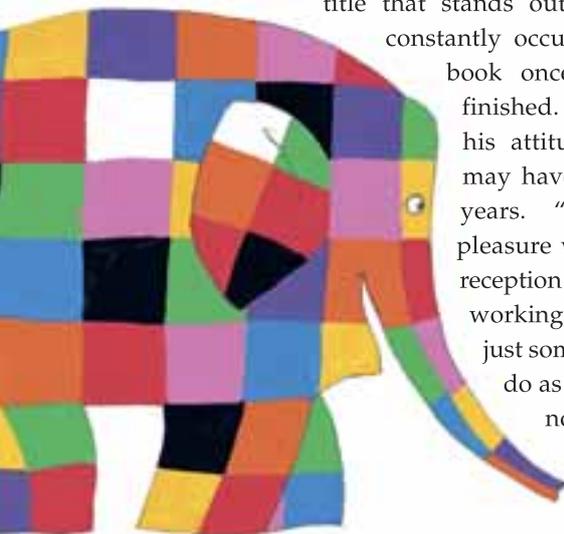


“I tell stories in words and pictures — that’s what I do”

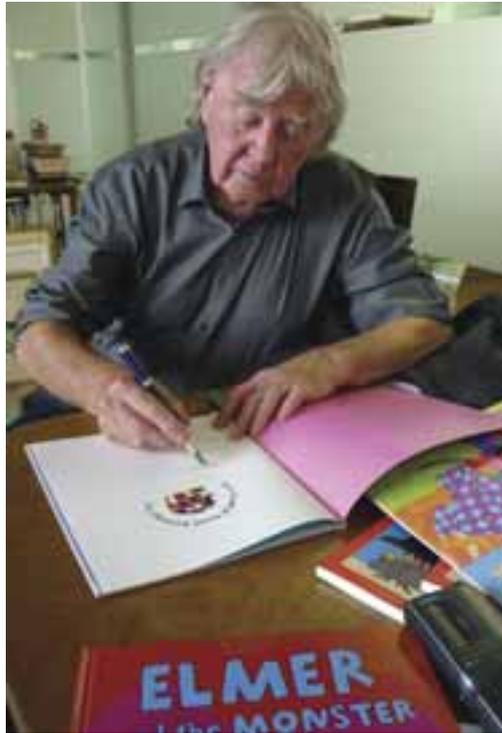
A conversation with David McKee

While sitting in the office of Andersen Press, founded by Klaus Flugge, waiting for David McKee to arrive, I can’t help noticing the collection of Elmer items dotted around; artwork, merchandise – even an Elmer rug in front of Klaus’ rather imposing desk. I’m here to talk to David about his life in children’s books, and the twenty-fifth anniversary since the Andersen version of *Elmer* first appeared in print. My initial enquiry about the origins of Elmer, prompts David to recall the original version, published in 1968 by Dobson Books, which was forty-eight pages, whereas the current version is thirty-two. “It included a form of introduction. It didn’t go directly into the story. The first version was much more ‘painterly’ – much looser; the treatment had less respect for the colours being in the same square each time. It was completely redrawn with a different technique and rewritten. The Andersen title is a different version but it’s still the same story”.

The phenomenal success of *Elmer* with its simple, yet affecting message about respecting and celebrating difference, has spawned a worldwide franchise. *Elmer* is currently on his twenty-second story, with more to come, but there’s no one



title that stands out for David. He is constantly occupied with the next book once a manuscript is finished. He acknowledges his attitude towards *Elmer* may have changed over the years. “There’s obviously pleasure with having a good reception to people liking and working with *Elmer*, but it’s just something I do, which I do as well as I can. I have no idea of what *Elmer*’s enduring appeal is. I tell the stories and in a



way I live with *Elmer*. He tells me an adventure, and because he’s much bigger than me, he obliges me to do the book!”

David avoids going to many *Elmer* events these days. “Time fills up as you get older. There are more obligations so it’s harder to find pure work time.” He hasn’t embraced new technology, still writes pen and paper letters and doesn’t use email or the internet. “People used to say ‘How do you manage?’ Nowadays they say, ‘You have a life of luxury!’”

Over the years, some of David’s other stories have landed him in trouble. He tells me *Two Monsters* has upset people because of the insults but the kids love them. “*Not Now, Bernard*, the children seem to read correctly. They associate first of all with *Bernard* and

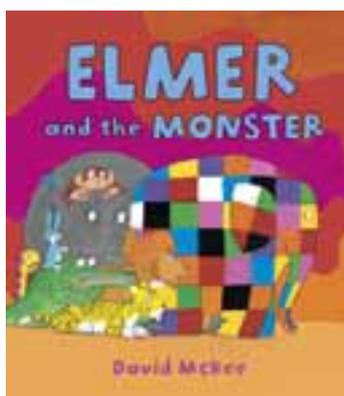
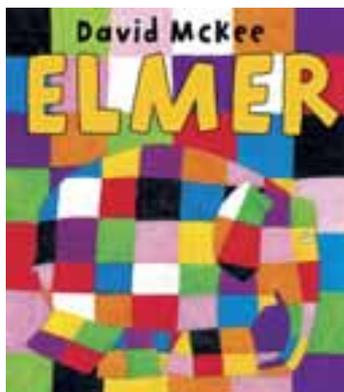
then with the monster.” Controversy aside, it gained a firm place on the National Curriculum reading list which David is unsurprised by, given it has an essential message. He breaks off to retell an anecdote about a talk to a class of pupils when “I was probably drawing and talking at the same time and somebody in the class started saying, ‘David, David, David.’ And a hand was obviously up. I heard the teacher saying, ‘Not now, Peter’. And the whole class said, ‘Not now, Peter’. I turned and said, ‘What is it, Peter?’ It suddenly dawned on the teacher what had happened.” David likes producing titles which provoke conversation, “Not necessarily within myself but to provide adults, particularly teachers, with good talking points.” He considers that some of his books are as much for adults as for children. “People forget that a picture book is the one book that is shared by an adult and a child.”

Those who know David’s work would agree there isn’t a David McKee set style. He acknowledges there have been many varied influences on his work. During his art education, he became interested in the Fauves, mainly for their bright colours. Derain, Braque, and Matisse were also big influences. “I had forgotten how much Brueghel has influenced me for drawing. I was looking at the interaction of people in images which I did in something complicated like the *Melric the*

Magician stories. I realised how much Brueghel inter-reaction was there. There's no consciousness of the viewer, they live their life and the viewer is the voyeur. I think I feel like that when I'm working. I'm a voyeur. I know these people and I'm recording their life. I may just be drawing a woman crossing a road but I know that she's arguing and that she has got three children at home waiting and her husband has to get off to work. I can feel all that background of a person as I'm drawing them." Other influences include Steinberg, Andre Francois, Klee (the inspiration for Elmer), children's drawings and medieval art. "You name it, I've been influenced by it and I'll continue to be. I think that's what art is about. It is not something that's precious; it's there to be taken if you want it."

David works in many different media, not because he gets bored with working in one, but because he wants to try new things as the stories demand a different treatment. The way he has worked with Elmer has changed over the years. "It was watercolours in the early stories and perhaps airbrush on the first Andersen edition. I have also used acrylics as under painting. These days it's more pencil, gouache and coloured crayons. It goes through a lot of stages to build up the richness." Typically, he will work on multiple projects at a time, with always a book on the go. He tells me there is always a painting on the easel. He constantly uses sketchbooks and makes notes and drawings for other projects which are regularly asked for by charities. Then there are birthday cards for families! (What a treat it must be to receive a hand drawn birthday card from David.) He has frequently drawn for newspapers and magazines and enjoys completing this observational work for an adult audience.

David's film company produced *King Rollo* and *Mr Benn* stories, but nowadays he has virtually stopped working on film projects. "You have to make a selection of what you want to do, and I'm not so good at team work. I'm much happier painting when it's only me who decides what I do. With books, I bring them in quite prepared for a rejection, or a suggestion to change things. But first of all, I like to do it the way I want to." David is continually asked to make an Elmer film. "At the moment I feel he's okay as books. You see films being made of everything. Just because you can it's not necessary that you have to." He is realistic about the possibility of a film sometime in the future, but it's not a project he would personally wish to get involved in. "There are a few projects which I would like to have done and I now realise I will never have the time to do."



L to R – David McKee, Klaus Flugge and Tony Ross

As the interview draws to a close, Tony Ross pops his head around the door asking if we are through. They have just enjoyed a hearty lunch together. Once Tony and Klaus join us, it is immediately obvious these three are the best of friends. It is a delight to see the mutual respect and admiration they have for each other. Klaus is as enthusiastic about championing their work as in the early days when both were budding, young, talented author/illustrators. David's working relationship with Klaus began when he was with Abelard-Schumann. He bought David's first book *Two Can, Toucan* in 1962. We spend a further half hour chatting and viewing David's work during which Klaus extracts from a cabinet some original Elmer artwork which David hasn't seen in decades. There is also a

new range of Elmer merchandise which Klaus is excited to share. The first print sheets of David's next book, *Elmer and the Flood*, had arrived that day and was to be David's first viewing. As I peer over their shoulders, I see it is a title that will satisfy all those keen Elmer fans.

The interview ends with all three posing for photographs in front of framed envelopes which have been sent to Klaus over the years. Each envelope is drawn or painted with great skill by his illustrators – David and Tony included. A selection of these appears in the book *Letters to Klaus*. It was David who started this tradition. "I have done this for many years now. These envelopes have started to have a price", he chuckles, "If you live long enough you see all sorts of things happen!"

Dave Chant

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