

The epic adventures of William Grill



If I was to name just one picture book that caught my imagination last year, it would be *Shackleton's Journey*, a stunning information title that took William Grill approximately a year to compile, "In fact much longer" he told me, "as all the initial sketches were completed in my third year at University." It tells the story of Ernest Shackleton and his crew who undertook the epic journey across the Antarctic. However, when his ship, the *Endurance*, became trapped in the ice, the adventure became one of survival. It's a story of great courage and endurance, which is dramatically illustrated by William. This multi-award-winning book made William the youngest winner of the Kate Greenaway Award for more than fifty years. His distinctive style comes from many sources, but he cites the Fauvist painters, Eric Ravilious and Saul Steinberg, as constant influences.

William grew up in rural Hampshire. "I spent a good deal of time outdoors, making dens and the like. I think that's why I'm now so interested in stories that take place in wild places." His parents weren't particularly artistic, but, coming from a geographical background, they were keen travellers. William recalls, "I hate to admit it but I probably looked up to my older brother as he's always been artistic and a few steps ahead."

So what inspired William to write a book about Ernest Shackleton? "The spark for me was seeing Frank Hurley's expedition photographs – they seemed to tell so much in a quiet way, which made me think they could almost be

animated and expanded upon through illustration. I love the romantic nature of the story itself and how it shows people can still be positive in spite of monumental failure." In a joint venture with Zelda Turner, William has produced an intricately drawn activity book to accompany the picture book. "This was an idea put forward by Flying Eye, an imprint of Nobrow; I hadn't thought of doing it, but since *Shackleton's Journey* is being used in schools now, it makes sense that the book can be made more interactive."

Eagerly anticipated in May is the publication of William's next title, *Wolves of Currumpaw*. Again it is a book which is more than a century old that was the inspiration for this stunning picture book, of which I have been fortunate to catch a preview. "On a whim, I picked up a copy of Ernest Thompson Seton's 1898 classic, *Wild Animals I Have Known*, and after reading Lobo's tale, I couldn't put it out of my mind. The story seemed so timeless and relevant to today that I was surprised it wasn't more well-known. This combination was enough to convince me to try and adapt it visually for a modern audience." Lobo was one of the last 'outlaw wolves' that terrorised a handful of ranchers and cowboys in Clayton, New Mexico, in the 1890s. To the frustration of many men, he evaded capture and poisoning countless times, earning him the title 'The King of Currumpaw'. Seton was a

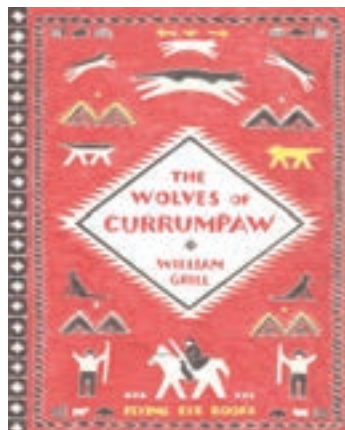
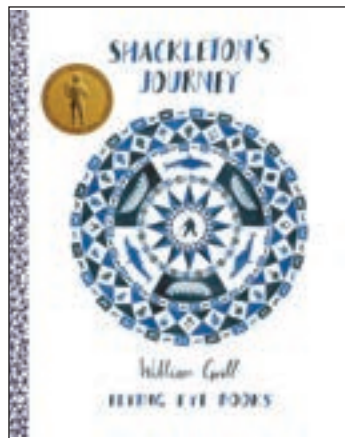
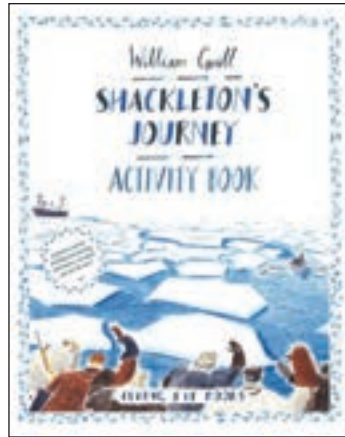




talented artist, writer and naturalist. He was also a skilful hunter who knew how to catch wolves! William tells me Seton even wrote a manual for doing so. But after his encounter with Lobo his life changed and he never killed a wolf again. Instead, he devoted the rest of his life to trying to protect wildlife. Apart from lobbying for wildlife protection laws, Seton realised one of the best ways to do this was through education. "This is how the Boy Scouts of America was formed. You could argue he was one of the first conservationists."

As part of his preparation, William spent a week volunteering at the wolf sanctuary in New Mexico helping out with odd jobs which involved "mostly weeding!", so that he could fill a sketchbook with observational drawings of the wolves. "The drawings were done in the morning when the wolves were having breakfast as that's when they're most active. The best moment was hearing all the wolves howl in chorus at dawn and dusk; the worst moment was finding a black widow spider in my jacket! I wished I could have stayed longer. Just as I was getting to know the place and the people, I had to leave. Hopefully I'll pay them another visit soon."

William leads a very busy life out of his studio. He recently exhibited at the Treviso Comic Book Festival in Italy. "I was amazingly lucky to be invited to exhibit my work alongside three other Nobrow author/ illustrators. I think the Festival invite at least one person from Nobrow every year." Last autumn William was invited to run a few drawing workshops, exploring the collections at the Design Museum in London. "Every weekend a different illustrator led the session. As an illustrator you hope that drawing sharpens your observational skills, so helping others to look at these objects in this way, was a really



nice way for people to try something a little challenging and engage with the museum's content." He also runs an art club at a local school. "This came about through *Twitter* funnily enough. The school's year six was due to study Shackleton through a reading programme created by CLPE (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education) where one or two children's books are used as a basis for their study. I helped out on occasional days and even went to see their school play based on Shackleton's expedition. I was sad when it came to an end so suggested setting up an after-school art club!"

William uses sketchbooks widely, but he also incorporates photographs when working towards the finished piece. He tries to use his own reference as much as possible. However, sometimes photographs are needed for specific details and imagery he's not able to see first hand. Sadly, one of William's sketchbooks has recently gone missing. "It contains all my drawings from the wolf sanctuary so it's a big loss to me – another reason to go back there!" We sincerely hope the sketches of this gifted artist turn up soon – and not on eBay!

Dave Chant

Published by Flying Eye:

Shackleton's Journey
£14.99 ISBN: 978-1909263109

Shackleton's Journey: Activity Book with Zelda Turner
£9.99 ISBN: 978-1909263802

Wolves of Currumpaw
£14.99 ISBN: 978-1909263833