



Pictures for Dickens & Jones

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Michael Foreman writes about his latest illustrations.

Illustrating a dead author has advantages because there are no arguments. Illustrating a living author has advantages because there is lunch. **Michael Foreman** writes about creating

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Pictures for Dickens & Jones

I re-read **A Christmas Carol** during a long flight in October 1982. From that moment on I was full of the Christmas spirit.

When I am home I feel I must work. Reading isn't working (actually I don't think drawing is working either) and any reading I have to do is done during journeys or waiting at stations, airports and dentists.

Whenever I opened **A Christmas Carol** I was instantly lost to all around me, and when forced to look from the book by the arrival of my stop, plane or dentist, I would be surprised to see no snow through the window.

Japan in October was not very Christmassy, and London in that bright crisp November was quite out of step with my festive feelings.

By December it was better. We were now in Cornwall. At least the streets were cobbled. People wrapped and muffled, actually smiling and saying 'Hello. Merry Christmas!'

The shops in the narrow street almost rivalled Dickens' glorious description of the poulterers, fruiterers, and grocers.

By this time I was well into the pictures and it was very difficult to keep working while feeling the bustle mounting in the streets and the bonhomie in the pubs.

Part of the story actually stems from a visit Dickens made to Cornwall.

In the sequence about the mine and the moor and the lighthouse, Dickens referred to the old tin mines at Bottalack, between St Ives and Lands End.

As part of my research, therefore, we made little trips along the coast to Bottalack, and the fact that the old Count House at the mine is now one of the best restaurants in Britain is purely coincidental.

The colour plate of the cliffs shows the ruins of the old Bottalack mine. Other reference was at hand. My image of Scrooge is based upon a Cornish friend and master mariner, while one of the shops on the endpapers is my mother's old village shop in Suffolk.

One of the interesting things about illustrating Dickens is that it is the first period in history to be thoroughly recorded photographically, and but for the substitution of parking meters for horse dung, whole streets of the period are virtually intact.

With this wealth of available reference, there is a danger of overdoing the detail and petrifying the action.

Whether books need illustrations at all, and the work of a brilliant descriptive writer like Dickens in particular, is a question I won't raise. The fewer people who think about that the better!

I want my pictures to be more of an invitation than a guided tour. I had a wonderful time doing it. Imagine - the Christmas spirit every day for four months.

If you are one of the peculiar people who don't like Christmas, (I was one for a while) either change your friends, (change them anyway, they must be a boring lot) or read **A Christmas Carol**. Enjoy a born again Christmas.

Illustrating Terry Jones is obviously something completely different. Everything is invented. His **Fairy Tales** (written for his daughter), of course, are outside time and historic reference, but **Eric the Viking** also was written without any factual constraint.

Terry wrote the saga for his five year old son, Bill, and carefully avoided learning anything about vikings other than what everyone thinks they know about vikings. When I thought about the pictures I found I needed to know rather more.

I went to Scandinavia and saw the remains of long ships and Viking bits and pieces.

The main directive from all the experts there was 'Whatever you do, don't put horns on their helmets. Viking helmets did not have horns.'

I decided that what they meant was they had never *found* a viking helmet with horns, and I decided I had "every faith" in them finding one in the next week or two!

Reassured by how little had actually been found, I thought the Jones version was as sound as any.

Terry Jones' **Fairy Tales** were virtually finished before he showed them to me. But Eric was fed to me adventure by adventure. Like a Dickens serial.

I found it grew from an exciting adventure into something quite epic.

It gained a momentum of its own and I think even surprised Terry in some of the directions it took. The first drawings I did were OK for the early part of the saga, but did not suit the later developments, and needed to be redone.

Terry, of course, has his four penny worth if he doesn't approve of any of the pictures. He is often surprised by my interpretations, but usually I can talk him round over lunch.

Illustrating a dead author has advantages because there are no arguments. Illustrating a living author has advantages because there is lunch.

Due to the lack of a publisher, we had two years of lunches before **Fairy Tales** was produced by Pavilion.

Eric was produced much quicker and there was more work involved, so we are still catching up on the lunches.

Working on two books at the same time can cause problems, but usually I find it an advantage.

The Dickens had to be finished first, but whenever I had a block or became unsure of what to do, I had a go at the Vikings for a few days. In this way each book kept the other fresh.

This winter, I am concentrating on just one book - **Tales from Shakespeare** - by Leon Garfield. A daunting prospect. But Leon phoned the other day and suggested LUNCH, so things are moving in the right direction.

The Books

A Christmas Carol, Gollancz, 0 575 033118, £5.95

Fairy Tales, Pavilion Books, 0 907516 03 3, £6.95

The Saga of Erik the Viking, Pavilion Books, 0 907516 23 8, £6.95

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