

Michael Foreman

My Life in Pictures

Michael Foreman has won two Kate Greenaway medals. He believes that drawing is the vital quality of his artwork and in this article he has shared insights into this long-awaited retrospective of his life as an artist and master storyteller.

My mother owned the village shop in Pakefield, on the Suffolk coast, during WWII. Soldiers trained on the local cliffs and frequented the shop for their cigarettes and a friendly cup of tea. Missing their own children, they made a fuss of me. My father died a month before I was born and the soldiers took me under their wing.

The shop was always crowded. Soldiers, sailors, bus drivers and conductresses enjoying a chat and a cuppa. A particularly friendly bunch of soldiers was the King's Own Scottish Borderers. Most of the young soldiers were only around our village for a few final weeks of training before going overseas. The Quartermaster Sergeant, Gus Dagleish, was a permanent fixture around the place and became a true and lasting friend of



the family. He had a special little uniform made for me. My uniform was inspected every Sunday morning before they marched past the shop on Church Parade. Gus remained in touch with my mother after the war and, many years later, visited my wife and me and our boys in Cornwall. He also joined me at the Edinburgh Book Festival.

Not to be outdone, another wartime friend of my mother's, 'Pop,' a sailor from Cornwall, gave me a Royal Navy Uniform.

We had no books at home.

Actually, we had one, a small Bible given to our mother, when she was a little girl, as first prize at Sunday School on January 9th 1903. I have it still.

Although we had no books, it was a house of stories. So many soldiers and sailors, missing their own children, spoilt me rotten. In the evenings, by the fire, I was passed from knee to knee while they played cards and drank beer which they got by the jug full from the pub across the street. Each knee meant another story, stories they had shared at their own firesides.

After the war a new source of stories were the tramps, 'the Kings of the Road,' who often passed through our village. Usually, they would set up camp at the edge of the wood or in one of the old gun blockhouses on the cliff. We boys were often out all day, supplied with bread and cheese and any fruit we could 'scrum' and we shared our provisions with a tramp and listened to his 'traveller's tales.' Some, of course, didn't want to talk, wanted to be left alone, and told us to 'clear off.' It was only later that I realized some of these wanderers had found it impossible to settle back into 'normal' life following the trauma they had suffered during the First World War.



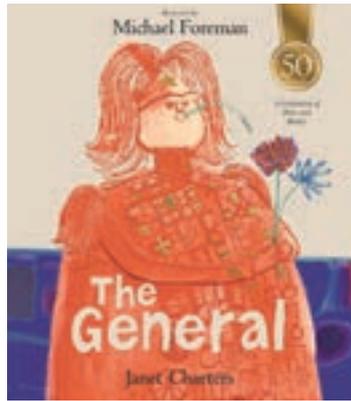
Things that happen to us as children help shape the adult we become. A wartime childhood had a powerful and lasting effect on me. Of course, I lived a charmed life – a firebomb missing me and exploding in the fireplace and another landing, but not exploding, in the outside loo. Air raids were part of the pattern of life, including school life.

The fathers of some of my friends were away in the war. Two didn't return. Another got home many months after the war ended, having endured years on the Death Railway in Burma as a prisoner of the Japanese. The whole village shared the sorrow.

Years later, when I came to think about doing my first book, it wasn't going to be about cuddly animals or fairies or wizards, was it? Only one subject demanded to be addressed. It had to be about peace and the stupidity of war. However, is this really a suitable subject for a children's picture book? I was young and naïve and didn't know any better ...

Written at the height of the Cold War with my first wife, Janet, *The General* was republished recently to mark its 50th anniversary, both here and in the United States and, this time around, in Russia as well.

From my earliest days, aged eleven, at Saturday morning art class in Lowestoft Art School, I have loved drawing the real world. A decade later I graduated from the Royal College of Art with a Travel Scholarship to America and, during the 1960's and 1970's, I was fortunate to be commissioned to make drawings all over the world for US and UK magazines. This lucky experience gave me inspiration for stories and locations in which to set them.



In the 1980s, with a new young family, I travelled less, but found endless inspiration through my studio window overlooking the Bay of St Ives. Watching the boys grow and explore, and trying to answer their endless questions, inspired more story ideas.

Cornwall is such an ancient land. The rocky cliffs and high, mysterious, misty moors are perfect settings for legends, giants, pirates and all kinds of magical Hobgoblins.

No need to travel the world for inspiration. Look across the table at your children, or grandchildren, or just look out of the window and dream.

Perhaps the most magical land I have travelled is Sikkim, a tiny Kingdom, high in the Himalayas. In 1972 I was invited by the Queen of Sikkim to visit her country and help with a collection of traditional Sikkimese tales. The Queen was American born, Hope Cooke, who had met the Crown Prince of Sikkim in Darjeeling while she was still a student. Four





years later, in 1963, they married. The old King died and her husband became the King and the American College girl became Queen.

When Hope found that the traditional tales had never been written down, she began a programme to collect and record them and I was asked to help with the project. It required travelling across high, snowy passes by mule and yak with guides and an interpreter to hear the stories from storytellers.

The small country above the clouds had a big effect on me. The Royal Palace, elaborately painted but with a tin roof, stood with a small Buddhist Monastery on a high plateau ringed all around with cloud and Tibetan prayer flags. On my first morning I was up early to see the sun peer over the eastern peaks and turn the snow pink on Mount Kanchenjunga.

During the following weeks we climbed to tiny villages and remote monasteries, crossing rickety rickety bridges swaying high above tumbling icy streams, and enjoying the warmest hospitality from the most smiley people in the world.

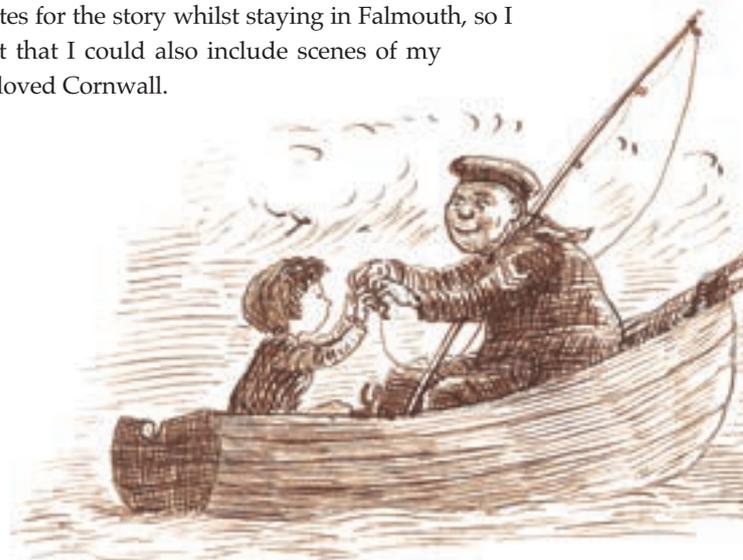
When I was fourteen our English master at my Secondary Modern School, Arthur Rudd, discovered that not one boy had read *The Wind in the Willows*. The following Friday afternoon he brought in his own copy and began to read to us.

Mr Rudd was a strict disciplinarian. He was hard, but well respected by the boys. We were astonished when he started reading to us – big boys now – about dressed up little furry animals.

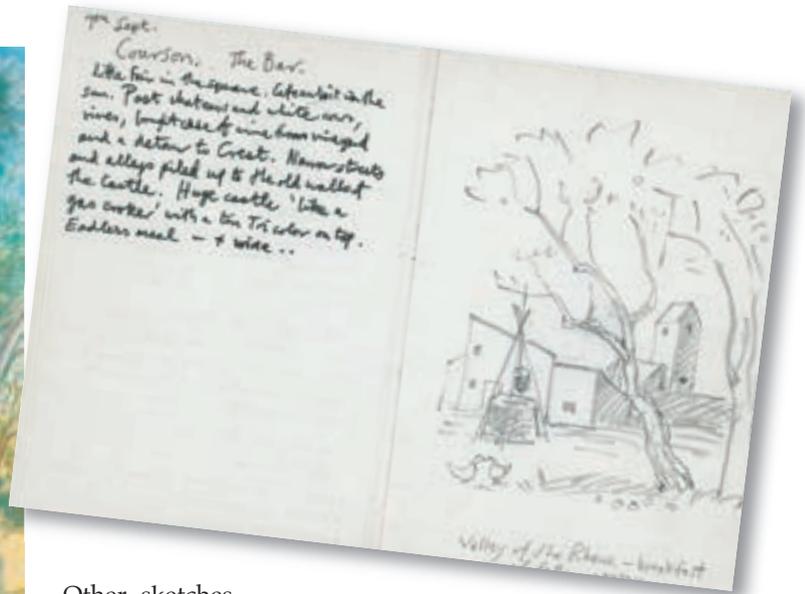
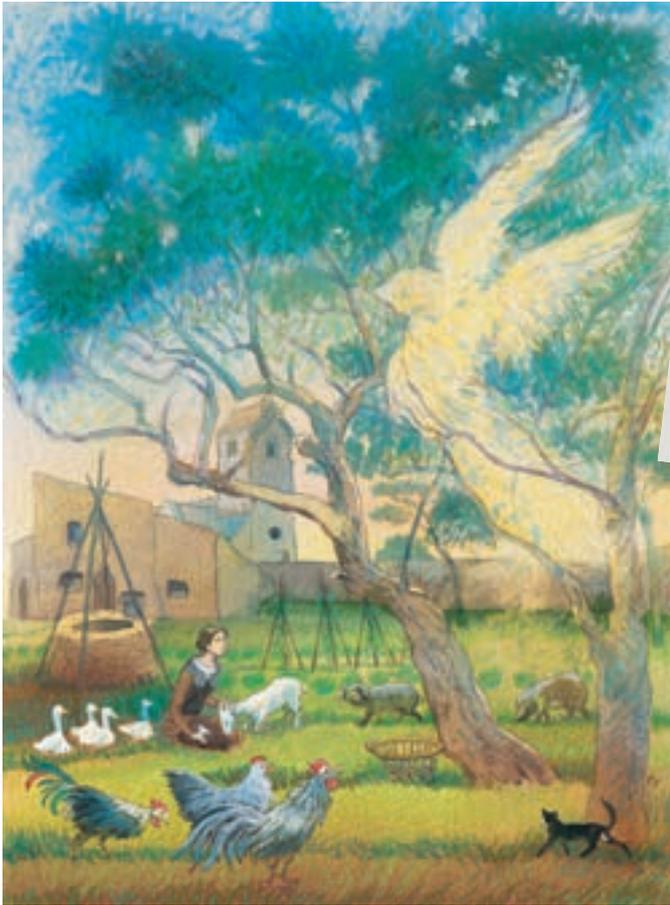
However, we could all identify with ‘messaging about on the river’ and, by the end of the first reading, we were hooked. We all looked forward to the next Friday afternoon chapter. It reminded me of the days spent with ‘Pop’ the sailor who took me fishing on the River Waveney during the war.

Many years later, when I was asked to illustrate *The Wind in the Willows*, I tried to give it a ‘sketchbook’ feel as if I was sitting quietly in the stern of Pop’s boat, sketching Ratty and Mole and Mr Badger as they ‘messed about on the river.’

I had also learnt that Kenneth Grahame had made his initial notes for the story whilst staying in Falmouth, so I felt that I could also include scenes of my beloved Cornwall.



It is evident from Michael’s enthusiasm for illustrating children’s books – well over a hundred for other authors, and more than thirty of his own stories, – that he is a master artist. This short piece about his life’s work confirms his place in the highest echelons of children’s book illustrators.
David Blanch



Other sketches from the Terry Jones French adventure, particularly time spent with a tiny travelling circus, inspired pictures for Terry's *Fantastic Stories*.

I have scores of sketchbooks, going back over the years, and they remain a source of first hand reference for locations around the world.

My first sketchbook, given to me at my first Saturday art class, was a step on a lifelong journey.

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With my own books, the inspiration could be visual or story driven. When working with other writers, of course, the story comes first and, hopefully, I see the pictures in my head as I read it. It is rather different with Michael Morpurgo, as we tend to talk about our next project whilst still working on the current one. So, there is a degree of 'give and take' in forming the idea. That might start from either one of us and, sometimes, the 'other Michael' adapts a story after seeing some of the preliminary pictures.

Our first book together was *Arthur, High King of Britain*. Location is important to both of us and, as the Arthurian stories are set in the West Country, it was an obvious choice for us. Next was *Robin of Sherwood* with visits to Sherwood Forest.

After two heroes – why not the heroine? As soon as Joan of Arc was mentioned, we knew it was inevitable and, as a bonus, this trip promised good food and wine!

We walked the streets of Orleans, the banks of the Loire and stood in silence in the Square in Rouen, where Joan was burnt at the stake. These journeys into the landscapes of our stories are invaluable.

On a previous trip around France, researching a book with Terry Jones, I had made a sketch of an orchard in the Rhone Valley. It seemed an ideal setting for the miraculous appearance of the Angel to the young Joan of Arc.

