

James Mayhew

I first met James Mayhew at the Hungate Bookshop in Norwich in 1993. Enid and Chris Stephenson were hosting an event to mark the publication of Joyce Dunbar's book, *Mouse and Toad*, illustrated by him. As head teacher of a small rural primary school in Norfolk, I took the opportunity to invite both author and illustrator to my school to celebrate Children's Book Week. Over the subsequent years James visited the school many times alongside other writers, artists, musicians and illustrators. We have maintained both a professional and personal friendship over the past seventeen years so I was delighted to be asked to write this article about his work and what it is that motivates him to create.

Born in 1964 in Stamford, Lincolnshire, James grew up in the village of Blundeston in Suffolk. At school he was known as a day-dreamer – a promising start for an artist and writer! He studied illustration at the Maidstone College of Art, graduating in 1987 with a first class degree.

Having been told by schoolteachers that he wouldn't make a living from his art, his first book for children, *Katie's Picture Show*, was published by Orchard Books in 1989 and firmly established a long running series about a child's adventures in an art gallery. How wrong can you be!

James has a passionate interest and enthusiasm for the Arts and most of his published work reflects his commitment. I was always keen to introduce my pupils to famous paintings but there were few resources or child-friendly materials available at that time. Katie was a character who played an important

Illustration from *Katie and the Sunflowers*



role in our school lives – and also the lives of the children's parents. By sharing her imaginative stories and interpretations, by making time for lots of discussion, we began to amass a wide range of pictures for use in school. Everyone was enabled to begin a journey of discovery and adventure in art. It is impossible, even with hindsight, to know what impact this had – and is still having on those lives – but I sincerely believe, as do parents and staff with whom I am still in contact, that Katie made an important contribution to the learning and education of those children.

This view of mine is in line with James' convictions. He feels that many students and teachers are unsure about how art and classical music can enhance children's experiences so Katie, *Ella Bella Ballerina* (his series about the ballet) and his *Tales from the Opera* provide teachers and parents with excellent starting points.

James has visited many schools promoting art and music. His direct involvement with us introduced exciting new skills and materials including charcoal, fabrics and different kinds of paint. This resulted in designs for costumes for a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, painting large scale pictures, planning and constructing miniature theatres, and making – with all the children – four large panels representing the four seasons integrated with the everyday life of the school. These enhance the new building we moved into.

Added to these experiences was the valuable opportunity to watch a 'real' artist at work, to share his rough sketches and to see his notebooks. A particular ability always delighted his audience. Telling a story and, at the same time, holding a canvas on his lap, he entrances children by painting the scene he is describing BUT upside down and back to front! Incredible. Especially when it's a Russian tale from his book, *Koshka's Tales*. The re-creation of the Firebird, in beautiful language with a wonderful picture created before their eyes, the magic for children is finger-touching, tangible and so, so stimulating.

Since James' first publication, the retail industry has changed. There are fewer bookshops but his titles are often stocked by

galleries and museums as well. *Katie and the Sunflowers* has been spotted in New York's MoMa and in the Guggenheim in Venice, among others. When there was a major Velasquez exhibition in the National Gallery, it was wonderfully complementary to *Katie and the Spanish Princess*. Not to be left out, *Ella Bella Ballerina* enjoys pride of place in the Royal Opera House shop.

More recently James has worked with the deHavilland Philharmonic Orchestra, (based in Hatfield at the University of Hertfordshire), presenting an annual concert that combines music, storytelling and creating illustration. James works at an easel on stage which is then projected on to a vast screen behind the orchestra. The enthusiasm and sense of wonder is truly heartwarming. "These concerts are probably the hardest thing I've ever done," admits James, "but I do believe in the value of helping children find a way 'into' classical music." This year's event is on November 7th, the programme yet to be decided.

James enjoys visiting schools but after some disastrous experiences he is now more careful and selective. The visit of any illustrator, author or poet needs to be carefully planned for children to benefit from the unique experience. Preparation and follow-up work is essential if the visit is to be truly worthwhile. Being just a tick in a box for Ofsted is not enough! Teachers should always be present to share fully in the occasion.

These direct experiences feed subtly into James' work – talking and listening to his readers gives him insight into their needs and preferences. In response to his blog (see below), James has been working with a school on their entry for the *Take One Picture* competition at the National Gallery. All the detail are there together with some superb photos of the process.

Another exciting project was the collaboration with Catherine Rayner in a joint exhibition of their work in the National Gallery of Scotland. In between storytelling sessions and master classes for

Illustration from *Ella Bella Ballerina and Swan Lake*



Illustration from *Katie and the Spanish Princess*

adults, he designed an exciting Katie trail guide for the Gallery in Edinburgh. Next year, 2011, the new Katie book will be set in Scotland. She will meet Nessie and children will be invited to create their own Loch Ness Monster portrait in a competition to be launched in conjunction with the National Gallery of Scotland. The winning picture will be included in the new publication, *Katie and the Waterlily Pond* and *Ella Bella Ballerina and Swan Lake* are both due to be published later this year so the future is looking good.



A little while back James and I had a wonderful golden day together, catching up with all the news, looking at old photographs, talking non-stop and sharing a pot of tea. I hope this article will encourage you – if you're unfamiliar with his work – to explore and enjoy it. You will be amply rewarded for your efforts.

Margaret Hickman Smith

Katie's Picture Show Orchard Books £5.99 ISBN: 978-1841216348
Katie and the Sunflowers Orchard Books £5.99 ISBN: 978-1841216348
Starlight Sailor Barefoot Books £10.99 ISBN: 978-1846861857
Book of Stories from the Opera
 Barefoot Books £9.99 ISBN: 978-1846860973
Ella Bella Ballerina and the Sleeping Beauty
 Orchard Books £5.99 ISBN: 978-1846162992
Koshka's Tales out of print
 James' blog may be found at
<http://jamesmayhew-katiespictureshow.blogspot.com>