

All we want for Christmas is a box of beautiful books illustrated by

P J Lynch

P J Lynch's considerable reputation as a distinguished Irish artist might almost be intimidating so there is something reassuring in his description of himself as a child, lying on the floor, always drawing. New shirts brought a special delight in the large expanse of white card that they always came with. Something else to draw on. His mother was encouraging. Everything he did was brilliant, she said, and it seems likely that it actually was. Now, he paints portraits, murals, theatre and opera posters, has designed his country's stamps several times and, of course, there is the growing number of award winning books he has illustrated. Now, Ireland has recognised his contribution by nominating him for the Hans Christian Andersen Award.



His illustrations are full of real faces, feelings and shifts of light which give the impression of an artist who draws upon the traditional while exercising a moving, exploratory intelligence. He uses models in a painterly way, but also makes use of stills photography. He does not rely on photographs because he is not interested in the detail. Photographs are not enough, he says. He uses computers which he finds useful for his roughs and adjustments. He says, however, that the best of his composition comes in his thumbnail sketches. He speaks of the artist using new methods to further study and relates this to the use of optical devices in the past, like Leonardo's curved mirror. He seems to be someone who does not reject tradition but has found new ways to work.

He was the first from his school to want to do art so they steered him into areas they were more familiar with, like architecture. His parents, however, were right again when they said, "Do what you really want." He wanted to paint pictures, his interests were traditional and that was what he expected to do. He looked around for an art college and was not sorry to have some respite from the troubled Belfast he lived in at the time. He went to Brighton and was apparently dazzled by the place. He thinks the attraction was the seaside. During his Foundation Year he had tried out everything – photography, graphics – but at Brighton, painting seemed to be entirely expressionistic. There was the Life Room but none of that seemed to carry over into the Painting Department. Fortunately for us, he discovered the Illustration Department.

PJ, as everyone refers to him (and everyone seems to know him), is established. His early books were often illustrations for fairy tales, like *East o' the Sun and West o' the Moon* and *Favourite Fairy Tales*. The pages are full of richly coloured textiles, Rackham-like trees, mysterious landscapes and, right from the beginning, recognisable people.

Teachers and interested parents would find it rewarding to share with children the CD which comes with *The Bee Man of Orn*. PJ takes us through the creation of the book from initial study of the text to the finished paintings. It gives a good insight into the long process, starting with days of pencil sketching, the transfer of the sketch to water colour paper, the washes with a sponge, the fine detailing with tiny brushes and the highlighting with gouache. He speaks of making all the "hard decisions" in the drawing stage and



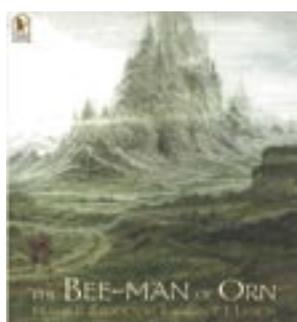
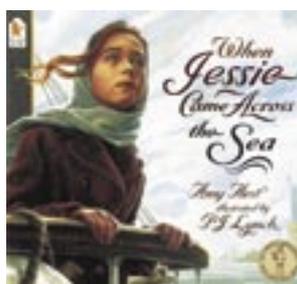
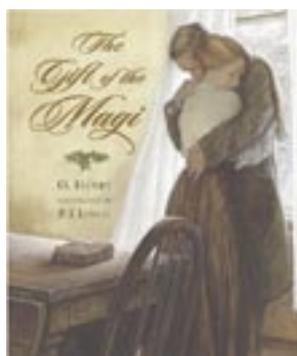
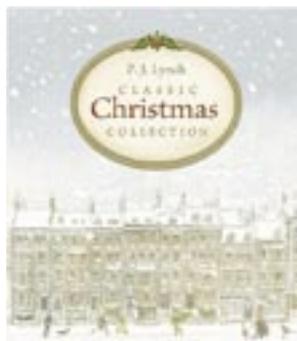
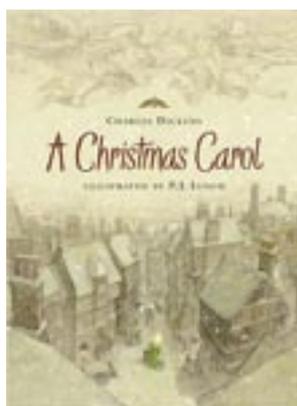
then the pure pleasure of the painting which may take months. Children will be deeply impressed by the *whole drawer full* of pencil sharpenings (you may, indeed, have to hide this enticing detail from some children) but it speaks of hours of preparatory work. The finished book is a tale, written with sly humour by R. Stockton, of bravery and adventure. The landscape has depth, drawing us into the mountains where a dragon guards a stolen child. The old Bee Man is equal to his ghastly foe and returns in triumph with the baby to his honey-coloured home among his beloved bees. There is a skilful use of light in his pictures,

Illustration from *East O' the Sun and West O' the Moon*.

whether it comes from a window or a candle, concentrating our attention on the characters illuminated. There are lighted doorways shining out in the darkness. Underground caverns dangerously shaded and then brilliant in the light of a dragon's fire. In *When Jessie Came Across the Sea*, a Greenaway Medal winner, there are wonderful weather spreads and depictions of the light playing across the wild ocean. Always these add to the emotional atmosphere of the story.

This is an artist who is attentive to the text. He says he would not expect his illustrations to be the servant of the text but he respects it and always returns to it. In fact, text and illustration work in partnership to an extraordinary degree. This is touchingly evident in *The Christmas Miracle of Jonathan Toomey*. This book has won at least four awards, including the Greenaway. "The village children called him Mr Gloomy. But in fact, his name was Toomey." No one knows of the wood carver's private tragedy, the death of his wife and child. The Widow McDowell calls with her young son, Thomas, to commission a set of Nativity figures for Christmas. Thomas, however, wants to watch the process and insists on turning up in the cottage, much to Toomey's annoyance. The boy is tolerated and gradually becomes involved in the work. By Christmas, the work is done and Toomey has been gently drawn back into the world of hope and feeling. It is a moving story of a man's gradual recovery from grief. What is striking is the way in which the emotional pacing of the pictures moves step by step with the text, shown delicately by an expression, the stance of a character or by physical proximity, until on Christmas Day we see Toomey and the boy and his mother hand in hand. If you need a Christmas present, look no further.

PJ seems to have a special talent for Christmas. For older readers, there is O. Henry's story *The Gift of the Magi*, set in a snowy New York. In a drab, 1920s flat, many floors up, a poor young couple both make a sacrifice to give each other a gift at Christmas. He sells his watch to buy her the set of combs she covets. Alas, she has sold her hair to buy a silver watch chain. Outside, snow swirls on the roofs; inside, the domestic detail is precise: an iron stove, a damp hall, peeling wallpaper, meagre furniture in period. As in his other work, the pictures are thoroughly referenced. The twist in the story which reveals that the sacrifices have been misplaced can be



traced in the faces of the characters but the last view of the young couple from far below, through a lighted window, leaves us in no doubt that the real gift was love.

The ultimate Christmas book is surely *A Christmas Carol*. (PJ's version appears this Christmas in a special, very Christmassy, boxed gift – the perfect present for a family.) He has had the great good fortune to be allowed the unabridged text. The illustrations are everywhere, across a double spread, sneaking off the edge, lining the sides and, a nice traditional touch, in full page pictures bordered with chains and holly. He tells the story of walking through a graveyard in Brighton and noting on a headstone that one, Ebenezer Robbins, had died on Christmas Day, 1842. He later discovered that Dickens had visited Brighton in 1842 or 1843 and he wonders if he had seen the grave or someone had told him of it. He does know that Dickens had once approached an Irish doctor called Marley at a party and had vowed to put him in a book. He always wanted to illustrate the book and had four pictures in a portfolio until, at last, his editor at Walker saw them and suggested that he should go ahead – only with many more pictures. The result is a handsome, colourful volume, rich in detail and atmosphere, whether in the London streets or in the presence of the Spirits of Christmas.

There is scope for all PJ's many talents in this book. One feels the opportunity to illustrate *A Christmas Carol* must have been as great a gift to PJ Lynch, illustrator extraordinary, as the book will be to families everywhere this Christmas.

Pat Thomson

Published by Walker Books:

Favourite Fairy Tales by Sarah Hayes
ISBN: 0-744569568

East O' the Sun and West O' the Moon
ISBN: 1-844284980

The Bee Man of Orn by R. Stockton
ISBN: 978-1844285068

When Jessie Came Across the Sea by Amy Hest
ISBN: 978-0744569636

The Christmas Miracle of Jonathan Toomey by Susan Wojciechowski ISBN: 978-1406310405 (First published as *The Christmas Miracle of Jonathan Twoomey*.)

The Gift of the Magi by O. Henry
ISBN: 978-1844280384

A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens
ISBN: 978-1406311488

Boxed set of the 3 Christmas books
ISBN: 978-1406321159