



Authorgraph No 50 ? Ruth Brown

Article Author:

[Tony Bradman](#) [1]

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Ruth Brown was interviewed by **Tony Bradman**.

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The name Ruth Brown might not be immediately recognisable. But say **A Dark, Dark Tale** or **The Big Sneeze**, and you'll know we're talking about an author whose picture books have calmly and quietly infiltrated our awareness over the last few years. And very popular they are, too.

Ruth herself gives the impression of being a contented sort of person for whom life is full and pleasant. She remembers her childhood as being very happy, even though she was a 'war baby'. Her family originally came from Bournemouth. Her father, however, had been at Dunkirk and, convinced a German invasion was imminent, despatched his wife and oldest daughter to the greater safety of Devon, where Ruth was born in 1941.

Ruth's grandmother, aunt and her children came too, and a *menage* consisting of three women and five children was set up in a tiny two-up, two-down cottage. Ruth was the youngest.

'I remember it as a very happy time,' she says. 'And I particularly remember long summer days, and the feeling of being a child and walking through a field in which everything is at your shoulder height.' It was a feeling she was to translate into a picture book over 40 years later.

After the war, Ruth's father got a job with The Control Commission, the organisation set up to run the now defeated and occupied Germany. The family therefore had to move to Europe in 1947, an experience which came as 'something of a shock'.

'We went from deepest Devon to places in Germany like Frankfurt and Cologne,' she says. 'They were badly smashed up. We also led a very strange existence, living in very big, posh houses that must have been requisitioned.'

In 1953, Ruth's father brought the family back to Bournemouth, which again 'was a very different sort of life'. 'I went to Bournemouth School for Girls, which was practically out of an Angela Brazil novel. It was terribly dull. The only person I related to was the art teacher.' Ruth had already shown an interest in art, and some talent too. 'I was always good at drawing, and often had my pictures put up on the wall.'

Eventually the day came when she had to start making decisions about what to do after school. Her older sister Sylvia had already gone on to art school, something Ruth says paved the way for her.

Ruth went to Bournemouth College of Art at the age of 16, and two years later, when her parents moved to Worcester, she switched to Birmingham College of Art. Then she got a place at London's Royal College, where she started in 1961.

'It was a terrific time to be there. My contemporaries were people like David Hockney, Zandra Rhodes and Ossie Clark.'

And of course, London in the sixties was quite a jolly place to be, too.?

Originally Ruth had wanted to concentrate on painting, but she had found herself doing graphic design. During her time at the Royal College, she began to think of herself more as an illustrator. In 1964 she married Ken, a fellow student she'd met in Birmingham. He went on to work in advertising, and then the expanding graphics department at the BBC.

?At the time I didn't really know what I wanted to do. I did a bit of art teaching, but didn't enjoy it. I liked the students a lot, but not the staffroom politics. That was all very dull.

?Then in 1966 I had my first baby, Hogan. I did little bits of freelance work, but mostly I was a full-time mum. I liked it, and that's where all my creative energies went. I became more interested in children's books because I began to read them to Hogan.

?I remember he loved the Richard Scarry books, and Babar. But some books were terrible. I used to get so angry at the way they were written. They were really boring.?

Ruth's next child, James, wasn't born until 1972. ?That sort of threw me sideways for a while, and although it might sound daft, all my creative energies were taken up by wanting a baby, so I didn't do much work.?

Once James was born, however, something was released, and Ruth began to work again. She was asked by the BBC (not by her husband, she hastens to add, who wasn't allowed to commission her) to do some pictures for the early **Play School**. As she says, she must have done it well, for she was then called upon regularly by the BBC to provide illustrations for a whole range of children's programmes, from **Jackanory** to **Watch** and **You and Me**, some of which involved a certain amount of animation.

Ruth could have continued with such work, but a friend helped to push her in a new direction. Ruth's husband Ken had known Laurence Hutchins ?for years?. They'd first worked together in 1960, and went into partnership in 1974. Laurence's wife Pat is none other than Pat Hutchins, a name which needs no introduction in the world of children's books.

?We've been friends a long time,? says Ruth, ?and Pat was always telling me that if I had an idea for a book, she'd ring Margaret Clark at The Bodley Head for me. At the same time, I'd been feeling that I wanted to do something more permanent. Television's so instant ? it's there one minute, gone the next.

?Ken was doing very well, so I had the luxury of being able to give myself a couple of months to come up with a book, which I did. The result was **Ladybird, Ladybird**. The Bodley Head liked the pictures, but didn't think it was strong enough.

?Margaret Clark and Judy Taylor were nice enough to say they liked my work, and to tell me to try again. I did a year later with another book idea, and they rejected that one, too. This time they suggested I take it to Klaus Flugge at Andersen Press. I showed it to him, he liked it, and he gave me a contract.?

That book was **Crazy Charlie**, published in 1978, and the rest, as they say, is history. Although that doesn't mean everything was easy from then on. It took Ruth a while to come up with the idea for a second book. but when it came, it was a good one. **A Dark, Dark Tale** turned out to be Ruth's ?breakthrough? book. It was an international success, appearing in a number of co-editions, and still sells well today.

?Since then we've got into the pattern of Klaus expecting a book a year from me,? says Ruth ? who works these days in the ?shed? Ken built especially for her at the foot of their walled garden in leafy Teddington. ?When I get an idea now, I don't put anything down until I've thought it right through. I do love having a good think, and it's important to sort it all out in your head. The idea comes first, and it involves superhuman effort. The writing comes next, and that's hard work. Last comes the drawing, and that's a pleasure.?

In fact, Ruth is an artist to whom words are very important indeed. This might sound strange coming from an artist, but a book is a book, to be *read*. If the words are wrong, the book's a non-starter, however beautiful the pictures.

That's why the next stage for Ruth after the initial idea has been thought through is to write down the story. I start off writing quite a lot and then cut. I always bear in mind that if the story's boring, children won't want to turn the page. I get so angry when stories in picture books are badly written... it's important for them to trip off the tongue. It isn't easy, though. I usually know where I want to get to. It's the getting there that's the problem.

Once the story is right, Ruth does some roughs and perhaps a dummy. Then it's time to take the idea to Klaus. That's the point at which any author, even the most experienced and well respected, is at their most vulnerable, as Ruth explains.

I hate taking an idea to Klaus because there's always the possibility it might be rejected. It's awful when it happens. It's almost like someone saying something horrible about your children.

Rejection can't have happened too often, as books have followed each other with some regularity and acclaim, too. **A Dark, Dark Tale** was followed by **If At First You Do Not See**, **The Grizzly Revenge**, **The Big Sneeze**, **Our Cat Flossie**, **Our Puppy's Holiday** and Ruth's latest, **Ladybird, Ladybird**. She's also illustrated several stories by James Herriot for Michael Joseph.

In terms of subject matter, everything Ruth has done so far has been about animals. **The Grizzly Revenge**, in which animals take revenge on the nasty humans who hunt and kill them, seems to be making a very obvious statement about her beliefs.

I was walking through a department store when I saw a crocodile skin handbag, says Ruth, and I thought, wouldn't it be wonderful if it fought back. I like animals, although I'm not a vegetarian, and I wear leather shoes.

But to kill a crocodile for a handbag is awful, it's really sick. Once an animal is dead, it's dead, but I hate the greed of people who do that sort of thing. My American publishers didn't take the book, because they said it was too didactic. But children love it. It makes a good read aloud when I go to schools.

Other books have more personal connections. **Our Cat Flossie** is about Ruth's cat - a dear, dear old cat who used to treat everyone other than me with total disdain, and used to sit on my drawings. Unfortunately, Flossie died at the ripe old age of 16 just before the book was published - just to spite me for doing it. Ruth now also has the daughter of the puppy who was the model for **Our Puppy's Holiday**.

Her most recent book, **Ladybird, Ladybird**, is a re-working of her very first book idea. I'd written it out in prose at first, but something was wrong with it. Then when I did it in verse, it all came right. Ruth has taken the old nursery rhyme and carried it on, to produce a book with a magical feel - the feel of a small child walking through summer fields where everything is at shoulder height.

And what of the future? Ruth does a certain amount of school visiting and book fairs, which she enjoys and will continue, although sometimes she finds kids 'terrifying'. Contact with children concentrates your mind wonderfully on your audience. Children are very demanding people to write for.

But so far I've never done anything I'm 100 per cent pleased with. I just want to carry on and get better at what I do.

Photographs by **Richard Mewton**.

The Books

(published in hardback by Andersen Press and in paperback by Beaver unless otherwise stated)

The Big Sneeze, 0 86264 088 1, £5.95; 0 09 942150 X, £2.95 pbk

Crazy Charlie, 0 905478 51 7, £5.95; 0 09 924130 7, £1.95 pbk

A Dark, Dark Tale, 0 86264 001 6, £5.95; Hippo, 0 590 70163 0, £1.75 pbk

The Grizzly Revenge, 0 86264 024 5, £5.95; 0 09 942300 6, £1.95 pbk

If At First You Do Not See, 0 86264 021 0, £5.95; 0 09 932250 1, £2.50 pbk

Ladybird, Ladybird, 0 86264 200 0, £5.95

Our Cat Flossie, 0 86264 120 9, £4.95; 0 09 947580 4, £2.50 pbk

Our Puppy?s Holiday, 0 86264 145 4, £4.95

Ruth Brown has also illustrated titles by James Herriot, published by Michael Joseph:

The Christmas Day Kitten, 0 7181 2750 1, £5.95; Piper Picture Book, 0 330 30463 1 (Oct 88)

Bonny?s Big Day, 0 7181 2880 X, £5.95

Blossom Comes Home (Sept 88)

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