



# Authorgraph No 41 ? Rodney Peppé

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**Rodney Pepp**

**Rodney Peppé** interviewed by **Stephanie Nettell**

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?I was told at the Central School that in advertising you meet the rats and in publishing the people are so, so nice. It isn't true. You can get rats in publishing, and people in advertising are charming and terribly talented.?

Like so many writers and artists, Rodney Peppé was trained in advertising, where he believes professional standards are higher than in publishing, an irritation that he says has 'bugged me for the last 18 years'.

?Deadlines are sacrosanct to me, something not reciprocated on the other side ? it seems to be unusual in publishing to actually bring in something *on time* ! And what about paying attention to proofs? ?Make sure you get that 'eek' on the cover,? I said to them in Belgium for **Cat and Mouse**, but when the finished copy came through it wasn't there. And printers, too, cut up your artwork in an extraordinary way to get it on camera, and tea stains and ash appear on it: I don't like selling my artwork, but for a lot of artists today it's an extra source of income, and there it lies, unusable.

?As an author I'm saved the plight of the illustrator, who suffers from a sort of gentlemen and players attitude among publishers. I think it's better now because those of us who are author-illustrators have strengthened the hands of the rest - Faith Jaques has been trumpeting on for years about the way artists are treated.?

Rodney Peppé's own hand is certainly strong now. He left advertising not because he was unhappy but because to work hard for a three-month campaign 'was like drawing in sand. Like every graphic designer I wanted to do a children's book as an ego trip, I wanted to make something that would not be washed away. I'm quite chuffed that every single book I've done for Penguin is in print, and **The Alphabet Book**, the first I ever did, in 1968, is still bringing in very respectable receipts, not in bookshops but working away in libraries and schools. ? PLR (Public Lending Right) has thus strengthened his author-artist's hand, once 'the ridiculous idea of 50 per cent text on each page' was out of the way: all his books are now eligible, making a big financial difference and handing him a useful weapon in reissue arguments.

He is particularly sensitive to this artistic class distinction, because of his twin brother's experience as an illustrator ('he can draw better than I can') and his younger son's prospects ? when he leaves the Slade. It's a talented family: his older son is in films, and Tatjana, his Estonian-born wife, specialised as an art student in sculpture, though he believes her talents lie now in interior design ? and advising him. ?I use her as a sounding board very much, it's invaluable to have a fresh *educated* eye that knows you and your work.?

They met as students, ?I'm sorry to say I pinched her off a friend, and my brother did the same with his wife. Must be something about the Peppés ? too damn lazy to look for their own!?

The Peppé twins were born here but went out to India when they were six months old, where their family were landowners in the foothills of the Himalayas. They used to think the name was Huguenot, but Rodney believes some

great-great-grandfather added the accent to make sure it was pronounced as two syllables ?though it?s worked against me: I did some Guinness posters and the trade press asked why we needed these foreign artists when we?ve got good ones of our own!?

The boys returned during the war for their education, celebrating their eighth birthday on board the *Windsor Castle* as she zig-zagged alone through six minefields from Bombay to Liverpool, only to be bombed in the docks a week later. Neither their fluent Hindustani nor their ?sort-of-Welsh accent? survived much longer.

At the Central School Peppé gained his diploma as an illustrator and wood engraver. ?Students then ? and probably now? were total art snobs: ?commercialism? was a terrible word, and anyone commercial quite beyond the pale.? But advertising was a way to make a living, and he worked for two big agencies, including J Walter Thompson (where he knew Pat Hutchins). Then, after five years, came an absolute plum of a job.

?I was offered the design consultancy to Ross, the frozen food people, and I did all their packaging, the R symbol and so on, for seven years. I did two days? work at home and every Tuesday at Ross, which left four for my own work ? and all for the same money I?d earned at Thompson full-time.? At the Central he had shared a desk with John Burningham, whom he came to see as a beacon to follow ? *his* stuff was not being washed away in the sand.

?It?s very important that your first book should take, or you easily think, this isn?t for me, and give up. And in fact my first book has never been published, for when Grace Hogarth saw it, she said, ?You just don?t have the picture book feel,? and I did give up. But then I thought, well, if I can?t be an illustrator, I?ll be a designer, so I changed completely and did **The Alphabet Book**?

Those early books used a poster-like, collage technique; the original artwork has a depth of colour and varied texture that must have been curiously flattened by the printing process. It seems a long way from the detail of his present work, whether based on his own models or the quirky doodles of his thumbprints magicked into multiplication tables. It?s as if he has become three different artists: ?There seems little point of contact between the Mice books and the Toy books, while the thumbprints belong very much to a graphic designer.?

He moved on from the traditional nursery rhyme text when he carved Henry the elephant, a strokably smooth little wooden chap. Peppé the collector of old children?s books and toys became Peppé the toymaker ? his house is alive with mechanical marvels based on ingenious Victorian ideas, such as Luigi, ?a slightly over-the-hill acrobat?, whose sand-based mechanism gives him a delightfully unexpected random action. Some, like his jumping jacks, he sells in specialist galleries, but with a 100 per cent mark-up he knows, like every other craft toymaker, there?s no commercial future here; unlike them he found an outlet in an instruction manual, **Rodney Peppé?s Moving Toys**

Most of his models go into his books, culminating in the ultimate fantasies created for his Mice. ?It was the toy element that started them off. I wanted to do the old woman who lived in a shoe, and had been looking in antique shops for an old buttoned-up boot when my father sent me a pair of Hush Puppies that were too big for him ? instead of wearing them I made one into a house. Don?t know what made me switch to mice ? something about the scale worried me, and I was happier with mice than people.

?The Mice books took off in a different league from all my other books ? perhaps because they?re not so didactic?? Small readers, even parents, write requesting ?the kit? for the intricate models on the back cover, not appreciating that each took a month?s dedicated work ? every book takes about seven months to complete. Nor do many catch his little running gags, such as the optical illusion bootlaces, or the EEK registration marks.

?When I began I wrote and drew for myself, not even for my own children, but over the years as I?ve learnt the trade I?ve become more interested in the recipients of the books, and now I have children very much in mind. I like children: Tatjana says I can?t generalise like that, but I can ? I actually *like children*! Paul Klee wrote of a child describing the creative process: ?I think, and then I put a line around the think.? That?s got to come from a child ? it?s an all-lean remark, the process of drawing encapsulated.?

The Peppés tend to move house frequently (strange in a man who says he dislikes change), but seem comfortably settled in a country side-road near Hindhead, Surrey. surrounded by a wealth of items each has collected or made. He's happiest when working (no good on holidays), but restricts himself now to five days a week. The other two? He makes clocks ? and there they are, twinkling and amazing, gorgeous and amusing, in kitchen, bathroom, sitting-room and studio.

?I'm totally self-centred, immersed in my work ? I actually enjoy it whether it's good, bad or indifferent. I feel I know my limitations: I know people with much more talent who haven't made it work for themselves ? does it burn up, or are they too lazy? Maybe hard work is rarer than talent?? It's the combination of both that is rare, which is why, far from being worked in sand, Peppé's creations are now reaching out to their second generation.

### **Some of Rodney Peppé's many books**

(published by Viking Kestrel or Methuen)

**The Alphabet Book**, VK, 0 670 80023 6, £5.95

**Circus Numbers**, VK, 0 670 80025 2, £5.95

**Humpty Dumpty**, VK, 0 670 38673 1, £5.50

**Puzzle Book**, VK, 0 670 60261 2, £5.50

**Cat and Mouse**, VK, 0 7226 6027 8, £4.95

**The Mice Who Lived in a Shoe**, VK, 0 670 81142 4, £5.95; Picture Puffin, 0 14 050.413 3, £1.25

**The Kattleship Pirates**, VK, 0 7226 5837 0, £5.95; Picture Puffin, 0 14 050.416 8, £1.50

**The Mice and the Flying Basket**, VK, 0 670 80190 9, £5.95

**The Mice and the Clockwork Bus**, VK, 0 670 81098 3, £5.95

**Hello Henry**, M, 0 416 45540 9, £4.95

**Hurrah for Henry**, M, 0 416 45550 6, £4.95

**Tell the Time with Mortimer**, M, 0 416 59820 X, £5.95

**Run Rabbit, Run!**, M, 0 416 22060 6, £4.95

**Little Toy Board Books**, M, £1.25 each

**Peep and Play Concertina Books**, M, £1.95 each

**Block Books**, M, £1.95 each

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