



Authorgraph No.79: Michael Morpurgo

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Michael Morpurgo interviewed by **Colin Mills**.

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There can't be many successful children's writers who can say that they regularly spend evenings with large groups of children from all over the country, reading them stories, listening in to the ways they see the world. That's after helping to organise their days spent feeding calves and pigs, rounding up sheep, mucking out stables!

But all that is part of the pattern of Michael Morpurgo's life. As well as being a prolific writer for children, he manages Farms for City Children with his wife, Clare, and a large staff based at Nethercott Farm, in North Devon and at Treginnis, Pembrokeshire. Children (2,000 of them a year) come in groups of 30-40 for a week at a time throughout the school year for an intense and challenging week's work. And Thursday evenings are usually 'story night' with the resident famous author.

The enterprise has been an important part of Morpurgo's life for nearly 20 years now, and continues to feed into his work as a writer. We talked at his home in Iddesleigh, a short swallow's flight from Nethercott Farm, on a bright and crisp January morning. Although there was a lull in the activity 'the 'term' hadn't got started' there were constant phone calls, inquiries, negotiations going on. Clare Morpurgo works relentlessly (and *very* full time) on the project. I asked Michael how it got started. 'As a primary teacher in the sixties, I did an average-to-good job, but I felt that I wasn't having a great deal of impact on children's lives. I worked to 'unglaze' their eyes... to find a way of changing their perceptions of the world.'

What started as 'an ideal' all those years ago involved a deal of risk (a move from Kent to Devon with three young children, dog, cat, chickens and two donkeys) but it's now a respected educational charity. The Princess Royal is their patron and work now proceeds on a third site 'they hope to open in the next year or two in Gloucestershire.

As he talked with obviously undimmed enthusiasm of the thrill of seeing city kids during their first days on the farm, I was reminded of the vivid description in **Friend or Foe** when David and Tucky, the two evacuees, are transported from London to their new home (a farm in North Devon):

All that day and the next they saw things they'd never seen before as Mr Reynolds shepherded them around the farm. They watched him helping the foal born the night before, pulling him up on to wobbly legs. They discovered that the sheep on the steeply sloping fields were not wild after all; and three milking cows, golden brown with white patches, wandered slowly towards them and did not attack...

The concern for 'changing children's perceptions', for giving them more and intense experiences, runs like a thread through Morpurgo's writing and his conversation.

Born in 1943 into a family with exotic European connections (illustrious ancestors include a Belgian poet-anarchist

grandfather who settled down as a professor at London University) he spent his early years in the 'smog-bound' London which found its way into his later writing in both **Friend or Foe** and the soon to be filmed **Mr Nobody's Eyes**. Each of these books also offers a strong sense of the intensity of experience that the Second World War gave children. It figured largely in his own childhood. 'The whole mythology for children growing up at that time was of the War. The evidence was all around you. The adults all talked about it. Everybody had lost somebody... an uncle, a father...'

Experiences in a boarding school in Sussex and, later, public school in Canterbury were echoed much later in stories which dealt with transition, with lonely children having to 'put on a show of normality' and make sense of new, often frightening surroundings. The peculiar ethos of the English public school has given him both the context and content for his new (and, for him, his most significant) book, **The War of Jenkins's Ear**.

Sandhurst and the army ('a debacle') followed school. Then, a degree in English ('I didn't really tune into reading and literature through that'). It was teaching in primary schools, after a PGCE, that led to his salvation, to an interest in children's stories. 'I found myself seeing children respond to the stories I read to them. I started reading widely. I got a *freshness* from children when I talked with them about their reading. I saw excitement in their eyes... and grew up in front of a class.' This led him to try out some writing 'short stories' of his own.

Serendipity ('a friend knew a friend who worked for Macmillan Education') led him to Aidan Chambers who was at the time on the lookout for short stories for a series he was editing. A collection of Michael's, **It Never Rained**, was accepted. He's still grateful to Chambers and acknowledges the value of encouragement to novice writers 'I now try to do that for the children I meet and work with.'

Around that time, the farm venture was getting started, so after his first 'long' and successful story, **Friend or Foe**, he began to combine the roles of co-manager of the farms and children's writer. Since then, his output has been increasingly ambitious. His stories have strong, involving plots. To the sturdy English tradition of the well-crafted adventure story, he's added social sensitivity and anthropological variety. Children in his stories often have to make hard choices. In **Friend or Foe**, the young evacuees have to decide whether to betray the German soldier who has saved one of their lives. The young hero of **Waiting for Anya** has to deceive his mother in order to keep secret the existence of the Jewish children he's helping to keep 'underground'. 'I'm interested in writing about *dilemmas*... in asking the reader to try and work out what's right and what's wrong. Life is full of dilemmas...'

Adults in Morpurgo's books are unusually three-dimensional. The young often form strong bonds with them, especially the very old: both learn, and gain, from the closeness. He's given young readers a memorable gallery of characters: the mysterious Birdman in **Why the Whales Came**; Uncle Sung in **King of the Cloud Forests**; Signor Blondini and Ochy, the chimp, in **Mr Nobody's Eyes**. One of his favourite creations is the very substantial and rumbustious 'ghost' of Walter Raleigh in **My Friend Walter**, 'I wanted a *real* character not just a fool in a white sheet.'

His books cover a distinctively wide historical and geographical canvas and it was fascinating to hear of their origins and of the meticulous research and detective work he does. **Why the Whales Came** had its start in a chance holiday to the Scilly Isles with his son, an avid birdwatcher. Local folklore led him to the story (a true one) of the deserted island which is at the centre of the story. Old men's reminiscences, and pictures of World War One carnage found in an attic, were woven into the plot of **War Horse**. Research for that book meant many hours in the Imperial War Museum. **Waiting for Anya** entailed long conversations with an uncle who had been involved in resistance activities. **The King of the Cloud Forests** needed deep reading into the origins of the Yetis. **My Friend Walter** meant 'long chats with the Beefeaters at the Tower. Researching a book is *me* being a child. I want to *know*.'

His approach to writing is embedded in the tips he now gives to the many novices he meets in the course of school visits 'and in the end-of-the-day farmhouse sessions. 'I tell them 'give yourselves time'. It's important to let stories work themselves out and grow, organically. Most of the 'big' books I've written have taken me a year or so.'

He is generous with his ideas and values collaboration, having learned a lot from co-operation (on **All Around the Year**) with Ted Hughes, who is now President and a keen supporter of the Farms work.

His more recent work for younger children (he talks with modesty of his 'big' books and 'little' books) has involved him in another successful collaboration with the artist, Shoo Rayner. The 'Mudpuddle Farm' books echo the events, fun and feelings that he sees all the year round at Nethercott. The latest, **Martians at Mudpuddle Farm**, is a lovely example of pictures and text working together in a variety of formats – speech bubbles, cartoon frames – to invite your readers in and along.

He's also pleased with his Banana Books for the newly-independent readers: he knows that they reach children in schools and get them 'engaged' (a word he uses a lot) in reading. Some of his best stories for the young have animals at the centre. **Colly's Barn**, a Banana Book, has a little girl who fights to save the habitat of her favourite wildlife. The story catches wonderfully the natural rhythm of animals' lives. The rough edges aren't softened, either. The book, unusually, ends with a death. I asked him about the appeal that animals hold for young children. 'I think there's an elemental thing that connects young children with animals. They do understand each other. There's something raw and real about animals and about children's emotions. I try to tune into those emotions through animals. Animals bring out a strong sense of fairness, of what's right in young children. I see this all the time.'

Morpurgo is a writer who is constantly doing that kind of observing. He now has a new and very immediate audience in young grandchildren of his own. **The Sandman and the Turtles**, a book which enables young children to explore the very essence of storymaking, is dedicated to one of them.

Although he's shyly courteous, measured in his speech and extraordinarily modest about his achievements, there's a quiet passion about the importance of writing well for children. Though not over-keen on a great deal of involvement in the 'children's lit' circuit, a recent invitation to judge the Smarties Prize has helped him clarify his ideas about what counts as quality (and what's dross). It's left him with the view that 'there's just too much produced, and too much that's samey'. He's enjoyed the learning that's come from his scriptwriting and the joint adaptations of his own books for TV and films.

There's a genuine enthusiasm for his new book, **The War of Jenkins' Ear**. 'It's the best yet,' he says, without a hint of artificiality or effect. His favoured themes are reworked: isolation, dealing with conflict against the odds. But there's a new sharpness in the writing of this tale about a boy arriving at a boarding school and proclaiming that he's Jesus Christ. The feuds between the schoolboys and the villagers are written with dash. In his own words: 'It's about class, that very English pre-occupation, and love, and strong emotions. It's about a society at war with the outside world. I want children (and adults) to read it and to have strong ideas...'

They will, I'm sure. It's a riveting read with which it's hard not to... well, *engage*.

Michael Morpurgo's books mentioned are:

Friend or Foe, Mammoth, 0 7497 0130 7, £2.99 pbk

Mr Nobody's Eyes, Mammoth, 0 7497 0104 8, £2.99 pbk

Waiting for Anya, Mammoth, 0 7497 0634 1, £2.99 pbk

War Horse, Mammoth, 0 7497 0203 6, £2.50 pbk

Why the Whales Came, Heinemann, 0 434 95200 1, £7.95; Mammoth, 0 7497 0537 X, £2.99 pbk

King of the Cloud Forests, Pan, 0 330 30560 3, £3.50 pbk

My Friend Walter, Mammoth, 0 7497 1216 3, £2.99 pbk

Martians at Mudpuddle Farm, ill. Shoo Rayner, A & C Black 'Jets', 0 7136 3614 9, £4.99

Cully's Barn, ill. Claire Colvin, Heinemann 'Banana', 0 434 97666 0, £2.95

The Sandman and the Turtles, Heinemann, 0 434 95206 0, £7.95; Mammoth, 0 7497 1045 4, £2.99 pbk

The War of Jenkins? Ear is published in March 1993 by Heinemann, 0 434 96219 8, £9.99 hbk and 0 434 96408 5, £4.99 pbk. The cover of the book is featured on the front of **BfK** this month.

For further information about Farms for City Children, contact Clare Morpurgo at Nethercott House, Iddesleigh, Winkleigh, North Devon EX19 8BG.



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