

Helen Craig: Family Matters

Philippa Pearce's daughter, Sally, married Helen Craig's son, Ben. Philippa and Helen, neighbours, 'co-grannies' to Sally and Ben's two boys, Nat and Will, agreed to further the unification by collaborating – author and illustrator respectively – on a joint venture. *A Finder's Magic* is a uniquely family affair. Written by Philippa (who died at the end of 2006), illustrated by Helen, designed by Ben, with a foreword by Sally and featuring a hero whose name is an anagram of Nat and Will. Below, HELEN CRAIG writes about her family, her career and her collaboration with Philippa Pearce.

I was always drawing as a child. During the war years we lived down a lane, in a tiny thatched cottage a mile from the village. We had to pump the water for washing but drinking water was collected in cans from a stand pipe at the end of the lane. These and other jobs, like looking after the chickens and helping around the house, were allocated to my brother and me, and I never seemed to have enough time to do all the things I wanted to do.

We would enjoy drawing cross-sections of caves with hidden entrances that went deeper and deeper into the ground. All the rooms had electric lights (unlike our cottage) and the necessary furniture, and there was always one that had treasure in it. I remember becoming so absorbed that I was almost in them. Something I still enjoy when creating pictures. I like to feel that if I stepped into the picture I would be able to go around a corner or through a door and there would be even more to see.

So I always wanted to draw but felt overshadowed by my family. My grandfather was Edward Gordon Craig the stage designer [and son of Ellen Terry]; my father, Edward Carrick, designed for films and stage, and my brother was a fine artist from a young age. I never felt able to compete and was never really encouraged. Instead my father persuaded me to become an apprentice to a photographic studio.

I didn't have the courage to rebel and go to art school. What little art training I had came from my father and evening classes at the Central School of Art, where I was taught by Mervyn Peake. I had no idea at the time just how fantastic this was, but I do remember that he was very encouraging and kind. So when I came to finally doing illustration I had to learn as I went along – and am still learning!

I bought Ben, my small son, Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, which I found truly inspirational. Everything about it – subject matter, composition, pen-work, pacing – worked superbly.



Helen Craig

It was as if a door had opened just a tiny bit, and I started experimenting with images that might work for a children's book. But it took another few years before I actually got started.

I continued with my freelance photographic work. One day I was delivering a portrait of my father to Sarah Hayes, then PR at Gollancz, for a biography of my grandfather that he had written, and we somehow got talking about children's books. She suggested I visit her mother, Mami Hodgkin, the Children's Editor at Macmillan. I took along an idea I had been working on

about a little circus elephant. Mami liked it, but the story needed more work. I went back three times but never succeeded in getting it right. However, she offered me a job, illustrating *Wishing Gold* by Robert Nye. That was in 1970. (And later I jumped at the chance to illustrate Sarah Hayes' first Bear book, *This is the Bear*, 1986. We had no idea that it would run into a four-book series, still going strong.)

I didn't start illustrating until I was thirty-six. Between 1970 and 1972 I did three books for Macmillan, none of them in full colour. Then a long gap before I made an attempt to get started again, with a little alphabet of mice in the form of a concertina in a box, published in 1978. The first of four, this led to the first Angelina book, in 1983, *Angelina Ballerina*.

I sometimes find it hard to believe Angelina's success. Katharine Holabird, the author, and I consider ourselves so lucky that the little dancing mouse is still around and it is such a pleasure to hear how much children love her. When we did the first book, we had no thought of more to come. I just enjoyed myself inventing the character and the world she lived in. I even made floor plans and elevations of the various rooms from different vantage points in her cottage, so that I would always have the backgrounds right wherever I set the picture. I'm still using those plans. I set the story in my own cottage, with candlelight and oil lamps, back in a time when things were more homemade and simpler, but with plenty



Philippa Pearce – Photo by Helen Craig

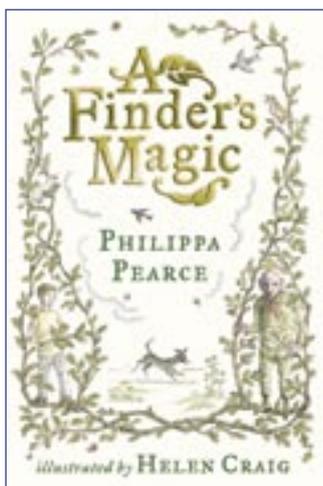
of detail – it takes at least nine months to illustrate each book – for the children to ponder.

Likewise, when I did *The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse* [a retelling of Aesop’s fable, short-listed for the Smarties Prize 1992], what attracted me most were the elements of contrast, the tiny mice living alongside humans, who are the giants. As a child I loved anything miniature. I liked the idea that the mice had their own world, hidden from the humans.

In 2005, I moved to Great Shelford, near Cambridge, where Philippa Pearce lived, to be nearer the grandsons, and I feel she taught me how to be a grandmother. To have been lucky enough to have met Philippa is one thing, to share the experience of being grandmothers together, and to get on as well as we did, was just wonderful. We had some good times together. Early on we both said we wanted to see the Grand Canyon and so we made the trip together, staying overnight in two log cabins, so that we could get up early to see the sun rise and, later, watch it set. It was very special.

We often used to talk about how nice it would be to do a book together for Nat and Will, our grandsons. I had done a doodle of an odd little man and Philippa asked if she could keep it, as she felt she might work up a story around him. We didn’t discuss the content, although I remember she asked me what I enjoyed illustrating and I told her that I liked it when there was an element of the magical and fantastic co-existing with normal reality.

I think I asked her once how the story was coming on and she made it quite clear that I *shouldn’t*, so I didn’t bother her anymore. Finally, in July 2006, when I thought that perhaps she had decided not to write anything, she asked me to come round to tea and presented me with the final copy of *A Finder’s Magic*. This was so exciting because, in a way, I had stopped expecting anything. I did a few sketches of Finder and we discussed him a bit but,



of course, the great sadness is that Philippa died before the work had really got under way.

I love the story. It is a wonderful mix of emotions and ideas: the boy who is broken-hearted at losing his beloved dog, the excitement and the fun of the different characters that help towards finding her again. And I enjoyed all the veiled references to places and people that only we – and the grandsons – would know. It is so superbly crafted. Like all of Philippa’s work there is nothing superfluous in it. So I felt it a great responsibility to complement this. (Ben Norland*, my son, who was the designer on the book, encouraged me to do the pencil sketches and to leave them in a ‘rough’ state, which is something I had never done before. We worked well together and we both felt that great responsibility to make the book as good as we possibly could.)

It’s interesting that she never actually describes the Finder – she told me that she didn’t want to – but simply writes that he was ‘an odd-looking little old man, hardly bigger than himself, and dressed all anyhow.’ This, of course, is just fantastic for an illustrator, as it gives them all they need – and such freedom. But the real character of Finder is in Philippa’s words. We used to walk around the meadow and talk generally about the story, but I don’t think she would ever have been dictatorial about the pictures, because she saw the book as a real collaboration between us.

Many of Philippa’s stories, including *A Finder’s Magic*, are based on her immediate surroundings. I have done the same with the illustrations, as I think she expected. The dog is a portrait of our grandsons’ dog, Nelly. The trees and the meadow and river are close to the meadow by her house that Philippa walked around every day. The two Miss Gammers, I suppose, represent us two grannies, but I deliberately made them quite different from Philippa and me. She always maintained that they were not actually us.

It takes me a while to get used to any finished book that I do. To begin with all I can see are things that I would like to change. But I am pleased with this one and just hope that Philippa would have liked it too. It has been such an honour and a real pleasure. And I feel so lucky, as I don’t think I would have ever met Philippa if it hadn’t been for the coming together of our children. Then, on top of it all, to be co-grannies, as we used to call ourselves, was just lovely! Yes, it did make *A Finder’s Magic* extremely special to do.

* See Carousel No. 34

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