



Authorgraph interview 199: David Roberts

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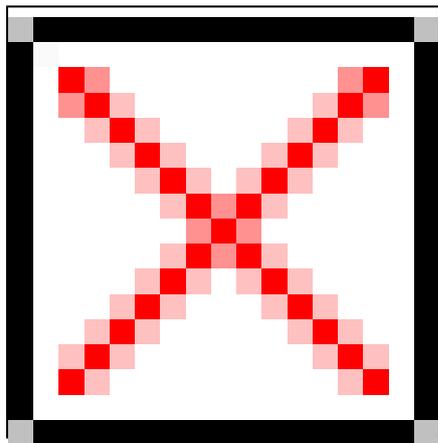
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Article Category:

Authorgraph

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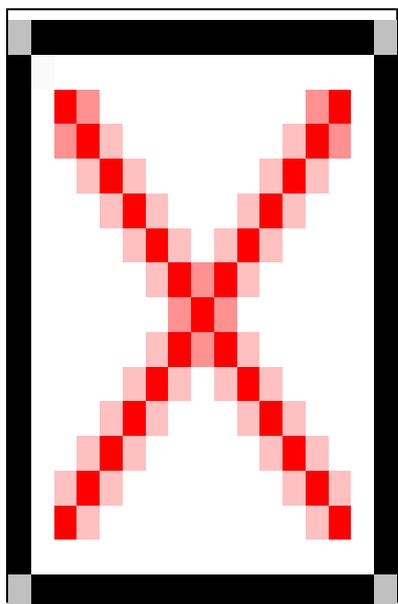
Dirty Bertie creator **David Roberts** interviewed by **Damian Kelleher**.



He farts, he burps, he scratches himself in all sorts of embarrassing places. But is children's hero Dirty Bertie anything like his creator David Roberts? Damian Kelleher finds out for **Books for Keeps**.

Back in his high school days, a young David Roberts fell foul of teacher Mrs Whittle during a Commerce lesson. David was always drawing back then, and sometimes getting into trouble as a result. 'I'd drawn a woman's face with eye make-up and lipstick,' David explains. 'Mrs Whittle held it up for everyone and said, 'this is an example of what you shouldn't be doing in lessons. This will get you nowhere.''

Mrs Whittle couldn't have been more wrong.



Over the past 10 years, David Robert's quirky, stylish and distinctive illustrations have adorned all kinds of children's books. From collaborations with authors such as Julia Donaldson (**Tyrannosaurus Drip**), Chris Priestley (**Uncle Montague's Tales of Terror**) and Sally Gardner (**Wings & Co**), David's talents are in big

demand. Then there are the updated fairytales he's illustrated for his sister Lynn Roberts' stories, and his own **Dirty Bertie** books (the chapter books written by Alan McDonald). And his reinterpretations of children's classics such as Kenneth Grahame's **The Wind in the Willows** have made a huge impact too. And it all started back at school.

'I was always drawing,' says David in his gentle Liverpudlian lilt as we chat in his studio in south London. 'I was absolutely rubbish at everything else at school. Looking back now, the teachers obviously recognized that there was one thing that they could encourage me with, one thing that I would feel confident at. So I can remember being given projects ' to draw big pictures for the assembly hall. I did this one about death on the Thames with this skeleton rowing a boat. I must have copied it out of a book because I don't think it would have come from my 8 year old mind; it had a dead dog floating in the water.'

Like many children with a genuine passion for art, David felt he just wasn't cut out for school when he was growing up in Liverpool.

'I hated it with a passion it didn't deserve. It wasn't that my school was bad, ' it was a good school ' but some children just slip through and you don't necessarily get noticed, or you get noticed for all the wrong reasons, and school becomes unbearable for some kids.' Part of the problem was the school's attitude to art as a subject. 'When I was at school, art was just overlooked,' says David. 'It was the subject that was given to the people who were basically the trouble makers. They'd choose art because basically it was an excuse not to do any work. The art teacher sometimes would just go and hide in the stock room because he was frightened of some of the kids in the class, and we would just spend our days copying pictures out of magazine. That was all we would do. We weren't actually being taught, and that was a shame.'

One of the results of being a successful children's book illustrator is that David Roberts is in huge demand to visit schools himself and talk to them about his work. The schools he finds himself visiting now are a very different proposition from the schools of his youth.

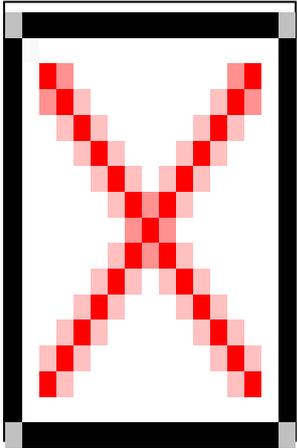
'I went up to one private school in Peterborough and they showed me their art department and I was amazed. The resources that they had were incredible. There were all these oil paintings on the wall and I said 'who did this??' and they said 'the students!'. It was a joy to see them being encouraged and pushed to express themselves ' even the ones who weren't particularly creative. There were amazing portraits and sculptures, too. We didn't do anything like that at school.'

Following on from school, David studied fashion design at Manchester, and after graduating, began a career as a milliner. He worked for a company called Sunny Hats in Hong Kong ('I had misheard the lady on the phone and turned up for my interview asking for Mr Funny ' there were all these Chinese girls giggling behind their hands!') and later the celebrated British milliner Stephen Jones. He'd initially envisaged a career illustrating fashion magazines, but after acquiring an agent, David got his first children's book commission, and couldn't resist drawing on his fashion influences.'It's out of print now, but I illustrated **Frankie Stein's Robot** by Roy Apps, for Wayland. It was a fun little book to do. It had this great character called Aunt Griselda. She was fearsome, but I made her look really glamorous with a little beret and fur stole, and high stiletto shoes.'

To a whole generation of kids, David's most famous creation is one of the grubbiest trouble magnets in the annals of children's literature. Over the past 10 years, Dirty Bertie has starred in more than twenty books, written by Alan McDonald, with titles such as **Fleas!**, **Bogeys!** and **Burp!**. But it all began with David's picture book simply called **Dirty Bertie**.

'I wanted to do picture books and I wasn't being offered any at all. So I thought, I'll see if I can write one. Writing isn't my thing ' I failed English 'O' level ' but I had this idea for a little boy with really dirty habits. I thought it could be quite funny; I like humour in books. So I wrote this little story, well it's more of a situation really, where Bertie would have these dirty habits and there would be a consequence. Amazingly, Little Tiger said they'd like to publish it. And it's 10 years old this year.'

What is it about Bertie that makes him such a runaway success, I ask? David looks coy. 'He's quite a likeable character,' he explains. 'He's not horrible or mean, he's just mischievous.' When I ask David if there are any similarities between himself and Bertie, he smiles wryly. David Roberts, the immaculate and urbane illustrator couldn't possibly be anything like a boy who picks his nose and delights in constantly farting, could he?



'I think there probably is a little bit of me in Bertie,' he confesses. 'But I certainly don't pick my nose and eat it! That's what I always get asked by children. As an illustrator, people always say you draw yourself in your characters and I think there's a lot of truth in that. You get so used to your own face - just looking at yourself - that when you draw, you instinctively draw yourself. When you see illustrators and you see their work, you would certainly be able to pick them out. So I definitely think there's a bit of Bertie in me, yeah.'

But if Bertie's disgusting ways revolt parents, it's exactly that sense of naughtiness and mischief that children adore. 'Yes, they're being allowed to be cheeky with these stories,' says David. 'They're not encouraging dirtiness. It's saying, there are consequences to having these habits, however, you are allowed to laugh at this. It is funny as well. And you are allowed to revel in the revoltingness of it, to say 'yuck' and 'urgh'! I'm not saying, 'go off and eat your snot!' I'm saying 'no, you don't do that, it's horrible and disgusting. Bertie does it and it's not nice!''

After Bertie and his bottom burps, David's latest project is like a breath of fresh air - literally. Last Christmas, his reinterpretation of Kenneth Grahame's classic **The Wind in the Willows** was a major hit with young and old readers alike. Was he nervous about tackling Grahame's evergreen when so many of us identify Ernest Shepard's illustrations with the original text?

'I was a little bit worried, but I had never read it,' David explains. 'I knew it - I knew the characters - because I'd seen it on telly but I didn't know the story as such. I hadn't actually seen Shepard's version and I made a point of not looking at it, or any of the other well-known versions. I was just so excited to be given an opportunity to reinterpret a classic like that. Helen Mortimer at Oxford approached me with the idea, and I'm always interested in what other people think I can do. As an illustrator, you often stay within the realms of your own imagination. Then when someone suggests 'what about this?' you think, oh wow yeah, maybe?'

The Wind in the Willows demonstrates all the hours of planning and research that go into David Roberts' work. Determined that the drawings should be true to the era, he resisted any temptation to 'modernize' the illustrations.

'I did a lot of research to make sure I stayed within the boundaries of that period, the turn of the century. So the patterns I used for the wallpaper, their clothes, I was very particular that I didn't do anything that would be recognizable from a different period. But then again, I didn't want to just copy a William Morris wallpaper. So I took a more stylized approach; I looked at Gustav Klimt - he was around at the same time - and how he used repeat patterns of triangles and circles. They're quite simple shapes and I thought, I'm going to use that, that's what I'll take from that era. The circle motif is used throughout the book as a chapter heading, and the circle is also mirrored in the shape of the doors for Badger's and Mole's houses to show they're like warrens, and then the triangle print on the wallpaper in Ratty's home.'

The great problem with research, of course, is knowing when to stop; when to put down the books, log off the computer and pick up the pen. David agrees.

‘Oh especially with Google, it can be endless, it can take hours. I enjoy going to buy books on pattern. I love Dover Street Bookshop because you can find fashion books on costume from 1910, surface pattern, wallpaper and design. Those things I like looking at, and I take inspiration from there. But I’m always keen to start the drawing process.’

It’s that planning stage that David admits is his favourite part of the job. For him, much of this phase will take place not at his desk, but in an altogether more unorthodox environment – immersed in a pool of water. ‘I think I’m at my happiest when I’m swimming and I’m thinking of planning the pictures. When you’re swimming (as long as you’re not counting lengths, which is the most boring thing in the world!), it’s just that freedom where you can think, there’s nothing else to do other than think. There are no other distractions – there’s no radio, no music, no TV – so you can just plan things. The whole of **The Wind in the Willows** was planned in the Marshall Street baths in Soho. Every single illustration was worked out, chapter by chapter, quite methodical.’

Having tackled one classic, David says he now has the bug. When I ask him which other texts he’d like to tackle next, there’s no hesitation.

‘Oh, **The Wizard of Oz**, I would dearly love to do that. And **Beowulf**. If anyone would like me to do **Beowulf**, I’d be thrilled. But it’s what somebody else might see that I could do. Somebody else might present me with something I’d never even thought of, and that would then spark my imagination. That’s why I like working with authors rather than writing my own stuff. It’s that moment when you get this text and suddenly it paints all these pictures in your mind that I would never have thought up myself.’

Time might be an issue for David over the coming months. He’s just finished illustrating a Peter Bently story about a group of sheep that steals an aeroplane and flies off round the world (his research sent him back to the pastoral works of Eric Ravilious for inspiration) and there’s a new Julia Donaldson story about a flying bathtub on the horizon, too. Is there anyone whose writing he’d like to illustrate that he hasn’t already done?

‘There is one author I’d dearly love to work with,’ David admits with a grin as cheeky as Dirty Bertie’s. ‘I have worked with her before on an educational book called **Hairem Scarem**, about a creature with long hair. That’s Jeanne Willis. She’s such a character – the stories she tells about the pet snake that used to live in her hair! That’s my next campaign – to work with Jeanne.’

Despite all the demands on his time, David still manages to get out and about to encourage children to pick up their pencils and draw, and his enthusiasm is infectious. At a recent event at the Discover centre in Stratford, East London, he managed to persuade even the most reluctant young artists to try out their skills.

‘It was great, the kids were hilarious. I always get them to draw and I tell them there’s no wrong way to do it. If you think you can’t draw, take that out of your mind. Because you can’t do it wrong. I said ‘it’s not like maths! You can do a sum wrong, but you can’t do this picture wrong. However it turns out is your style and your interpretation.’ Some children will launch straight into a picture, they won’t be frightened of that white expanse of paper. But others say, ‘I don’t know what to do, I don’t know how to do it,’ and you say ‘well just saw a circle and another circle and build up a face that way.’ That’s satisfying, seeing all those different pictures although we’ve all drawn the same thing. I love that.’

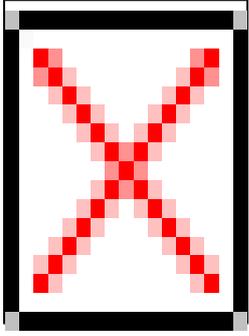
The Books

The **Dirty Bertie** books are published by Little Tiger Press.

Tyrannosaurus Drip, Macmillan Children’s Books, Julia Donaldson, 978-0230015500, £6.99 pbk.

Wings & Co books by Sally Gardner are published by Orion Children’s Books

The Wind in the Willows Oxford Children’s Books 978-0192732347 £12.99 hbk.



Damian Kelleher is a journalist and writer.

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