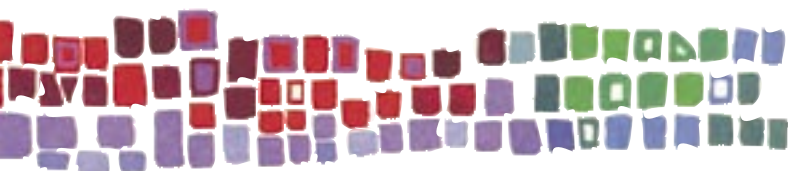


# The General:

## Celebrating Fifty Years with Michael Foreman



It seems appropriate that on this Golden Anniversary we celebrate not only fifty years since the publication of Michael's first book, *The General*, but also that we celebrate the mighty and distinguished contribution that he has made to the whole vista and history of the genre – illustrated books for children: for his wonderful handling of colour and for his distinctive and versatile skills with drawing while telling stories. His washes of bright, luminescent, signature colours seem to evaporate off the picture, helping to take the meaning beyond the limits of the page. Each mark, layered tone and texture seem to be charged with emotion and inescapable meaning, always reaching out to give the reader a chance to interpret the imagery which highlights the very essence of the story.

When *The General* was first published Michael was a student at the Royal College of Art, studying Graphic Art from 1960 until 1963. He arrived there from St Martin's where he had studied commercial art, followed by painting with a bias towards abstract expressionism. He remembers that he was naturally drawn towards illustration because he was working as an illustrator for a local newspaper to pay the rent and he liked the fact that more people could enjoy his work. It was clear to see from an early painting on his walls how the bold shapes and textured colours influenced the illustrations in *The General* and his other titles of the period, such as *The Perfect Present* and *The Two Giants*, both 1967. This bold and more experimental approach for using colour washes and texture happily coincided with the introduction of the new printing process, photomechanical lithography, which allowed illustrators more freedom to express themselves.

The story of *The General*, although fifty years old, is still relevant today. It was written at the time of the Cold War when the fear of nuclear destruction preyed on the minds of many people, but it also focused on environmental issues which is a theme constantly re-occurring in his work. Two striking incidents in Michael's early life seem to have had a major influence over his storytelling

and creative illustration. Firstly, there is the apocalyptic memory of being woken by an incendiary bomb in 1940. This crashed through his bedroom ceiling, missing him and his mother by inches, before dropping into the fireplace and exploding up the chimney. It was the inspiration for the remarkable title – *War Boy: A Country Childhood* for which he won the Kate Greenaway Medal in 1989. We could see what he meant when he confessed he is always interested in and aware of "...extraordinary events occurring in ordinary landscapes and dealing with important matters in the real world."

Secondly, by joining a local Saturday drawing class in Lowestoft he recalls that the teacher "...immediately gave us a sketch book with a pencil and sent us out to draw the world." This has had a lasting influence over Michael and he always uses sketch books whenever travelling in search of information for his storytelling. On the spot drawing contributed later to his work as illustrator for the local newspaper including covering events such as the traffic jams in Lowestoft when the bridge was closed.

Michael's fine control of pencil line and watercolour paint is his



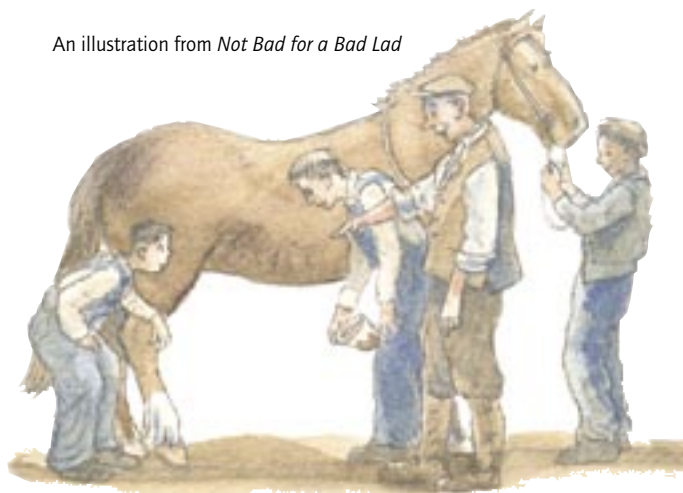
hallmark quality but he is always ready to experiment and keep his images fresh and responsive to the text by using other media such as inks, gouache, collage and chalks. He said that he likes to bolster watercolour with pastels when more intensity is needed. The challenge of making marks on a white sheet of paper is never a problem as he has meticulously pre-planned a storyboard, laying out each spread of his book with the order of illustrations – both large and small – paced to effectively impact upon the text. With a twinkle in his eye and a smile, he acknowledges that the number of books he has been associated with – either as author, author/illustrator or in collaboration with another – is approaching three hundred titles. This highlights a fantastic achievement of consistency, innovation and dedicated passion.

His range of illustrated work covers a remarkable variety. As he says, he always likes to keep two or three books in progress at any time, one being black and white only. This keeps his thinking and work balanced and spontaneous. All his presentations are underwritten by a moral integrity and supported by his rigorous observational research into characters and locations. Each of his titles deserves mention for their particular qualities of impeccable pacing and craftsmanship, but his unique ability is to keep on surprising his readers with new experiences by creating stories that originate from seeing everyday objects and happenings. High drama through picture making was illustrated in *Cat and Canary* (1984). This is a sensational book of hand-drawn adventures based on an intriguing cat-sitting experience for a friend in New York. Humour is always in his books but never more so than in *Trick A Tracker* (1981) where action and fun bounce from page to page whilst animals cover their tracks around the world. This was stimulated by Michael watching his sons gleefully skate boarding .

Still with ideas close to home, *Ben's Box* (1986) was a completely new and exciting challenge which he enjoyed immensely. It was a pop-up fantasy and is still one of the best as it makes a dream story come true from a child's imagination. A simple cardboard box becomes Ben's vehicle for a massive adventure involving dragons, a huge octopus and panic below the surface of the sea before the ultimate flight into space. This was the creation of someone with an exuberant imagination and creative ability. Recent books extend the variety and confirm Michael's skills and innovation whilst keeping stories alive. *Mia's Story* (2006) is a sketch book of hopes and dreams based upon what he discovered in Chile. It uses

drawings he made there on waste paper which he recovered and collaged into the book. *Why the Animals Came to Town* (2010) is equally captive of Michael's concern for animals. A wonderful mix of imagination and reality, *A Child's Garden* (2009) is a story of hope, a reminder of his talent for writing and visually interpreting a story about children and plants becoming

An illustration from *Not Bad for a Bad Lad*

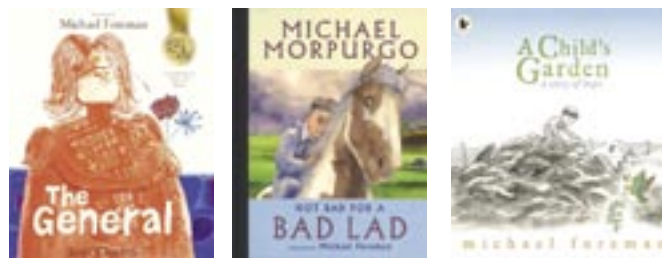


elements of renewal and re-growth. The regenerative power of nature is shown by the pages of the book changing from mono to full colour as the green shoots of new plants appear.

Michael's current work includes a full colour re-working of *Kensuke's Kingdom* by Michael Morpurgo. His next title is *Not Bad for a Bad Lad*, also by Morpurgo for Templar Publishing. Forthcoming is *Fortunately, Unfortunately* to be published by Andersen Press and Walker Books are due to reissue *The Two Giants* later this year.

Without repetition, few contemporary illustrators have produced and published such a rich mix of titles, with images that truly engage, enchant and edify their readers with such distinguished consistency.

Mike and Theresa Simkin



- A Child's Garden* Walker Books £5.99 ISBN: 978-1406325881
- Beowulf* (Michael Morpurgo) Walker Books £8.00 ISBN: 978-1406305975
- Mia's Story* Walker Books £10.99 ISBN: 978-1406305333
- Not Bad for a Bad Lad* Templar Publishing £9.99 ISBN: 978-1848773080
- The General* (Janet Charters) Templar Publishing £10.99 ISBN: 978-1848771536
- Warboy: A County Childhood* Pavilion £9.99 ISBN: 978-1843650874
- Wind in the Willows* (Kenneth Grahame) Pavilion £10.99 ISBN: 978-1862054868
- Why the Animals Came to Town* Walker Books £11.99 ISBN: 978-1406338012
- Titles out of print
- Ben's Box* *The Two Giants* (to be reissued shortly)
- Cat & Canary* *Trick a Tracker*
- The Perfect Present*

