



Authorgraph No.158: Simon Bartram

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Simon Bartram interviewed by **Martin Salisbury**.

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It's not a particularly good time to be a season ticket holder at Sunderland Football Club just now. Indeed, short of a miraculous change of fortune, by the time these words appear in print Simon Bartram's beloved team are likely to be waving goodbye to their brief Premiership status. But this particular Mackem's naturally cheery demeanour is boosted by a rare win for the Reds that precedes our Tyneside meeting on a chilly Sunday morning.

The resemblance of illustrators to their characters is something of a cliché, but it is hard to avoid the sensation of being in the presence of a combination of Bob (the Man on the Moon) and Dougal (keeper of the Deep-Sea Diary) as Simon bowls up, all animated long limbs and fingers, offering a genial handshake. This is one of the most outstanding artist/authors to emerge on the children's book scene in recent years. His work is characterised by exceptionally secure draughtsmanship and a distinctive, richly harmonious colour palette that serve an affectionate and perhaps very British sense of the absurd. A partnership with the publisher, Templar (and in particular designer, Mike Jolly), whose commitment to high quality design and production has had a noticeable knock-on effect on the UK market, has led to a series of picture books that are both aesthetically beautiful and highly popular with children and parents.

'I always wanted to 'do art', he tells me as we discuss the origins of Simon's work, 'but I didn't really know how to go about it in terms of a career. I just wanted to draw.' As a child, he had been an avid consumer of comics. 'Roy of the Rovers was one of my favourites and one of the first artists whose names registered with me was 'Schiaffino' who drew 'Hotshot Hamish'.'

He studied at Birmingham Polytechnic, graduating with a First in illustration in 1990, having come through a Graphic Design route. As is often the case in broad Visual Communication programmes, a minority of students became involved in illustration. 'I went to as many extra evening classes in life-drawing as I could,' he says. This has served him well and, though most of his imagery now flows directly from the imagination, the discipline of observation has proved an important underpinning process to his work. His approach to painting is also well informed by an eclectic range of interests and influences. He looked at the Dutch school, Jan van Eyck for instance, and by contrast, the richness of Caravaggio. Among the more recent figurative painters whose work he particularly enjoys are Stanley Spencer, Peter Blake and the Glasgow artist, Peter Howson, all of them sharing his love of paint, colour, surface and the graphic power of the human figure. He left art school though with 'little idea' of what he was doing he says, 'but I picked up a few commissions to do book jackets and various editorial illustrations.' He moved down south for a while, picking up further commissions including several from that great champion of illustration, Alison Pincott, then art director at the **Evening Standard's** 'ES' magazine. But the 'one-off' editorial image could not compete with the book as the appropriate outlet for Simon Bartram's talents. In 1999 he was nominated for the Mother Goose Award for his **Pinocchio**

(adapted by Jane Fior for Dorling Kindersley). The book was awarded second prize, helping to raise awareness of Simon's work, but it was running into the team from Templar at the awards ceremony that influenced the course of his career profoundly, leading to an ongoing, highly productive collaboration. "When you put so much into a painting, you always worry about seeing it come back poorly reproduced, or designed. That's never a problem with Templar, they care as much as I do about these things," he explains.

I asked Simon about writing. Was it something he always knew he could do? "It just came about as a way of drawing what I wanted to draw really," he told me. This process has seen a highly individual voice emerge, a synthesis of words and pictures that celebrates the everyday, often by putting a sort of heroic ordinariness into extraordinary surroundings. In **Man on the Moon (a day in the life of Bob)**, the "décalage" between words and pictures is particularly acute, never failing to delight children. While the verbal text examines Bob's suburban preoccupation with his commuting routine, his timekeeping, details of the contents of his lunchbox, his certainty that there are no such thing as aliens and so on, the pictorial text is awash with evidence of more exotic goings-on. I have seen the unfailing delight that this brings to children as they insistently try to bring these things to Bob's or the reader's attention in true pantomime fashion. When Simon does school visits he particularly enjoys doing the schoolmaster act; "I take a long stick and point to the picture saying things like, "I know for certain that there are no aliens in this picture because I painted it myself." As I move the stick around they all scream at me trying to get me to point to the aliens." The same theme runs through **Dougal's Deep-Sea Diary**, Mister Ordinary this time finding himself transported from the 7.45 train to Waterloo to the lost world of Atlantis. An elusive mermaid can occasionally be spotted lurking in the shadows. The author's natural enthusiasm and genuine bonhomie come through in the good humoured diary text; "12.30 pm Lunch" too excited to eat (almost!). Coming up with his own concepts and texts has clearly moved Simon Bartram's work on to a new level.

The earlier **Pumpkin Moon** (Tim Preston, 2001) showed what he is capable of, but was perhaps a little stifled by the need to direct the visual content so much toward the American Halloween market. His versatility was revealed through a more lyrical excursion with **A Winter's Tale** (Marcus Sedgwick, 2003), another beautifully designed Templar production using transparent vellum sheets dotted with snow to great effect.

But it is through his own writing that Simon's best work seems to emerge and the most recent Templar/Bartram production sees this aspect exploited to the full. **Watch Out for Sprouts! (poems, pictures, doodles and serious brain-thinking)** brings the contents of Simon's sketchbook to the pages of a book. As with many book artists, the sketchbook is the place where Simon's ideas, notes, doodles and musings germinate in words and pictures. Templar have given full reign to the "thoughts capering around his mind in an extremely likeable fashion", as it says on the dust jacket. The book breaks free from the 32-page picture book format into a chaotic 112 pages of extremely funny nonsense, in the form of poems, drawings and general mucking about. A sense of what's to come greets us within a couple of pages "a great big bloke in a Sunderland shirt bears down on us with:

Hands off Wordsworth

Keep away Byron

You write your own poems

"Cause this one's my one!

The book is a joy and had me in fits of laughter. Among the various philosophical offerings are "Know your sausages" and "Nine reasons to avoid sprouts". Of course the visual "chaos" is in fact the product of excellent design, the apparently hand-rendered type being a carefully selected font, printed in half tone to give the appearance of pencil. And it would not have been realistic for the author to complete a huge project like this with his usual intensely rendered approach to painting, so he has been able to work in a "looser" way "sketches and colour images using more transparent washes of paint. There is a well-considered colour scheme in the form of a preponderance of greenish yellow sproutiness offset by vivid reds. I get the impression that Simon is rightly proud of this book, and grateful to have been given such an opportunity to indulge himself (even to the extent of having the book's boards bound in red and white

Sunderland stripes!).

The labour intensive method of Simon's usual painting style, built up in painstaking layers of acrylic, means long hours in the studio and a considerable amount of stress in terms of deadlines. This is something he has had to learn to live with in order to achieve the richness and depth that characterises his work. He reveals that 'it's not unusual for me to be in the studio until three o'clock in the morning. I sometimes look at all the digitally generated work around and wonder 'should I be learning this?', but I think paint is my thing. I suppose I like getting my hands dirty.'

There are lots more projects in the pipeline, the famous sketchbook abounds with ideas including a book about football provisionally titled **Up for the Cup!** This sounds like another ideal vehicle for the Bartram treatment and will no doubt be liberally sprinkled with Sunderland heroes (smallest book in the world?? sorry). Simon tells me that 'As a kid I loved drawing footballers. I still do. These are the same drawings really but hopefully a bit better.' I am privileged to see a first painting from 'Up for the Cup'. It's a ruck of players climbing in a tangle of arms and legs, competing for a header. A heroically casual looking centre forward is languidly rising above the hapless defenders to glance a header into the net. He has barely a hair out of place, a self-satisfied smile on his face and the palms of his enormous hands are characteristically facing towards us. The image brings out all that is best in Simon's work, drawing on his interests in comics, in football and in a sort of gently heroic 1950s world. This is a real tour de force of a composition and one suspects that **Up for the Cup!** will be a labour of love for this footie mad artist. I for one can't wait to see it.

Chatting to Simon, the time seems to fly by. But I have a train to catch to head back south. We stroll off to Newcastle station, but decide to have a swifty in the cavernous bar, and end up putting the illustration world to rights. Eventually Simon heads off into town to stock up with liquitex acrylic paints. It'll be another long night in the studio (and a long season for Sunderland FC).

Martin Salisbury is an illustrator and is Course Director for the MA Children's Book Illustration programme at Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge. He is the author of **Illustrating Children's Books** (A & C Black 2004).

The Books

(from Templar Publishing)

Bob's 123 1 84011 462 2, £4.99 board

Bob's ABC 1 84011 457 6, £4.99 board

Bob's Big Activity Book 1 84011 492 4, £3.99 sticker book/pack

Dougal's Big Activity Book 1 84011 514 9, £3.99, sticker book/pack

An Exciting Week in Dougal's Deep-Sea Diary 1 84011 508 4, £10.99 hbk, 1 84011 509 2, £5.99 pbk and CD

Man on the Moon (a day in the life of Bob) 1 84011 445 2, £10.99 hbk, 1 84011 491 6, £5.99 pbk and CD

Pumpkin Moon Tim Preston, ill. Simon Bartram, 1 84011 105 4, £9.99 hbk, 1 84011 230 1, £5.99 pbk

Watch Out for Sprouts! 1 84011 368 5, £9.99 hbk (1 84011 388 X pbk, September 2006)

A Winter's Tale Marcus Sedgwick, ill. Simon Bartram, 1 84011 307 3, £9.99 hbk

Up for the Cup! 1 84011 383 9 (due in 2007)

Pinocchio (adapted by Jane Fior, Dorling Kindersley, 1999) and **Night and the Candlemaker** (Wolfgang Somary, Barefoot Books, 2000) are now out of print.



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