

Bruce Ingman

A true exponent of the hand-made mark

We recently had the enjoyable experience of attending a performance by children's author and illustrator, Bruce Ingman, at Warwick University Arts Centre, as part of the annual tour of The Children's Bookshow. Bruce kept the 555 children (and adults) spellbound for an hour with songs, the odd dance and visual displays of photographs. A short video depicted clips from the TV shows he loved as a child including *Blue Peter*, *Pink Panther* and *Road Runner*. There were also projections of several of his picture books which he read to us, including *This is the Story of Alison Hubble: who went to bed single and woke up double*. Not an inconsiderable achievement given that he had mislaid his contact lenses and had been forced to wear his emergency glasses from c1973!

Following the show, Bruce carefully inscribed copies of his books for over an hour. We then sat down to talk about his life in books.

We began by asking how Bruce became involved with The Children's Bookshow and why he remains a regular contributor to the annual tour. "It's the thrill of seeing the children enjoying themselves. I have done a few Bookshows over the years in Liverpool, Coventry and one in Newcastle with double the number of children than are here today. When I was at school, you didn't get authors or illustrators visiting. I do remember theatre actors though and that type of experience sticks in your memory, like you remember your first school teacher. The children who come to The Children's Bookshows will always remember them. I am aware you have this line back to your childhood. That's why I put the TV shows in *my* show today."

Bruce was born in Liverpool. As a child, he spent long periods in hospital with a hearing disorder, which meant drawing became both a way of communication and a pastime. He studied for a Fine Arts degree at Nottingham Trent University and a MA in Illustration at the Royal College of Art in London, working under the tutorage of Quentin Blake. It was Quentin who gave him some memorable advice about how to illustrate an incident, which Bruce had shared with the children



Bruce Ingman with Sian Williams at The Children's Bookshow.

in the Bookshow - to think about the moments before and after the event. Bruce now passes on his own expertise and has taught art in various colleges. He has illustrated for publications including *The Sunday Times* and *Vogue* and worked on album covers including Ian Dury's *The Busman's Prayer*. In addition, he has exhibited all over the world, most recently in New York.

Bruce didn't set out to be a children's book illustrator. He tells us this happened more by accident. His first children's picture book, *When Martha's Away*, is a fun story about what cats get up to when they have the house to themselves. It won the overall V & A Illustration Award in 1996, and Bruce also picked up the Mother Goose Award for the Best British Newcomer

to Children's Books.

Bruce's style is distinctive - deceptively uncomplicated, minimalist even, but with some amusing and thought-provoking details on the page. He acknowledges that his style has evolved slightly over the years. Seeking to define something of his 'raison d'être' with his approach to illustration he notes, "I'm very much interested in the hand-made mark. I like to see the human touch in the world rather than it go through a computer. Hopefully there's spontaneity in my work; the sense of immediacy, the thrill of the moment, and the thrill of when you're working. To make things look easy is very hard. My sketchbooks are my initial thoughts and I don't try to over analyse in terms of how I do this. I try to be honest, get the idea down as simply as possible." Thumbing through *Previously*, a title he illustrated in collaboration with Allan Ahlberg, Bruce picked a picture at random and

explained, "This took me maybe ten minutes, then I did it again and it was rubbish. I took another hour trying, then I went back to the first one which had captured the spirit of it."

Among the stylish picture books which Bruce has illustrated include some that are self-penned: *Lost Property* (1997), *A Night on the Tiles* (1998), *Bad News I'm in Charge!* (2003). Other titles are a result of working in tandem with authors



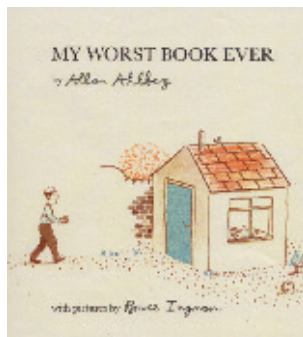


A spread from *the Hole Story*.

including, *Boing!* with Sean Taylor (2004) - which remains a special book for Bruce because it coincided with the birth of his daughter, and Bruce's latest title, *The Hole Story* (2016), with Paul Bright. This latter is a creative tale of two holes who need to find a home. The sunny illustrations successfully feed the imagination as to where and how these holes can fit in.

He feels privileged to have established a regular working relationship with Allan Ahlberg over the last ten years, and is characteristically unassuming when expressing his excitement at being one of the first people to see the draft of Allan's stories. Their joint creative talents have produced *The Runaway Dinner* (2007), *Previously* (2008), *The Pencil* (2009), *Everybody Was a Baby Once* (2010), *Hooray for Bread* (2014) and 'Alison Hubble' (2016). *The Pencil*, which is a Children's Book Award winner, is a clever tale of a solitary pencil, who needs to draw to find company, and his creation of an overzealous rubber - which results in tremendous fun. Bruce's illustrations wonderfully complement the story, providing plenty to pore over and explore. Reflecting on working collaboratively, Bruce emphasises it is largely his vision that appears on the page and notes that when you illustrate somebody else's story, you are in a fifty-fifty partnership. He elaborates, "It is important, as an artist, you do not become 'a slave to the text' and find time to enjoy the experience."

Bruce explained his method of working with Allan begins with them swapping notes, ideas, text and pictures back and forth before coming together with the editor and designer at the publishers. "Each book takes time. The one I'm currently working on with Allan, *My Worst Book Ever*, has so far taken about two years." Bruce then produced his working copy of this semi-autobiographical picture book which depicts the working process from an original idea through to the production of a picture book. The opening pages show Allan



going to his shed to write. Other sketches depict Allan, Bruce's family and a whole host of interesting details including snails and crocodiles! Allan and Bruce visit the publisher who decides he wants dinosaurs... and then the designer wants weird and wonderful fonts. Finally, the printer comes into the story rounding off the whole book process. It's a privilege to hear Bruce's commentary as he takes us through the various pages, clearly revelling in the fun of what he has been able to conjure up from Allan's story. "Allan's still got that drive - he's inspirational to me. I enjoy working with other authors but I would drop everything to work with Allan." You get the impression that this feeling is likely to be reciprocal.

Bruce is a charming man. Effusive about his work, a pleasure to talk to and clearly one of those creative and talented individuals it is fun to be around.

Elaine & Dave Chant

For more information about The Children's Bookshow see Roundabout on page 46.

Selected Bibliography
 Published by Walker books
When Martha's Away £6.99 ISBN: 978-1406329605
Bad News I'm in Charge £5.99 ISBN: 978-1844284565
The Runaway Dinner £5.99 ISBN: 978-1406305494
Previously £6.99 ISBN: 978-1406313505
The Pencil £6.99 ISBN: 978-1406319552
 'Alison Hubble' Written by Allan Ahlberg Puffin £6.99 ISBN: 978-0141359243
The Hole Story Written by Paul Bright Andersen Press £11.99 ISBN: 978-1783441938