



# Authorgraph No 45 ? Dick King-Smith

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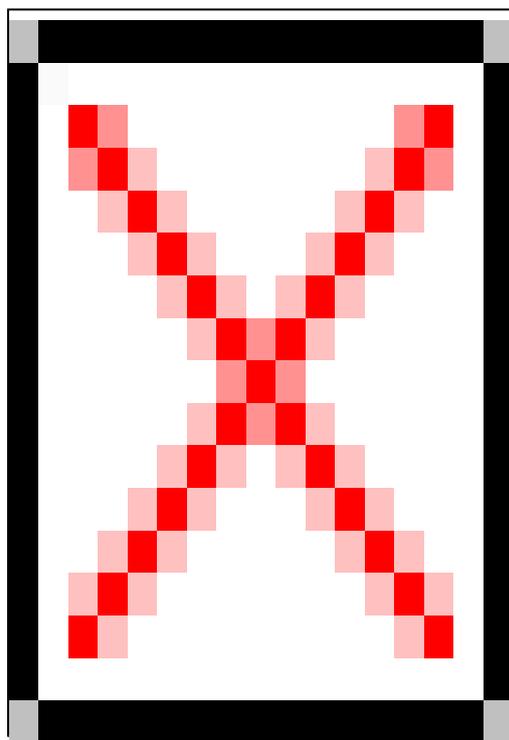
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Thanks to those television appearances on **Rub-a-Dub-Tub** and now **Pob**, a small dachshund called Dodo has become as much a favourite with children as her master, Dick King-Smith. She's also much better at playing the star ? ?an unashamed exhibitionist? he calls her. ?Watch the way she plays up to the camera.? Mind you, he makes the same claim about himself. ?I'm a bloody show-off, actually. Not at all modest by nature ? a bowling extrovert, I think.?

If you believe that, of course, you'll believe anything. The King-Smith modesty is as legendary as his charm. Most of his statements about himself are accompanied by the sort of twinkle in the eye that makes you grateful he's not talking about *you* because behind the warmth and courtesy there's shrewd appraisal at work and an obvious relish for human (or animal) folly. Well, what would you expect from the author of this...

The American Mink

Has the edge, I would think,  
On the foolish American male.

For the mink's little wife,  
Spends the whole of her life  
Wrapped in mink from her top to her tail.

The American man

Works as hard as he can  
To provide for his wife such a habit.  
Which alas, presupposes  
He gets a thrombosis  
And she gets a tippet of rabbit.

Nine of these 'alphabeasts', illustrated by Quentin Blake no less, appeared as a centre-spread in **Punch** in 1965. Along with similar verses in **The Field**, **Good Housekeeping** and **Blackwood's Magazine**, this was not merely the literary high-spot of the first 55 years of Dick King-Smith's life, it was just about the sole evidence that he was a writer at all. He was, to put it mildly, a late starter.

Once off the mark, of course, his career has been lickety-split. After his debut as a children's writer at the age of 56 with **The Fox Busters** (1978) there was the slight hiccup of a second novel never published, but books like **Daggie Dogfoot** (1980), **The Mouse Butcher** (1981), **Magnus Powermouse** (1982) and **The Sheep-Pig** (1983) which won him the Guardian Award for children's fiction (the previous three had all been runners-up) rapidly established him as our foremost purveyor of exciting, funny animal stories no more anthropomorphic than they needed to be. Nor were they any more realistic. With a little help from an author in-the-know, pigs can swim and herd sheep as well as fly while chickens can outfight foxes and a mouse out-bite a cat.

It's a risky enterprise, admittedly. 'Storytelling is a bit like stretching elastic,' he says. 'Pull the band too far and it'll snap, leaving you with a sore hand.' So far his own hand has been sure rather than sore, as evidenced by a mensa-rating parrot in **Harry's Mad** (1984) and a Wessex Saddleback on the road to military fame in **Saddlebottom** (1985). Why, then, did it take so long for this extraordinary suspender-of-disbelief to get his narrative act together?

According to him, the explanation is disarmingly simple. 'You have to see the whole thing in the light of *failure*. One has to say that anyone who's foolish enough to stand in the way of a hand-grenade that's being thrown at you by a paratrooper is an unsuccessful soldier. Then I was most certainly an unsuccessful farmer because I'm a hopeless businessman... I only lasted for 20 years because for 14 of them I was being subsidised by my family's firm.' Later he became an unsuccessful salesman of firefighting equipment, an unsuccessful time-and-motion expert in a shoe factory and an unsuccessful primary schoolteacher so handicapped by poor number sense 'I couldn't even cope with the old maths never mind the new.' His writerly fame has crowned a career that would otherwise be characterised as a flop.

Well, that's the way he tells it. But let the interviewer beware. Take, for instance, his tribute to three women without whom this belated celebrity would never have come about. Apparently it was Joanna Goldsworthy at Gollancz who 'taught me everything I know about writing for children because I knew very little about the craft when I started **The Fox Busters**. It was a war-story so I wrote it like a war correspondent's report - it was absolutely stark, no characterisation at all and no dialogue. She drew all that out of me.' He tells a similar story about his television success. That's down to Anne Wood, it seems. 'All thanks to her... she was gaffer of the TV-am children's programmes and wanted a presenter who'd been a farmer, had been a teacher, wrote children's books and owned a small photogenic dog. There was a short-list of one, I think. I felt I'd be a slightly fourth-division Johnny Morris... but Anne told me 'here's the trick - think of Charlie, he's in that box.' Once I'd got that idea I got a bit better at it. But Anne must take the credit.' His third Muse, though, is perhaps the most important of all since he claims 'I don't think I ever had any critical faculty I can remember' and therefore depends heavily on his wife Myrle to check on his progress. 'She's my first reader and my prime critic. After 44 years of marriage I know quite well what she's thinking whatever she says. If she's saying 'look, this book's going down the plug-hole' then I *know* it.'

Fair enough. Perhaps even true enough up to a point. But it doesn't take much nouse to spot a King-Smith rule of conduct: that self-praise is not on the agenda. The man who can attribute his miraculous survival as a platoon commander in war-time Italy to the fact that 'I dug deeper trenches than anyone else' is unlikely to let sudden literary good fortune go to his head. Both the books and their author are, in the best sense, very *English*. How could they be otherwise, given the upbringing and education he received? 'My father was the sort of man who read **The Field** and **Country Life** and latterly, in his old age, thought there was no greater author than Dick Francis. I shouldn't think he

ever read a word of classical literature in his life. My mother played the piano like an angel and used to read biographies but there was certainly no inclination towards the literary. Also I went to the sort of prep school in the thirties which concentrated on Latin and Greek as a matter of course. That went on till I left public school so like any classicist ? though I?m very grateful for it now ? I didn?t get a fair crack of the whip as far as Eng. Lit. is concerned till very much later when I went to a college of education, specialising in English, and suddenly studied chaps like Shakespeare at the age of 49 or 50. Of course as a child I was always keen on reading ? mostly the animal stories of Ernest Thompson Seton and Charles G E Roberts, thrilling reading both of them. Then there were the William books and later Sapper and Dornford Yates but I was very indiscriminating. ? He can?t even recall reading or telling stories to his own three children very much since this was a particular delight of his father?s. ?By the time he?d finished, they?d had enough.?

It wasn?t till he?d qualified as a teacher and taken a job in a country primary school that the notion of writing for children took root. To begin with, this was a device to occupy him during the summer holidays. ?What I should have done was prepare for the next term but instead I said ?I?ve got six weeks, let?s have a bash at writing a story.? So I began **The Fox Busters**, with a plot based on something that happened in my farming days. Once this roused interest, and went on to be published, I was so blooming thrilled about the whole thing that I got hooked.?

And went on being hooked, to the delight of children everywhere ? not least a growing band of grandchildren (eight so far with two more on the way).

These days, Diamond Cottage, the seventeenth-century house in a small village near Bristol where he?s lived for more than 20 years, looks set to become as famous an address as Gipsy House, Great Missenden? with not even the great Dahl himself offering quite so much to child visitors as the King-Smith dogs and chickens and rabbits and guinea-pigs. What is it about animals which makes them perfect protagonists for the young reader? ?I think this whole concept of anthropomorphism is tailor-made for children?s writing. It?s so marvellous to be able to humanise an animal character, to give it human speech, to give it human foibles but you?ve got to be careful you don?t cross the invisible dividing line and make the animal do things it couldn?t possibly do ? for instance, the idea of animals dressed up in human clothes, the Rupert Bear concept, that?s absolute anathema to me because that?s whimsy. But if somehow you can steer a way between leaving the animal as an animal and still make it recognisably human, that seems to me to be the trick.?

It?s a trick at which he?s supremely adept. Take that porcine rounder-up of sheep, for example. He had a press-cutting reporting just such a phenomena sent to him after the book?s publication! Can we expect to see a parrot on **Mastermind** any day now?? Latterly, however, his own way has steered him towards books like **Noah?s Brother** (1986) where the animals are incidental to the story, or **Tumbleweed** (1987) which relates, splendidly tongue-in-cheek, the exploits of a knight whose incompetence makes Don Quixote look like Sir Lancelot. Soon to be issued, too, is a collection of stories called **Friends and Brothers** (Heinemann) based closely on the exploits of two of his grandchildren. Here the King-Smith idiom has more than a touch of Crompton about it as he explores the ups-and-downs of sibling rivalry ? but the apparent switch to human protagonists has no particular significance, he says. ?With **Tumbleweed** I just wanted to have a bash at a different kind of fairy-story... **Friends and Brothers** came because two of my grandchildren, William and Charlie, wanted me to do it. And **Noah?s Brother** was really written just for fun ? but then, of course, I fell in love with Hazardikladorum himself, my central character. The way I work is really frightfully simple. It?s a top-juniors way of doing it, actually.?

Or a top professional?s, perhaps. Most days. he?ll write for three hours in the morning, spend a couple of hours in the afternoon typing it up and use the rest of the time ?while I?m walking the dogs or sitting on the loo? to brood a bit. And that?s about all apart from the evening rendezvous with his quality-controller, Myrle. Whether for books, school-visits or television appearances, he?s now in the enviable position of having more offers than he can cope with yet he finds it enormously difficult ?to disappoint people who?ve been courteous enough to ask me to do something for them because it seems to me to be uncivil to have to write back and say no.?

With his world-wide popularity growing apace, saying no is something Dick King-Smith will have to get used to. He still sees himself as ?a writer of talking animal stories for people between seven and seventy? and has forthcoming books about a guinea-pig and about a snail to remind us of this ? as well as the cat story on which he?s currently

working. There may be plenty of surprises in store, though, from an author who clearly relishes the diverse demands made on him by a literary itch he now has plenty of chances to scratch. One of those alphabeast poems, so far unpublished, seems to sum up his situation perfectly:

There are 500 sorts of Fleas  
(Just 46 in Britain)  
Which goes to show variety?  
The spice of being bitten.

## **The Books**

(published in hardback by Gollancz and in paperback by Puffin unless otherwise indicated)

### **The Fox Busters**

0 575 02444 5, £5.95 hbk; 0 14 03.1175 0, £ 1.50 pbk

### **Daggie Dogfoot**

0 575 02767 3, £5.95 hbk; 0 14 03.1391 5, £1.75 pbk

### **The Mouse Butcher**

0 575 02899 8, £5.95 hbk; 0 14 03.1457 1, £1.75 pbk

### **Magnus Powermouse**

0 575 03116 6, £5.95 hbk; 0 14 03.1602 7, £ 1.50 pbk

### **The Queen's Nose**

0 575 03228 6, £5.95 hbk; 0 14 03.1838 0, £1.50 pbk

### **The Sheep-Pig**

0 575 03375 4, £5.95 hbk; 0 14 03.1839 9, £1.75 pbk

### **Harry's Mad**

0 575 03497 1, £5.95 hbk; 0 14 03.1897 6, £1.50 pbk

### **Saddlebottom**

0 575 03715 6, £5.95 hbk; 0 14 03.2177 2, £1.50 pbk

### **Noah's Brother**

0 575 03876 4, £5.95 hbk

### **Tumbleweed**

0 575 03975 2, £5.95 hbk

### **Friends and Brothers**

Heinemann, 0 434 94581 1, £6.95 hbk

Stories by Dick King-Smith can also be found in Heinemann's Banana Books series and Hamish Hamilton's Cartwheels. Some non-fiction titles about animals appear in Puffin.

Photographs by **Richard Mewton**

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