

Robert Ingpen –

Servant to the Story



Robert Ingpen is one of Australia's most successful illustrators and has created well over a hundred books. He was born in 1936 and grew up in Geelong. His childhood was filled with books and drawing but he confessed that he struggled academically. Thankfully, a perceptive teacher appreciated his talents and persuaded him to study art and design at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. In his first year he was taught by Harold Freedman about the *Art of the Book* but it was not until he got a job in the fifties, as a designer with the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation, that he began to learn and appreciate the practical art of visual storytelling - and the *power* of stories.



His professional work, in relating design to scientific research, continued and involved him in many conservation and environmental projects all over Australia and South America. His time in Peru inspired our favourite work, *The Voyage of the Poppykettle*. This epic adventure story tracks five Hairy Peruvian Gnomes as they sail to the Promised Land in an earthenware pot. Loosely based on a seventeenth century tale of Peruvians fleeing the Spanish in boats, this story is annually portrayed in many different formats in his home town, Geelong, as part of *The Poppykettle Festival*. He is immensely proud of this honour, bestowed upon him by his local community which, for the last thirty years or so, has attracted over 5000 young people annually to present a parade - in costume, performances and art work - to celebrate this book. As he talked about the Festival his face lit up with enthusiasm. "Direct contact with young people is very meaningful for me. Visits to schools are rare but so worthwhile." His slightly terse demeanour disappeared as we shared his deep sense of integrity about creating books for young people and revisiting fine stories and their writers to give the experience of "... losing themselves in the story."

In 1986 this extraordinary gift for communicating visually with his readers was acknowledged internationally when he was awarded the Hans Christian Andersen Medal for Children's Literature (Illustration). He is the only Australian to have been

given this - the pinnacle for illustration in books for children. His work has featured in many exhibitions all over the world but he was especially proud that his work was part of the 2002 inaugural exhibition at *The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art* in Massachusetts.

Robert Ingpen was in London to celebrate the launch of another book in his series of newly

illustrated classics, *Just So Stories*. Each of the twelve titles is a beautiful book with heavy covers and sumptuous parchment pages covered with stunning paintings. "Were you influenced by the original artwork?" we asked. At this point our conversation took on a surreal feel. "Not really," was the response. After a brief pause, he continued. "When I am illustrating these classic stories I need to have contact with the original creator. They are invited into my house and we spend many hours talking about the story and what might be illustrated. Kipling's own pictures are idiosyncratic. His captions are extremely long because he can't draw so they had to instruct the reader what to look for! Kipling insists the pictures were the best he could do, but with no other picture person available - and he was adamant pictures were needed - his ego insisted 'I can do them myself.'" Robert was amused by our initial unease but chuckled, and went on. "I need that close contact. Those conversations clarified what I could show in the illustrations to fill the spaces in the story. The essence of Kipling's stories is in the reader's imagination and my pictures were inspired by our talking together. The words are not easy to read, but if pictures can inspire



Illustrations on this page (top and right) from *Just So Stories*

young people to follow the story, then my work will make sure that this literature will live for another generation." Initially Kipling invented these delightful stories about the beginning of the world for his own daughter, Josephine, who tragically died when she was six. There are thirteen stories in the collection – including *The Tabu Tale*, which is often excluded but became important to Robert and provides a tempting invitation as the book's back cover.



the use of pictures to enhance their words is always approached with the utmost care and consideration.

All the books in the series have been challenging to illustrate because the author's words are not always easy to comprehend. Making contact for further explanation is subconscious and mystical. "I needed to talk at length with Kenneth Grahame about his piper. E.H. Sheppard had complained that he felt unable to complete his illustrations if the piper was included but the

story falls without the chapter on him. The light of dawn coming through the forest was very difficult to capture but became easier for me after numerous conversations with Grahame about the ... *bubble of day*. He also told me that he based his four main characters on people he knew and drew on their characteristics. I did the same. I based Ratty on Keith Richards from the Rolling Stones. Reading about Ratty's bizarre approach to the world – somewhat anti-social, show-off, being in places where he'd never be – Keith Richards just appeared! Toad is the very epitome of a prime minister we had in Australia some years ago, John Howard. By doing this I was able to continue in Grahame's shoes. And do read the story aloud – it works so well."

We were interested to hear why each of the titles had been selected. Were they favourites from childhood? Or random suggestions? "We all need to understand the tradition of literature better, and do what we can to maintain a diet of current stories as well as the rich heritage of the past for our children today. My own favourite in this series, so far, has been *Treasure Island*. The early chapters remain the most compelling reading in adventure literature; I agree with the many experts who assert that if children can read and feel the drama of the happenings at the Admiral Benbow Inn, as imagined by Stevenson, then they will remain **real readers** forever. This swashbuckling tale of heroes and villains provided me with the richest territory ever for an illustrator to work on."

"Initially, the proposal for me to reissue twelve classics with new illustrations came via Great Ormond Street Children's Hospital. As the celebration of one hundred years of receiving royalties from *Peter Pan*, I was asked to illustrate a new edition of this much loved, brilliant tale of Peter and Wendy, John and Tinkerbell and everything that goes with all that magic. Hopefully this book will be re-illustrated time and time again. If it misses a generation it will be lost forever – even though it is great literature. I portrayed Peter as an average boy in London of the time rather than the fey creature that he has become since the book was first written. Barrie wanted him as a real boy, just one of the lads who played in the park and Kensington Gardens. Other illustrators have made him into a bit of a fairy!" Robert Ingpen snorted. He did not approve of a pampered Peter.

He is uncompromising in his respect for these old tales, and for the men who created them, and with whom he has had such close contact. He talks about Barrie, Kipling and Stevenson as old friends and is totally of their world. To converse with them about

"*Tom Sawyer* doesn't work so well out aloud. If you read too much it becomes a tongue-twister as the author is too keen to compose himself into the tale but loses continuity in the process. Mark Twain was very keen to have illustrations in his book to help young people 'get' into the story. But a lot of opportunity for illustration is lost because the exciting action is at night when there is no light! I regret I didn't read *The Secret Garden* as a child, simply because I regarded it as a book for girls. It didn't really matter because as an adult I discovered



Illustrations on this page from (top) *Treasure Island* and (right) *The Wind in the Willows*



Robert uses a variety of media, including watercolour, pencil and pastel. But his illustrations in this stunning series of classic novels stand out because of their extraordinary detail. Beautifully designed, they ooze quality with dust jackets that are consistent in design, and gold lettering for titles that suggest classic books of the past hundred years. There is hardly a page in the series without a picture and many fantastic double page spreads, with superb fine line detail and gentle wash colours to bring the images to life.

With children’s imaginations being influenced more and more by films and television, Robert Ingpen feels that our great heritage of classics now need newer illustrations more than ever. His aim, with this series, is to draw old and new readers to the classics. He has elegantly wrapped these stories so that readers can discover things, bit by bit, as the book unfolds. *Carousel* feels he has succeeded beyond measure.

Jenny and David Blanch

what great literature it is. *A Christmas Carol* was a joy to work on. I have a deep regard for Charles Dickens and would love to illustrate more work by him, especially *Bleak House*. I am just finishing the last commission, *Pinocchio*. I was apprehensive about this story because where *Alice in Wonderland* had been a challenge of issues and warnings for me, *Pinocchio* was a psychological study of teaching manners and morals. Told in a dark way, it was brilliantly imaginative. If a film was in my remit I would have ensured that Johnny Depp took the title role! It seems different from the previous titles, but very worthy of inclusion.”

“Digital technology has opened up great opportunities for illustrators,” he told us. “It has removed many of the graphical problems of the past, but intellectual limitations still remain.”

Illustrations on this page from (top left) *The Wizard of Oz* and (right) *The Wind in the Willows*



Books published by Templar

Peter Pan and Wendy J.M.Barrie £14.99 ISBN: 978-1840112504

Treasure Island R.L.Stevenson £14.99 ISBN: 978-1840111149

The Jungle Book Rudyard Kipling £14.99 ISBN: 978-1840117189

The Wind in the Willows Kenneth Grahame £ 14.99 ISBN: 978-1840113525

A Christmas Carol and A Christmas Tree

Charles Dickens £14.99 ISBN: 978-1840115017

Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland Lewis Carroll £14.99 ISBN: 978-1840119688

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer Mark Twain £14.99 ISBN: 978-1848774643

The Secret Garden Frances Hodgson Burnett £14.99 ISBN: 978-1848774469

The Wizard of Oz L.Frank Baum £14.99 ISBN: 978-1848775282

Around the World in Eighty Days Jules Verne £14.99 ISBN: 978-1848776203

Just So Stories Rudyard Kipling £16.99 ISBN: 978-1848772281

Pinocchio Carlo Collodi £16.99 ISBN: 978-1847717189

