

James Mayhew:

A climb into the wide world of art, imagination and magical creative thinking



For the 25th Anniversary, a new edition of *Katie's Picture Show*, first published in 1989, is being totally refreshed and re-worked by James Mayhew to celebrate, with the other twelve titles in the series, the remarkable success of a character story in awakening new generations to the world of art and creative storytelling. It also reminds others, aged seven and seventy-six, how vital it is to sustain curiosity, be energetic and remain engaged in the world around us. He helps the reader to feel an enduring, insatiable love for art and a respect for imaginative storytelling. James' titles thrive in their exceptional pacing, each story laced in turn differently with humour, fantasy, mystery, adventure and discovery.

For the benefit of those not already familiar with the Katie books, it is essential to recognise their potential for personal interpretation as well as giving confidence to children to enjoy art. As James said, it is also about "Teaching children not to be afraid of art and to look with their own eyes, make up their own minds about what they are looking at." Although the cover to *Katie's Picture Show* depicts *Surprised (A Tropical Storm with a Tiger)* by Henri Rousseau, it could be read as a child confronting their own fear of the strange and powerful world of art. It is a challenging image followed inside the book by the entrance to the gallery where the diminutive Katie is set into a very grand environment. The setting, atmosphere and scale are therefore established in readiness for the next stage of the adventure which is *The Hay Wain* by John Constable. It has a

notice "please do not touch" underneath. "Why not?" said Katie and James placing Katie in the freedom of Flatford Mill and the idyllic serenity of the famous landscape. Is the story now about painting landscapes or scenery by Constable? No! Katie finds and eats a freshly baked apple pie cooling on the windowsill of Willy Lott's Cottage. Animation and drama ensue as one of the men on the famous wagon shouts, "Hey, that was my supper." A master stroke, as James blends the real world and humour to sustain a lively interest in a painted landscape. From landscape, we move into portraiture and people with costume; history, customs and manners are introduced. Katie discovers Madame Moitessier with tea and cakes on offer. She can't believe her luck so is looking at the reader in disbelief. This is before she spills the tea over Madame's dress. Time to flee to the next page, showing *The Umbrellas* by Pierre-Auguste Renoir. This is a very imaginable journey back in time to a different world of fashion and conversation with a little girl playing with a hoop. This ploy quickens the pace of the story by running away as they do and ends up in a jungle, the antithesis of Constable's verdant pasture; this landscape has tigers, a monkey and bananas. A remarkable adventure typical of James' ability to mastermind spellbinding storytelling for children.

Representing modern art is Kazimir Malevich's *Dynamic Suprematism*. An abstract and different painting but in no time Katie is having fun sliding down a triangle, which is a bit scary but she emerges from the frame, under instruction by the guard, covered in paint, in time to find Grandma, wake her up and leave the gallery to have tea, cake and tell Grandma all about it. A wonderful adventure, successfully achieved and to be built upon in James's other equally imaginative books involving painters and art.



James Mayhew painting with local children in the run-up to the Pop Up Festival of Stories 2014 at Coalbrookdale (c) Patrick Boyd



James Mayhew drawing a crowd at the Pop Up Festival of Stories in Coalbrookdale, April 19 (c) Patrick Boyd

The first Katie book is a masterpiece of visual narrative, not only acting as an introduction but as an art lesson in its own right. The illustrated story enables James to provide more information about the artists and the way he paints and draws, using inks, dip pen and water colours. This gives his illustrations rich iridescent luminosity, thus encouraging the reader to try painting for themselves. Inspiration came from close to home. *Katie meets the Impressionists* (1997), is dedicated "For my sister, the original Katie" and in the text it says, "Katie loved the gallery because you never knew what you were going to see there." If you substitute the word gallery with James' books you come closer to understanding their quality and value.

In the books, there are two major protagonists, Katie and Grandma. Katie very energetic and curious, Grandma caring and supportive; always in the background, usually having a snooze but vital to any child who goes through adventures as a rock to return to. It is she who instigates the adventures in the first place.

Like the Impressionist masters James has represented in his Katie books, there is a joy of painting and, in the use of paint itself, in all his books and illustrations. The energy and spirit of his application of colour can proffer more than just stimulation for the eye; the senses of smell and touch are also titillated as can be seen in *A Secret in the Garden* (2003) and *Katie and the Water Lily Pond* (2010).

Storytelling pulses through James's veins. He recounted with relish tales his grandfather told him of his adventures on the high seas looking for treasure. His own father had plenty to entertain him with, too, following his service in the RAF. Add in folk tales from his native East Anglia such as *The Black Dog of Bungay* and it's easy

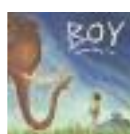
to understand where the passion and adrenalin come from. Luckily, his parents encouraged him and their copy of an illustrated book called *Art Treasures of the World* has always been treasured as a stimulus for his appealing stories. With *Ella Bella Ballerina*, his latest set of titles takes you to the ballet with equal fervour, underwritten by sparkling texts and wonderfully choreographed illustrations.

James is a multi-tasking and immensely skilled illustrator, writer and performer, particularly when he presents live shows of illustrated classical music on a big screen. This is something very special to share as paint is seen to move across the screen in washes and dribbles to live orchestral accompaniment. Of course, this gives a change of scale to his work. At the same time, unlike illustrating books, he is gaining immediate audience reaction; adding another dimension to his work. On a smaller scale he does his "upsidowner act" in classrooms where he likes to face the audience simultaneously telling a story and creating the illustration for all to see the right way up.

The scope of James's illustration and pictorial storytelling is hugely expanded through many of his other titles particularly *Miranda the Explorer*, a magic round-the-world adventure (2002), *Boy* (2004), a large illustrated book about a boy discovering the pre-historic world and *Shakespeare's Stories* (1988), a chance to enjoy again the Bard's masterpieces through James's illustrations. His work is always inspirational, passionate and a positive affirmation of life.

In the pipeline is a new Katie book, *Katie's London Christmas*, and live performances at the Cheltenham Music Festival and Edinburgh Book Festival, followed by a major exhibition in the autumn at the National Gallery of Art in Edinburgh. Join in and enjoy.

Mike and Theresa Simkin



Selected Bibliography

Katie's Picture Show (25th Anniversary Edition)
Orchard Books ISBN: 978-1408336052



Katie Meets the Impressionists
Orchard Books ISBN: 978-1860397684

Katie and the Dinosaurs Orchard Books
ISBN: 978-1845623960

Katie and the Water Lily Pond
Orchard Books ISBN: 978-1408304648



A Secret in the Garden
Chicken House ISBN: 978-1903434581

Miranda the Explorer Orion Children's Books ISBN: 978-1444008500
Boy Orchard ISBN: 978-1408314098

Can You See a Little Bear? Frances Lincoln ISBN: 978-1845077785



Shakespeare's Stories
Hachette Children's Books ISBN: 978-0340970133

Ella Bella Ballerina and The Nutcracker
Orchard Books ISBN: 978-1408314081

