



One to One...

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Shirley Hughes assesses the work of **Alan Marks**.

a new series in which we ask an author or illustrator to comment, as an insider, on the work of a fellow professional

Shirley Hughes Meets Alan Marks

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Alan Marks is a true illustrator. This struck me from the first time I encountered his Nursery Rhyme collection, **Over the Hills and Far Away**, in the hands of a small grandchild who was enjoying it every bit as much as I was. Unworthy feelings of envy at such mastery quickly gave way to sheer pleasure. Here, unmistakably, was the age-old hybrid skill, balanced somewhere between literature and painting (but belonging to neither) borrowing much from theatre, mime and movie syntax, springing from good draughtmanship; a practised observation of life taking off into imaginary worlds. It was heartening to see it still surfacing - not all that common even in the hot-house fecundity of today's children's book industry.

Marks is in his late thirties. His style is rooted in drawing, a felicitous line (something he cares about passionately) overlaid by fluid watercolour washes. His figures populate the pages, flowing and tumbling across the spreads, sturdily bulked out but light as a feather. They are real people all right; no reliance on a simplified cartoon style, no gimmicks, faces and hands meticulously observed. Animals, domestic and otherwise, are completely true to nature. The surprises come in the fresh viewpoints, the new perspectives, the way he makes the eye of the beholder animate the scene.

This seemingly artless vitality is, of course, like all good illustration, underpinned by a carefully honed and hard-won technique. Marks makes many pencil roughs, done on semi-transparent paper which are over-laid, juxtaposed - 'you drop the eye-line and the whole thing changes?' - until he arrives at his final composition. This is then drawn straight onto the page in biro or pen. He's not afraid of the surface of his paper. He clearly loves it, works it into wet washes, uses erased areas and stop-out (a masking fluid which keeps the paint away from chosen areas of the picture) to dramatic effect. But the essential characterisation is done in a lightly hatched pen drawing.

Marks first came seriously to grips with all this at Bath Art College, Corsham. From an early childhood in London - 'I lived in Docklands before it became fashionable?' - he had always known he wanted to create books. There were no artists in the family, save for a grandfather who would have loved to have been one. No art gallery outings either, though his talent was never discouraged. He read widely, especially books about African wildlife and Marvel comics, was aware of exciting visual images of the Space Race and 60s' posters and record covers. At secondary school in Kent he asked if they could visit an art school but they came up with a trip to a paper mill. He applied for an art course at the age of 15, but was considered too young. It was after A-levels and a foundation year at Medway that he arrived at Corsham and found himself surrounded by just the right stimulating atmosphere.

Though he admired artists like Jim Dine and R B Kitaj for their energy, he never liked painting - 'I was terrified of

colour.? All his interest was graphic, expressed in black and white. There was a lot of life-drawing, printmaking, book-binding, etching and lithography on offer, though he did not take to silk-screen - ?like juggling with yoghurt?! All along his subjects were led by literature.

He made a book, Robert Tressell's **The Ragged Trousered Philanthropist**, illustrated it with etchings and handset the text. A drawing of his London childhood was seen by Heinemann who commissioned him to do an adult jacket. So he went straight from art school into freelancing. His illustrations at this point were huge - ?my portfolio was bigger than the average publisher's desk.? Now he mainly works actual size. He did black and white illustrations for literary magazines, mostly dark subjects like nuclear proliferation or the rise of fascism. These were drawn in biro onto heavyweight paper, hatched to produce a magnificent range of tone.

When Heinemann asked him to illustrate a children's book, Kevin Crossley-Holland's Carnegie winning **Storm**, it was his first essay into colour, at this point elegantly restrained. Marks, as one might expect, loves the challenge of interpreting good writing. It has certainly come his way since then, in the form of Jill Paton Walsh, Joan Aiken, Chris Powling and poetry collections such as **Golden Apples** and a superb World War II anthology, **Peace and War**. He is intensely influenced by different writing styles, adapting his own to grow out of the text. But, as with all distinctive techniques, it is always highly recognisable, like a beautifully tailored suit of clothes in which he feels entirely at home.

Kevin Crossley-Holland's **The Green Children**, for instance, is a poetic text offering a stimulating challenge - that of bringing a young reader to inhabit the being of a stranger from another world, one who comes into a human and sometimes bruising and confusing society where she is not understood. Here the colour green is crucial to the characterisation and to the whole feeling of the story. Marks has enhanced the archaic setting by carved borders running along the top and bottom of each spread. Jill Paton Walsh's dreamily evocative **Birdy and the Ghosties** and **Matthew and the Sea Singer** both elicit the same kind of watery, other-worldly pictures, sometimes so fragile they seem to hover and float above the page.

When Austrian publisher, Michael Neugebauer (who incidentally publishes Lizbeth Zwerger, an illustrator long admired by Marks) offered him the chance to do a collection of nursery rhymes, it was a completely open brief. Neugebauer is a great book-lover who gives his artists free choice of content, size, and design of page. Marks found this wonderfully inspiring. **Over the Hills and Far Away** has a sequential rhythm which connects through both the seasons of the year and the time of day. It is, at first sight, a traditional children's rhyme book, often using colour on one side of the spread offset by lively silhouettes dancing off across the opposite page. But it's full of surprises. The reeling, filmic viewpoints sometimes have us down on the pavement, bowling about among the dustbins or deep in the depths of a huge barn as the north wind doth blow, or with the crumbling masonry of London Bridge toppling over us. Then we are soaring with the crows high above the Bells of Shoreditch, or looking down from the oak tree like the wise old owl, or from an attic casement, or teetering at the top of a dizzying flight of stairs. He catches the essential earthy humour too, and gives us a story within the rhyme, as with the grocer hastily adjusting a ?CLOSED? notice on his shop door as Betty Botter fussily approaches.

It is sometimes assumed, usually by non-artists, that a story set in our ?real world? of today is somehow easier to tackle than period or fantasy. But Marks admits that he, like the rest of us, finds it taxes all his skill to infuse the everyday with a sense of poetry. He pulls it off brilliantly with his illustrations for Chris Powling's **It's That Dragon Again**. His sombre colour-range is let loose on the shadowy corners of little Sam's bedroom, where she is convinced the dragon lurks (only Grandpa takes its existence seriously and so exorcises the fright). Once again the drama is in the eye-levels, the flying curtains, the clouds blowing across the moon.

There are flashes of lyricism too in Elizabeth Laird's **Sid and Sadie**, a sparsely simple text of two children walking home on an autumn evening. Marks loves the poetry of wet pavements. And a little girl, on tiptoe outside the front door, is lit by rainbow colours from the glass panel.

Illustrating Charles Dickens' **David Copperfield**, edited for public reading by the author himself, is perhaps Marks' greatest challenge. He has some way yet to go with developing facial expression to match this kind of emotional range.

But he skilfully avoids the trap of overloading the pictures with excessive Dickensian detail. The period is effortlessly set. Dramatic filmic viewpoints give us David walking in a windy Yarmouth street with a huge expanse of sky and ragged clouds above a rattling inn-sign, and light thrown up on the ceiling of Mr Peggotty's home in the upturned boat, with figures eloquently grouped backview against the firelight. Also - one of his most powerful double-page spreads - the shipwreck scene where waves tower over the watching figures on the shore.

Marks has written two texts of his own, **Nowhere to be Found** and **The Thief's Daughter**. I hope there will be more. The sheer breadth of subject matter which he's able to encompass - from Dickens to the naturalistically observed chimpanzees for Jane Goodall - displays a rare professionalism. In the current rather over-heated struggle to be noticed in the market place, there is a lot of pressure on an illustrator to establish a niche, invent a highly recognisable character and stick with it, repeating the same (only completely different, of course!) with each book. It takes not only a mature skill but guts to resist. Marks clearly has both, fuelled by an abiding passion for his work.

What, if he could choose, would he like to do next? Illustrate Paul Gallico's **The Snow Goose**, he says. Or Shakespeare's **The Tempest**. Publishers, please note. Readers, watch this space.

Details of books mentioned:

Storm, Heinemann 'Banana', 0 434 93032 6, £3.99

Golden Apples, ed. Fiona Waters, Heinemann, 0 434 96391 7, £9.99; Piper, 0 330 29728 7, £3.50 pbk

Birdy and the Ghosties, Macdonald, 0 7500 0684 6, £3.50 pbk

Matthew and the Sea Singer, Macdonald, 0 7500 1175 0, £8.50; 0 7500 1176 9, £3.50 pbk

It's That Dragon Again, Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 13167 7, £5.99

David Copperfield, North-South, 1 55858 453 6, £12.95

The Thief's Daughter, Macdonald, 0 7500 1377 X, £8.50; 0 7500 1378 8, £3.50 pbk

The others are all, sadly, out of print.

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