



Terry Jones: Children's Writer

Article Author:

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Tony Bradman reports on a visit to the man behind **Erik the Viking**.

Interviewed by **Tony Bradman**

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A nice young lady (who later turned out to be the au pair) opened the door of the Jones house on the afternoon I arrived to interview Terry. I was ushered in and sent up the stairs to a room in the attic, where I half expected to find the aforesaid Mr Jones sitting at a large organ, naked but for a collar and tie.

That particular pose should be familiar to the millions of Monty Python fans out there; it was one in which we saw Terry Jones many times during the television series which changed British comedy for ever. Terry, along with the other Pythons, moved onwards, outwards and upwards into films like **Monty Python** and the **Holy Grail** and their most recent production - which Terry both directed and physically exploded in - **The Meaning of Life**.

But there's more, there's more; like several other members of the Python team, Mr Jones had demonstrated an envy-provoking ability to do Other Things As Well As Make You Fear For. The Integrity Of Your Bladder By Making You Laugh A Lot. To wit: he has also (and here we must speak in hushed whispers) *Written Books*. His first, an academic book on the Knight in Chaucer's **Canterbury Tales**, wasn't really the sort of tome you'd expect from a man who's been seen naked (but for a collar and tie) on television. But it was the result of a long term interest in Chaucer which has its roots in Terry's study of English Literature at Oxford.

Medieval literature and books about it therefore form a very substantial part of the library revealed to my eyes when Terry ushered me into the attic study of the South London home where he lives with his wife Alison, daughter Sally (nine) and son Bill (seven). Terry Jones has a very good grounding in the sort of material which, filtered through the subconscious of a Python, has emerged in two of the most interesting and individual children's books to have been published for many a long year - **Fairy Tales** and **Erik the Viking**. Which is, of course, why I was there to talk to him. I was there on one of the last warm days of the year, and we took the opportunity to sit in the garden.

Of course, the first question to put to Terry was Why Does Someone As Busy And Rich And Famous As Him Take The Time To Write A Children's Book?

"I just got up one Monday morning to discover that I had a bit of spare time, and I'd simply always wanted to write some fairy tales. I'd read Grimm and Andersen to Sally when she was about five, and thought the stories were too long and too wordy. I also didn't like them very much; I mean, it was a bit over the top to put Snow White's wicked stepmother in a pair of red hot metal shoes! I didn't like the violence, the gratuitous cruelty of them at all. They seemed to be condoning violence, and I thought that it wasn't right for a child to go to sleep with that message in her head."

Terry found the writing of the tales quite easy. "I wrote two a day to start with, although I slowed down after a while.

Alison's always worked since we've had kids - she's a research scientist - and Sally was in a nursery, so I used to try them out on her when she got home in the evening. It was a good discipline - you could always tell the ones that worked."

One major interruption was that Terry had to go off to Tunisia to make **The Life of Brian** with the Monty Python team, and it wasn't until he came back that he found a publisher for the book; another publisher, who shall remain nameless, had been too slow. Colin Webb had published Terry's Chaucer book when he'd been an editor at Weidenfeld and Nicolson, and had since started Pavilion Books - and he snapped **Fairy Tales** up. Terry already knew Michael Foreman, and had interested him in the project, and in his words, they came "as a package".

Some of Michael's original illustrations for the book adorn various walls of the Jones household. "I've got a lot of admiration for Michael's work", said Terry. "He seemed to get it just right, and I think that his pictures really do an awful lot for the book as a whole - as they do for **Erik the Viking**."

Which is, of course, the Jones/Foreman team's second co-product. "I wrote it for Bill, because he wasn't interested in Fairy Tales. This is all terribly sexist, but Bill appears to be solely interested in the different ways you can kill people. He said he didn't want a lot of different stories, he wanted one hero, and he was interested at the time in the Vikings exhibition at the British Museum. The Vikings did actually kill people, too, which made them OK.

"Unfortunately he's slightly irritated by wet Vikings like the ones in the book who don't do too much slaughter and pillage. I didn't do any research; I amassed a great pile of books about the Vikings which I then didn't read."

Bill, it appeared, was something of a character. I was even a little worried at the prospect of meeting him, imagining him to be some sort of large Viking child who chewed up interviewers for breakfast. I didn't actually meet him during the afternoon although at one stage Terry climbed up one of the garden walls (a high one, separating the garden from some playing fields) and had a long drawn out conversation with an invisible Bill on the other side. Apart from this being the only whacky thing Terry did during our meeting, it also managed to make the figure of Bill even more mysterious and terrifying. Subsequent perusal of photographs of the family reveal him to be a deceptively ordinary looking little boy.

I had a strong feeling that Bill was also behind the enormous career change which Terry Jones appears to be contemplating, although I'm sure he'll come to his senses before long.

"I enjoyed writing the two children's books more than anything I've ever done, in fact, and I'd love to write more and more books for kids. There's not much money in it, though, is there?"

I nodded my agreement.

"I'll just have to make more Monty Python films to finance my kids' books, then, won't I?"

Our interview didn't last much longer. Inside the house, the telephone was ringing and it seemed that the au pair had gone out, leaving no one to answer whoever was calling. Terry said that the dog was indoors, but "he was terrible on the phone", so he had to answer it.

I left, slightly nervous about meeting Bill in the street.

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