



# Authorgraph 239: Rob Biddulph

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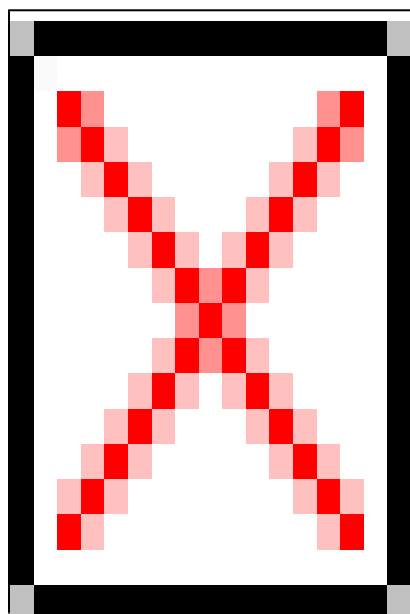
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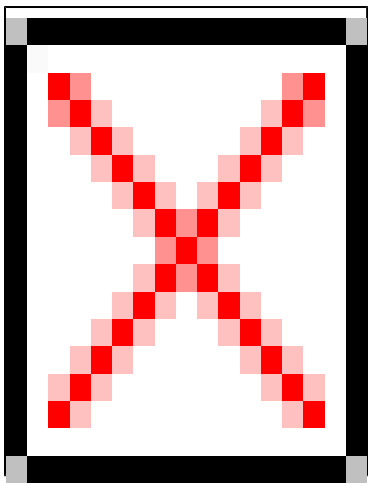
**Rob Biddulph** interviewed by **Louise Johns-Shepherd**

Rob Biddulph interviewed by Louise Johns-Shepherd



In 2015 Rob Biddulph's debut picture book, [Blown Away](#) [3] won the **Waterstones Children's Book Prize**, one of only two picture books to ever win this prestigious award. Over the next five years he produced a total of nine picture books including his latest, the brilliantly bonkers **Show and Tell**. As well as writing and illustrating his own books he illustrates for other authors, has been nominated for and won a string of awards, is the official World Book Day illustrator, has work scheduled until 2024, is branching out into longer middle grade fiction and negotiating some pretty exciting new developments. So was this a meteoric rise to fame and easily won? Not at all. Rob's career as a children's author and illustrator was, he says, a long time coming.

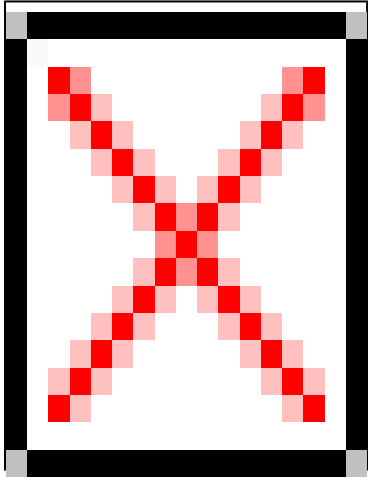
After Art College and studying graphic design, Rob had a long and very successful career as a magazine art director working on many national titles. He didn't really think about writing a picture book until he had children of his own. Reading to his three girls regularly and listening to them talk and play inspired him to make up his own stories and characters and from there he started to work these ideas up into books. He continued to work as the Observer Magazine's Art Director whilst he spent many years talking to agents and publishers about his work, using everything in his arsenal to try and get a book into production. He'd almost given up when he met Jodie Hodges at United Agents. She persuaded him to put together a portfolio, sketches and characters as well as his main ideas and it was the penguins from this portfolio that captured the attention of HarperCollins. Rob had a story about some children who were carried away whilst flying a kite and the penguins (who can't fly) fitted better into the story than the children: [Blown Away](#) [3] was born.



**Blown Away** helped Rob define his style as a picture book author, a style which is at once familiar yet distinctive and accessible. The book, like all that have followed, is written in rhyme, a conscious and deliberate decision. Rob likes writing rhyme because he likes reading it, particularly out loud to children. The idea that even very young children can tune in to the patterns and rhythms of the words so that they can almost 'sing along' with a story fits his intention to have children really involved when they are being read to. And having books that encourage reading aloud and that shared reading experience is what inspired Rob to become a writer in the first place. Four of Rob's books have been chosen to be read aloud on **CBeebies** as bedtime stories, testament surely to the way in which those rhymes add to the story arc and support that shared reading and listening experience.

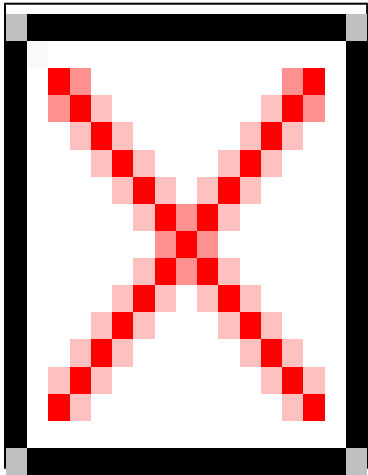
So the rhyme is really important to him and he adds: 'For me the part of the process that is most rewarding is getting the rhyme to work and the story to flow within those constraints. It is the best feeling when it all falls into place'. The visual is also key to Rob's process and he starts a story with a picture in his head. Then he plans out a rough and simple story arc and once he has this, spends time working on one or two set pieces or key events that he has visualised. He works these up almost to the standard they appear in the book. Having these pictures helps him with the writing because he has a concrete representation of the characters, the events and the colour palette. Then he does the writing in one block, making sure that the rhyming text is really moving the story forward.

Unusually, and because of his experience as an Art Director, Rob also likes to put the text onto the page, to design the layout. 'In magazines you are always laying things out to try to persuade people to read the article and it's exactly the same with the book, laying out the pages so that they pull you in and then taking you on the journey, slowing you down or speeding you up with your reading.' He has a great relationship with his Art Department and is always wary of treading on other people's toes but he spent twenty years laying out pages so the thinking about this is an integral part of his process.

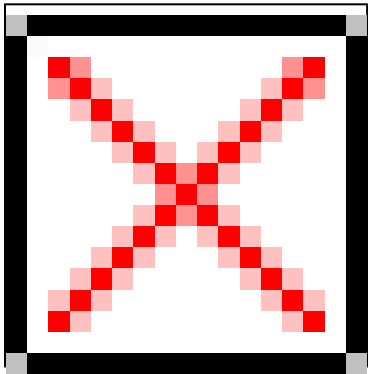


In all Rob's books there are the main stories and then many background details some of which tell parallel stories (the monkey in **Blown Away** or the rabbit love story in **GRRRRR!**) some of which are entirely irrelevant (the number 72 - the year of Rob's birth - appears in every book) and some which provide us with jokes, colour or interest (the hidden

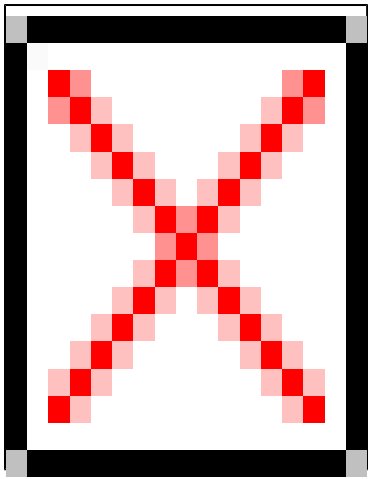
alphabet in **Show and Tell**, the reverse world bedrooms in **Kevin**). Again, the motivation for adding these is to provide a story time experience that grows with each reading of the book. Like any parent, Rob is familiar with the phase children go through of wanting a favourite book read over and over. Children love the familiarity of books they know and love to look for details: "I wanted to put in levels of details that you might not spot until the sixth or seventh time of reading it?". These details add different layers of meaning which make them interesting for older children or adults (particularly those adults who have to read them over and over again).



There are themes of friendship and hope throughout all Rob's books but he thinks this is because these are really universal themes which are very relevant to young children's lives. He really doesn't set out to "preach" or write stories with a moral but these kinds of themes seem to emerge. When he was creating [Odd Dog Out](#) [4] he had an idea for a world entirely populated by sausage dogs but it was his daughter returning from school worried that she didn't have the same lunchbox as her friends that made him think about a story where you didn't need to be exactly like everyone else to fit in. This, like all the best stories, evolved into something more nuanced and Rob talks movingly about speaking with adults in Russia who felt that the rainbow scarf dog was an important and meaningful symbol in a country where children are taught not to be open about their sexuality or identity.



**Kevin** was his first book which didn't have a cast of animal characters. Based on his daughter's actual imaginary friend, to whom the book is dedicated, this book was actually one of his earliest ideas. And now in **Show and Tell** he has created a cast of children - the very eccentric and rather wonderful Class 2L. Here, he has also carefully constructed a class of children which really reflects their differences and includes children with a range of backgrounds, as you would find in any inner-city classroom. He says: "I was reflecting my own children's class at school. I love that my own children's classes are very accepting of difference and diversity" and there are all these children in that class - so this is a reflection of what my life, and their life is like. It is very important for everybody to be able to see themselves somewhere in a children's book". He has taken a similar view of his work as the **World Book Day** official illustrator and as part of this role was instrumental in creating the **Share a Story** bookmarks where he was determined that there would be at least one bookmark from the range that would speak to every reader, whatever their tastes and interests.



Always busy, Rob is currently working on his next picture book, **The Day I Lost My Human**, as well as writing a new (yet to be announced) middle-grade fiction series and continuing with his famous #PackedLunchPostIts, at least until his youngest daughter leaves Year 6. He believes his is the best job in the world and obviously revels in the creativity of it all. Does he wonders why he didn't do this earlier? ?I don't think I could have done it before I had children. I know now what they like, and how to talk to them?. It is this love of reading a story that shapes his work: ?Sharing a story with someone is a truly magical moment?.

**Louise Johns-Shepherd** is chief executive of CLPE ([Centre for Literacy in Primary Education](https://clpe.org.uk/) [5]).

Books mentioned, all by Rob Biddulph, all published by HarperCollins Children's Books:

[Blown Away](#) [3], 978-0007593828, £6.99 pbk

**GRRRRR!**, 978-0007594139, £6.99 pbk

**Kevin**, 978-0008207427, £6.99 pbk

[Odd Dog Out](#) [4], 978-0008184780, £6.99 pbk

**Show and Tell**, 978-0008317911, £12.99 hbk

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