



[Home](#) > When the Kipling had to stop

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# When the Kipling had to stop

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44 [2]

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Other Articles

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**Nicholas Tucker** considers the effect of new images on an old favourite: Rudyard Kipling's Just So Stories

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New illustrations to classics always raise objections, especially when replacing originals by the authors themselves. Thackeray's pictures of Becky Sharp, for example, make it clear he saw her as a minx whatever kinder critics have maintained since. Losing such extra evidence of an author's intentions is a heavy price to pay for the sake of more adept artistry elsewhere. Where children's literature is concerned other arguments come to mind. The technical limitations apparent in the illustrations of a Hugh Lofting may sometimes actually bring them closer to a child audience, itself still struggling with the mysteries of drawing and often naturally sympathetic to others finding similar difficulties. In Arthur Ransome's case his simple line sketches supposedly etched by the Swallows and Amazons themselves are part of his general positive image of childhood, for him a time where a basic but perfectly serviceable competence can be both expected and achieved from the young whether sailing, reading a chart, or providing rough pictures and diagrams to a text as it goes along.

I would therefore always want a copy of the **Just So Stories** illustrated by Kipling himself. All his pictures have the extra benefit of the author's own running commentary on each of them, sometimes as witty as the stage directions Barrie supplies for **Peter Pan**. His pictures are also invaluable in trying to understand this extraordinary man.

The loving detail in his illustration of the different cargo boats in **The Butterfly that Stamped** memorably conveys the romance he and so many others felt about international trading at a harbour-side level. His picture of the Ethiopian in **How the Leopard got his Spots** is both moving and dignified; no patronising racist stereotypes here, despite Kipling's suggestion on the opposite page that his hero 'was really a negro, and so his name was Sambo'. This illustration also includes an ingeniously hidden giraffe difficult to improve upon, as are some other animal portraits in the book. The picture accompanying **The Cat that Walked by Himself**, where we see the proud animal stalking through the wet wild wood, tail aloft and whiskers bristling, is still unsurpassed as an image of tough defiance. According to his biographers Kipling was touchy about criticisms of his artwork, although he does once apologise to his readers for not doing any better with a picture in **Elephant's Child** 'because elephants and bananas are hard to draw'. But on the whole his **Just So** illustrations are excellent for someone who was not a professional draughtsman; more original, in their use of dead black, than anything his artist-father ever achieved. Kipling later abandoned illustrating except for hasty sketches on family letters. On the basis of this work he could well have developed his artistic talents further. Might it be that he did not want to eclipse his father here in the way that he had everywhere else while still a comparatively young man?

There are several moments in the commentaries on his illustrations when Kipling complains he is not allowed to use

colour. Rather, he urges his readers to colour in the pictures themselves, for example painting 'the banana-tree green and the elephant's child red.' As it is, the 'dead black' technique he used often obscured important detail, providing for example only a blurred glimpse of the mariner's famous suspenders in **How the Whale got his Throat**. This would not have mattered so much when everyone knew what suspenders were; today, like Sherlock Holmes' boxer cartridges or Trichinopoly cigars, familiarity with such things can no longer be taken for granted. In addition, when the **Just So Stories** were first told to his own children Kipling himself was on hand to answer any questions cropping up during his narration. Good pictures can now help out children tackling these densely written tales on their own. And when numerous pictures break up his rich prose into more manageable segments, each chunk accompanied by its own illustration, these marvellous stories do become far more approachable.

Recently all 12 have been re-illustrated by modern artists in a new series brought out by Macmillan and as a show-case for British illustration at its best this whole enterprise is quite admirable. (I suspect it will also sell for a ripe old sum one day when today's books have turned into tomorrow's collectors' pieces.) Two books in particular show how new illustrations can greatly enhance even the finest text. In **The Sing-Song of Old Man Kangaroo** Michael Taylor creates the Middle God Nquing (blue, starry and elf-like), then goes on to the Big God Nqong (a grizzled Aborigine).

Both are immediately memorable, and much more so than Kipling's own illustrations where neither god is at all impressive and so probably ending up in the reader's imagination as one undifferentiated Nq ... There is also nothing specifically Australian about Kipling's version of the terrain crossed by the kangaroo; Michael Taylor, by contrast, brings in vivid examples of local flora and fauna on every page. Another artist in top form is Michael Foreman in one of Kipling's lesser known stories, **The Crab that Played with the Sea**. Early on here Kipling introduces 'All-the-elephant-there-was' plus various other animals existing in a first idealised state before the creation of Adam. This poses quite a problem for any illustrator let alone parent or teacher faced with having to explain something like the Platonic theory of once perfect forms. But Michael Foreman draws a huge elephant head merging into blue sky beyond; next page sees his 'All-the-cow-there-was', another large, misty figure, and in this way he meets an imaginative challenge that could well prove fairly formidable to young readers left on their own.

This is not to say that everything Kipling wrote needs pictures. Which artist could ever hope to do better than the subjective impressions created in any reader's imagination by word-music like 'the great grey-green, greasy Limpopo river', or tall forests described as 'speckled and sprottled and spottled, dotted and splashed and slashed and hatched and cross-hatched with shadows'? ('Say that quickly aloud,' adds Kipling in parentheses, 'and you will see how *very* shadowy the forest must have been.') But on the whole modern children can only be grateful for the extra bonuses provided for them in today's illustrations. Pauline Baynes, for example, offers a delightful picture of the ship-wrecked mariner holding up his breeches with his hands after leaving his braces behind in the whale, and Louise Brierley creates a truly memorable Bi-Coloured-Python-Rock-Snake, not to mention enticing sticks of long purple sugar cane and quantities of 'greeny-crackly melons' in her illustrations to **The Elephant's Child**. As for Alan Baker's work in **The Butterfly that Stamped** the rich oriental atmosphere evoked here contains enough fantastic detail in just one of his 12 amazing pictures to keep any imagination busy. Not every book in this series is a winner; Victor Ambrus's broad and Quentin Blake's more scratchy humour are out of place, while Williams Stobbs' **The Cat that Walked by Himself** is too cosily domestic. But otherwise I think Kipling would have been as delighted with these books as Kenneth Grahame was with E. H. Shepard's illustrations to **The Wind in the Willows**, having previously warned the artist, 'I love these little people; be kind to them.' Shepard's brilliant work did much to increase their popularity; it would be nice if Macmillan's series could achieve the same for the **Just So Stories**, however difficult some of them now are for younger generations.

For those wanting one volume editions, Michael Foreman and Safaya Salter both offer pleasant illustrated collections. Foreman visited India recently to steep himself in its atmosphere, possibly seeing more of it than Kipling, who got most of his knowledge of the Indian jungle second-hand from photographs and travellers' tales. Foreman's own book, published by Viking Kestrel, is illustrated both in colour for atmosphere and black and white for humour and includes a properly enigmatic looking camel, some cheeky children and a cheerful short-nosed elephant. His illustrations for **The Crab that Played with the Sea** are quite like the earlier version he did for Macmillan, providing sharp-eyed young

critics with a good opportunity to spot the similarities!

Safaya Salter also has connections with the East since she was born in Cairo of Egyptian and English parents and brought up to love oriental art forms, especially Persian miniatures. In her edition of the **Just So Stories** (Pavilion) each tale is allotted an attractive head-piece plus one full-page illustration, with an extra title page showing all the chief characters somehow existing together alongside a river bank very much in the manner of Shepard's front page for the Pooh stories. Each picture has its own decorated border and the whole effect is very striking. Yet this is more a curtain-raiser to Kipling than genuine illustration. The camel for example looks surprisingly benign for an animal permanently cursed with three days of extra work. Quentin Blake does much better in his Macmillan version, ending up with Kipling himself perched on top of the camel; a fair comment on someone able to admit that where the hump that is black and blue is concerned, 'I get it as well as you-oo-oo--If I haven't enough to do-oo-oo!' Elsewhere Safaya Salter follows her own imagination rather than the text; her picture of Taffy's first illustration performed with a shark tooth on a piece of bark does not show the spear sticking into her father's back - a surprising error, considering it was this very detail that caused the Stranger-man such trouble when he handled the completed picture over to the young artist's neolithic mother. There are good things as well: bright flowers, huge suns, grinning little gods, and masses of jewels, mosques and minarets. I am sure some children will like it, others may go for Foreman and few, I would guess, could possibly resist every one of the talented artists discussed earlier. All that is needed now is the money for libraries and schools to buy all these copies so that readers can make this final choice for themselves.

### **Just So Stories**

The Macmillan series of individual stories, using various artists, is available at between £3.50 and £4.50 each or £1.75 each paperback. The Viking Kestrel edition (0 670 80242 5), illustrated by Michael Foreman, and the Pavilion edition (185145 105 6), illustrated by Safaya Salter, are £7.95 each.

**Nicholas Tucker** teaches at the University of Sussex. Amongst his many publications **The Child and the Book: A Psychological and Literary Exploration** (Cambridge University Press) is a standard work.

Page Number:

24

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