



A Sailboat in the Sky

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Children's Laureate, **Quentin Blake**, describes an unusual picture book project.

A visit to his local library resulted in our Children's Laureate taking part in an innovative picture book project involving the collaboration of eighteen hundred children. **Quentin Blake** explains. <!--break-->

Nowadays I spend part of every year in France, not so very far by road from the town of Rochefort, and it was on one extraordinary visit to the library there (which is another story) that I encountered a group of local teachers, well organised in their research into using picture books in the classroom, LSA 17 (Lectures Source d'Apprentissages). What they were hoping to do next, they explained, was to produce a book in which children collaborated with an illustrator. Oh yes, I said, showing a cautious interest; what was it to be about? ?Sur l'humanisme.?

What I found out quite quickly was that we were not talking about Humanism, but about humanitarian problems: of racism, the environment, of how we treat our fellow men and women. My task (how could I resist?), it seemed to me, was first of all to provide a visual pretext or starting-point which could allow a young hero and heroine to encounter a variety of problems. As we were near the sea I thought of a boat. We started with three black-and-white drawings (I would call them roughs) and to offer a range of possibilities I proposed a boat with wheels: one which could be on the sea, on the land, and in addition to that, fly. From these drawings the children set off in search of ideas: amongst which almost everyone went for the possibilities of flight.

My local teachers were in touch with the inspector of French speaking schools in Northern Europe, so that soon, via the Internet, they were receiving material not only from the South West but also from Luxembourg, London, Dublin, Oslo and even Singapore. ?Une tempête d'idées.? On the basis of a selection of all this I put together a complete sequence of rough drawings making up a narrative, and this set was returned to the schools for more work ? more suggestions, coloured drawings, dialogues. My job then was to stitch together a sort of patchwork in what I felt to be the most viable form for publication as a book ? one which could present itself like any other in the bookshops ? and to do the finished drawings.

Perhaps it was only to be expected that the story came out as a linear series of problems ? bullying, war, pollution ? with the rescue of a single character from each situation gradually filling the boat. The development of the project was supported by meetings, such as a day conference for several hundred children and their teachers in La Rochelle ? a group of children from London came specially, and teachers from several cities, and there were readings, sketches, songs ? and a gathering of several hundred children at Rochefort. I don't need to emphasise the extent of work and benefits of motivation implied in this activity. In the end eighteen hundred children took part.

And then to bring our venture to a successful conclusion we needed a publisher. For the past twenty-five years I have been published in France by Gallimard Jeunesse but their advice was that, on this occasion, I should approach Alain Serres who runs a small but noticeable publishing house called Rue du Monde: one which specialises in current issues such as the environment and children's rights. Serres had an initial moment of caution, conscious that a book by

children is not necessarily a book for children. However, the premise of this book was that it was by me; though a me putting together children's ideas and fully marinated, so to speak, in their thoughts and reactions. Once that this was clear, Alain Serres became our publisher. First (because he is also a writer) he worked on the text that I had stitched together from the children's words, making it more fluent and acceptable. Then – most impressively – he produced the book in elegant form and got it into the shops by the rentrée in September. Everything had happened within the space of an academic year.

The teachers involved also put an enormous amount of work into an accompanying CD Rom, entitled **Aventure d'une écriture, Ecriture d'une aventure** paid for by the education authority of the Poitou-Charentes region. It shows in considerable detail the writings and drawings of the participating classes as well as film clips of those days when we met together. As a record it is fascinating, but much more important is its potential use as a tool kit for teachers who want to pursue the theme further. By intention, the end of the book, with the friends setting off again in a new improved boat to meet new problems, offers this possibility. It's not only the end but also the start of a story, and of work in school.

The fact that this project happened within the two years when I was having the novel experience of being the first Children's Laureate was entirely a coincidence; in fact, if I had been able to plan it I am sure I would have arranged it otherwise. However, it did give me the opportunity of living something like two differing Laureate lives in parallel. Tiring, but fun.

Quentin Blake is the Children's Laureate. **Un Bateau dans le Ciel** is published by Rue du Monde (2 912084 30 X).

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