



Simon Bartram



It was a great welcome to Newcastle as Simon, with seemingly limitless energy, bounded through the crowd at the station to meet us as arranged. His enthusiasm instantly brought to mind the life in his illustrations as he seemed to evoke Bob's antics whilst on the moon, entertaining the visitors as the tourist space ships arrive from earth in his own book, *Man on the Moon*.

Simon has worked on at least five books but three titles, illustrated in his name and already published since leaving college in Birmingham, show three different jumping off points for his career. He has already proved himself as an illustrator with a distinctive style and skills, as shown in the classic tale *Pinochio* 1998 for which he was nominated for the "Mother Goose Award" 1999. This was followed by his illustrations for Tim Preston's *Pumpkin Moon* 2001 and his own book, *Man on the Moon* in 2002.

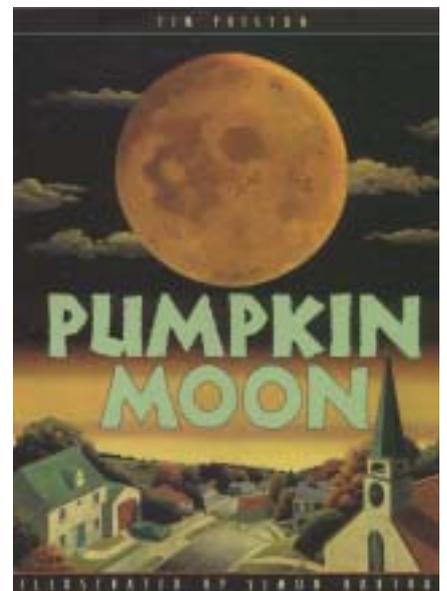
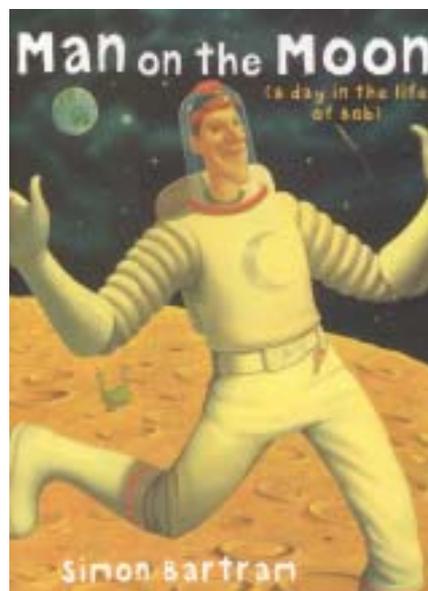
All of these books show a striking ability to amalgamate his immense drawing and painting skills whilst representing visual sequences both from real life and his imagination. In fact, he says he prefers to work with his imagination, rather than relying upon a great deal of research. He feels that he has assimilated and absorbed so much imagery/information during his lifetime from radio and looking at television, paintings and print media that he can readily call upon all of this to fuel his book ideas and illustrations. Since his early years there had only been two choices in life as a vocation; to be an illustrator or to be a footballer and play for Sunderland. He says, "I used to read *Roy of the Rovers* and that's when I first thought I would love to do comic strip type work. I remember asking a man when I was only ten 'How do you get a job doing work of that kind?'"

Besides his book illustrations Simon works regularly for magazines and newspapers. These commissions are of a broader nature and complement his other work in as much as they are painted in a similar style with big bold figures, but probably more personal as their origins stem from his own background.

The heart of his style and technique is that of a painter. The narrative illustrations for children's books, which he loves doing most of all, are produced at an easel and not at a desk or bench like most contemporary illustrators. This allows him space to view the work in progress head on and not at an angle, which has a direct bearing on his instinctive and skilled working of the dramatic close ups and exaggerated perspectives in his images. He also says his painting technique is very slow as he laboriously builds up the images by using many layers of paint to attain not only

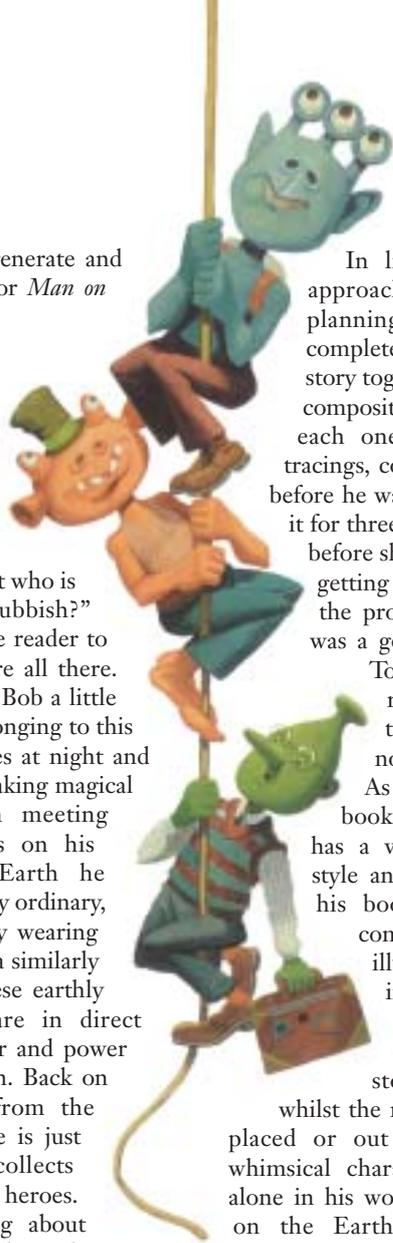
fine detail but to create mood and atmosphere, through using his palette of luscious warm, earthy colours with hints of brightness in predominantly blues, yellows and greens. This long process leads to constant tensions over deadlines, which he overcomes by hard work and commitment to his creative ideas.

Like a traditional artist, he spends a great deal of time on his own in a little room so when he does venture out his sketchbook is vital to him. "It is a case of just writing, drawing and doodling as much as I possibly can and then later you might just pick up on one little sentence that you have written, or develop a character or landscape from your observed notes. Bob of the *Man on the Moon* started off in a notebook, I had been drawing rockets and spacemen for about three days for some reason. I knew he was coming from somewhere". This coincided with memories of the Clangers, photographs of space flights, moon landings and a radio item about possible tourist trips to the Moon. All of these ingredients gelled



together to help him generate and visualise his storyline for *Man on the Moon*.

Of Bob, Simon says, "Bob is a bit like a janitor for the moon and I wanted to depict what he might get up to. He might keep the surface of the Moon clean and tidy but who is responsible for the rubbish?" The answer is up to the reader to find out as the clues are all there. Simon wanted to make Bob a little different, not really belonging to this world. So Bob fantasises at night and weekends about undertaking magical adventures and often meeting pretty mad characters on his journey. When on Earth he wanted to make him very ordinary, almost old-fashioned by wearing tank tops and living in a similarly dated house. All of these earthly and dated qualities are in direct contrast to the glamour and power of his job on the Moon. Back on Earth, you can see from the inside of the house, he is just like a kid who collects everything about their heroes. Bob collects everything about the Moon and lunar culture, he is Moon obsessed with models, moon globes, bedcovers, prints and paintings, even in the bath he is surrounded by moonlike items." I asked Simon how biographical this might be, to which the quick reply was, "I haven't been to the Moon, but I do often have a bath."



In line with his thorough approach and scrupulous planning of his books, he completed the core of the Bob story together with the layout and compositions for the spreads – each one taking up to twenty tracings, colour roughs and layouts before he was satisfied. He then left it for three years to do other things before showing it to Templar and getting the go ahead to complete the project. Simon said, "That was a good moment in my life.

To do a book is a bit like running a race with all the training in your notebook".

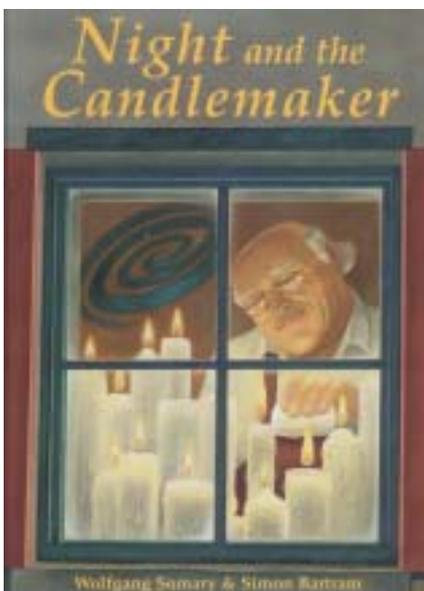
As his two large picture books already show, Simon has a very distinctive personal style and firm ideas about how his books should work. The composition of the fantastic illustrations is always very important to him as he believes they can help to develop the creative storytelling imagination

whilst the reader discovers the well placed or out of context clues and whimsical characters. Bob is never alone in his world, whether that is on the Earth on the Moon. Likewise, there are menacing stories and clues waiting to be discovered in *Pumpkin Moon*. Simon also prefers the reader to use their imagination with the pictures, rather than rely upon the words to tell a story. *Pumpkin Moon* has less than forty words in the text to place the images in context, emphasising the mood or breaking the story up and posing thoughtful questions for the reader to work out for themselves with the help of the pictures. Simon reflects, "There is so much more happening than is mentioned in the words." One of the most striking hallmarks of Simon's work is the degree of suspense and unpredictability he attains in his illustrations through his skilful use [and constant change] of viewpoint, depth of focus and close ups in the panoramic illustrations. He obviously doesn't like books where pages look very similar to one another as they are turned. His spreads are all designed to surprise and engage the reader. In both *Man on the Moon* and *Pumpkin Moon*, Simon invites the reader to suspend reality and share in

his exotic universe where there is a rich and imaginative fusion of earthly underworld and extra terrestrial elements. Not only in the mixing of surreal landscapes but flying objects such as pumpkins and space technology with bicycles, vacuum cleaners, neon signs and buses. Regarding characters, Simon leaves the apparent ambiguity of who's who with the identification and provenance of the more animate characters for the reader to puzzle over for themselves.

Like any good storyteller one feels there is a lot more to come from Simon and on the strength of what we have already seen in his work and with his skills, I cannot wait for his next book to appear. This should feature Bob's cousin, *Dougal the Diver*. After an inspirational day with Simon, who had urgent deadlines to meet, he left us at the station and again seemed to magically merge into a street scene similar to his rush hour illustration as Bob returns to earth in *Man on the Moon*.

Mike Simkin



Pumpkin Moon

Written and illustrated by Simon Bartram
Templar Publishing £9.99
ISBN: 1-84011-105-4

Man on the Moon

Written and illustrated by Simon Bartram
Templar Publishing £9.99
ISBN: 1-84011-445-2

Night and the Candlemaker

Written by Wolfgang Somary
Barefoot Books £9.99
ISBN: 1-84148-136-X