



## Authorgraph No 37 ? Colin McNaughton

[37](#) [1]

Article Category:

Authorgraph

Byline:

**Colin McNaughton** interviewed by **Pat Triggs**.

<!--break-->

?The older I get the more I realise that my sense of humour is exactly the same as it was when I was four years old ? it hasn't changed at all!?

Which may explain how Colin McNaughton is right there with his young readers ? It was kids themselves who so quickly made **Football Crazy** a standard classic of humour and wish-fulfilment. He is admired and well-reviewed, but he has never been a fashionable darling of the critics, and he notes, somewhat ruefully, that his books are not ?award? books. On the Mother Goose panel for his fourth and last year, he has never won an award himself, yet there can be scarcely a child in the land who hasn't identified with his tumbling anthropomorphic animals and boisterous, chubby humans. And for someone who says drawing has never been easy (?always honing, honing, till eventually it comes right ? I'm so jealous of people who can just pick up a pen and draw, he?s done an awful lot of books.

Most of them are in colour. ?I love black and white work, but it?s difficult to make a living out of it ? you're expected to do a book for £100. Till recently artists have had a raw deal, and often been expected to do a picture book for £500: you're patted on the head and told to run away, sonny, for six months and live on £500. That?s what it was like for me till five years ago, when I met Sebastian Walker. What it means is you do things very quickly ? and end up with not very good, books. Then someone will come along who?s spent the last five years on a book, and of course it?s wonderful, and it sweeps the awards and everybody says what a wonderful illustrator this person is ? and you've done eight books that year because you *have* to. It can be a terribly frustrating business in that way: you knew all the time you weren't doing the kind of work you were capable of simply because you had to make a living, you had a family to keep (it?s different if you're on your own).

?The result is there,? pointing to his shelves, ?stacks and stacks of books with nice bits in them but... Ten years and 40 or 50 books ? crazy! ? should have been ten or 15 books to do the quality I'd like. This is the first year I've been able to sit down and do a picture book to the best of my ability without a deadline. It'll probably be awful, but ? !?

Although there were no books at all at home as he grew up (?I never read *The Iliad* at four or was weaned on Dickens?), there were always comics, and the Christmas annuals like **Beano** and **Dandy**: they were his formative literature and their knockabout slapstick has been a lasting influence. He was among the first to weld words and images on one page.

?I've been talking about the comic format for years, along with people like Shirley Hughes and Jan Pienkowski. It?s been rejected, looked down on, scorned, thought of as being cheap ? and now the case has been proved, with more and more work of that kind being commissioned. France has had a fantastic tradition of comic strips ? not only is it a wonderful way of telling stories but it?s the modern way for today?s children: it?s about movement, the step between film and the book.?

He speaks in the Geordie accent of his native Wallsend upon Tyne, though softened by 15 years of making allowances for Londoners. He was born in 1951, one of three children of a pattern maker, a highly skilled craftsman in the shipyards: the other two were normal people, he says, and there?s an extra spice to his present success because he used

to be the black sheep of the family.

‘I left home at 16 – my mother has it that she threw me out; I have it that I walked out – either way I must have been pretty obnoxious. But I took care to stay close by in Newcastle, and went home with my dirty washing for Sunday lunch.

‘Up there, if you had five O levels, it was art school or teachers’ training, otherwise your main chance of work was the shipyards, or ‘The Ministry’ as it’s called at Newcastle. I opted for technical college because it offered more freedom than the sixth form, but I even made a mess of getting in there – I’d applied wrongly and when I turned up for registration they’d never heard of me! I must have looked a real cartoon character, walking away, head down, weeping... So I got different jobs for a year, including six months as a sign writer before they realised I was left-handed – you’re not supposed to be able to write signs if you’re left-handed. It was in a high-class gentleman’s tailors, Isaak Walton’s – we used to get these elegant tuck boxes to paint boys’ names on.

‘How *do* you drift into certain areas? I was introduced at school to a Youth Theatre by one marvellous teacher (it was the only good thing about school – I *detested* school, hated it so much I’ve only recently been able to talk about it) and this led me into areas of artistic expression that were totally alien to my working class background and friends. Acting, costumes... Marvellous, absolutely marvellous if you’ve never known that kind of ability to express feelings before. It enabled me to break out of the scheme of things that had seemed set for me – when you follow your father into the shipyards and so on.’

After a year’s foundation art course in Newcastle, he studied graphic design for three years at the Central School in London (‘Michael Foreman persuaded them to take me, and was my first real tutor – I’ve never forgiven him – no, I still love him, he’s a lovely man’), going on to specialise in illustration for three years at the Royal College. He sees the benefit of art schools solely as places to make contacts, plus the inevitable influence of fellow students: he himself taught part-time for six years in Cambridge and found it enormously frustrating (‘full-time might be better, for then you can keep track of people’).

His first books were published while he was still at college, after Timothy Benn saw his second-year exhibition, and his degree show was made up entirely of published work. ‘Publishers now tend to hang around the major colleges, scared they’ll miss some new talent ever since Tom Maschler discovered Nicola Bayley!’

He tried working in all sorts of advertising and editorial areas but didn’t like any of them, finding, like so many others, that the people in children’s books – publishers, writers – are somehow more agreeable. ‘The money in advertising is better, but you have to change everything eight times, go through 15 committees and an awful pecking order. In children’s books they give you some money and leave you alone to do the book, and at the end of it there it is, a book on the shelf, not like a newspaper in the gutter. In fact, once you start thinking about it, it’s a smashing job!’

He married at 19, and Francoise – an older woman at 21 – supported him through college and still handles his financial affairs. They met in a pub: she and her cousin, escaping small-town France together, had met a friend of Colin’s in London and hitched to Newcastle – *and* her cousin married his friend. The McNaughtons have shunted through ten different London flats in 15 years, the last seven around Covent Garden. Ever since it was built four years ago, they’ve lived at the top of an award-winning block whose little private yards and giant balconies are alive, even in mid-winter, with greenery and worm-hunting blackbirds, with Ben, who’s eight, and Timothy, six. The boys’ main feeling about their dad, far from pride or surprise when his name pops up at school, seems to be one of embarrassment at his continuing to wear jeans...

His present ebulliently successful partnership with Allan Ahlberg in the little **Red Nose Readers** stems from Ahlberg’s choice of McNaughton as one of his **Happy Families** illustrators for Kestrel. Is it true that the wildly funny Ahlberg is in fact quite a melancholy bloke?

‘That’s a good description actually – we often sit together over a drink getting depressed about life! To me he’s one of the best picture-book writers in the world, a wonderful communicator, with drawerfuls of ideas – anything you think of, he’s thought of it already. A partnership is much easier than working on your own, it takes a lot of responsibility off

your shoulders ? you're only the piano player, you're not writing the piece ? and we do spark each other off, even on the phone when we're not meant to be working.?

The future? He doesn't look more than a couple of years ahead, but his horizons are widening. A 50s rock'n'roll musical for children based on his story and illustrations for **Fat Pig**, 'The Story of the Pig who Wanted to Marry Cochonette' (Miss Piggy?), is in its third year in Paris, is showing in Vienna and all over Germany and Sweden, and is coming soon to England, while there are also plans afoot for an English production of his **Rat Race**.

And he wants to write ? even though he finds it as hard as drawing and cursed just as much by his inability to be satisfied; ?That really *isn't* very pleasant. Even now, after all the hundreds of drawings I've done, looking back I can only see the mistakes.? He's been spurred on by his two verses in **The Children's Book** for the famine appeal. ?I got more of a buzz out of seeing those in print than out of all my books: it's a different pleasure, and words always have a pathetic appeal to artists of awful Respectability which pictures never have. I'm writing a book of poems now for Walker ? well, not *poems*, humorous doggerel ? It's a kind of reward for doing so many books for them in the last five years? (16 Readers in the last two years, and a joke on every page).

He gazes dreamily at something far away. ?I wrote a poem yesterday about a little girl I was at school with called Pauline Crawford...?

## **The Books**

**Crazy Bear**, Heinemann, 0 434 94992 2, £5.95

**Cowboy Crazy/Snow Crazy**, Piccolo, 0 330 28223 9, 95p pbk

**Pirate Crazy/Rock and Roll Crazy**, Piccolo, 0 330 28453 3, 95p pbk

**Football Crazy**, Heinemann, 0 434 94991 4, £5.95; Piccolo, 0 330 26747 7, £1.50 pbk

**Great Zoo Escape**, Heinemann, 0 434 94989 2, £5.95

**King Nonn the Wiser**, Heinemann, 0 434 94990 6, £5.95; Pocket Bears, 0 907144 34 9, £1.50 pbk

**Walk, Rabbit, Walk** (with Elizabeth Attenborough), Heinemann, 0 434 94988 4, £5.50; Pocket Bears, 0 907144 51 9, £1.50 pbk

**Fat Pig**, Benn/A & C Black, temporarily out of stock

**The Pirates**, Benn/A & C Black, 0 510 00053 3, £3.95; Piccolo, 0 330 28291 3, £1.25 pbk

**Rat Race**, Picture Puffin, 014 050.311 0, £1.50 pbk

**The Great Fruit Gum Robbery** (with Russell Hoban), Methuen/Walker, 0 416 05790 X, £3.50

**Foldaways** (with Allan Ahlberg), Granada, £2.95 each:

**Circus**, 0 246 11785 0; **Families**, 0 246 11784 2; **Monsters**, 0 246 11782 6; **Zoo**, 0 246 11783 4

**Seasons Board Books**, Walker, £1.50 each:

**Spring**, 0 7445 0082 6; **Summer**, 0 7445 0083 4; **Autumn**, 0 7445 0084 2; **Winter**, 0 7445 0085 0

**Red Nose Readers** (with Allan Ahlberg), Walker, £1.95 each:

**Help!**, 0 7445 0250 0; **Big Bad Pig**, 0 7445 0251 9; **Make a Face**, 0 7445 0252 7; **So Can I**, 0 7445 0253 5; **Jumping**, 0 7445 0254 3; **Bear?s Birthday**, 0 7445 0255 1; **Happy Worm**, 0 7445 0256 X; **Fee Fi Fo Fum**, 0 7445 0257 8  
(Another eight titles coming in 1986)

Page Number:

12

---

**Source URL (retrieved on Feb '20):** <http://savfikh.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/37/childrens-books/articles/authorgraph/authorgraph-no-37-%E2%80%93colin-mcnaughton>

**Links:**

[1] <http://savfikh.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/37>