



Authorgraph 216 Caroline Binch

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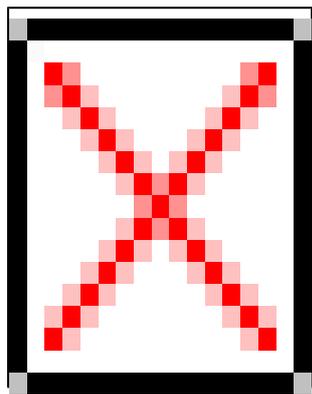
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Caroline Binch interviewed by **Tricia Kings**

Caroline Binch is the award-winning author and illustrator of much-loved picture books such as **Gregory Cool**, **Hue Boy**, **Christy's Dream** and **Amazing Grace**, and **Road Horse**, a book for young readers. Her books are always about people and places she cares deeply about, encouraging her readers to 'See the positives in life instead of the negatives.' She has won the **Smarties Prize** and been Highly Commended three times for the **CILIP Kate Greenaway Award**.

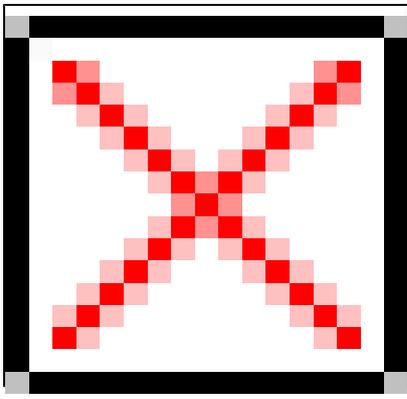


Amazing Grace is now celebrating its 25th anniversary and over one million sales. Its publisher Frances Lincoln has produced a special new edition with reflections from Caroline, and the book's author Mary Hoffman.

I met Caroline, and her dog Betty, at her home in Cornwall, a welcoming granite cottage full of colour, with pictures everywhere - postcards, cuttings, paintings and drawings, many by Caroline, including a stunning portrait of W. H. Auden. Upstairs is her studio, with a draughtsman's desk from Trafford Park, where her mother used to work. Set by a window it has a view across the Penwith fields to the sea. Caroline walks these fields with her dog and goes in the sea every day.

There are boxes labelled with the names of her picture books, containing the photographs used for creating each book. There are files with the images for book covers from the 70s onwards: many old friends - Dick Cate's **Ghost Dog**, Jan Needle's **My Mate Shofiq**. In her bathroom is the enlarger she used for printing her photographs - all digital now, no need for a bathroom darkroom.

We sat by the kitchen range and talked. Youthful, quietly spoken, reflective, and humorous, Caroline told me some of her story



and how horses first inspired her to draw.

She grew up in Old Trafford. Her father loved the outdoors and there were country walks, Camping Club weekends, and tents pitched in Cornwall every summer. Always her heart has been in Cornwall. And her great love has been horses.

Christy's Dream is Caroline's story.

She wasn't happy at school except in art, where she could mostly paint what she wanted - horses - and was good at it. In the evenings, while her father worked night shifts, she and her mother often went to the cinema, especially for cowboy films. From the age of 8 she was riding. She helped at a stables and at 11 she started saving for a horse from her paper round. At 17 she got him. Without her parents knowing. Just like Christy.

Wonder Boy was a two year old 15.2 blue roan, advertised in Horse and Hound for 130 guineas. She had saved £50, so she borrowed the rest and found a field for £1 a week. He was easy to break in and most days she cycled to see him, an hour each way. Before long her mother challenged her: "Anyone would think you had a horse?". "Yes, I have?". Her parents were angry, "It's either the horse or college?". "Come and see him." It worked.

She went to Salford Technical College to study Graphics, and every summer she waitressed in Cornwall. Her horse went there too, in an old furniture van. As with all her adventures she said "I'll sort it out when we get there, things will fall into place." And they did - a field was found.

She got her diploma but felt restricted by graphics. Most of all she was an illustrator. In Cornwall with her horse and her dog she drew and painted and kept herself through different jobs - life-modelling, nannying, farmwork. She built up a portfolio inspired by her passions - horses, Africa, black history and black American music, and photography.

Her passion for Africa came from her mother, who grew up in Namibia. Her stories and photographs made a strong impression. Caroline's grandfather had gone to Africa from Barnardo's and worked as a railway guard.

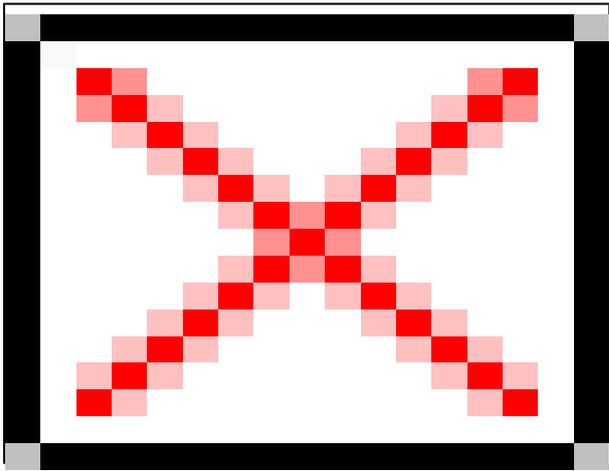
A keen interest in black American music and black history was fuelled by books from the library. "The library has always been big in my life". She recalls a picture book about West Africa: "the beauty and the energy of people, so creative in their dress and decorations." From early years the library was also the source of boys' adventure stories about horses. No **Jill's Gymkhana** for Caroline!

She was always interested in photography. She was doing drawings - "pushing it a bit further all the time" - using her own photographs, and those from books, like the pictures of the US Dustbowl migrants: "People marginalised in the world. Their life on their faces."

There were always adventures - a bike accident, a damp shack by a river, selling some pictures, never enough money. Leaving Cornwall, she eventually reached London with her portfolio, gaining the interest of the illustration agency Artist Partners whose artists included Brian Sanders, Michael Lennard and Roger Coleman, Caroline's heroes. The agency made her a magical work offer: a Soho studio and a loan of £20 a week. Soon she was earning: advertising jobs, Sunday supplements - and some exciting covers, such as those for the books of Primo Levi. Most of all she was interested in portraiture.

She could afford to travel and with Stella Gibbons' grandsons she took off for Peru and many adventures. A year away,

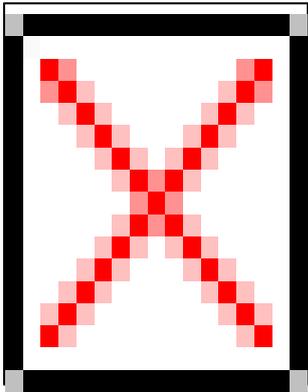
it included driving a 1936 Ford from La Paz to Honduras, and an extraordinary time there: "a richly diverse place with the descendants of pirates, slaves, Spanish settlers". She sailed along the coast to Belize, then hopped across to Jamaica and the Sunsplash festival, before returning to the UK with a wealth of photos, sketchbooks and stories: "I've some wicked pictures of the places I've been."



It was back to the "grim reality" of advertising and romantic book covers - but then came **Crown Jewel** " Ralph de Boissiere's novel about the Caribbean and Caroline's first black cover. This brought recognition for her multicultural work, leading to more such covers including those for teenage books by the US writer Rosa Guy. Chris Kloet, editor at Gollancz, suggested that Rosa and Caroline together do a picture book " a first for both of them. On Caroline's suggestion, Rosa wrote **Billy the Great** so that Kanju, Caroline's 6 year old son, could be the model. At the same time the story of **Amazing Grace** arrived. Caroline's small canon of picture books had begun.

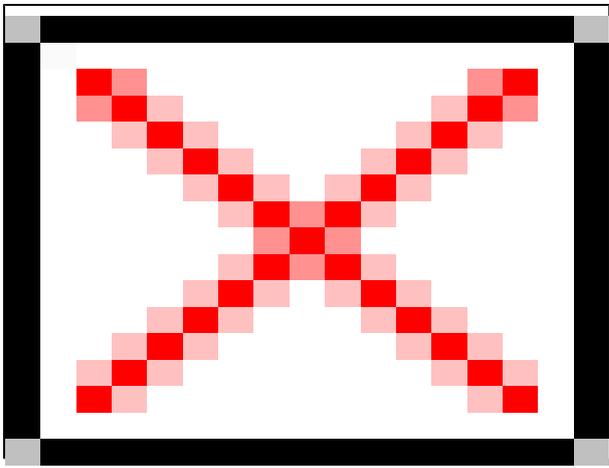
Caroline also writes and illustrates her own books, several of them published by Frances Lincoln. With her story ideas she first writes the text to submit to her editor. Then she finds the people to act out the story, taking many photographs from which she works to create the illustrations. "Doing a picture book is like running a film. You find the people, set the scene, and direct the characters." For each scene there's a quick thumbnail sketch, showing the setting and the pose or action needed.

The chosen photographs are then turned into drawings. Choosing which to use is "the hardest part" " there's the page layout, variety, the match with the text. "It's important to me that the facial expressions and body language are true, and clearly tell the story for young non-readers." Once these roughs are agreed, she paints the pictures.



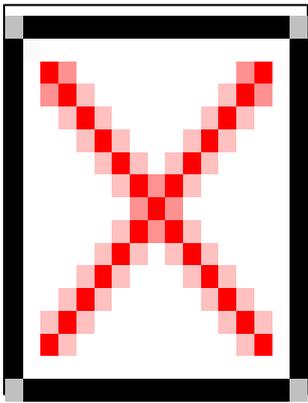
It can take up to a year to complete a book. For **Gregory Cool**, about a city boy staying with his relatives in Tobago, she went to the Caribbean, finding a family willing to be photographed. At the last minute "Grandma" got cold feet but then along came aunty, perfect in her striped dress and wonderful straw hat! **Since Dad Left** is the story of Sid, whose parents have split up, and his adjustment to the new patterns in his life. It's set in Cornwall and Caroline's rich pictures and spare, sympathetic text, powerfully show Sid's feelings and his parents' love for him.

Christy's Dream, as Caroline says, is her own story. Christy longs for a horse, and with his savings he buys his very own



pony. He just has to win round his ma? This shoot was with a family on a Dublin estate: lots of characters to coordinate, a race to get the last picture, and Christy's happiness shining from the page. **Road Horse** is a full-length story with black and white drawings about another boy and a horse, and about Gypsies, Travellers, and the Appleby Horse Fair in Cumbria which she visits to draw and photograph each year ? ?the best show on earth.?

And then there is **Amazing Grace**, a ground-breaking book about diversity. ?Reading **Amazing Grace** for the first time I felt a tingle of excitement. Yes! I would love to visualise this terrific character and her world.?



She remembers the publisher saying ?This won't be a commercial book, black books don't sell?? 25 years later with over a million copies sold around the world, **Amazing Grace** shows that such a book, written and illustrated with perception and passion, is wanted and needed. Launching its 2015 **Diverse Voices** booklist, which includes both **Amazing Grace** and **Hue Boy**, the Guardian said, ?In today's multicultural and multiracial UK, with 13% of the population non-white, even more young readers are hungry for stories where difference is a source of richness. And that's why the plea for more diverse books is so important.? Diversity is key in all Caroline's books. Children can recognise themselves there, and meet other children, and learn about their lives. As a librarian I have seen so many children and parents discovering and enjoying Grace and Christy, Hue Boy and Petar, and all the other characters painted with such skill and love.

We had talked all afternoon and now it was dusk. Time to take Betty for her evening walk across the fields.

Tricia Kings is a freelance children's librarian; she is a consultant for the **Reading Agency's Chatterbooks** reading groups programme, and writes resources and reading notes for children's books.

Amazing Grace Anniversary Edition, Mary Hoffman illus Caroline Binch, Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 978-1847805935, £12.99

Hue Boy, Rita Phillips Mitchell illus Caroline Binch, Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 978-1847803030, £6.99

Gregory Cool, Caroline Binch, Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 978-1847802583, £6.99

Christy's Dream, Caroline Binch, Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 978-1845074722, £6.99

Road Horse, Caroline Binch, Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 978-1847800701, £6.99

The Princess and the Castle, Caroline Binch, Otter-Barry Books, 978-1910959480, £6.99 (May 2016)

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