



Arnold Lobel

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Jill Bennett meets the American author/ illustrator.

Earlier this year whilst in America, **Jill Bennett** talked to **Arnold Lobel** and heard him speak about his work. Here she recalls the meeting and considers his newest books.

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Arnold Lobel was born in Los Angeles on 22nd May 1933 and grew up in Schenectachy, New York. He met his wife Anita (also an author/illustrator) whilst the two were attending the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. Arnold was directing a play in which Anita had the leading role. The Lobels now have a son and a daughter and live in Brooklyn.

The decision to do children's books was a simple one - 'I found it was the one thing I could do well.' Arnold Lobel has a clear idea of what is meant by doing it well. He believes that an illustrator is successful when there is a complete unity in the relationship of the pictures and text. 'Young children do not differentiate where the words stop and the pictures begin.'

The difference for him between illustrating his own text and that of others is that, as the artist, he must know when not to 'write the pictures'. He doesn't talk to the writer; but lets ideas percolate and tries to feel the manuscript before deciding on an appropriate interpretation - 'kind of like jumping into the mind of someone else'.

When he starts he has no fixed ideas on how a book will look and feels that art should not be forced on to a story. He hates the kind of artist who subjugates a book to his particular style. His own style, he says, is constantly evolving and changing; he keeps on experimenting and nothing is ruled out.

In his own books Arnold Lobel seems to speak to the mind of the child directly. Through the complete child-like quality of Frog and Toad for example, he achieves a direct communication with the *very* young. Was this intuition or cultivated observation? He decided that it must be instinctive. He has no childhood memory - or barely any - and does not try out his ideas on children. He described his most successful books as 'a kind of psychological accident'; somehow he had made contact with a part of himself and showed children his own weaknesses which they found amusing. Was it coincidence that to me he seemed like Toad personified?

The stories usually emerge from a visual idea. He approaches writing with much more caution and apprehension than illustrating (which he finds much easier). It can be a long and frustrating process before he eventually arrives at a text which is sufficiently finished for him to begin drawing the pictures. But even then he keeps working at it, taking out unnecessary words. 'When it comes to the words of a picture book, less is almost always very definitely more.'

The best part of creating a book, according to Arnold, is starting the illustrations. He uses tracing pads and makes hundreds of sketches which he describes as visual thinking. The pictures are evolved in layers and he achieves mirror images by reversing the paper so his drawing is 'kind of dynamic'. Making a dummy (a mock-up of what the book will

be like) is very exciting, but he detests doing colour separations which he calls the gruel - the bane of his existence. It took him years to learn the process and he says, 'I always do my separations through gritted teeth.'

'Once a book is actually out, it is a real anticlimax: you spend about nine months working on a book, it's three days with the printer and then I'm on to a different book.' His favourite book is always the next one.

Arnold Lobel's most recent book is **Fables** (Jonathan Cape) a large format book of animal fables. The humorous text of each takes up one page and is accompanied by a full page illustration, rich in colour and detail.

Arnold described how, in the winter of '78, he started on this venture. Using a series of 'Bic' pens - he scribbles with these as a kind of 'anti-image' because recently people have been claiming that when Arnold Lobel takes up his pen and writes, it is a literary event - he wrote the twenty fables in twenty-five days, 'roughly one animal per day, with very little rewriting'. He says he frightened himself, and felt it was like a kind of spirit writing. Then between October '79 and the following January, he took up a black marker - 'an anger symbol' - and reshuffled the chapters. Then came the pictures.

His labours have resulted in a book of fables which can be read and enjoyed on a number of levels by anyone from about seven. And with such illustrations as the bear with a frying pan hat and paper bag boots, and a bespectacled Father Elephant engrossed in his Daily Trumpet while (to his small son's consternation) the slipper on his left foot blazes away, Arnold Lobel certainly achieves that feeling of unity between text and pictures.

Also recently published is **Days with Frog and Toad**, the fourth of Lobel's classics featuring this endearing pair. In this one Toad is persuaded not to put off until tomorrow what can be done today; the two expend a great deal of energy getting a kite to fly and spend a shivery evening storytelling; Toad's birthday hat becomes a perfect fit thanks to his friend's ingenuity, and Frog decides that he wants to be by himself - only temporarily though - to Toad's relief.

The third collection of adventures, **Frog and Toad all Year**, is now happily in paperback. In this one the two friends' activities include a somewhat hairy toboggan ride, a search for Spring, and preparations for Christmas rather fraught as far as Toad is concerned.

I've long advocated Frog and Toad as indispensable companions for all those on the road to independent reading. A new friend is Owl, another enchanting Lobel creation.

In **Owl at Home** (now in paperback) his misunderstandings will delight all who make his acquaintance. In the five short stories he invites winter in to warm himself, discovers strange bumps at the bottom of his bed, makes tear-water tea, solves a problem, and finds a friend. I hope we shall see more of Owl. And lots more of Arnold Lobel.

Fables,

Cape, 0 224 01866 3, £3.95

Days with Frog and Toad,

World's Work I-Can-Read series, 0 437 90131 9, £3.50

Frog and Toad all Year,

World's Work I-Can-Read paperback, 0 437 96040 4, 95p

Owl at Home,

World's Work I-Can-Read paperback, 0 437 96041 2, 95p

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