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# We are such stuff?

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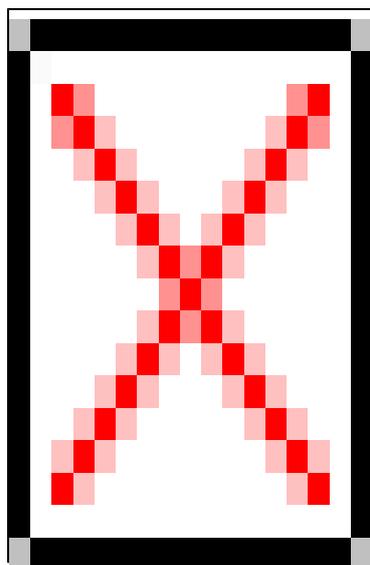
[Nicholas Tucker](#) [1]

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Byline:

**Michael Morpurgo** interviewed by **Nicholas Tucker**

**Nicholas Tucker** interviews **Michael Morpurgo** about his new book and as a new exhibition opens at **Seven Stories**.



Michael Morpurgo's latest book **Such Stuff: A Story-Maker's Inspiration** must be the most detailed account yet of how one successful children's author sets about writing their books. While Enid Blyton used to claim that her stories simply arrived from nowhere without effort, Michael puts forward detailed accounts here of how particular plots and characters came into existence in twenty of his most popular stories. He also includes extracts from the stories themselves plus some concluding pages providing extra context, given that all the plots concerned revolve around actual historical incidents. With illustrations by Michael Foreman, Michael's long-time friend as well as chief illustrator, this book, stretching over 372 pages, is for fans to savour and for those still unacquainted with this hard-working writer to try him out. The novels themselves start off with **War Horse** and end with **My Father is a Polar Bear**, published last year. Written primarily with young readers in mind, there is plenty here for older ones as well.

**Talking to Michael about this book I asked him to say more about what he describes as his 'dreamtime' - the period when all his various jumping off points finally cohere into a single, complete narrative.**

When I started trying to weave stories together I found that if I forced the pace and worked too quickly it all started to feel too arranged. So I decided to spend time not writing at all, instead wandering along country lanes or whatever until things finally seemed to come together. Ted Hughes, a neighbour and friend, once told me 'Never sit down in front of a piece of blank paper with no idea of what you are going to write. That way you will start associating writing with anxiety and fear. Always do your thinking beforehand.' So in my case I must first find a landscape and then populate it with my characters, giving them names and then imagining how they might relate. Sometimes this dreamtime can risk turning into procrastination, and I never get everything quite right before I start. But when I do sit down to write I always have a fairly good idea of how things will go. I won't always know the end of a story but all the people will be there in my mind when I start and also a picture of where they live. But most important of all I must find the right voice

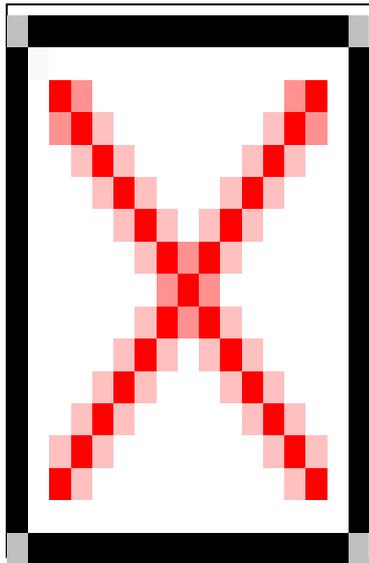
for telling the whole thing in the first place.

**But this voice so often sounds like you, as you are now and as I have always known you!**

A proper writer can stand back a bit further and I'm not sure I have that ability. I am too engaged, too involved with the story. I live it, every moment as I'm writing it. I think in that way I'm like an actor; I get inside my characters, sometimes calling them Michael too. This is how I am, and that's how I make my stories. I can't invent worlds; I can't write fantasy. I wish I could. But as a child I had C.S. Lewis force-fed to me and that may have put me off fantasy for life. It's important to have books in the house but it's also vital not to force them on children before they are ready!

**This present book is almost like a guide on how to write novels! You seem determined to strip away any of the mystique involved in writing. What was your thinking here?**

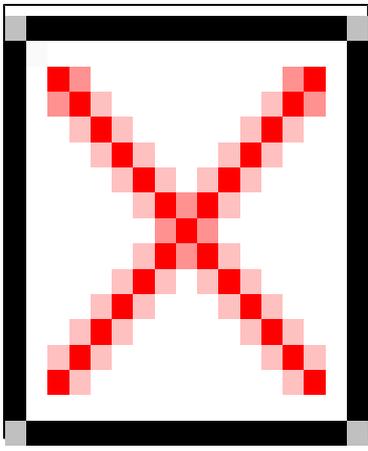
Children spend an awful lot of time asking authors "How do you do it?" "Where do you get your ideas from?" I was put



off writing for years because the whole thing was so often made to seem out of reach, both the books themselves and the process of story-making. It came to me really late in life that in fact we all have stories to tell. It's just a question of having the confidence to gather these thoughts together and then write them down. Writing is all about memory, and it's important for children to know that they have memories too which if they wanted to they could write about as well. There are stories everywhere; everyone's got stories. Every place has stories. I'm heartily sick of the whole business of the cleverness of writers. It's all silly nonsense. We are all story-makers. Whenever children ask me where I get my stories from I love telling them I get them from the same place where they keep their own memories of stories which may well be just as good.

**Even so, you do have a particular knack for coming across the most incredible stories yourself.**

I call it luck ? I really do! And I was also a good liar when I was young! I used to tell stories in my boarding school dormitory, however fantastic, and they would be believed. And I have travelled a lot since then and that's also a wonderful way of talking to people you have never met before, who often have the most extraordinary stories to tell as well. So put all that together, the stories you hear and then the way the imagination works upon them, and you finally get to what I do now.



But this is to downplay Michael's accompanying skill as a writer. Shorn of any affectation, his prose style honed over many years has long become lean and insistent, equally effective in dialogue or description. His imaginative range is also enormous, as the settings and topics covered in the extracts from the twenty stories selected for this book demonstrate. Locations include desert islands, Sri Lanka, Venice and a concentration camp. Topics and characters take in World War One, the ghost of Sir Walter Raleigh, transported British orphans to Australia, saving books from a burning library in Sarajevo, what happens when a Tsunami hits, smuggled child immigrants, German prisoners of war, the sinking of the **Titanic** and the **Lusitania** and the ravages of Foot and Mouth disease.

A diet as rich as this is something to be thankful for. Michael's further thoughts and annotations to his selected stories in this present book are also interesting and memorable. It is due to be published by Walker Books (£12,99) to coincide with a retrospective exhibition of his work put on by **Seven Stories, the Centre for Children's Books**, in Newcastle from July 2016-June 2017. Hopefully this and **Such Stuff** will encourage new readers either to the books selected in it or else to other titles from what is now a long list. It's not just that his stories read so well. They also almost invariably touch on important issues that involve us all, children and adults, but in a way that makes them accessible without ever writing down. He is a remarkable writer and a good man.

**Nicholas Tucker** is honorary senior lecturer in Cultural and Community Studies at Sussex University.

**Such Stuff: A Story-maker's Inspiration** illustrated by Michael Foreman is published by Walker Books, £12.99 hbk.

[Michael Morpurgo A Lifetime in Stories](#) [3] is at **Seven Stories, The National Centre for Children's Books** until 2 July 2017.

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