



Authorgraph 237: Adam Stower

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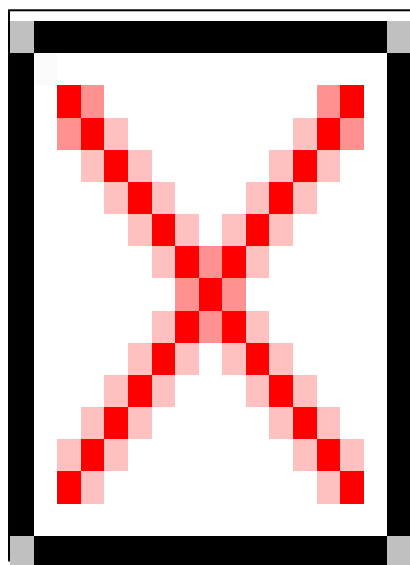
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Adam Stower interviewed by **Michelle Pauli**

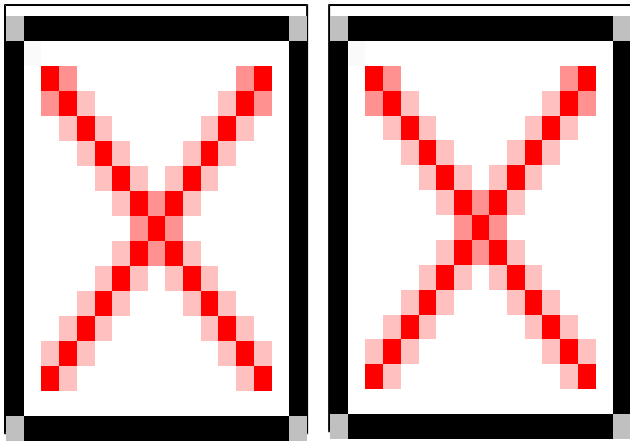
Adam Stower interviewed by Michelle Pauli



A busy summer lies ahead for Adam Stower. There's publicity to do for the recently published second book in his **King Coo** series, **The Curse of the Mummy's Gold**, then there's the third **King Coo** book to write for publisher David Fickling by the autumn, a new picture book for Andersen Press due in the same timeframe, plus the launch of the 'Rocket family' characters he has created for this year's **Summer Reading Challenge**.

However, sitting in the corner of a shared studio space in Brighton he has worked in for more than 20 years, surrounded by bulging sketchbooks, shelves packed with picture books and piles of work in progress, he seems remarkably relaxed.

The success of **King Coo**, his marvellous madcap adventure series, is clearly a joy and a relief. The highly illustrated chapter books are filled with an exhilarating mix of text, full page pictures, visual gags, graphic novel panels and hilarious annotated character portraits, using Stower's experience as a picture book author and illustrator to bring together words and pictures and make them much more than the sum of their parts.



The books feature an appealingly anxious little boy called Ben Pole and the brilliant eponymous King Coo, a fearless girl with a beard who lives in a treehouse in the woods with a wombat called Herbert. There she invents ingenious contraptions – the Cow-Pat-a-Pult is a masterpiece – and saves the day from bullies, crooked mayors and, in book two, the ‘Midnight Mob’ band of burglars.

At the heart of her character is an air of mystery – who is she? Why is she there? And does she *really* have a beard?

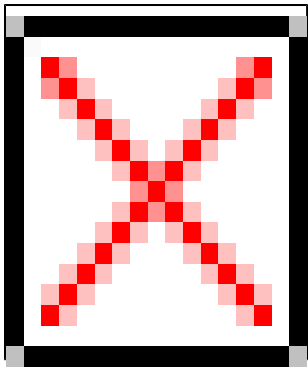
For Stower this element of mystery is central to the books, helping the reader to invest in the characters. He explains, ‘There’s an excitement in all the potential and possibilities. If you give a child a ball, they’ve got the ball and they are probably quite happy to have the ball. But if you throw it to them and they have to catch it, suddenly it becomes much more exciting and much more of a joint effort. That’s what I like to do with the characters in my books. I’ll offer up certain things and have the reader meet me halfway on aspects.’ It also helps to keep the character fresh for him, as he claims to not know himself what Coo’s origins are or if, indeed, her beard is real. Plus, of course, ‘Coo’s rather extraordinary characteristics are great to draw!’

While nothing about the Coo books might, at first sight, appear particularly likely to be autobiographical, Stower drew heavily on a range of childhood memories and influences. Coo herself was partly inspired by Pippi Longstocking, Stig of the Dump and elements of Scooby Doo, all of which he enjoyed as a child, along with the ‘wild man in the woods’ episode of **Hancock’s Half Hour**. His early life was spent in Switzerland, thanks to his father’s job, in a small village on the edge of Lake Zurich. He and his brother enjoyed the kind of free-range childhoods, filled with freedom to roam wild, remembered fondly by those of us who grew up in the 70s. ‘I think King Coo is a kind of encapsulation of all of that sort of joy of playing outside and building dens and treehouses in the forest in those long summer holidays,’ he says. He was also surrounded by books, due to his mother’s job as a librarian, and drew constantly.

Less idyllic were his years as a boarder from the age of nine at a school in Norfolk, steeped in boarding school traditions of ex-army teachers, power-mad prefects and the ‘fagging system’. However, it has provided a rich seam of grotesque, Dahl-esque characters for his books, from Monty Grabbe, the school bully who terrorises Ben Pole, to dastardly Professor Pickering, who sports a false eye made from a ping pong ball with a dot drawn on it.

While Stower is an established picture book author/illustrator, with seven titles of his own and numerous collaborations under his belt, writing **King Coo** was a departure for him and not always an easy one.

‘I’ve learned so much,’ he says. ‘I found the first book difficult because I was so fresh to it and trying to find my own voice and my way of writing. I was always so used to distilling ideas into text for picture books and suddenly I had all this space and so I went massively over word count. My editor just said, ‘everything you write has to move the story forward’. That was such good advice because it stopped me spending half a page describing someone’s shoes. By the second book I found that I learned certain lessons which really helped speed the process up.’



Stower's illustration has always had a strong narrative quality, from his first picture book **Two Left Feet** in 2004. His favourites are the award-winning **Silly Doggy** (2011), the truly delightful tale of a small child, Lily, who finds a bear in her garden and decides it's a dog ('one morning Lily saw something wonderful in the garden. It was big brown and hairy with four legs, a tail and a big wet nose and Lily had always wanted one?'), and **Troll and the Oliver** (2013). Of the latter, he says that the 'CHOMP!' towards the end is 'one of my proudest moments in picture books'. Much of the joy of the books lie in the combination of Stower's fluid line drawn illustrative style and the twists in the tail of the narrative, a common characteristic of his work.

He has also illustrated numerous other picture books, including **Bottoms Up**, written by Jeanne Willis, which won the **Red House Children's Book Award** and the sequel, **Sing a Song of Bottoms** which was shortlisted for the **Early Years Award**. Other artwork includes illustrating Timothy Knapman's **Mungo** adventures and creating cover artworks for Gareth P Jones.

It's a packed career that began as soon as he graduated from Brighton University with an MA in illustration, following a first class degree from Norwich School of Art. Picking up any work he could get, from government leaflets on obesity to maths textbooks ('brief: draw a jar full of 147 buttons and make it look interesting?') was a 'great apprenticeship in illustration', he says. After being asked to illustrate some Shakespeare stories for a textbook he realised that fiction was what he most loved to illustrate and gradually began to be offered more stories and fewer government information leaflets.

Like one of his heroes, Chris Riddell, he is passionate about the value of learning to draw and sketches constantly (and impressively 'it's a treat to have the chance to flick through his sketchbooks and see how he captures a personality in a few lines while people-watching in cafes). It all feeds into the work.

'When you're coming to illustrating from your imagination, you want your character to be able to perform whatever task you set them,' he explains. 'I think of it like theatre with a picture book, because you're doing the set design, the lighting ' these are all considerations and a lot of them happen as second nature, but, really, you populate the scene and your cast tell the story for you. And so your cast has to be able to perform everything the story demands of them.'

Michelle Pauliis is a freelance writer and editor specialising in books and education. She created and edited the Guardian children's books site.

King Coo The Curse of the Mummy's Gold, David Fickling Books, 978-1788450522, £6.99

Bottoms Up, Jeanne Willis, illus Adam Stower,

Sing a Song of Bottoms, Jeanne Willis, illus Adam Stower, Puffin, 978-0141328805, £6.99 pbk

Two Left Feet, Bloomsbury, 978-0747571438

Silly Doggy, Templar, 978-1848774520, £6.99

Troll and the Oliver, Templar, 978-1848771734, £7.99

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