

From a studio at the top of the house emerge top of the range information books by

Mick Manning and Brita Granström

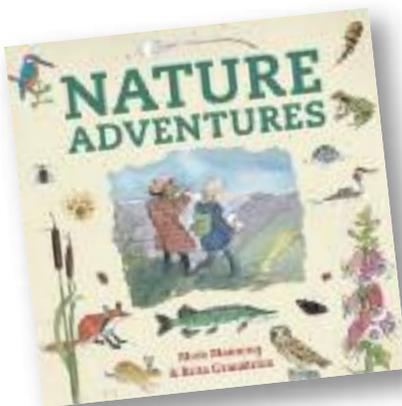
Take two illustrators who can also write and add four sons and that is a pretty good recipe for good-looking information books which attract children and then interest and amuse them as they absorb the facts. *Carousel* has been following the careers of Mick Manning and Brita Granström for some time and their books have become more and more attractive, challenging and useful to anyone trying to keep up with children's insatiable curiosity.



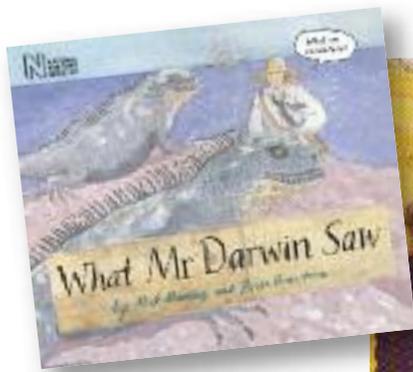
chose to work on children's books and chose non-fiction. The latter may have come from Mick's childhood interests. He remembers *Look and Learn* and *Wonderwise* as magazines he enjoyed and something of their informal style is preserved in the books. The books are more finished, more sophisticated, however, and between them they have developed a way of presenting otherwise complex material to children in an accessible way.

Usually, in such partnerships, one person draws, the other writes, but these books are a joint production from their attic studio overlooking the sea. Both make suggestions for the text, then decide on the "look of the book" and then each may take a different element of the artwork. Brita tends to draw the children, Mick may do the animals and plants – but it can vary. There's a spread in *Taff in the WAAF* where the women are lining up in their civilian clothes. Brita did the fashion while, on the same page, Mick did the background and the views through the windows. It is that much of a combined operation. Their empathy with children is evident and, what is more, they

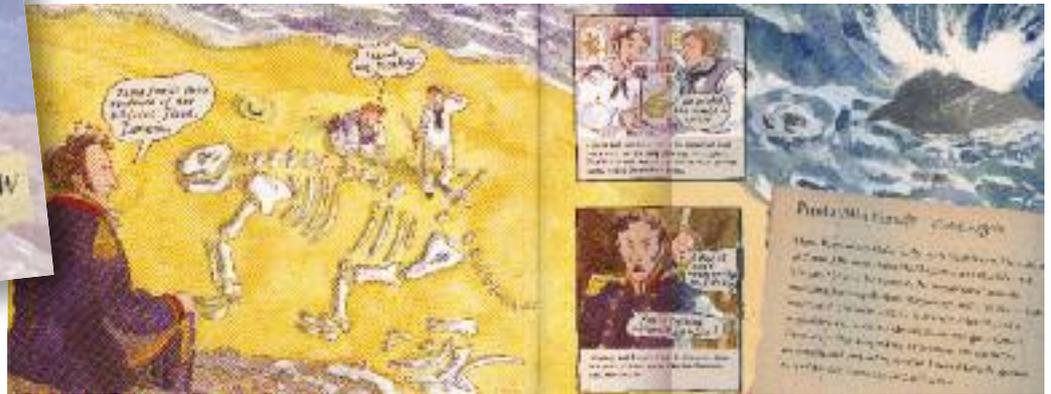
Their success seems to be anchored in a 'layered' approach. Text is presented in different ways. There are conventional blocks of text, but then there are speech bubbles and also captions to pictures and vignettes. What we have here are different accession points to reading. The same thing happens with the information; the facts. They may be embedded in the text, seeded into a comic strip or added as a 'fact box'. The colourful, well organised pages invite readers to take from them what they need. Mick says they are "visual people", they "think in images" so those who have difficulties with reading also have a point of access.



A spread from Nature Adventures



A spread from
What Mr Darwin Saw



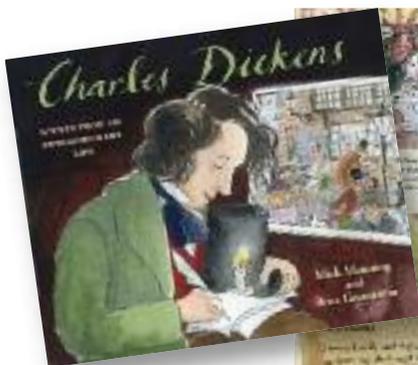
Asked about their research, it becomes clear that they want to be accurate. It's important. Brita says they start by "diving in" but after the books have piled up and the sources ransacked, some spoilsport reminds them that there are only sixteen spreads. Brita looks stricken as she explains that they have usually "found so many good facts!" Then she says they ask themselves what would interest children and they concentrate on that. They have become clever in getting all those facts in, maybe in an aside or one of the fact boxes. Just like the 'layered' approach to language, the same approach to content means that readers of different abilities and ages find the books equally approachable.

They have been involved with commissions from organisations such as the Imperial War Museum, English Heritage and The Wildlife Trusts and these bodies sometimes help with final details. "After all," says Brita, "these are *fact* books." Especially helpful is the fact that they are at ease with an educative purpose. Some cool young writers seem afraid of this but it is natural territory for Mick and Brita. As Mick points out, he loved non-fiction as a child and now has four of his own. They have the same curiosity he experienced. Children learn. It is what they do, whether you intend it or not. Learning from such books as these is no hardship given that Mick and Brita have the means to present the content in such interesting, exciting, varied and colourful ways.

In view of this year's anniversary, *Charlie's War* is of especial interest. Based on Mick's grandfather's experiences in the First

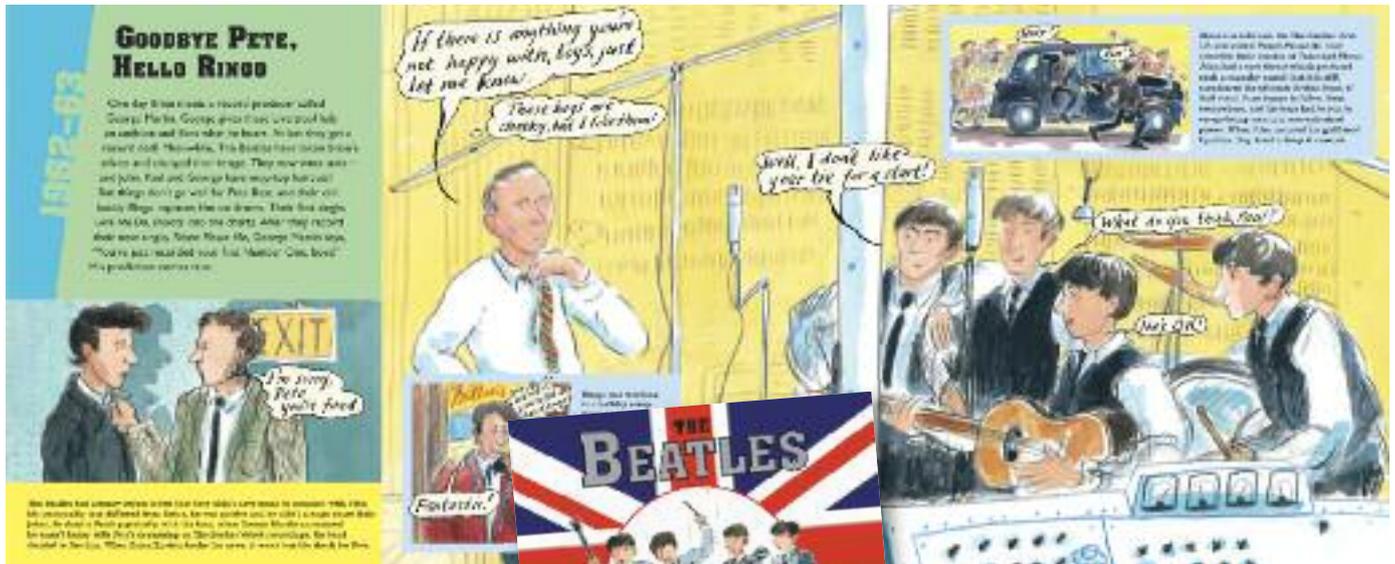
World War, it brings together the factual and the personal. Charlie fought on several fronts, so this is not confined to the European theatre. The events, the artefacts of war, even the horror are all there but filtered through the real person who returned safely, who made friends and sang songs. Mick and Brita always find it possible to present the facts without excluding the emotions which were also part of the story, but it is done with great sensitivity. In the Second World War, a second Charlie, Mick's father, joined the RAF and his story is told in *Tail-End Charlie*. Women are not forgotten either. *Taff in the WAAF* shows his mother, who worked at Bletchley Park, in the WAAF (Women's Auxiliary Air Force). The books combine the multi-layered text with information delivered in different kinds of illustration, whether letters, cigarette cards, posters or postcards. An enormous amount of ground is covered, an enormous amount learned in those few spreads. It looks effortless to us but represents a careful distillation and a presentation which never forgets its young audience.

Close to Mick's own interests is *Nature Adventures* (he remembers nature walks and nature tables at school) which manages to be a handbook, a nature reference book and an inspiration all at once. Typically, it stays practical. Take a rainproof coat, take an adult even. Woodland, seaside and wilder country are covered but the town can be a rich source of interest too. The illustrations are a delight and throughout are brief references to nature poetry. No one can be educated without cross references across the curriculum. The curriculum is not the real world and the lines of poetry slip into the



A spread from
Charles Dickens





conversation like an extra illustration. The book reflects children's lives as they can be and the thought lingers that maybe we lose some humanity if we cut ourselves off from the natural world.

The recently published *The Secrets of Stonehenge* is a good example of how a complex subject, one, indeed, not fully understood by the grown-ups, can be made intelligible for children. At first sight those stones give nothing away but Mick and Brita have kept pace with increasing knowledge and tell the story with intelligence and a kind of grace. Yes, there are some things we don't know but there is much that we have discovered which tells us these were human beings we can identify with. They start with Stone-Age Britain, showing how people may have lived; their getting of food and shelter, their relationship with the gods, both evidenced by the archaeology and artefacts which remain. Then they look at Stonehenge itself. How did the huge stones get there? How did they move them? These spreads are handled with humour, diagrams and useful comparisons. The possible use of the stone circle for ceremonies is dealt with by looking at other cultures where the solstices were important. Particularly useful is the closer look at the artefacts associated with burials. The Amesbury Archer will prove irresistible. How did a man born in the Swiss Alps come to be buried here with rich grave goods and an arrow in his bones?

As complex as ancient history are the lives of certain individuals. *What Mr Darwin Saw* is a good example of how a subject, once thought to be unsuitable for children, can be approached. Seizing the idea of the journey – the adventure – and making the text a first person diary account, the text immediately becomes personal. The young Darwin is seen not doing too well at his studies but finding his niche when the *Beagle* took him to places where his childhood interest in natural history became relevant. Page after page shows us the remarkable creatures that were recorded and we know what

questions Darwin was asking himself by the thought bubbles. The evolution debates evoke lively pictures but the theory is summarised in a last, straightforward double spread.

With *Darwin* a success, it was suggested that Mick and Brita should write *Charles Dickens: scenes from an extraordinary life* for the bicentenary. The pages are full and bustling, rather like Dickens's life. Mike says that Brita did all the artwork for this book because it was important to maintain the character. They did their research and the distillation to picture book size must have seemed impossible. Brita explains that they looked for links in Dickens's life to which children could relate. The layered approach again serves them well. His sense of the betrayal of his childhood comes through strongly and re-emerges in the books. His own early hardships are reflected in the city around him and the connections are made for readers. The sources were minor writings, letters and family accounts of Dickens's life and the biographical intercuts with the novels, presented as comic strips. At the time of the bicentenary, Mick and Brita found themselves in the States, in Dallas, talking to children who, they were warned, might be a bit restless. The children however, listened, were absorbed and then asked question after question. I asked what they thought had made that connection between these American children from a poor Hispanic background with an English novelist from the nineteenth century. Brita is sure that they identified with Dickens's tough childhood and his ability to overcome it.





Dickens received an amazing celebrity reception in New York and it was pointed out that this was not matched until the Beatles visited. So, the challenge was there and the latest book, published this year, is *The Beatles*. The cover immediately evokes the 1960s, the Union Jack spread behind the four of them. The colours are nicely tuned to the era, as are the clothes and surroundings. The four of them are introduced one by one. John's early life shows him devouring *Just William* and learning the harmonica – on a bus! (The bus upholstery is brilliantly conveyed.) Paul is introduced to John at a church fete, and as Paul knows George Harrison ... They get together on the top deck of a Liverpool bus so, through the windows of the big, green bus going to Penny Lane, we see George playing and the passengers' reactions. We gradually find out how the band formed, the pictures bringing out humorous episodes.

Their development is followed faithfully. Colin Hall, the Beatles historian, is acknowledged and they use the kind of detail he is famous for to good effect. Ringo's mum giving away her son's old socks to enamoured girls may well have been one such. The mania which broke out is cleverly depicted with packed speech bubbles in crowd scenes. We see what was happening in the world around them by the use of information boxes at the sides. The threads are kept running throughout: the historical development of the band and its activities, the Beatles as people and, especially, the creation of the songs. These receive chronological treatment, explaining how they came to be written, who wrote them, the ideas within the song

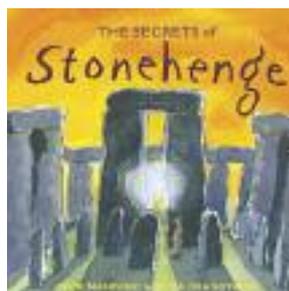
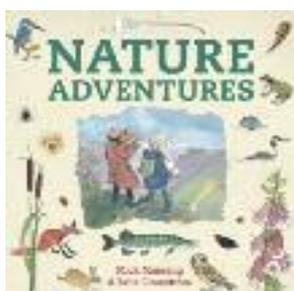
and some of the related statistics. Often, picture strips tell the story of the song. As the boys grow up, we are told about the differences which developed, the split and a spread about what happened in their later lives.

The book shows how the Beatles fitted into the 1960s with a Timeline showing the major world events as well as what the Beatles were doing. The whole book manages to give a 'retro' effect but in a sensitive way so there is no feeling of pastiche. One learns about a band but also sees how they were of their time in a way that affected them personally and then was expressed in music.

So, they have done it again. It would seem that they can maintain this high standard whatever challenge is presented to them. Fortunately, people do notice. Mick and Brita have received many awards and must be pleased, in particular, that those who work with children have honoured them, though Brita must be especially pleased to have been nominated twice for the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award since she comes from Sweden herself. In some ways, the books recall Lindgren's work, especially in their empathy with children, their vigour and humour.

Where on earth can they go now? There is mention of Shakespeare; the ultimate challenge. A man about whom no one knows anything very certain except that his influence is worldwide. Can't wait to see it!

Pat Thomson



Books by Mick Manning and Brita Granström published by Franklin Watts
Charlie's War ISBN: 978-145110332 £11.99
 Books published by Frances Lincoln *Tail-End Charlie* ISBN: 978-1847800756 £6.99
Taff in the WAAF ISBN: 978-1847804150 *Nature Adventures* ISBN: 978-1847803269 £7.99
The Secret's of Stonehenge ISBN: 978-1847803467 £11.99
What Mr Darwin Saw ISBN: 978-1847801074 £7.99
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