



Two Children Tell: Growing up with John Burningham and Helen Oxenbury

Article Author:

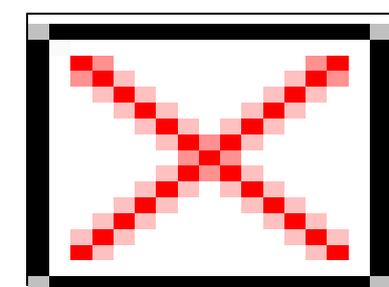
[Virginia Lowe](#) [1]

233 [2]

Byline:

By **Virginia Lowe**

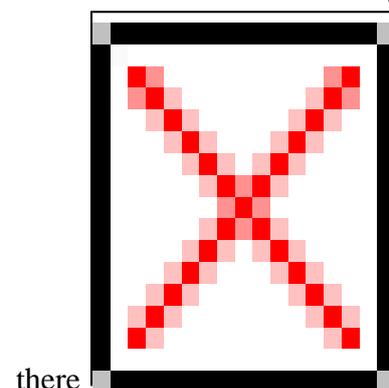
In the latest in her series examining children's relationship with books, **Virginia Lowe** observes the influence **John Burningham** and **Helen Oxenbury** had on her children's imaginations.



In 1975, John Burningham and Helen Oxenbury visited Australia. I went to hear them, of course, and had two books signed for each of the children. At the time they were six months old (0y6m) and 3y9m (Nick and Rebecca, not John and Helen of course). They were a fascinating couple (J and H not N and R!). I watched entranced the short films of **Around the World in Eighty Days** in which Burningham had devised many of the scenes out of found objects (I thought I would be able to find it on You Tube for you to see also, but unfortunately not.) We also saw slides of his forthcoming **The Cupboard**, in his series of everyday events with a toddler protagonist, for the youngest. He had already won two Kate Greenaway Medals.

Helen was witty and charming. I purchased her **Numbers of Things** and **Meal One** (Cutler), and **Mr Gumpy's Motor Car** and **Trubloff, the Mouse who Wanted to Play the Balalaika** from John (our record of balalaika music was one of Rebecca's favourites, and she loved mice as well). Both authors talked about their dog Simp, whom they had had for seventeen years, and who featured in their books.

The children had met Burningham's books before. Granny in Sydney sent down parcels regularly and always made sure



there was a book in each parcel for both children. We had already had a few of Burningham's **Little Books**. We also visited the library often, and had **Cannonball Simp** from there. Rebecca described it to the infant Nick [She saw it as the role of an elder sister to 'show him the pictures' as Lucy does in **Lucy and Tom's Day** (Hughes)]. He was only just over a month old, at the time. She told me R: Cannonball Simp! Nick was surprised when I said 'Cannonball Simp' to him! Cannonball Simp was a little dog who was so ugly nobody wanted

him? [as far as she got with the story to Nick].

The photo of their very dog was on the dust jacket flap. She looked at it and remarked 'he's not ugly there'. In the story the dog is thrown in a rubbish pit. We sometimes mock-threatened we'd throw both of them in the garbage. (R: No, you can't throw me in the garbage! V: Why not? R: Because you love me!) A few days later, she was mucking about while I was trying to dress her and I said it. She went very quiet and cooperative, then asked 'What would really happen?' She made no comment on the connection with the story, though I felt it had affected her.

Numbers of Things was influential. It was great fun, and excellent practice, to count the various things together. At 2y3m Nick was naming the things, a few months later he could read the numbers, but he was 2y9m before he started actually counting the objects. There are lots of extra things to talk about in each picture too. On the '7 Chairs' page, Nick found 'bubee', sitting in the high chair, then, in quite a different tone (his singing intonation) 'bubee' for 'Rock a bye baby' while pointing to the bentwood rocker, to tell me 'rocking chair' as best he could (he was 1y4m at this reading). Rebecca would remark on the different people such as the boy 'fixing the wheel' or the baby, with laughter, 'he's spilt his bowl' (3y10m). At 3y11m Rebecca really enjoyed the game of working out 'which one's the odd one out?' and working quite hard to find similarities, especially on the 'chair' page for instance to the two armchairs R: Those two are the same because of their softness. She enjoyed counting the large numbers too, which led to us together reciting to 100 several times at 3y10m.

The title which was the most popular of all the Burningham/Oxenbury titles, and shared with visitors almost inevitably for years, was **Would You Rather?** They were 4y5m and 7y7m before it came into the family's book collection, and it caused much discussion. Rebecca could not understand why you'd be embarrassed by your father doing a dance at school, for instance. At the time she was attending an alternative school (as Burningham himself had done) so maybe that's why it wasn't seen as embarrassing. Even though the crab is drawn in the front, so large in perspective, it would in fact be preferable to be chased by one than by a pack of wolves or the other choices. And sometimes the most likely is still the safest. It's hard for a child to say they'd rather be lost in a crowd, and it takes a while to see that it would be much safer than 'in a jungle' for instance. Nicholas solved this to his satisfaction by saying: I'd be lost with you there, Mummy. We could be lost together!

Dr Virginia Lowe lives in Melbourne, Australia, and is a literature adjunct associate at Monash University. She is the proprietor of Create a Kids' Book assessment agency. Her book **Stories, Pictures and Reality: Two Children Tell** (Routledge 2007) is based on the records of reading to her children. **Lines Between John and Virginia Lowe** a poetry chapbook has just been published.

By John Burningham

Cannonball Simp

Mr Gumpy's Motor Car

Trubloff: The Mouse who Wanted to Play the Balalaika.

Meal One, Ivor Cutler, illus Helen Oxenbury

Lucy and Tom's Day, Shirley Hughes

Numbers of things, Helen Oxenbury

Around the World in Eighty Days Jules Verne, illus John Burningham

Page Number:

Source URL (retrieved on *Mar '19*): <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/233/childrens-books/articles/two-children-tell-growing-up-with-john-burningham-and-helen-oxenb>

Links:

[1] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/virginia-low>e

[2] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/233>