



A Rich Alchemy: Jake Hope interviews with Kate Greenaway Medal winner Jackie Morris.

Article Author:

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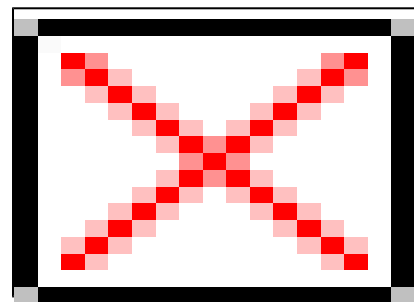
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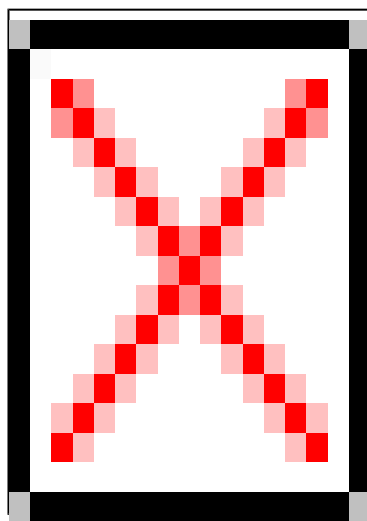
Kate Greenaway winner Jackie Morris interviewed by **Jake Hope**

Jake Hope interviews with **Kate Greenaway Medal** winner **Jackie Morris**.



Interest in art first began for Jackie Morris at age six, watching her father painting a lapwing. Jackie was captivated by the way it appeared to land on the page, as though alive, an alchemy she was eager to perform herself. The idea of this magic is something she attributes to **The Lost Words**, a book comprised of a series of spells written by Robert MacFarlane and illustrated by Jackie herself.

'Working on **The Lost Words**, it was almost as if the wild was talking through us,' Jackie explains. 'When I was



painting the wrens, everywhere I went there were wrens, under cars, even on the beach. People have told me they have visited **The Lost Words** exhibition and have never seen an otter, but have read the spell aloud three times and have seen one. There's a type of magic in that. It's frequency illusion, but it's like a kind of summoning.'

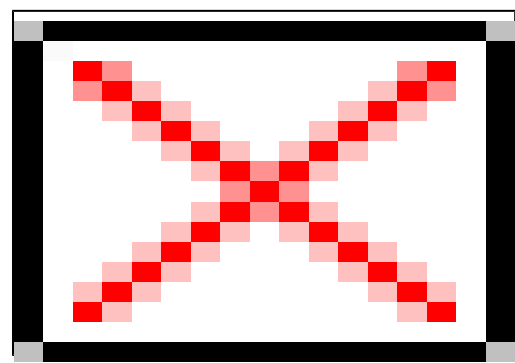
Winner of the **2019 CILIP Kate Greenaway Medal**, **The Lost Words** is a magnum opus that has taken on a life of its own. The impact and projects it has inspired have been too wide-reaching to capture. There has been a crowdfunding

movement to get copies of books into schools, and Jackie has been amazed by the money, time and organisation people have invested into this. She describes a man who is on a pilgrimage walking coast-to-coast, carrying a copy, visiting schools and hosting assemblies. In London, the **Royal Orthopaedic Hospital** has four floors full of images from the book put together by its designer Alison O'Toole. In New York, Jamie Burton, leader of the **Boston Symphony Orchestra** has set the acrostics to music for a boys' choir describing music as simply spilling out of them. Commenting on what she thinks has made the book such a cultural phenomenon, Jackie muses, 'too often, there's a dearth of honesty and integrity in modern life.' She feels people recognise the integrity of the book's creative core: 'Its success lies somewhere between the words and the images. The words make it so accessible to so many people.'

One of the groups Jackie is particularly pleased the book has appeal for is less confident readers. As a child, Jackie did not have access to books at home, 'We didn't have many books on our shelves, just some Readers Digests and a copy of the Bible.' Jackie remembers being taken to the library: 'The wealth that was in front of my eyes was astonishing. My parents didn't take me to galleries, they knew nothing about art and couldn't guide my reading as they knew nothing about children's books. It was librarians that guided me, suggesting 'You might like this?', or 'take a look at this.' One of the first books she read where the world dropped away was Jack London's **The Call of the Wild**. It feels an apt book for an author and illustrator whose work has been influenced so heavily by the natural world.

Talking about how she first became involved in children's book illustration, Jackie describes learning from the line, colour and light of Brian Wildsmith's work. Her move into children's books was what she modestly calls an accident. Jackie had been illustrating for publications like **The New Statesman** and **The New Internationalist**, she tells how she had become known for coping with difficult subjects like child abuse in care. After an abortive pamphlet, Jackie went to Australia for a year returning with new vigour and working in full-colour watercolour. She painted greetings cards for **Oxfam**, **Greenpeace** and **Amnesty International**. Author Caroline Pitcher saw her work and Jackie was invited to illustrate Caroline's book **Jo's Storm**. Despite being imminently due to have a baby, it was a challenge Jackie accepted with relish.

'It's really important not to infantilise children,' Jackie comments, 'they are more than capable of dealing with sophisticated subjects and, in some cases, possibly more so than adults. We have to trust their intelligence and integrity.'



Jackie feels there's a special craft to writing picture books. 'You have to leave space for the other creative person to step into. When writing and painting come together there's a special synergy and connection which happens, that's where beauty is found in picture books and that's why the **Kate Greenaway Medal** is so important.'

As well as illustrating her own stories and those by other writers, Jackie has also written texts for other illustrators, **Mrs Noah's Pockets**, with James Mayhew and the forthcoming **The Secret of the Tattered Shoes**, with Ehsan Abdollahi. 'It's a wonderful feeling to write a text and to see your words spring to life in colour, odd but brilliant. I love writing for other people to illustrate.'

Despite a gruelling schedule, she is enroute to Yorkshire to the opening of the **The Lost Words** exhibition when we speak, Jackie is nonetheless brimming with energy for her new books. **The Unwinding** will be an exciting venture with Unbound, a crowdfunding publisher. The book will bring together a series of the paintings she works on between books. 'There's a lot to stress when you're responding to teams of people,' Jackie explains, 'to unwind I paint.' Jackie hopes

the book will become a talisman for people to fall into, helping them to also unwind. Jackie has also illustrated a new edition of **The House without Windows**, a book written by a twelve-year-old in 1927 about a girl who cannot bear to be inside, who lives a wild life first in the meadows, then by the sea and finally by the mountains where she becomes a part of the natural world. It's a book, Eleanor Farjeon reviewed, stating it was 'nothing short of a miracle.'

There's a pleasing sense of synchronicity to the fact Jackie is now working on a book of birds. She has researched everything from photographs to slow-motion film. It's hard not to be reminded of six-year-old Jackie, enraptured watching her father painting a lapwing. Her hope is that the success of **The Lost Words**, a book where publishers granted her and Robert creative free-reign, might inspire greater trust for creators, allowing books which speak directly to the heart and soul of readers, gifting children something beautiful, a rich alchemy of words and pictures.

Jake Hope is a reading development and children's book consultant.

The Lost Words, Robert Macfarlane, illustrated by Jackie Morris, is published by Hamish Hamilton, 978-0241253588, £15.99 hbk

[Mrs Noah's Pockets](#) [3], James Mayhew and Jackie Morris, Otter-Barry Books, 978-1910959091, £12.99 hbk

The Secret of the Tattered Shoes, Jackie Morris and Ehsan Abdollahi, Tiny Owl Publishing, 978-1910328378, £12.99 publication date September 2019

The House without Windows, Barbara Newhall Follett, illus Jackie Morris, Hamish Hamilton, 978-0241389812, £12.99 publication date October 2019

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