



James Mayhew and Zeb Soanes

exchange thoughts about their award-winning partnership on *Gaspard the Fox*

Zeb (Z): I was thrilled when you agreed to take on *Gaspard the Fox*, what attracted you to the project?

James (J): To begin with, I've always really liked foxes! I think they are, like wolves, fascinating, beautiful and much misunderstood animals. It was also perfectly timed; after 30 years of 'Katie' books I was on the look-out for a new project. I was very attracted by the fact that *Gaspard the Fox* is set in the real world - a departure and a bit of a challenge for me.

The characters in 'Gaspard' are beautifully real, we all know a superior Peter or a fluttery Finty in real life. How did you create them and imagine their individual personalities? Are they based on anyone human, or drawn entirely from observing the animals?



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Z: The title character was based on a real fox that had been visiting me at home in London. Foxes have both feline and canine characteristics so I decided to give Gaspard two friends reflecting both those facets: a cat called Peter and a little dog named Finty. Gaspard is an innocent, with whom children can identify, so I needed the other characters to provide dynamics. Peter is based on a very elusive and superior cat that stalks around in my front garden; he is the sharer of knowledge and uses big words. Finty is based on one of my best friend's Jackapoos (Jack Russell/Poodle cross). If Peter is the rather effete know-it-all, Finty needed to be the doer, the instigator of action and so she is adventurous and fearless. Yes, the animal behaviour is observed but the imagined conversations between them come to me on my daily cycle-commute to the BBC. This first story is about new friendships, fear of rejection and being accepted and liked for who you really are. Peter has

pretensions and has created a haughty personality that later slips, allowing Gaspard to glimpse the real him, sealing their friendship with a secret (Peter is not his real name). Finty believes Gaspard is another *dog* when she first meets him; he fears she will reject him if she knows he is a fox but when revealed she thinks it's 'so cool' to be friends with one.

I can't imagine anyone else illustrating 'Gaspard' as your style encompasses all the elements of the books I loved as a child. Which illustrators and books influenced you?

J: I didn't take to reading easily; it was illustrations that kept me going back to the school library. We had very few picture books at home, but lots of chapter books with line drawings. I was fascinated with the skill and expression in the drawing. Older artists like John Minton, Edward Ardizzone, Edward Bawden, jostled with drawings by Tove Jansson, Shirley Hughes and John Burningham. And how about you - which stories and illustrations do you remember in particular?

Z: I had the ladybird series with their rather photo-realistic depictions of trolls and malevolent crones. I remember the illustrations in Roald Dahl's books before Quentin Blake such as Nancy Ekholm Burkert's wiry inkwork for *James and the Giant Peach* with its indecently fleshy fruit, and the memorable peach-stone house in Central Park at the end. But for sheer volume of stories I have to thank my father for bringing home a magazine called *Storyteller*, a fortnightly part-work published by Marshall Cavendish. It was a magazine full of beautifully illustrated folk and fairy tales, read by some of our finest character actors on an accompanying cassette. An electronic 'ping' prompted you when to turn the page. I eagerly went to bed early so I could have more time under the blankets reading and listening.

One of my favourite stories when we talk to groups of children is how you took up art by accident thanks to a supply teacher. It's incredible the impact one person can have on our lives - how did that come about?

J: When I was ten, something very special happened. A temporary supply teacher took over our class and introduced us to ink. There were coloured inks – glowing and luminous, we made stained glass windows with them. Then there was

the sepia ink, and we used dip pens to go sketching. The village where I grew up - Blundeston - is the birthplace of Dickens's David Copperfield, and several buildings in the story still exist, so we attempted to draw them. Most of the class struggled, but for me, something clicked. Perhaps all those hours in the library looking at drawings helped... I just fell in love with it. I've used pen and ink ever since.

Traditionally, foxes get a bad deal in children's stories: sly and cunning. Gaspard is gentle and kind, and a bit of an innocent. Did this grow from your observing the real Gaspard?

Z: Foxes often get a bad press built on centuries-old stereotypes. I wanted to write a children's story depicting urban foxes as I had witnessed them first hand as shy, tender and sensitive creatures. Foxes often turn their backs to you when they eat, which can appear rather coy as if they would prefer you didn't witness their poor table manners!

Lots of our readers have commented on the nostalgic feel to the pictures. I think that's because you still draw entirely by hand. How do you go about choosing what you will illustrate from a text?

J: Although I see some exciting things created on computer, that approach is not for me. I like the feel of the paper, the smell of the inks, the little imperfections that make art human and real - the antithesis of digital art, really! Choosing what to illustrate is very often an instinctive gut reaction. When you read an un-illustrated text - and anyone who has read a novel will understand this - you just "see" certain scenes, or characters in a certain way. Then you have to plan the pages to give the book variety and interest. Double page spreads for BIG moments, for example. The designer sets the texts to the correct size and font, and starts the process of planning the layout, but I change almost everything, as I begin to draw, and redraw, and draw again.

Gaspard the Fox trips off the tongue. How did you conjure the perfect name for "London's handsomest Fox"?

Z: My French partner had always wanted to name a dog Gaspard - an old French name - and Ravel's beautiful piano suite *Gaspard de la Nuit* (Gaspard of the Night) suited the real fox's nightly visits.



J: We've had such a lot of fun touring with this book to festivals and events. It's been a real adventure. What stands out in your memory?

Z: Firstly, you are the best travelling companion - who else would have *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* stored on his mobile phone to while away a torturous ten-hour rail replacement journey to the Hay Festival! Obviously it was a huge thrill to see and sign our book in grand bookshops such as Foyles and Hatchards but my favourite events last year were our first and last. In April we had such a warm response from the Federation of Children's Book Groups conference in Hatfield which launched our tour and at Southwold in November it was an entirely adult audience just as receptive as the children we had met throughout the year and, like them, bursting with more questions about real foxes than storybook ones. I've just become patron of The Mammal Society, so we will be sharing many more foxy facts in our festival appearances this year. How about you - what moments from our tour have stuck in your mind?

J: I've loved them all, and it's been a real privilege to share the stage with you Zeb, and forge a great friendship - a theme we find in the book, in fact. But I suppose returning to Blundeston Primary School - where I first attempted pen and ink drawing - after 45 years... that was very special. And the first person to greet me? The same librarian I had when I was ten. She was still there... amazing!

I know there are exciting plans for Gaspard's future. What about you? Now you've been embraced by the world of children's books, have you got any other ambitions and plans?

Z: Our second Gaspard book, *Gaspard Best in Show* is out in August and I'll start writing the third over the summer. Working on these books and characters is a labour of love and brings me great joy - long may that continue. Aside from 'Gaspard' I'm working on the text for a new orchestral work for children about a fantastical flying machine that will be performed in the autumn.



Bibliography

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Gaspard: Best in Show £12.99 ISBN: 978-1912654673
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