



Authorgraph No.116: Colin and Jacqui Hawkins

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Colin and Jacqui Hawkins interviewed by **Stephanie Nettell**.

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Mr Wolf went off ?like a starburst? in Colin Hawkins? head. <!--break--> One Wednesday, daughter Sally came home full of this wonderful playground game, What?s the Time, Mr Wolf?, and instantly he could see it as a pop-up. He and Jacqui worked over the weekend, got it together by Monday, excitedly phoned Judith Elliott at Heinemann, took it to her on Wednesday (on layout, *not* toilet, paper, as she enjoys saying), who bought it on the spot (while Jacqui waited on a yellow line). One week! ?As far as we?re concerned, from way back she was the First Lady of publishing: we owe a lot to her.?

Mr Wolf appeared in 1983, the culmination of an explosively active period. But it had not always been like that. In 1979 they had been fruitlessly showing **Witches** to everyone, until Granada agreed to look at it for a while. They looked so long that the Hawkins, fighting for survival, took other ideas to other people, and just when Granada, spurred into action by the French firm Albin Michel at Bologna, decided to take it, the other publishers started coming back ? ?Remember that idea you left with us *x* months ago?? ? and in two years they found they had gone from no publisher to four.

They continued to be astonishingly prolific, and today are published worldwide. Hugely successful in France, they are still with Albin Michel; the classic split-page word-game, **Pat the Cat** , which Brenda Gardner got up and running at Evans? Pepper Press, still sells phenomenally with Dorling Kindersley, who also bought many of their Heinemann titles; and the Evans? **How to Look After Your Cat/Dog** ?manuals? (the closest they?ve come to being serious) are now with Walker. Granada were taken over by Grafton Books, who were taken over by Collins, who became HarperCollins and published scores more Hawkins books. They have watched over the award-winning **Whose House?** and the explosive success of the **Foxy and Friends** series, and are now smacking their lips over another series that begins with **Greedy Goat** and **Daft Dog** , jolly tales that affectionately transform vices into virtues.

Jacqui and Colin have known each other a long time: theirs is a watertight working, talking, loving partnership. Although Jacqui was brought up in south-east London and Colin in Blackpool, it happened that each family returned every holiday to its Irish roots, farms only a mile apart. One belonged to Colin?s uncle, who in effect had taken the place of his dead father, the other to Jacqui?s ?real? grandmother (as opposed to the English one) to whom she had to write every week. Through her ferociously Catholic mother, she grew up in an Irish ghetto, with no comics, no chewing gum, no Bonfire Night, ?as if you were in the middle of Ireland without the niceness that went with it, until you went there for holidays. *That* was home.? They have returned throughout the rest of their lives, ?the warmth and affection that envelops you the minute you go back? tugging them ?home? so strongly they are restoring a ruin there, where one day they will live permanently.

Although aware of each other, they did not meet until their mid-teens, and, perhaps thanks to the anxious prayers of

Jacqui's mother, not properly until Colin was at Blackpool Art School and Jacqui working in London. Later, as she realised what she wanted, she went to Goldsmiths College, studying graphic design. They married in 1968. Colin defied the art school wisdom of the sixties by landing a fat job as a reportage illustrator on the **Daily Express** - Crufts, Chelsea Flower Show, decorative column heads. Total freedom, loads of money, but also the creatively killing knowledge that the work was unlikely to appear. In 1971 the dilemma was solved when the **Express**, downsizing, offered tax-free cheques for redundancies (people were killed in the rush, and they had to re-employ many of them?), and he went freelance.

Times became hard. I used to illustrate realistically in those days: I was good, but there were other people better or longer in the market. Jacqui suggested humour. He would *not* listen to me! Because he had such a facility for cartoons he tended to negate it. She worked in a design studio until their son Finbar surprised them, returning when he was rising-three; then they freelanced together, eked out by Jacqui teaching in a boys' school and Colin at Medway and Norwich Schools of Art. On the point of despair, he had started teaching full-time, when 'Sod's Law' meant things took off. As freelance illustrators of other people's books they had had to wait for the phone to ring, but as producers of the whole package, words and illustrations, they got a hearing. It was the only way you could step the other side of the line.

From the beginning they were a team, but Jacqui - even today quieter, rather self-effacing - stayed in the background, unnamed or with a jokey credit (*by Colin Hawkins and an old witch*) until the HarperCollins reissues. She ponders why **Witches** evolved from coming back with Sally from playgroup and we used to do a drawing every day? Colin: You used to do a drawing every day? of a different witch shopping, cooking etc. Eventually they became a book, but I was teaching by then and didn't go to the meetings. Colin wasn't sent the proofs, only the final book, which hadn't got my name on it. When he angrily pointed this out? Colin takes up the story - the publisher said, 'Well, we can't put every little housewife's name on all the books.' Well, without *this* little housewife, the book wouldn't be here! Jacqui continues: 'Awful, and it was a woman who said it! Well, I stood back from those books because I never would work for that editor, as you can imagine, and just worked with Colin and never bothered about my name until they were reprinted. Now they are all **Witches**, **Spooks**, **Vampires**, **School** etc - gathered in a restructured series that thrills them both.

They work opposite each other, zipping round the desk with doubts, ideas, advice, working on different stages but as an indivisible unit, each crediting the other. Colin: 'People see the final book, but before that you have lots of roughs, overdrawings, talking, working out words. In all the books before **Whose House?** it may appear to be my particular illustration but the work has been maybe 60-70 per cent Jacqui's.'

Now you can see two styles, one familiarly sharp, Gothic, the other the rounder, softer feel of the enchantingly detailed **Whose House?** and the gentle domesticity of **Foxy** - yet even the Foxy books, insists Jacqui, are balanced collaborations. But she does love these younger books. Colin: **Whose House?**, essentially Jacqui's in terms of illustration, is a milestone. For ever and ever I've seen these *beautiful* roughs coming through, but it's 'No, you convert them' so they end up with my slight edge to them. It's taken me ten years to persuade her! So I'm delighted it's had that response [a **Parents** Gold Award to match Foxy's] - it'll be easier to get her to do another one! Jacqui: 'But I really like the ideas stage, the planning and roughs, going down different routes to solve a problem. I could never have worked in children's books without Colin to sneak up behind?' 'Yes you could?' 'No I couldn't... the horrible exposure of each time opening your folder...' 'But the joy, the passion, of showing a great idea...!' 'True, I love being there for that.'

Colin's the performer (whence, says Jacqui, came Sally, their actress daughter), but like a scriptwriting team they bounce off each other, capping corny jokes, scrubbing bad ideas, smoothing wrinkles, until the offered product is almost guaranteed publishable. Even the nightmare experience of doing their own paper engineering for **Mr Wolf** taught them what to offer the experts. Their whole philosophy is to make books *fun*; regardless of educational fashions, this, they believe, is the only way to get kids reading. They slip in lavatorial jokes - very immature, but publishers can be so anal, and indeed that final giggle in **Whose House?** was too much for America - as well as every pun and groan

known to **Beano** .

They have taught their children that enjoying your work matters more than money, and in the end the good times came with children's books. Their house in London's Blackheath says they are right - an elegantly angular, airy creation by the fifties architect Patrick Gwynne, now protected by the National Trust, it would look from above like a Mickey Mouse head with two ears, one of which is a bright studio, gay with puppets, pirates' ships and their own spooky-monster merchandise from Boots, with their bedroom above, the other the sitting-room and bedrooms of their now-absent children. Life does look good, as we sit in the vaulted open living area, by the central fire, watching a pilot for the TV series of 52 five-minute animated films about Foxy and his little-but-not-be-ignored sister (based on the Finbar and Sally of long ago, and close to Jacqui's heart).

What's the time, Mr Wolf? Surely it's HAWKINS TIME!

The Books - a small selection

From Collins Children's Books:

Whose House? , 0 00 1360213, £10.99 hbk

Witches, Monsters, Spooks, Pirates, Vampires, School, Aliens, and Grannies , £4.99 each pbk

Foxy and His Naughty little Sister , 0 00 198219 2, £9.99 hbk, 0 00 664564 X, £4.99 pbk

Foxy Plays Hide and Seek , 0 00 136018 3, £9.99 hbk

Foxy and Friends Go Racing , 0 00 664565 8, £4.99 pbk

Daft Dog , 0 00 198209 5, £9.99 hbk Greedy Goat, 0 00 198334 2, £9.99 hbk

From Egmont Children's Books:

What's the Time, Mr Wolf? , 0 7497 1747 5, £4.99 pbk

Mr Wolfs Week, Mr Wolf's Birthday Surprise , £4.99 each pbk

I Know an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly, Old MacDonald had a Farm, Noah Built an Ark One Day, The House That Jack Built , £4.99 each pbk

From Walker Books

How to Look After your Cat/Do & Hamster/Rabbit , £6.99 each hbk, £4.50 each pbk

Come for a Ride on the Ghost Train , 0 7445 2171 8, £8.99 hbk, 0 7445 3671 5, £4.99 pbk

Stephanie Nettell is a critic, author and journalist on children's books.



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