

# Jim Kay

## Harry Potter and the Search for a Style



Jim Kay is a softly spoken and modest man who possesses a talent for illustration which merits shouting about. In 2012, he won the Kate Greenaway Medal for his illustration of *A Monster Calls* by Patrick Ness. He has since taken on the prestigious commission of creating illustrated editions for each of the Harry Potter titles. With the first three stunning books under his belt, Jim is currently taking a year out;

an ideal time to talk to him about his reflections on the 'Potter' commission. We memorably spoke with Jim in the conservatory at Bloomsbury, his publisher, as we battled against the noise of clattering cutlery and a disco being sound-checked for an evening Christmas Party!

Jim recalled how he first misunderstood the phone call from his agent about working on the 'Potter' project. "I thought she meant just the covers!" When he learned the commission was to illustrate all seven books it was an appealing, but terrifying, prospect. "My initial reaction was 'this is too big'. I'd not really illustrated for children before in colour. But my old lecturer used to say, 'if you want to get better you must do things that frighten you'. It was about as far out of my comfort zone that you could possibly get." He considers he was naïve in underestimating the reach of it. "Once you're working on 'Potter' you notice it referenced everywhere - on Radio 4 recently, a politician mentioned Voldemort."

The original plan was for Jim to take six months to complete each book which would allow him to take six months off. The first book took two and a half years to complete with Jim working insanely long hours. "I was a wreck. I took three or four days off after finishing it, then went straight into book two as I knew it had to be done in nine months. The same happened between books two and three." By then Jim was really ill, but managed to finish the third book. Now he has some respite. "It's

the first time I've been able to step back and appraise what we are trying to do with the books."

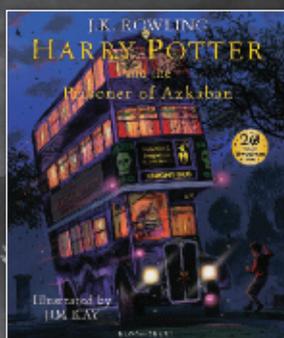
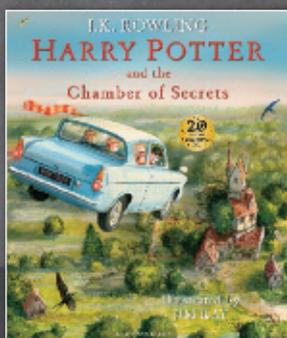
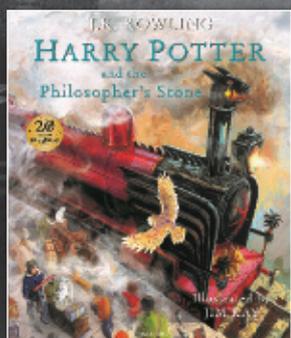
Jim initially studied illustration at the University of Westminster and qualified in 1997. He took freelance work for a variety of magazines. "It was hard work and I had to learn quickly." He also worked in the archives of Tate Britain and the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew. His first venture into children's books came when he wrote what he describes as "a really grim story". An exhibition which included the book's illustrations garnered contrasting opinions - the adults considered it was too dark for children, but the children thought it was great and wrote comments like: "We want more of this." As Jim notes, "There's a difference to what children and adults want." The early reactions to his work as "too dark" persisted. Fortunately, Walker Books saw his potential and gave Jim the opportunity to illustrate *A Monster Calls*. The book's dark, brutal, black and white illustrations memorably deliver the fear and anger within the story. "It took a long time to get there. You have to keep plugging away and you have to take a lot of criticism."

The working process for each 'Potter' illustration is an intricate one. "Some of my preparatory work has ended up in the books. I used to spend hours drawing in the Natural History Museum. I like to approach my work anatomically. I make a skull from balsa, put on modelling clay, then put the skin and muscle on; a great way of creating a design but not too consciously." Jim uses real-life models including children found during school visits. The preparatory drawings for the child characters originally necessitated working from photographs as the children struggled to sit still for long periods. "When I first met them, they were tiny kids. They have 'stretched' a



foot and a half in no time and now are striking young adults."

Jim's work uses a wide variety of techniques, so how does he decide which approach lends itself to a particular illustration? "I experiment ... I tried one recently using charcoal. It didn't work so I switched to chalks but that didn't work. I ended up using a lithographic pencil. I think the text should dictate the style, which



is what happened with *A Monster Calls*. With the 'Potter' books, the first book has a fun, youthful charm to it. It changes as the characters get older, and the story gets darker." He says he has been incredibly lucky in the open-minded approach taken by both the publisher and J K Rowling. "She seems to encourage going outside the scope and building on it. I have added cheeky bits to Diagon Alley which is a little naughty, but I've not yet had anybody say anything. I don't like to do the obvious things. I like to do things that are almost 'off-screen'."

Deciding which illustrations to include is a group process. For 'Azkaban', Jim sketched over twenty major illustrations that didn't get in. "There's a lot of self-doubt so it's nice to have a group of people at Bloomsbury. No one knows the books better than they do. We work together and collectively come up with what is thought to be the best decision. Sometimes even when the publisher is happy, you are reluctant to hand an illustration over because there's so many permutations you would like to use." The drawings he has found most enjoyable to work on are those that went right first time. "You remember all the late nights and the ones you had to throw away. It's difficult to express how that weighs upon you, when you work on an illustration for a week and it doesn't work. You think I could have had a week off! In reality you are finding ways that don't work which is just as valuable."

Although currently on a sabbatical, Jim is already working on the next 'Potter'. "I wanted to get ahead. I can really enjoy it without a time pressure. I've already finished chapter one. I'd like to populate this book as a lot of new characters appear. I'm currently wrestling with Mad-eye Moody. The description of him is hideous so we are trying to find a balance - something that's not too frightening but that's close to the text."

Reflecting on his early influences, Jim recalls growing up with the gothic, fantasy illustrations of Ian Miller and is gratified he is now a friend. He enthuses about Richard Scarry. "He didn't seem to dumb down. He threw everything at it. It was a wonderful way for children to learn about the adult world; his towns, people and their occupations - so much detail." Among



contemporary illustrators, Alexis Deacon is a particular favourite. "The best exponent of Crack illustration." The evening of our interview, Jim was thrilled to be meeting Alan Lee, who illustrated the special editions of *Lord of the Rings* and was concept artist on the Peter Jackson films. "The filmmaking process is similar to the way I approach things: making models, positioning the cameras, changing the lighting - exactly as I do in a more intimate way in my studio."

And has he met JK Rowling? "No. I sent her an illustrated letter which took a long time. She sent a lovely letter back and so I sent another letter that I illustrated. I feel now I have to illustrate every letter I do. She writes beautifully. Initially I didn't want to meet her as I wasn't sure how my 'Potter' would be received - if I had destroyed the world's most popular children's book! I'm hoping to chat to Jo one day. I'll have to build up courage."

Unsurprisingly, Jim hasn't had time to pursue other projects. "I did some film work while doing book one. I was so tired I started to hallucinate." He is currently learning to make hats with his partner, who is a milliner. "I am making my first hat at the moment which is Harry Potter influenced. It's sort of a large piece of lettuce covered in slugs. I'm learning how to do felting and embroidery." He smiles, "I think ultimately, I'd rather be a hat maker than an illustrator!"

His final reflection is typically self-effacing and contemplative. "I'm still trying to find my style - I haven't got a style yet. I am trying to find one I'm comfortable with, so people will say that's a Jim Kay."

*Elaine and David Chant*

#### Bibliography

- A Monster Calls*, Patrick Ness, Walker Books £9.99 ISBN: 978-1406339345
- Written by J K Rowling, Published by Bloomsbury at £30.00 each
- Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* ISBN: 978-1408845646
- Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* ISBN: 978-1408845653
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