



Chris Riddell

becoming reacquainted with the craft of the picture book



On one of the first warm days of the summer, we had the pleasure of sitting with Chris Riddell in his garden in Brighton to talk about his ingenious and rather splendid new picture book, *Once Upon A Wild Wood*. "It's ten years since I did my last picture book and it seemed right to get back to this wonderful medium which is where I began." It's not as if Chris hasn't been busy in those ten years. There have been further instalments of the ever-popular Goth Girl and Ottoline series, along with *The Edge Chronicles*, in collaboration

with Paul Stewart. Also, numerous, wonderfully illustrated books including *The Sleeper and the Spindle* for which he won a third CILIP Kate Greenway Medal for illustration. Chris is the only illustrator to have achieved this accolade. Then there's the small matter of being the 2015/17 Children's Laureate ...

Revisiting the experience of both writing and illustrating a picture book was particularly invigorating for Chris "Not least because it showed me how difficult writing a picture book is. It's a short form but it endlessly needs to be rehonored. It has reacquainted me with the craft of the picture book - how you handle pages, the design, the rhythm of turning the page and how you build to the big moment."

Once Upon A Wild Wood is the story of Little Green Rain Cape and her eventful journey to a party in the Wild Wood. On her way, she encounters a number of familiar fairy tale characters, each with their particular issues, including a sickly version of Prince Charming and seven dwarves who are ready for basting in a roasting tin! It's a refreshing tale that demonstrates skilful, visual storytelling. The interplay between words and pictures expands and enriches the narrative and encourages children to explore fairy tale traditions in a fun and stimulating way.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, the initial inspiration came from a visual image of walking through a wood near his house in Norfolk. "I started thinking about something that Arthur Rackham did in the Golden Age of Illustration which is the

personification of trees. I have two very good friends there, and they are both huge oak trees. I remember thinking about the Kipling poem, *The Way Through the Woods* ... what a wonderful title. I considered who would wander through the woods? Traditionally, there would be Little Red Riding Hood. I wondered if I could invent a close companion, a character that kids could identify with ... Little Green Rain Cape! So, I had my character and my setting. And then it was an invitation to revisit my memories of fairy tales."

Little Green Rain Cape is gutsy, smart and very resourceful, and she has some comfortable, clumpy boots. There are clear resemblances to his middle-range fiction characters of Ottoline and Ada, from the Goth Girl series, but the main inspiration is his daughter Katie. He does like to have realistic, strong girls as central characters because he believes this matter needs addressing. Drawing Little Green Rain Cape multiple times enabled Chris to get the sense of the character in the round. "The way that I draw characters informs me of what the story might be. I often draw my cast list first and that is because I am an illustrator who writes."

Originally, Chris wrote the whole text in verse as part of a deconstruction of traditional fairy tale tropes. His editor at Macmillan felt the verse was taking over and gently brought him back to the notion of narrative. What survived of the verse is an enigmatic quatrain that introduces and concludes the tale.

*The way through the woods is dark and deep
With many a lesson to gauge
And the path you take is the story you make
Each step a turn of the page*

This, he told us, is his response to why we need books. "Because books are a journey. We embody our own experiences in the books that we create."





During our visit, Chris led us 'down the garden path' to his studio, "the department for making beautiful books". Overlooked by a life mask of William Blake, Yorick's skull and an animated Walt Disney cartoon character called Stitch, he explained the process of producing one of the spreads for *Once in a Wild Wood*. "It takes a day to sketch and rough it out. This is all done with Conte pastel pencils and it's a fairly detailed pencilled version. Over the top I lay watercolour. This gives it a slightly soft line but enough definition to have some of the quality of an ink line. It's a synthesis of pastel and pen and ink. (Any redrawing is done from scratch as he wants them to have life) ... In a sense its drawing with no safety net!" The finished spread is an invitation visually to look around and discover sub text and observational detail.

Chris hasn't embraced working digitally. "Why recreate a charcoal line when you can pick up a piece of charcoal?" In his typical self-deprecating manner, he says he is incompetent at using this approach. "I realise I'm very old fashioned now. I quite enjoy the sense of being slightly behind the curve and waiting for the revolution to come around again." He is however, fascinated by new innovations and spoke enthusiastically about an artist he encountered on a recent trip to New Zealand, who was experimenting working in 3D. But the book remains the magical item. "People will encounter things online but then they will go and find the book on the shelf. What doesn't change is the notion that we need stories. And the best way to carry a story around is written within the pages of a book." His passion for the physical book is clear, "I think beautiful books with fantastic finishes have never been more prevalent. I really believe we live in the age of the beautiful book."

Never a day goes by when Chris isn't drawing. "I always make sure I have pens and paper to hand. For me it's a way of making sense of my inadequacies. When I do something asinine such as missing my stop on the train, then I draw a picture of me missing my stop. I think I've documented that so that's okay!" *Travels with My Sketchbook* recorded his two years as Children's Laureate. Drawing as he went, he found the experience the opposite to any creative block that you might assume would be the result of so many calls on his time.

He sees his 'other job' of political cartoonist for the *Observer* as having strong similarities to his illustrations for children. "When I draw a political cartoon, I am often thinking metaphorically. I people my cartoons with figures, animals or

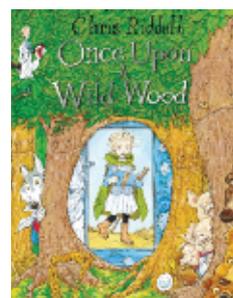
mythological constructs that wouldn't be out of place in a picture book." He enjoys being part of a long tradition of children's book illustrators and writers who have worked in both mediums - Dr Seuss, Ernest Shepherd and John Tenniel. "It's a tradition that shows visually there's not this huge gulf between an audience who is going to read a picture book and one that is going to read the political cartoon." He finds it fun stepping in and out of the different personas. "And very useful when one is invited to seats of power as a children's book person to slightly worry the person you are talking to by revealing you're a political cartoonist!"

This year Chris took on the role of President of the School Library Association. During his period as Laureate, he championed children's libraries and so this seemed a natural progression. Although you can't ignore the fact that school libraries have been in the front row of austerity, he remains hopeful. "In schools I think we can really change the culture. If you succeed in doing this and can make a library central to the life of the school you will have kids leave and go to their local towns who will support them." He relishes opportunities to wave a book around and say, "This is the key to engaging the next generation."

As we took in the many drawings and library of sketchbooks to be found in his studio, Chris revealed that he is about to fulfil one of his long-held ambitions and illustrate both Lewis Carroll books featuring Alice. He feels he is joining a club of distinguished illustrators who have gone before. "I am very taken by the original photographs. I want to see if I can bring that Alice back into the pages."

We left Chris putting the final touches to his monthly cover for *Literary Review* which featured an article on Lessons in Power from Shakespeare. Chris had drawn an entertaining caricature of Trump as a Shakespearian tyrant!

Elaine and David Chant



Bibliography

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