



Authorgraph Steve Antony

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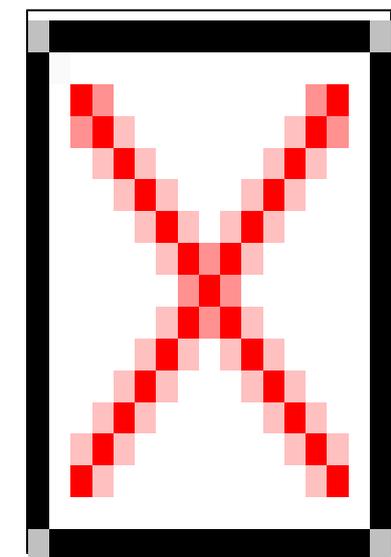
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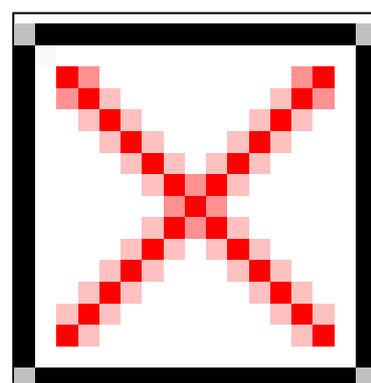
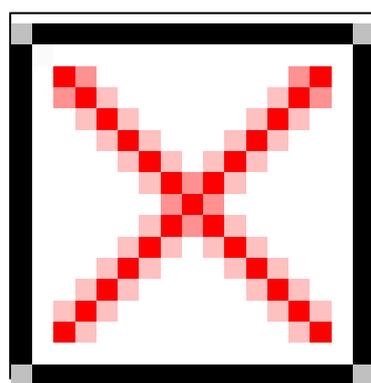
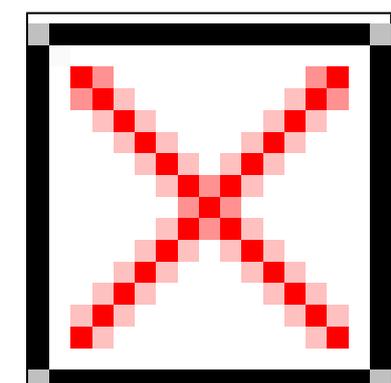
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Steve Antony interviewed by **Michelle Pauli**

It's been a ridiculously busy two and a half years for Steve Antony since he graduated from his MA in children's book illustration at Anglia Ruskin University. He's packed in eight published picture books, chart-topping success, a major children's book award and appearances at festivals all over the country - he almost can't quite believe it himself. While to the outside world he appears to have burst onto the children's books scene from nowhere, the 39-year-old Swindon-based author-illustrator sees it rather as the culmination of many years of hopes and dreams, rejections and hard work.



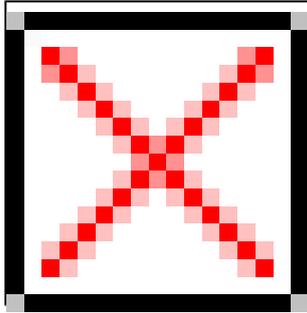
"A few years ago I was working in a call centre, and dreaming of this happening," he says. "It might seem to other people as if it was an overnight thing, it wasn't at all. It's been a big mountain to climb and I'm still climbing that mountain."



It all kicked off in May 2014 when Hodder Children's Books published [The Queen's Hat](#) [3], a gloriously bonkers tale of the Queen chasing her hat around London landmarks. It was swiftly followed by [Please Mr Panda](#) [4], a morality

tale of a grumpy panda with a passion for politeness, which saw Antony crack America when the book was chosen by the Barnes and Noble chain as the first of its Story Time books and was read in 654 stores simultaneously one day in January 2015. **Green Lizards Vs Red Rectangles** is a simple but powerful exploration of war and peace, while his Betty the gorilla series, [Betty Goes Bananas](#) [5] and [Betty Goes Bananas in Pyjamas](#) [6], which perfectly depicts a toddler's exasperated and exasperating world, also captured the hearts of parents of tantrummy toddlers everywhere (and became huge in Taiwan).

Monster in the Hood is just out, there's a third, festive, Queen book, **The Queen's Present**, out next month in time for



Christmas, and a third Panda tale, **Thank You Mr Panda**, coming next year. It's a hectic time for Antony and, when we meet in Swindon Central Library, his head is full of the book he is currently on deadline to finish. But the words come tumbling out, from the excitement of meeting his literary heroes and the fun of lurking in the green room at the Hay festival to the joy of being sent pictures from small fans of his work (he brings some along to show me ? ?Look! They've just read [Monster in the Hood](#) [7] so they've all drawn pictures and it's just so fantastic to see this. That's their amazing work ? I just put the seed out there and it grows and becomes something else and means different things to different people and that's what's so remarkable, something I hadn't anticipated.?)

Antony also brings a fascinating array of sketchbooks and idea books to explain the process of dreaming up and creating a picture book. **The Queen's Hat** was inspired by one simple image he saw in a newspaper, of the Queen holding onto her hat on a windy day. He immediately had the idea of her running around chasing her hat, followed by a butler, guards and, of course, a corgi. ?A very, very simple, story, pure fun? as he describes it. With its red/blue patriotic colour scheme, the book also marked another important turning point for Antony ? his relationship with colour and, more specifically, his colour blindness.

His red/green colour blindness was diagnosed when he was a child and it used to be a source of frustration. ?I can remember vividly a teacher asking me why I had coloured the sky purple. And I was annoyed at myself at getting it wrong because I was convinced it was blue,? he recalls. ?I used colour pencils because they were labelled but even then I really struggled because you can have a whole range of yellows and the yellows merge into dark browns, or light browns even, and there?s a bit where I can?t quite tell where the yellow stops and the brown starts or when it turns into green.?

Antony's growing confidence with his art and artistic process changed that, although the animals in **Mr Panda** are specifically black and white creatures because of his colour blindness.

?I realised, actually, the possibilities are limitless if I just see being colour blind as a positive as opposed to a hindrance. I used to really envy people who can just pick up some paint and then paint the grass - they know the rules and they know how to break the rules. Which is something I never had because I've never really known the rules in the first place. So I've made up my own rules. That?s what I've done with my books. I look at colour differently. I don?t think of it as 'the grass is green and the sky is blue', I think about what the colour means in the book, what is the intention of the book. I try to think about colours more intentionally rather than just colouring in. So I think about colour at the beginning of the book. It can almost influence the book as well.?

With **The Queen's Hat**, the colour scheme has fed into what he describes as ?a very British book? with its iconic landmarks and a certain kind of humour. For Antony, it?s also a very nostalgic book, harking back to the homesickness he felt as a young English boy living in the States. ?There were so many things I missed about England, little things like cobbled streets and Flake bars and Walkers Crisps,? Antony remembers. Although he was born and raised in Swindon,

he lived in New Mexico from the ages of seven to 16 after his parents divorced and his mother, also an artist, married an American.

The family moved back to the UK at a difficult time for Antony as he was too old for school and too young for college and times were tough financially. Living alone in Swindon, he started at college but had to drop out and work in a supermarket for two years, saving up to continue his education. Art college followed but then a nine year hiatus working night shifts in a call centre, which was fantastic because it allowed me lots of time between calls to draw. Sometimes I would continue drawing while I was on the phone to a customer so while they were moaning about their blocked drains, I was doodling away on autopilot.

An offer of voluntary redundancy came and he grabbed the chance to pursue his passion, via Anglia Ruskin's celebrated MA. It was daunting in many ways but Antony knew it was his great opportunity: I didn't have a plan B. I knew that if it didn't work out I was pretty screwed, to be honest.

It was clearly the right risk to take. He left Cambridge in 2013 with three picture book dummies, which were all snapped up, and by the following spring he was working full-time as a writer and illustrator. Unusually, perhaps, he thinks of himself as a writer first and foremost who would much rather write for someone else than illustrate someone else's words. The exception is when he was asked to illustrate a new cover for Enid Blyton's **Five Have a Wonderful Time**, as part of the 70th anniversary celebrations of the **Famous Five** series: I used to fantasise about my books getting published and what it would be like but being asked to do this was beyond my fantasy, he says. It was also challenging, encapsulating the much-loved characters and doing the story justice.

Another recent, and huge, point of pride is being appointed [Patron of Reading](#) [8] at Swindon library. Libraries have always been an important part of Antony's life and he credits the **Draw 50** series by Lee J Ames - books that he'd take out of Alamogordo library each week and pore over - with helping him learn how to capture a character's personality with as few strokes as possible.

When I was a kid we couldn't really afford to get that many books and we certainly were never able to afford the whole series of those books. Without the library, I wonder whether things would have turned out how they have for me - it was libraries that held the books that fostered my love of drawing. When a library shuts you, essentially, are locking the door to this world of limitless possibility, he says.

It's a long way from Alamogordo to doing live sketching of **The Queen's Hat** in the window of Foyles but, with his boundless enthusiasm and sheer joy in being able, finally, to do the job he always dreamed of, Antony's taking none of it for granted. These are such special moments, he says. It's been a long journey but I'm still on the journey. This isn't the end of a journey, this is the beginning of another journey which is really exciting.

Michelle Pauli is a freelance writer and editor specialising in books and education, and former deputy editor of the **Guardian** children's books site.

[The Queen's Hat](#) [3], Hodder Children's Books, 978-1444919158, £6.99pbk

The Queen's Handbag, Hodder Children's Books, 978-1444925548, £6.99 pbk

The Queen's Present, Hodder Children's Books, 978-1444925630, £11.99 hbk

[Please Mr Panda](#) [4], Hodder Children's Books, 978-1444916652

I'll Wait Mr Panda, Hodder Children's Books, 978-1444916676, £6.99 pbk

Green Lizards Vs Red Rectangles, Hodder Children's Books, 978-1444920109, £11.99 hbk

[Betty Goes Bananas](#) [5], Oxford Children's Books, 978-0192738165, £6.99 pbk

[Betty Goes Bananas in Pyjamas](#) [6], Oxford Children's Books, 978-0192738196, £6.99 pbk

[Monster in the Hood](#) [7], Oxford Children's Books, 978-0192739797, £6.99 pbk

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