



Authorgraph No 51 ? Michael Rosen

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Michael Rosen was interviewed by **Morag Styles**.

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You may think I?m happy, you may think I?m sad,

You may think I?m crazy, you may think I?m mad,

But hang on to your seats and listen right here

I?m gonna tell you something that?ll burn your ear.

A hip. Hop. A hip hop hap.

I?m givin? you all the Michael Rosen rap.

(from **The Hypnotiser**)

Enter Mike Rosen, a large affectionate bear of a man brimming with exuberance, warmth, and humour. ?I?m a bit of a kid myself,? he confesses. He loves a joke, a good story, a bit of the latest gossip from the children?s book world. Without pausing, he?ll suddenly regale you with a poem ?hot off the press? with exaggerated gestures as if he were performing to an audience of hundreds. His room is awash with letters (especially from children ? he allows about a day a month to reply to these), manuscripts, and masses of books. He?s just moved his study and there are books, in piles and in boxes, all over the room.

Mike has been collecting books for as long as he can remember. He buys most anthologies of poetry for children, black British writing, community publishing, poetry from all over the world. His other passion is anything relating to the oral tradition ? street rhymes, popular songs, folk stories, working-class history and the like. Having taken a degree in English, he?s got all the standard literary texts, but he is currently far more interested in a shelf full of unusual, quirky volumes. Australian joke books nestle side by side with feminist poetry, ?The Unwritten Song?, Chinese Nursery Rhymes and the lyrics of John Cooper Clark!

In the last couple of years Mike has treated Australia, Canada and Singapore. as well as British schools, to the Rosen magic leaving school children, teachers, students and librarians clamouring for more. It?s not just that he makes them weep from laughing at his mad antics or that he is a superb performer of his own poetry, with every gesture and nuance captured to perfection; the talent he displays might be termed ?the common touch?. He *knows* how children tick, he communicates directly and naturally with them and they respond, how else but directly and naturally. Add to that the fact that his poems are true to life, well crafted, often extremely funny, and involve a messing about with language, and you have a winning combination. As well as ?reading? his poems, he jokes with the children and encourages them to join in. He tells stories about himself and his children in a way that his audience can relate to.

Of course ?the touch? is two-way. He gives but, as he?ll tell you, he gets just as much back. And that?s what makes him one of the most significant figures in contemporary children?s poetry. He was one of the first poets of his generation

writing for the young to draw closely on his own childhood experiences (the child in him) and to 'tell it as it was' in the ordinary language children actually use. Up till then (his first book was published in 1974), most children's poetry was rather more formal and dominated by poets (often very good ones) who chose subject matter more remote from children's lives - funny rhymes, the natural world, cautionary verse, magic and the like mainly written in traditional verse forms. Of course such poetry has its place, but the advent of writers like Rosen has added another dimension and, in so doing, has changed the face of children's poetry. Now it's commonplace to find poetry written from the child's point of view about everything and anything; street and school life is explored realistically: unmentionables are mentioned, humour is the real stuff of the playground.

Mike Rosen played an important part in opening up the range of poetry available to children in the early seventies and has been continuing to do so ever since. Perhaps his special place in this exciting development is three fold: first there is his belief in and respect for what children say, think and feel in their talking and writing. Then there's the forms: the long narrative poem, dramatic monologues, conversation pieces, jokes and word play. He writes about the little events that make up our lives - having an argument, not being picked for the school team, what it feels like to be teased, unfair treatment by brothers and sisters, fears, uncertainties, hopes, dreams, fun... And finally the language: he writes about these ordinary things very often in a 'free verse' that captures natural speech rhythms. In this way he dignifies and gives status to children's everyday lives. The young reader gets the message that it's desirable not only to read this poetry but also legitimate to write about experiences and concerns themselves and that other people will be interested.

The lighthearted nature of much of his work, his use of real speech rhythms, his refusal to make poetry anything other than 'down to earth' has not led to unanimous critical acclaim. His detractors tend to neglect the more serious, substantial poetry which has always been a feature of Rosen's work especially in collections for older children and teenagers - for example, his anger about the neglect of his dying mother by friends who presumably couldn't face the ravages of cancer:

Mum

What held them away
from our door?
Was it the dark rooms?
The rows of bottles of tablets?
The heavy scent of her perfumed cushion?
Or the sight of her shiny skin
stretched over the bones of her skull?

They kept their distance
they kept their place
they left her for dead
months too soon.

Or:

For them I was just Jew.

I was the Jew that it was
OK-to-say-all-the-foul-things
you-want-to-say-about-Jews-to.

And I played along with it,
I thought it'd stop them hating me
But all it did
was make it easier for them
to hate all Jews,

(from **When Did You Last Wash Your Feet?**)

Mike is the son of two very distinguished educators, Connie and Harold Rosen. He was very close to his mother. She was somebody who passionately believed in child-centred schooling and he says he still looks at classrooms through the filter of his mother's views – the centrality of first-hand experience, self-discovery, real writing, learning through talking – a holistic view of primary education. Connie Rosen features lovingly in many of Mike's poems and he remembers her best as the mum who fired his passion for books by reading to him every night. Her sing-song voice lulled him to sleep and initiated him into the wonderful world of stories.

Harold Rosen, much loved and highly regarded in the English teaching world (as Emeritus Professor of the London Institute of Education) was, and continues to be, a powerful influence on Mike. His memories of childhood are of his father as a raconteur with a comic touch: an enthusiastic singer who loved playing folk music; the person who read aloud the *whole* of **Guy Mannerling** and **Little Dorrit** on family camping holidays. When Mike was in his early teens, Harold Rosen gave him some good advice which in turn Mike now passes on to children he meets: 'don't write in generalities, write about what you know, concentrate on the particular, the personal.'

When Mike was growing up his parents were both teachers leading a busy, sociable life. Evenings were spent with colleagues (many now well-known in educational circles) swapping stories and enjoying conversation. 'Yakking was a legitimate activity in our family.'

His brother Brian, who now holds a senior position in the Natural History Museum, is also a reference point in many of Mike's poems. As the informal recorder of Brian's antics which include a great gift for mimicry: 'I haven't done him justice yet.'

This loving and stimulating childhood provided a security and warmth for Mike that is evident in his poetry. In this respect Quentin Blake was a perfect choice as illustrator, as he is so good at capturing the amusing, sometimes tender view of the child's world. The Rosen/Blake partnership is particularly successful in the books for younger children. However, Mike's poetry also touches on the painful side of life and in his work for an older readership deals with social injustice. In his often hard-hitting collection for teenagers (**When Did You Last Wash Your Feet?**) Tony Pinchuck's inventive, cartoon-style art work complements the text most effectively. Overall, the strongest flavour in Mike's work is that of a basically happy family life with its ups and downs.

As a boy, Mike wanted to be an actor ('I got the acting bug at about ten!') – or a farmer. He was writing plays, acting and directing while at Oxford – and had his first play performed at the Royal Court in 1968. Back in his teens Mike temporarily turned his back on 'the arts' and spent two years studying medicine. But nature would out and he transferred to an English Literature degree in 1966. In fact he found literary study at Oxford disillusioning. He disliked the narrowness of the course he followed which he describes as 'novels, plays and poetry mainly by middle-class white, male writers'. When he was studying ballads, he became interested in working class ballads – the ones still being sung! He encountered resistance from his tutors in what was seen as a radical course of study. Like many students of the late sixties, Mike got involved in the protest movement and this has matured into a powerful commitment to anti-racism, anti-sexism, the rights of children, trade unions, anti-poverty and the working classes ever since. 'The way I write is consistent with my political beliefs.' He believes that our society stifles people's creativity and is keen that working-class experience, in particular, is valued by promoting the culture of ordinary people through personal writing, autobiography and the oral tradition. 'People possess culture. You start with people's own culture, not assume they don't have any.'

After Oxford Mike spent three years as a BBC trainee working on **Play School**, Schools Television and Radio Drama. Although he enjoyed his time there, 'the Beeb patriarchy got to me. I was fed up having to direct rubbish. Their view of 'educational' was narrow. The machine had decided this was the direction to take. Your own creativity was down the spout.' But he got the opportunity to work with some good people and has since put this experience to good use as writer/presenter of programmes like **Middle English**, **Talk**, **Read and Write** and **Everybody Here**.

In 1973 he joined the National Film School which he describes as 'the freakiest set of people I've ever met'. He didn't always see eye to eye with his tutors there either. 'I've never believed in exercises. You do it for real.'

All in all it added up to 11 years as a student, living an abstemious life with very little money for luxuries like clothes! 'I have a nightmare that I'm 41 and still have no degree! I've decided to change to a History course, I haven't done any revision for the exams and I'm older than everyone else...'

Around this time, although he didn't realise it, he became ill with what was eventually diagnosed, in 1981, as a hypothyroid condition. Mike gradually became, over ten years, a sluggish, large, puffy-featured man until doctors put him on a course of drugs which changed his life. He likens the experience to the Rip Van Winkle effect 'all of a sudden he began to shrink into a lively, attractive, energetic person. The transformation happened over a period of months and had a profound impact on him. In terms of his writing, his work has gone from strength to strength.

Mike had begun writing poetry, based on childhood memories, before he went to university. His mother thought the poems promising and showed some to Joan Griffiths, a BBC Schools Radio producer. Joan immediately recognised their potential and used them in a **Living Language** programme in 1971 and commissioned three further programmes 'a great boost to his confidence. Later publisher Pam Royds at André Deutsch recognised that no one since R IStevenson had written poetry so directly from the child's point of view. In 1974 **Mind Your Own Business** was published and Mike has been busy writing for children ever since.

He now leads a hectic freelance existence, interspersing writing with television and radio work, performances, running poetry workshops, talking to teachers and compiling anthologies. His energy and versatility is astounding: few writers produce stories and poetry for such a wide age group (four to sixteen plus), anthologise both poetry and fiction, perform, work regularly with pupils and teachers. and do regular broadcasting. And there's the small matter of being married with a combined family of five children as well. His books sell like hot cakes and even if the 'children's literature establishment' doesn't always appreciate his work, his young readership certainly does. Mike gets irritated with the 'self appointed priests of the world of children's poetry who are appalled at new developments and who have definite ideas about what poetry ought to be. You know, nonsense rhymes and beautiful imagery, all winter snow, wind and adjectives, copy-cat stuff. Poetry isn't all about beauty! It ignores all the modern movements in poetry ' free verse, concrete verse. dialect, black poetry... I'm much more interested in poetry that gets at kids' experience, so they write what they think and use the words people actually speak.'

And how does he do it himself?? 'I often jot down a word or phrase to remind myself to write about an incident that's happened to me. If you looked at my desk right now you'd see 'toenail'. This is a little note to myself to remind me of the time I lost my big toenail. Sometimes I play with a word for days or even weeks; I've been trying to make a tongue twister about Houdini:

Who done Houdini in?

Dan done Houdini in.

Who done Dan in??

The message he gives to children is their entitlement to own and control language. 'Language is not something that's fixed and controls you. You can control language and you can use other people's language, their sayings and make it your own.'

Let Mike have one last word. 'If anybody out there is still worried about whether it's poetry or not: don't worry about it. Don't call it 'poetry'. I don't mind. Did the people listening to **Beowulf** worry about whether it was an epic or a saga... or did they just listen to a bloody good story??

Photographs by **Richard Newton**.

Some of Michael Rosen's books

Poetry collections:

The Hypnotiser, ill. Andrew Tiffen, Deutsch, 0 233 97929 8, £5.95

When Did You Last Wash Your Feet?, ill. Tony Pinchuck, Deutsch, 0 233 97859 3, £5.95; Lions, 0 00 672676 3, £2.95 pbk

Don't Put Mustard in the Custard, ill. Quentin Blake, Deutsch, 0 233 97784 8, £4.95; Picture Lions, 0 00 662677 7, £2.50 pbk

Mind Your Own Business, ill. Quentin Blake, Deutsch, 0 233 96468 1, £4.95; Young Lions, 0 00 670959 1, £1.95 pbk

You Can't Catch Me, ill. Quentin Blake, Deutsch, 0 233 97345 1, £4.95; Picture Puffin, 0 14 050.380 3, £1.95 pbk

Quick, Let's Get Out of Here, ill. Quentin Blake, Deutsch, 0 233 97559 4, £6.95; Puffin, 0 14 03.1784 8, 11. 75 pbk

Fiction:

Hairy Tales and Nursery Crimes, ill. Alan Baker, Deutsch, 0 233 97708 2, £3.95; Young Lions, 0 00 672675 5, £1.75 pbk

You're Thinking About Doughnuts, ill. Tony Pinchuck, Deutsch, 0 233 98082 2, £5.95; Lions, 0 00 673044 2, £1 .95 pbk (November 88)

Nasty!, Puffin, 0 14 03.1599 3, £1.50 pbk

Anthologies (as editor):

A Spider Bought a Bicycle, ill. Inga Moore, Kingfisher, 0 86272 286 1, £6.95

The Kingfisher Book of Children's Poetry, Kingfisher, 0 86272 155 5, £7.95

Speaking to You, with David Jackson, Macmillan Education, 0 333 36360 4, £2.95 pbk non-net

That'd Be Telling, with Joan Griffiths, Cambridge University Press, 0 521 35302 5, £4.95

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