



A Fishy Tale from John Patrick Byrne

After a fifty year incubation *Donald and Benoit*, John Patrick Byrne's children's book has been published. A brilliant mix of glorious illustration and witty words, I was curious to hear why it had taken so long to be completed. Forewarned that he was a 'walking work of art' I was not surprised by the vision on a bike sporting an eclectic mix of shirts, sweaters and scarves. The celebrated dramatist, artist and writer is a familiar figure around Edinburgh – and elsewhere. Brought up in Paisley he had nothing but praise for his teachers although one, Miss Harper, had a wooden hand which she used to unscrew and throw at her pupils occasionally. John went to many different schools and ended up at St Mirin's Academy in Paisley before enrolling at Glasgow School of Art. "I was only the second person from St Mirin to go to art school," he told me proudly.

Coming from a working class background, dreams of becoming an artist meant overcoming many hurdles. "It is very different today where art is ubiquitous and artists are celebrities," he said. He was also tempted by the theatre and had dabbled in some design work – a claim to fame from this period was designing Billy Connolly's banana boots. His artistic promise was spotted and the director invited him to design the whole production.

Whilst earning his bread and butter in Leicester, he became immersed in the London theatre when out of the blue came an invitation from Donald McCandlish, Assistant Head of Drama at the BBC. "I had written bits and pieces of drama for fun but was astonished to learn that my name had been put forward to write a script about a rock band. I locked myself in our coal bunker and slaved for twenty-four hours a day." His incarceration paid off – the result was *Tutti Frutti*, the iconic series which launched the careers of Emma Thompson, Robbie Coltrane and Richard Wilson. John Byrne went on to create plays concerning his early life, including the hugely successful *The Slab Boys* trilogy about his work mixing colours in a carpet factory in Glasgow.

Still yearning for recognition in the art world, "I was always trying different ploys – sending coloured slides to London galleries as well as Scottish ones until, after much perseverance, I managed a show in Glasgow in 1962. In 1967 I was described as a naïf painter in a London gallery and about this time I realised that certain galleries had a certain clientele!" But why a children's book now?

"I remember, as a young man of about twenty, walking along Sauchiehall Street and thinking 'I'd like to write and illustrate a book for children.' Now, fifty years later, it's done!" He and his then partner, actor Tilda Swinton, had twins who, following a holiday, became the catalysts. "We went to Brittany, to St Marc



sur Mer where Jacques Tati had made his films. (I'd inadvertently booked flights to Bordeaux which meant I had to hire a van and drive four hundred and fifty extra kilometres!) The children were small and we bought them a couple of comics about Benoit the strongest boy in the world. I took the name and he became a young chap who lived in Fishertown on the north east coast of Scotland. His father is Jean Kiki called after a pal named Jean

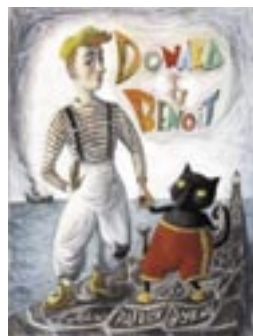
Christophe whose pet name was Jean Kiki." Other names have been pinched from his village – the Ballerina Ballroom was once a real building in Nairn. Donald the cat and his child friend Benoit live here and when Benoit's dad returns to sea and doesn't come back, the friends have an anxious wait.

The twins were slightly jealous when other young readers were allowed to share *their* story. "Honor, in particular, felt very proprietorial. They are both great readers; don't have a television in the house and love music and cats – like their father."

He feels very strongly about children growing up with challenging values and recently an award has been set up in his name. "My friend, Andrew Paterson, bought a couple of my paintings and said he also wanted to do something about modern values to consider and challenge society's views." The *John Patrick Byrne Award* was set up and John is one of the judges. Young people are invited to draw, paint or write – any medium they choose – to get the importance of 'Challenges' across. The winning Community High School received £7000 for their film which explored themes of greed, selfishness, alienation and participation.

And what next? Recently turned seventy, John feels strongly that life is to be enjoyed. "Many Scottish men of my age moan on and on. I'm not one for elasticated trousers or velcro slip-ons. Men in beige? They are the scourge of the earth!" No chance of John Patrick Byrne fading into the background as we parted and he pedalled away.

Valerie Bierman



Donald and Benoit
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