



Shirley Hughes: A Life Illustrating

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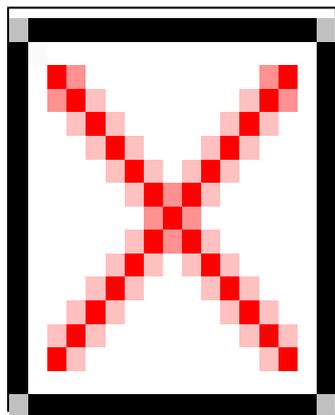
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Shirley Hughes interviewed by Catherine Swan.

Shirley Hughes: A life illustrating



In her memoir, **A Life Drawing: recollections of an illustrator**, Shirley Hughes quotes the gloomy advice a tutor once gave her: 'Book illustration work can only be undertaken as an adjunct to teaching or matrimony.' Her remarkable career proves just wrong he was. **Catherine Swan** finds out more.

It's hard to keep up with Shirley Hughes. At the age of 84 she has just written her first novel and her latest 'Alfie' picture book has published once again to critical acclaim. With sales of more than twelve million and over 50 published titles to her name, her commercial success speaks for itself. What stands out most, however, in her long career is just how popular she is with both young and old. She is universally praised and awarded for her craft and her innovation but more than anything, she is cherished by generations, as the creator of such perennial favourites as Alfie and Dogger.

As I arrive at her three-story terrace, armed with cakes and questions from my own children, I can see the landscape of Alfie's world. It's Notting Hill of course, trendy now and full of developers installing swimming pools in basements but you can still see where Alfie's community came from. I'm not sure if the milkman still waves, the neighbours help out as much or the children even play in those beautiful communal gardens any more, but the houses look the same. And as I walk up the steps to the front door, I think of Alfie. Getting in first!

The world of the small child

It was of course **Alfie Gets in First** that launched Shirley's most successful series of titles and is often held up as a classic example of her mastery of a page. How she uses the layout of the 32 page picture book format to subtly add to the pace of her story telling. Referred to by some as the split screen technique, her clever use of the gutter of the page to help position her characters and text is clearly illustrated in **Alfie Gets in First** where he remains on one side of the door/gutter and a cast of characters assemble on the other side to try and help him out of his crisis.

Shirley's warm West London welcome is notorious and I find myself ensconced in an armchair, commenting, like many before me, on the cosy, family feel of her home of nearly 60 years. It was here that she raised her own family and learnt how small children behave and of their day to day dramas. This must have helped her create such realistic, endearing and timeless characters but Shirley adds she has always been an observer. 'Just as to become a writer, you must first

become a reader, so becoming an illustrator is preceded by learning how to look. This is a point that Shirley comes back to time and time again. As a child, as an art student, as a mother, as an artist out in the park with her sketchbook, she was always looking. You have to learn how to look, it is a skill in life. Her daughter, Clara Vulliamy, now also writes and illustrates children's books.

Shirley's publisher and editor at Random House Children's Books Fiona Macmillan says of Shirley's keenly observed stories, She has a mastery of her technique that in my mind is unparalleled. Her drawing and attention to detail make the books such treasures you just have to keep them near to hand. She succeeds in creating a timeless and yet contemporary feel.

She has never stopped being interested in the world of the small child, adds Fiona. Shirley always watches and listens whether to the world of children around her or indeed with her own children and grandchildren. In a new book we are working on together she has come up with the most perfect and contemporary of solutions to what to give a five-year-old boy. Not yet published, we must all wait to see what that might be, but there is major agreement that part of Shirley's timeless appeal is how true she remains to what interests and matters to children. Joy Court, learning resources manager for Coventry City council and national coordinator for CILIP Carnegie and Kate Greenway Medals says of Shirley's work, She has a fantastically realistic palette of colours and a beautiful expression of nature. Her immaculate line and draughtsmanship combined with her innate sense of humour and terrific expression of all her characters, make her work immediately recognisable and relatable to children of any age.

Feeding the memory

Shirley Hughes was born in West Kirby and was the youngest of three daughters born to the founder of the Liverpool department store TJ Hughes. She says of her pre-television childhood interrupted by the Second World War, There was plenty of time to read, to draw, to dream or simply mooch about. Not content to frequent the local tennis club in search of a husband, Shirley trained at Liverpool School of Art and the Ruskin School of Drawing in Oxford. I had a good training in figure drawing, and life classes. I learnt that drawing is not only a training of hand and eye it is feeding your memory. So when you come to draw people without recourse to a model, as every illustrator must, you can recall the turn of a head or the way a forearm works and can conjure up a telling gesture or a fleeting movement.

Children's book consultant Kate Agnew says of this visual accuracy, She is a great observer; she sees how people really are. How children stand when nervous, how they reach out to each other, how a mother dances with her child, how a four year old boy sticks out his chin in protest her illustrations capture real life perfectly. Kate Agnew also comments on Shirley's appeal to parents as much as children and speaks with great affection of the level of anticipation before a Shirley Hughes signing at her Muswell Hill bookshop. She is so universally well liked and her books so consistently well received. She is hugely popular.

A mini theatre on the page

The best selling author of today is charmingly self-effacing. Sharp as a tack, with a twinkle in her eye that hints at a great sense of humour, she seems fairly no nonsense and unimpressed by celebrity fame and fortune, but admits that as a young girl she was rather star struck. Remember back then Liverpool was a great theatrical City and trips to the Playhouse or the Empire were eagerly anticipated. At home we were always acting out plays at home, to whoever would watch. As a result her early ambition was to be a set designer but a brief experience at the Birmingham Rep changed her mind. If you think about it, it's not that big a step from theatre to illustrating I am creating a mini theatre on the page, directing my cast of characters.

So it was illustration that Shirley finally turned to, and even then it was more by luck than design. Although looking back now I can say I always knew I would be an illustrator, at the Ruskin it was more of a case of I didn't want to be a fine artist. Early influences towards drawing came from the books of her childhood. She recalls the rich variety of visual styles, the skill in black and white line drawing which has rarely been rivalled in my own time the towering graphic talent of artists like William Nicholson, Ernest Shepard, W Heath Robinson and Edward Ardizzone. These four

are my great heroes.?

With her portfolio of drawings she moved to London and started doing the rounds looking for work. Slowly she was asked to illustrate other people's books, which was mostly black and white line drawing. ?I was very tentative about using colour then. It took a long time to acquire the expansive confidence you need to let go and let it flow across the page.?

Shirley's first significant commission as an illustrator came in the 1950s ? for republished editions of the **My Naughty Little Sister** books by Dorothy Edwards.

By the time she tried a children's book of her own, she had married the architect John Vulliamy, and had two small children. **Lucy and Tom's Day** was an unassuming little book about every day life with small children. And there, the winning formula was laid down. For it is this, more than anything else, that defines a Shirley Hughes book and has made her work so enduring and loved.

?Shirley holds a unique place in the world of children's literature in the UK,? confirms Fiona Macmillan. ?She has built an audience of loyal readers by not creating overcomplicated stories or characters, but rather ones who resonate with every reader. She has maintained this in her work consistently allowing generations of families to enjoy her stories and characters together.?

?She tackles perennial issues but subtly updates them for a new time,? agrees Kate Agnew. It is universally held that Shirley does real life brilliantly and these little everyday dramas are what appeals to her readers. To a four-year-old nothing is more important than getting your boots on the right feet or going to a party without your mum and working out what to do with your comfort blanket. ?Many, many generations of children have grown up making friends with the characters that they find in her books and have learnt valuable lessons about people and how the world and families work. Her characteristic pictures are full of life and warmth and incredible details,? says Joy Court.

Too English?

Lucy and Tom became a series that still evokes feelings of warmth and familiarity today. But it was a story about a much loved cuddly toy that went missing, turned up on a stall at the local school fete and was reunited with his heartbroken little owner, that is perhaps Shirley's greatest triumph and certainly elevated her to the forefront of children's book publishing. ?It's ironic really that I was consistently being told then that my books were too English, too full of local sports days and jumble sales to appeal outside this country and yet it was this most local and domestic of stories that turned out to be my launch pad onto the big stage,? says Shirley. ?**Dogger** is no doubt Shirley's most successful single title,? confirms Fiona Macmillan. It is individually her bestselling book; it won a Greenaway and then went on to win the Greenaway of Greenaways in 2007.

Joy Court explains this significance. ?The CILIP Kate Greenaway Medal is one of the oldest and most distinguished awards in the field of children's literature and one of the few that recognises outstanding illustration. When the Medal celebrated its 50th anniversary, as part of the celebrations a public vote was held to find the Greenaway of Greenaway's and very fittingly this was awarded to Shirley Hughes for her book **Dogger**.?

Alison Kelly from Roehampton University tells us, ?Shirley Hughes has a timeless appeal because she taps into childhood experiences with accuracy and authenticity. A book like **Dogger**, despite its considerable age, still has resonance for young readers because of the universality of its themes and the distinctive charm of the illustrations. True, the books reflect a particular cultural and class seam of society, but the characters outlive the era. Our students still bring **Dogger** with them to sessions where we share favourite childhood books.?

While **Dogger** remains her best selling title, the ?Alfie? series of books are arguably what Shirley Hughes is best known for. Ask many a child who their favourite character is and Alfie is usually the answer. Admittedly Alfie, alongside his sister Annie Rose features in a series of books which invites readers into the wider world of Alfie and his family and friends and builds on his overall success. But it is more the character of Alfie himself that Shirley created that is so well

loved. He is truly timeless, despite 30 years of publishing. 'I suspect that many teachers went into teaching because they wanted to work with children like Alfie - children inquisitive about the world and people, willing and wanting to experience things, loyal and loving but as mischievous and real as the boy next door,' says Joy Court.

Alfie is no hero, just an ordinary boy who experiences the complexities of life that children recognise. The 'Alfie' books are universal, simple stories told with great warmth, which give reassurance that it is all going to be ok. You can trust an Alfie story. Yet in addition, Shirley infuses a sense of adventure, an edge of excitement into everyday events. 'I want children, however small, and wherever they live in a town or the country, to use their eyes, to look out and see that it's ravishingly beautiful out there.' This passion, this belief that all children deserve a chance to read, to learn, to explore, to feel great joy and excitement has obviously always driven Shirley and is still strongly with her today.

It is evident in her passionate advocacy for the access for all to books through libraries. 'Shirley has been unstinting in the generosity with which she supports schools and libraries and she continues to demonstrate her belief that every child is entitled to the life chances that being able to read will give them. Her delightful books have themselves grown many lifelong readers by capturing them when they are young,' says Joy Court

Books for older readers

Indeed it leads us onto some of Shirley's other work, published for older children and intended to keep the joy of the picture book alive as children start reading for themselves. Here, even more than with small children, the competition from play stations and round the clock television is stronger and in looking to this market, Shirley could have set herself up for criticism that her work is not relevant in our technologically led modern day. She agrees that technology is seductive for children and that the window to captivate them with books first is getting smaller: 'This does make it tough for parents today but there has never been a golden age of parenthood, there are always pressures and I have always felt it was wrong to stop reading to children as soon as they learnt to do it themselves. And why stop all the pictures?' Shirley's urban-based series of 'Trotter Street' books contain great humour and warmth and certainly portray a less advantaged group of children while stories such as **The Lion and the Unicorn** and **Stories by Firelight** show how varied Shirley's work can be. These books encourage older children to read more about legends and myths, to seek out history and while they contain longer text panels, the visuals still add to the enjoyment of the story. Certainly all my three children read **The Lion and the Unicorn** in primary school when studying the Second World War and the evacuees. Shirley published her autobiography **A Life Drawing** in 2002 and received the Eleanor Farjeon Award for distinguished services to children's literature in 1984. In 1999 she was awarded an OBE.

And of course, at the grand age of 84 Shirley has just completed her first novel. Due for publication soon, it is a thriller for teenage children, set in Italy during the Second World War, and was started largely as a therapeutic exercise after the loss of her husband John Vulliamy. She says it helped and she enjoyed the process but is glad she became an illustrator rather than a novelist. 'It's rather cerebral, writing; I rather enjoy the satisfying feeling of squeezing out my colours onto a palette of a morning.'

And most mornings she is to be found, in her airy studio, overlooking the largely quiet now communal gardens, with paints in hand. Her talent and output remain undiminished by age and she still has much to do. She says of her hero Edward Ardizzone, 'His work is full of sentiment but never sentimentality - a tightrope which we all walk but on which he performed so sure-footedly and with such modesty and affection that there can hardly be an illustrator working today who does not feel his influence and salute him. No wonder I was seduced by the prospect of life drawing.' I wonder how many of our young illustrators of today will be saying the same about Shirley Hughes.

A selection of Shirley Hughes's books.

Lucy and Tom Go to School, Puffin, 978 0 1405 4415 2, £5.99 pbk

Alfie Gets in First, Red Fox, 978 1 8623 0783 4, £5.99 pbk

Dogger, Red Fox, 978 1 8623 0805 3, £5.99 pbk

Angel Mae (Tales from Trotter Street), Walker, 978 0 7445 6377 1, £4.50 pbk

The Lion and the Unicorn, Red Fox, 978 0 0992 5608 3, £8.99 pbk

Stories by Firelight, Red Fox, 978 0 0991 8611 3, £6.99 pbk

A Life Drawing, Bodley Head, 978 0 3703 2605 4, £19.99 hbk

Catherine Swan is a journalist.

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