



Authorgraph No.12 - Russell Hoban

[12](#) [1]

Article Category:

Authorgraph

Byline:

Russell Hoban interviewed by **Pat Triggs**.

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There's a stillness about Russell Hoban which draws you in and makes you want to know more about him. His character seems to be a mixture of reserve, gentle humour and reflection, so that when you talk to him you feel as if you're watching the surface of a swiftly flowing river. From a distance it appears to be motionless, reflective. Closer in, you can see the strong current, but however close you look, you know you'll never get to the bottom. Unless you fall in.

Last year saw the publication of his fiftieth book. Appropriately enough for such a milestone, it was that haunting modern fable, **The Serpent Tower**, a book deeply imbued with a feeling for the way children see the world, and plugged in to the magic of number, symmetry and words. Most of his books - 46 in fact - have been children's titles, and it's only in recent years that he has begun to write novels for adults. But the same strength is apparent in both his children's and his adult books. In many ways, the soul that sits inside Russell Hoban's head, staring out through the skull's eyeholes, knows two things. First, the way children think; and second, that every adult is still a child, only dressed in grown-up clothes.

The stillness of non-being passed into motion for Russell Hoban when he was born in Lansdale, Pennsylvania in 1925. He began to display talent at an early age. 'I drew well from the age of five, and it was always assumed that I was going to be some kind of visual artist.' However, he didn't go straight to art school. He did five weeks at university first before transferring, only to be swept up into the United States Army and the second world war a year and a half later.

'After getting out of the army I painted in a desultory way, and I had a whole lot of jobs before I settled down.' His jobs included working for small magazines and in advertising, and five years as a television art director. He eventually settled down to being a freelance illustrator.

'It was during my time in advertising that I learned the discipline to become a freelance, but my careers kind of overlapped. It was while I was a freelance illustrator that I began to write children's books.'

It was in 1959 that his first children's book, a non-fiction title called **What Does It Do and How Does It Work?** appeared. 'There was a time when I was concentrating on drawing construction machines, and some friends saw some of my drawings and said they thought they would make a good children's book.' An introduction to the children's book department at Harper and Row in New York through another friend followed, and Russell Hoban the published author was born - he produced both text and pictures for the book.

'After that it just happened that having become a published author I naturally went on writing books.' Another non-fiction title followed, and then his first story book - **Bedtime for Frances**. 'I don't know how it happened, I just started writing about the things children come up with.'

After the first three books he began to concentrate on writing while his first wife Lillian - with whom he had four children - drew the pictures. He, meanwhile, continued his career as an illustrator in other fields, but with growing disenchantment.

'Around 1965 I didn't want to be an illustrator any more because I felt that I wasn't temperamentally suited to it. I wanted to put more into every assignment than was appropriate to the job. I used to say that I never made more than 50 cents an hour, because if I was given 5,000 dollars for a job I'd put in 10,000 hours.'

'I pretty well gave up illustration then, but most big career decisions aren't straight decisions so I really just changed my way of acting and, I found out later on, that I had made a decision. I just went round with my portfolio less and less and the phone rang less and less too.'

So in 1965, to confirm the new direction of his career, he took a job as a copywriter for the famous advertising agency Doyle, Dane and Bernbach. 'I was there from 1965 to 1967, by which time there were enough royalties coming in from the children's books to allow me to become a full-time writer.'

Apart from the royalties reaching the right level in that year, 1967 was also the year in which **The Mouse and his Child** was published. He began writing the book in October 1963, and the four years which it took to finish straddled his careers as illustrator and advertising copywriter. He still has the toy which inspired him to write the book - and it still works.

'It just happened that I became preoccupied with a particular toy. There's a lot of pathos in the way they look and the way they move, and having first seen it in a collection of toys under a friend's Christmas tree, I found that the Mouse and his Child stayed in my mind. There seemed to be a story there that wanted to be put down.'

At first he thought it would make a slightly longer book than the picture books he was doing. 'But it kept on getting longer and longer, and by degrees it became a novel-length story.' He sent his editor, Ferd Monjo, at Harper and Row each chapter as he finished it, and believes his help was vital in his progress as a writer.

'It was with his coaching that I began to be able to explore the material of a story idea and just stay with it until it got to where it wanted to go. It seems a simple thing, just common sense, but it isn't that easy to get into the material-exploring habit. At first you tend to want certain things to happen and you try to make your story go that way. It takes some discipline to have the patience to look at everything and see what's there - and let the story go the way it wants to go, which might not be the way you want.'

It's interesting that he never actually thought of **The Mouse and his Child** as a children's book. 'I thought I was writing an adult's book at the time. It was simply as much as I could write with all of the resources I could command. There were no concessions made to vocabulary or level of comprehension, and I didn't attempt to sell it as an adult book because I didn't think anybody would publish an adult novel about a clockwork mouse.' It was, in fact, his connection with the children's department of Harper and Row which led to it being published as a children's book.

For the last 12 years Russell Hoban has been living in London, and he explains his transatlantic migration quite simply. 'It's a curious kind of thing, but I had always liked English writers and I had always assumed that some time in my life I would spend some time in this country.'

'After writing **The Mouse and his Child** I thought, well, now I've written a novel I'll just go on writing novels, but I didn't have an idea for a novel-length story for a long time. So I thought, well, now's a good time to have a couple of years in London.'

Two things happened in London which changed his life completely. One was the break-up of his first marriage, and the second was a new development in his writing. 'What happened was that London became the transition joint for me from children's books into adult novels. After I broke up with my first wife I hurled myself headlong into adult fiction, and ever since then that's what I've been doing. When a place is a place where the really big events of your life happen, you and that place have something between you from then on.'

Another event which changed his life was his marriage to Gundula Ahl, and the birth of three more children. Readers of the two books he did with Colin McNaughton last year - **They Came From Aargh!** and **The Great Fruit Gum Robbery**

- would recognise Jake, Ben and Wieland immediately. Things seem to have come together for Russell Hoban in every way in recent years. His adult books - **The Lion of Boaz-Jachin and Jachin-Boaz**, **Kleinzeit**, **Turtle Diary** and **Riddley Walker** - have all been received very well, as have his latest children's books, and there's a lot of interplay between them and his daily life as the father of three small children. One way of describing **The Mouse and his Child** could be that it's a book about finding a place to be. Russell Hoban has found his place, both physically and metaphorically.

'I've often heard people say that every artist has a particular theme which he goes through over and over again, and I suppose my theme has to do with placing the self, finding a place, and in one way or another all my characters in all of my books go through it.'

'I'm also a firm believer that if we pay attention to kids we can see in them some fundamental states of being that we get conditioned out of as we get older. I'm reminded of watching Jake when he was little with a toy. Gundula's German, and the kids are bilingual, and when he was little Jake would sometimes break a toy - make it **kaput** - and ask me to make it **heil** - whole again.'

'It began gradually to impress itself on me that **kaput** was not necessarily less good for him than **heil** was. It was just another state of things. I think that our need to impose order, to keep things whole, is often fear-motivated. It's a kind of holding on, we're afraid to be carried along on this one-way trip and we cherish the delusion that if only we can make everything tidy perhaps there will be a return somehow.'

In **Turtle Diary**, one of the adult characters - Neaera, a children's writer - says that we're telling kids continually 'this is the way to be' and we're afraid that one day they'll say there isn't *any* way to be. And in **Riddley Walker**, his last novel, a haunting story set in Kent, thousands of years after a nuclear holocaust has totally destroyed civilisation 'as we know it', a key phrase is the '1 Big 1', which stands variously for the nuclear bomb itself and also the unity of all that there is in the universe, a unity of which we are all fragments.

'This being my second family, and this being a new life violently distinct from the old life, I'm noticing things in a different way and taking them in a different way. Having these kids around me, I'm aware all of the time that they are closer to the 1 Big 1 than I am. They're closer to the unity in which there is multiplicity, and I get a lot out of their being and their doing. With all of them at different times and in different ways I'm getting fresh reinforcement for continually opening perception and being open to what I'm receiving.'

Russell Hoban is a man who chooses his words - both in conversation and print - very carefully. **Riddley Walker** took him five and a half years to write, and he's currently working on a new adult novel set in the period of the first crusade, for which he has to do much arduous research - which he doesn't enjoy. Writing books like **They Came from Aargh!**, **The Dancing Tigers** and **Ace Dragon Ltd** come, he says, as something of a relaxation in the course of his deeply committed - and very philosophical - work on his novels. 'They're also a bit more like poetry. The work I do might only take a day or a week, but it's very concentrated, very intense.'

In the meantime he sits at a desk in the bay window of his Fulham house, looking out on to a park and a children's playground, surrounded by short wave radio equipment on which he tunes in to radio stations all over the world. 'I suppose what I'm really writing about in the end is the surpassing strangeness of being alive. And the older I get the more I get to believe that you just have to let go and tune into the vibrations around you in whatever you do.'

Russell Hoban books

Children's

The Serpent Tower Methuen/Walker, 0 416 05600 8, £4.50

The Mouse and his Child Faber, 0 571 08844 9, £3.25 Puffin, 0 14 03.0841 5, 95p

They Came From Aargh! Methuen/Walker, 0 416 05840 X, £2.95

The Great Fruit Gum Robbery Methuen/Walker, 0 416 05790 X, £2.95

Flat Cat Methuen/Walker, 0 416 89960 9, £3.50

Arthur's New Power Gollancz, 0 575 02835 1, £3.50

A Near Thing for Captain Najork Cape, 0 224 01197 9, £3.50

The Twenty-Elephant Restaurant Cape, 0 224 01707 1, £2.95

Ace Dragon Ltd Cape, 0 224 01706 3, £3.25

The Dancing Tigers Cape, 0 224 01374 2, £2.95

Harvey's Hideout Cape, 0 224 00957 5, £2.50

Crocodile and Pierrot Cape, 0 224 01172 3, £3.50

La Corona and the Tin Frog Cape, 0 224 01397 1, £3.50

The Mole Family's Christmas Cape, 0 224 00958 3, £2.50

Adult

Kleinzeit Cape, 0 224 00964 8, £5.95

The Lion of Boaz-Jachin and Jachin-Boaz Cape, 0 224 00831 5, £5.95 Picador, 0 330 24160 5, £1.25

Turtle Diary Cape, 0 224 01085 9, £5.95 Picador, 0 330 25050 7, £1.00

Riddley Walker Cape, 0 224 01851 5, £5.95 Picador, 0 330 26645 4, £1.95

Page Number:

16

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