

Vintage John Burningham

This has been a vintage year for John Burningham. Apart from celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of his first picture book for children, *Borka the Adventures of a Goose with No Feathers*, this summer saw the publication of *Picnic*, a new children's title, and he has recently been announced as the UK's nominated illustrator for the prestigious Hans Christian Andersen award. To top it all, he is currently aptly working on a book about Champagne! To celebrate John's remarkable career in picture books, Random House has published a handsome collector's edition of *Borka*, along with the re-launch of some of his much loved stories and a paperback edition of *John Burningham: Behind the Scenes*, a treasury of his work, lavishly illustrated, and largely told in his own words.

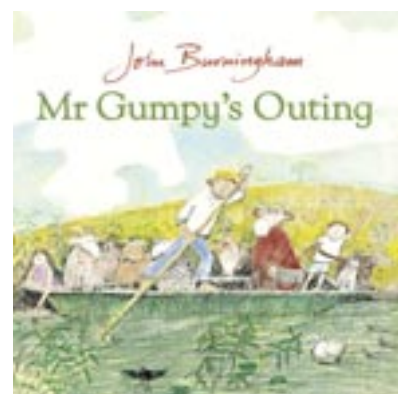
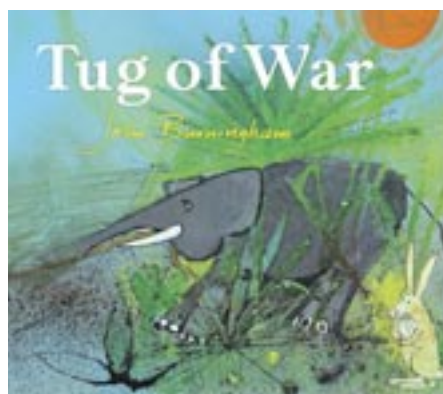
We had the opportunity to visit John towards the end of this momentous year at his elegant and comfortable home in Hampstead, with the intention of reflecting on some of his achievements. However, John is not a man who dwells on looking back, preferring instead to focus on his current projects. Nonetheless he kindly allowed us to revisit the reissued titles from his earlier work.

Borka is a lovely appealing story of a little goose with no feathers who is left abandoned by his family because he is unable to fly away in winter. Despite its tragic potential, it is a humorous and uplifting tale. Noting that several generations of children have now grown up with *Borka*, John agrees it remains fresh with a universal theme that is still relevant today. He jokes, "It's a fairly traumatic story – not having any feathers and then being dumped. You can't have anything more dramatic than that." The success of *Borka* which won the Kate Greenaway Medal in 1964, pointed John in the direction he should go but, fifty years on, he acknowledges it was more by accident than design. "Life is full of chance encounters and I might not necessarily have gone down that route." The pressure to continue to produce work of such high quality throughout his career is not something he has particularly felt but he is keen to point out the sheer hard work that the task involves. "When people ask what you do and you tell them you write and illustrate children's books they say, "Oh what fun" – well as far as I'm concerned they're not fun, they are protracted hell. I think working for adults is easier than children – they won't stand for any nonsense."

Tug of War, another early title which is also being re-launched this year, is based on a classical African folk tale. Its sumptuous illustrations vividly depict a



contest between Hippopotamus and Elephant cleverly engineered by Hare to teach them both a lesson. John is still very fond of the drawings but, unusually, the original text was not his own. He says rather enigmatically, "I decided I would do it my way" and so this new edition is John's own reinterpretation. When pressed whether he would consider taking on other classic animal tales he admits he hasn't been tempted, partly because there isn't enough time. John reminisces that *Tug of War* was "done for peanuts". Originally commissioned as a 32-page picture book for \$500 it was then made into 48 pages for no extra money. (You can tell this still niggles). And thank goodness he agreed to go ahead as he added pictures "such as those depicting the sunset and dusk tugging". The book contains some truly remarkable spreads including the climax of the contest where what appears to be a mere suggestion of Elephant is depicted by a heavy black 'scribble', which John admits was probably audacious for its time.



Mr Gumpy's Outing, for which John was awarded a second Kate Greenaway Medal in 1970, is a charming tale of a kindly gentleman who is happy to allow a host of friends to join him on his boat as he journeys along the river. The boat steadily getting fuller increases the anticipation of what is about to happen. This is the first of two 'outings' for Mr Gumpy as he also re-appears in *Mr Gumpy's Motor Car*. John speculates "The perfect thing would be to do 'Mr Gumpy's Garden.' I have looked at it for thirty years or so, but I can't make it work. That would be an ideal book." In *John Burningham: Behind the Scenes*, John likens Mr. Gumpy to a "prophetic caricature in that I get to look like him more and more each day". To what extent this is prevalent in other books is dryly met with the remark, "Yes. I do find I look like some of my characters. I look at the Lord Mayor of London I drew in *Humbert* and I am getting to resemble him. It's frightening how these things come back to haunt you!" *Mr Gumpy's Outing* is distinctive for its restrained use of colour, uncluttered and uncomplicated interaction between text and illustration. "I think the worst thing you can do is to over decorate something in a meaningless way. Originally all the pictures were going to be in colour. I think it was Tom Maschler at Cape who thought it would benefit by being monotone on the left hand pages, and rightly so. It's an example of lessening the colour and being more effective."

Interestingly John never anticipates what style or technique he will use for a particular picture. He picks up an earlier thread about the craft of continually refining and simplifying until the final piece is accomplished. There is almost a sense of believing that if he were to stop and analyse what he does the skill and mastery of his work will disappear. "The trouble with drawing is that if you stop doing it then you have got to get cranked up again, not unlike a pianist who needs to practise daily. You may think after 50 years you must know what you are doing but you can still produce a most awful colour and terrible line."

At this point we are joined briefly by John's wife, the writer and illustrator Helen Oxenbury and reminisce about holidays in southern France. We can't resist reminding Helen and John



of the *John Burningham* title page which includes a 1960s photograph of them both wearing stylish fashion which is now back in vogue. Curious to know if John and

Helen discuss their projects with each other, John confirms they do but will wait until the time is right before asking for an opinion. Having collaborated on *There's Going to be a Baby*, there are no plans for a further joint venture.

Picnic is John's latest title which he describes as a "proper simple story" about a boy and girl and their adventures while going on a picnic. He has invented a game of hide and seek which requires the child to find items on the page. Many of the familiar 'Burninghamesque' elements are here such as the taken for granted interaction between animals and humans, the fun caricatures and the sunny landscape. Flicking through this delightful picture book with John, he highlights some of its distinctive features. "The bull is quite tame looking; it's an adventure without a real threat... I thought a wash wouldn't add anything other than fill that sky with atmospherics and I wanted to keep it simple with very simple language." By challenging the reader to look closely at the page, John is keen to get children to think about and share what they see. In an age where youngsters are in danger of developing what he describes as 'texter's hump', he worries "people walk around with their heads down and don't communicate any more".

A final treat is a privileged preview of John's next children's picture book *The Way to the Zoo*, to be published next spring (which is as entertaining and beautifully executed as you might expect) and a visit to his studio to see the early stages of some wonderful art work for two adult books. "I'm always doing two or three things at the same time, not necessarily children's books, but other projects. There's an adult book on French windows and another on champagne which is more of a compilation. I'm still experimenting with techniques, all sorts of things; it keeps you interested in what you are doing."

Witnessing these works in progress, next year is sure to be yet another 'vintage year' for John.

Elaine and Dave Chant



Borka Red Fox £6.99 ISBN: 978-0099400677
Tug of War Red Fox £6.99 ISBN: 978-1849418072
Mr Gumpy's Outing Red Fox £6.99 ISBN: 978-0099408796
Picnic Cape £11.99 ISBN: 978-0857550521
John Burningham Behind the Scenes Red Fox £19.99 ISBN: 978-1862309715