carries great import. He points to the resemblance with the Icarus and Daedalus myth. 'I love the sense of Wayland using his craft skill to make the wings that release him from his captivity.' I think back to his earlier reminiscences about teaching children to write and reflect on this most precious message to convey to all young writers - that through writing they can find agency in their lives.

Nikki Gamble is Director of **Just Imagine Story Centre** and Associate Consultant at the **University of London, Institute of Education**.

Wayland, David Fickling Books, illus John Lawrence, 978-0857560148, £14.99 hbk

Plum, Barn Owl Books, illus Peter Bailey, 978-1903015858, £5.99 pbk

Bumpus Jumpus Dinosaurumpus, Orchard Books, illus Guy Parker-Rees, 978-1841212944, £6.99 pbk

Down by the Cool of the Pool, Orchard Books, illus Guy Parker-Rees, 978-1841210988, £5.99 pbk

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