



Marks on the Page



“I never set out to be a children’s illustrator,” said Alan Marks as we sat down to have a chat about his long career as just that! He was born in the fifties and lived in the docklands before it became fashionable to do so. As a child he loved drawing and greatly admired the work of E.H. Shepard which influenced him when he left school. He knew he wanted to become an illustrator ... “but not drawing for children”.

He attended Medway College of Art and Design and then spent three years at the Bath Academy. It was here that they gave him the space and time to learn how to draw. When the course finished he taught for a while then relocated to teach at Southampton Art College. “I didn’t really have any idea about how I was to make my living but gradually began to find work in magazines.” He illustrated for *Time Out*, *TLS* and *Radio Times* and it was the latter that gave him a showcase for his work. “I also did a little colour work for Oxford University Press on their novellas so I could claim some colour experience but, basically, I was a black and white artist.” He still had no desire to work in children’s books.



Out of the blue came a phone call from the design editor at Heinemann, now part of Egmont. The designer had been impressed by Alan’s work in an exhibition and decided he wanted him to illustrate a short story by Kevin Crossley-Holland for their new, innovative *Banana* series. The book was *Storm*, a wonderfully atmospheric ghost story, set in lonely marshlands, which went on to win the Carnegie Medal in 1985. As a result of this he began to be approached by other editors and offered more work in children’s books. Since that time he has never had to chase work – it has always found him!

From such an unexpected introduction to the world of children’s book he has illustrated work by many great authors – Rosemary Sutcliffe, Joan Aiken, Jill Paton Walsh, Anthony Masters, Berlie Doherty, Mal Peet, Jenny Nimmo – to name but a few. He was also invited to illustrate *The Federation of Children’s Book Groups* anthology *Up to the Stars*, a unique collection of nearly fifty favourite poems.

Egmont recently updated their successful *Banana* series and Alan was asked to produce new artwork for *Storm*. “What was it like going back twenty years to re-do the cover picture?” I asked. “It was quite strange because in those days I did a lot of cross hatching work – usually with a biro. I had to go back and rediscover the style as I do very little of that nowadays.” Looking at the two covers, side by side, Alan was

again successful as the book still invites young readers to dip into the story about an edgy, stormy night.

His work displays a fascination with light and he sees this as a vital aspect. The light of the moon gives an unearthly impression on both *Storm* covers and the heavenly glow from a star illuminates *The Shepherd Girl of Bethlehem* in the book of the same name. This conscious direction for his work gives distinction to his style. In this last title both angels and moonlight add extra excitement and emotion to the characters as they visit the new born baby.

How does he get started? He begins by drawing a very quick sketch of his original idea for the picture. With that completed he overlaps another piece of paper on top and refines it. Then he follows the same procedure again and again until he is satisfied that the final pencil sketch is exactly what he wants. He admits that although it sounds a tedious business he can do the whole series for one illustration in less than an hour but he retains the initial spontaneity and feels, that for him, it is the best way he can convince the reader that the picture is an essential part of the story.

At present he is working on a non-fiction series written by Sandra Markle for the American publisher Charlesbridge. The first of these is *Family Pack* all about a Snow Leopard – his favourite wild animal. Working with wet paper he captures the fluidity of the creature’s fur with no lines and complements the story of wolves being reintroduced into Yellowstone Park in the States with emotional, sensory detail. Alan’s water-colours for these books are masterful and, with ever present light, they create atmospheric pictures which are a delight to share. They bring to life the harsh landscapes in which these creatures live and learn how to survive.

And for the home market Alan is continuing to illustrate retellings of many of the classics. He believes they will appeal to young readers and are an excellent way of introducing young children to good stories. They have an easy reading text that might tempt them to the original editions as they get older.

After over thirty years producing stunning pictures for children’s stories, has he ever wanted to produce his own books, by writing as well as illustrating. “Not really. I have tried it but I am far more comfortable illustrating other people’s work.” Long may he continue to do so.

David Blanch

Titles illustrated by Alan Marks.

Storm Kevin Crossley Holland Egmont £3.99 ISBN: 978-0749746988

Up to the Stars F.C.B.G. Hodder £4.99 o/p ISBN: 978-0340795163

Shepherd Girl of Bethlehem C.Morning Lion ISBN: 978-0745962320 £5.99

Black Beauty Anna Sewell retold Usborne £4.99 ISBN: 978-0746070543

Family Pack Sandra Markle Charlesbridge \$15.95 ISBN: 978-1580892179

