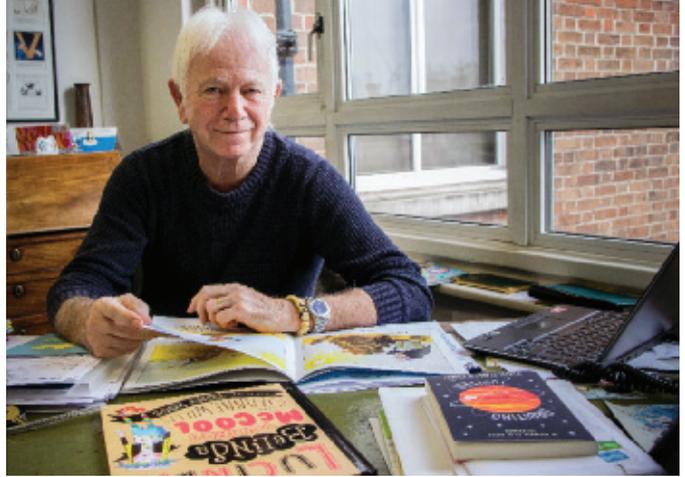


The Enduring Talent of Tony Ross

Where do you start? Where do you begin to celebrate an author and illustrator who has illustrated nigh on over 2000 children's books and who has just enjoyed his 80th birthday, who modestly says he does it for love of a good story and fell into illustrating because he wasn't very good at anything else?

Of course, we don't believe him, especially when he adds that he has "been very lucky". Certainly, serendipity has played a part in Tony's long and illustrious career but the skill and talent of his quirky, humorous and characteristic drawings are testament to their freshness, appeal and success today. The delight of Tony Ross' work is in the portrayal of everyday family life with all its ups and downs, which we can all identify with, young or old, as is so cleverly celebrated in *The Little Princess* stories, of which there are now 14. The iconic Little Princess, originally based on Tony's young daughter, has been animated by Channel 5 for four series and has sold 'millions' of copies for Andersen Press.

It is thanks to this partnership with Klaus Flugge of Andersen that Tony's career has continued for so long. Starting off at the Liverpool School of Art, he moved on to work in advertising and graphic design and as a cartoonist for *Punch* magazine. Whilst Senior Lecturer in art at Manchester Polytechnic, he was offered the role as head of the Illustration course and thought he had better "have a go himself". He illustrated a children's story of his own, spoke to a friend that knew a publisher who, to his surprise, took on the book and commissioned another. In 1976 he learnt of Klaus Flugge's new enterprise, establishing Andersen Press, and approached him with some drawings. Klaus liked his work and the very first book Andersen Press published was *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, illustrated by Tony Ross, which was named as one of the best books of the year by The Federation of Children's Book Groups.



Tony Ross – credit Mark Guest.

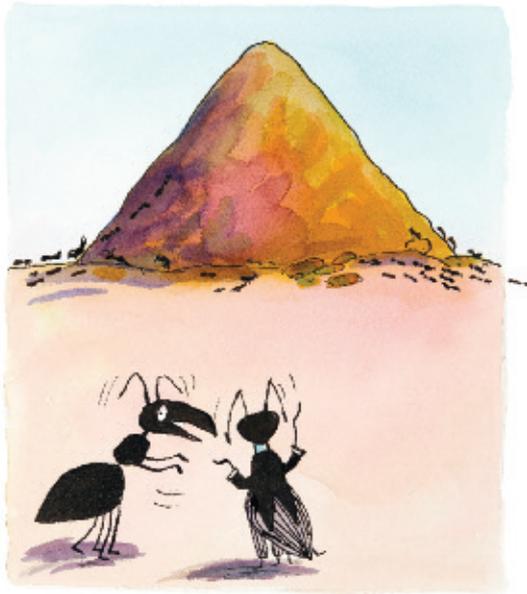
Tony comes from an artistic family; his father was a conjuror until he had to get "a proper job", his mother a dancer and two uncles were successful actors. Favourite books from his childhood were the *Rupert Bear Annuals* (eagerly waited for each Christmas), *Just William* and *Winnie the Pooh* and he says he can see influences from Rupert in particular, creeping into his work. Tony described the antics of Rupert and his friends as quite eccentric and commented, "Where else would you find a fully clothed bear with human hands?"

Tony says he works "whenever I am not doing something else, which is quite often" in his studio; an upstairs room with drawing desk, computers, and bookshelves. "I usually draw in black indian ink, and coloured Dr. Martins liquid watercolours. I do as few drafts as possible. I feel that the first drawings are the liveliest."

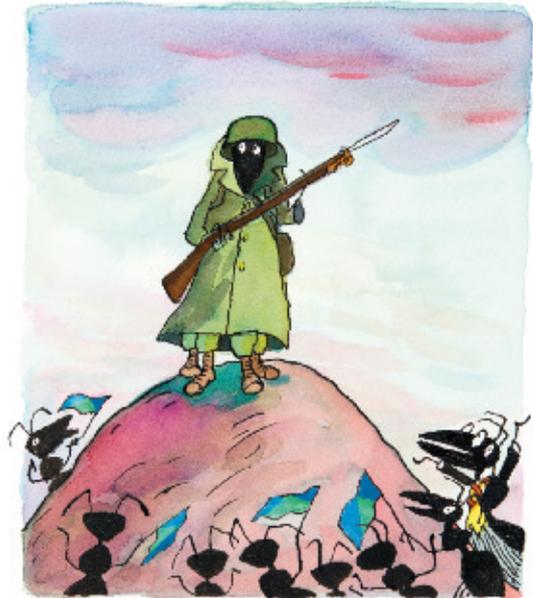
It is perhaps Tony's illustrations of Francesca Simon's *Horrid Henry* series which have brought him most fame and he recognises echoes of *Just William* from his childhood. He has illustrated work by almost every well-known writer you can think of, from Roald Dahl to Paula Danziger with *Amber Brown*, to Giles Andreae, Anthony Horowitz and Clare Balding. Another very successful partnership has been with Jeanne Willis whose work he always enjoys illustrating and describes as "quality writing". He plays down his obvious talent, saying that often "he just draws lines around the author's ideas" and considers his work "amateurish" which his continued success belies. He has said that he often prefers illustrating his own work so he can leave out what he is not good at! His main concern is that it is enjoyable and it is this sense of pleasure that resounds through his portrayal of many diverse and fun loving characters.

A visitor to the Bologna Annual Book Fair recalls seeing Tony Ross and David McKee either side of the Andersen Press stand with queues of hopeful illustrators waiting to show them their work and Tony commenting that "wonderful young talent" could be found there. He continued "much work done now, seems quite traditional, based not on changes in artists, but changes in children. Some younger artists seem to be quite zany, and that can influence us all."

It is important to Tony that the story is well written and it is this which has perhaps drawn him to illustrate many classics from Shakespeare and Alice in Wonderland to Astrid Lindgren's *Pippi Longstocking* as well as re-tellings of myths and legends. He



Douglas was worried, but he promised he would do his best. "What must a soldier do?" he asked. "He must defend Antworld," replied the Chief Ant.



So Douglas proudly put on his uniform, glad that his big head and big teeth would make Antworld a safer place for the little ants.

describes Pippi as "one of the best heroines ever, no parents, independent and rich" and his illustrations certainly add to the appeal of this feisty character. His latest collaboration is with the hugely successful David Walliams and Tony has brought to life characters such as Walliams' Grandpa and Gangsta Granny as well as bears, snakes and a hippo. It seems that an overwhelming theme running through Tony Ross' work is that the stories should be accessible to the young readers and his illustrations certainly achieve this.

Considering his career and long list of books to date, the theme of Tony Ross' latest self-penned book may come as a surprise to many and is testament to the talent and energy of this redoubtable illustrator. Published by Andersen, *An Anty-War Story* is just that. Tony recounted how he was standing in the fields of Belgium where the Battle of Waterloo had taken place in 1815, in the same month of June and realised that the wildlife surrounding him then, the rabbits, butterflies, insects and birds, had been there in 1815. They too had been killed as had been the many soldiers in that battle and in the wars since. He decided to tell a story which would spark conversations and encourage the reader to think.

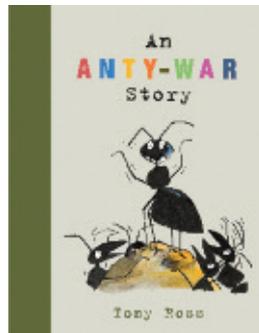
Instead of choosing rabbits as the main characters Tony decided on ants. Douglas and his fellow ants have found the perfect place to build Antworld and enjoy their role of collecting food. Douglas is the only ant with a name and wants to fit in but he has no task to do until he is chosen to be a soldier. He is proud when he is told that he is special and will be responsible for making Antworld safe for the little ants and joins the line of other soldier ants. But when war comes to ant world his story is quite different.

Powerful, subtle and thought provoking, Tony has written a story with a character the reader will engage with from the beginning and has created a tale which will keep you guessing

to the last pages. This is a long way from Horrid Henry and his mischief or Towser the clever dog but has the qualities that Tony himself has always admired; that of being a well written story. It seems that Klaus Flugge had no hesitation in publishing this new work and the press release describes it as "An eye-opening allegory about the optimism and vulnerability of ordinary people during the First World War." Tony is more concerned that Douglas' story will make children think and remind us that animals too suffer in wars.

It will be interesting to see where Tony's journey takes him next. He is currently illustrating a new David Walliams story. The Little Princess has grown up and her story is continuing, now written by Tony's partner Wendy and illustrated by Tony. She wears jeans, has long hair and has been given a name ... Whatever Tony produces, we have the guarantee that the story will be well written and entertaining, the characters will be independent, full of fun and courage and each will be hall-marked by Tony's wonderful, distinctive and realistic illustrations.

Louise Stothard



Selected Bibliography:

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- Horrid Henry* series written by Francesca Simon Orion
- Amber Brown* series written by Paula Danziger Puffin
- Goldilocks and the Three Bears* Andersen £6.99 ISBN: 978-0905478005
- An Anty-War Story* Andersen £11.99 ISBN: 978-1783446100
- Pippi Longstocking* written by Astrid Lindgren OUP £5.99 ISBN: 978-0192793799
- Gangsta Granny* written by David Walliams HarperCollins £6.99 ISBN: 978-0007371464