



Authorgraph No.19: Michael Foreman

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Michael Foreman interviewed by **Pat Triggs**.

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Michael Foreman is one of the most talented, successful, respected and sought-after artists working in children's books. He gets more offers of work than he can cope with, has the next four years more than mapped out. Yet as he sat on the edge of the fireplace in his vast studio living room, flanked by two stone angels ('the previous owner left them; she said she was an interior decorator') he talked about himself like someone who can still hardly believe his luck. It's an understandable feeling when you discover that but for the chance appearance of two people in his life he might never have found out what he could do.

Both of these people lived in Suffolk where Michael Foreman was born in the seaside village of Pakefield. His mother kept the village shop. Growing up in the war had its advantages for a boy whose father had died a month before he was born. 'The other boys' fathers were away and that helped me; not having a father didn't seem unusual'. The village shop delivered Sunday newspapers and magazines. 'The magazines arrived on Wednesday so from Wednesday till Sunday I had the run of all the magazines and comics. My favourite was **John Bull** because it always had a drawn cover. One of the artists used to draw scenes with hundreds and hundreds of people in them.' Michael, who drew all the time, was influenced. 'The soldiers billeted in the village were all Scottish, so I drew scenes of hundreds and hundreds of people in kilts.'

He also delivered the papers. One of the houses on the round belonged to a teacher at the Art School in Lowestoft. 'He wanted to start sculpture classes and he asked if I and my friends would like to dig clay for him from the cliffs. Later he started a Saturday morning class for kids and invited me to come.' That was the start. 'He encouraged mum to ask at school if I could go to the Art School for one afternoon a week.' On comes the second significant person. The headmaster of Michael Foreman's secondary modern school was Michael Duane (later of Risinghill). 'He said I wasn't to go for one afternoon a week. I should go for two.'

When Michael left school at fifteen it was automatically assumed that he would go to the art school full-time. 'I had no academic qualifications so when I got there I was lumped with the apprentices on day release. After a few days the teacher from the village saw me. He said. 'You shouldn't be here', and took me into another room where there was a big pink nude woman. I thought, 'I'm an artist!' But it didn't last. 'The principal was horrified. She thought I was too young, or too dumb and put me back.' The next year the grammar school entry arrived and with them Michael officially joined the Fine Artists. Had he got his 'O' Levels now? 'Well, no. But I had to be 'doing them' at night school.' Somehow it seems they never got 'done'.

At the end of the course he was all set for National Service; but his two older brothers wouldn't hear of it. So Michael persuaded officialdom that a year doing commercial art at St Martin's School of Art in London would equip him to do a

proper job so he wouldn't be a burden on society. During that year National Service ended; Michael Foreman got married and started to look for work as a freelance. Out of this, almost by chance, came his first picture book, **The General**, a story about how even the military can discover that there are better things to do than make war. 'I had nothing to show to get work so I made up a theme and drew some pictures.' Herbert Read who was active in CND saw it and liked the idea so Janet (my first wife) wrote the story and it was published.' That was 1961. It was six years before the next book appeared.

There followed a year at the Royal College of Art (ostensibly doing the Graphics course but in fact going his own way with painting and drawing) and a travel scholarship to the USA. Back in England, 'It didn't seem possible to be just an illustrator,' so he set up a Design Group with two friends. 'We did things like covers for Penguin.' Then it was back to the USA as Art Director on **Playboy** magazine. 'I stayed four months. The first two months were terrific. After that it was the same package every time. I got a job back here as Art Director on the new magazine **King** which was trying to be a British **Playboy**. They agreed to hire our group provided I did every drawing, including cartoons, in different styles and signed with different names. It was good fun. Like being the manager of a Fourth Division football team trying to do good things with no resources. **Playboy** was trying to do predictable things with endless amounts of money.' But working on **Playboy** had shown him what he wanted to do. 'My job there was to commission illustration for the fiction pages. I decided I wanted to be the one who was being asked.'

The idea of tight deadlines didn't appeal so advertising and the press were out. 'With books you get time and you can live anywhere.' But the money isn't good. 'I had to do enough of the rest to buy three months off to do a book. If the royalties came in I could take another month off.' That way **The Perfect Present** and **The Two Giants** got done. But an artist needs a lot of books in print (or one huge seller) to make a living.

Michael Foreman was getting there slowly. His early picture books with their political and moral themes - pacifism, inequality, conservation - were not always well received. ('Communist tract for infants,' shrieked one American reviewer.) On the credit side in 1971 he was given the Francis Williams prize (awarded every five years and much valued because it is given for illustration to artists by artists) for Horatio. He won it again in 1977 for War and Peas. They made him a judge the next time!

'The ideas come from inside me. There are often three or four lying around. Which one becomes most pressing and gets done often depends on what is happening outside. If my more recent books are different it's because I've travelled a great deal and collected images I want to use. **The Land of Dreams** for instance is more to do with my experience than with events.' It arose from a visit to the Himalayas. 'The place had a tremendous effect on me. I did lots of watercolours and an idea I had had years before suddenly made sense transposed to the mountains.' Not that all the books turn out as originally envisaged. 'Things happen on the paper and you can go with it. That's the nice thing about not answering a brief. I usually have three books going at once. My own book is the antidote to the ones I'm doing for other people.'

Increasingly since the success of his illustrations of Andersen, Grimm, Peter Dickinson's Old Testament retelling, **City of Gold**, Alan Garner's **Stone Book Quartet** and others he is much in demand. 'I was fortunate to be asked to do Andersen by Joanne Goldsworthy at Gollancz. I'd done no work to suggest that was something I could do. The material is so rich and each story is so different. It was a tremendous opportunity and a challenge. You know your work is going to be put up alongside earlier versions and you want it to be your own interpretation. The text is already a classic and the pictures need to last.

'I think I did Andersen before I should have done. It was the first classic I did. I'd much prefer to be doing it now. I had too much to find out that was not connected with the material in the stories. I was frightened by the practical problems. I know now how I think Andersen should be done and I'd like a chance to do another.'

Michael Foreman is not easily satisfied. 'You really need a break from the pictures, to see them fresh and be able to do bits again. But you never get it. In my own books I'd like to change things. I think the idea often deserved better than it got. Perhaps if I live long enough everyone will have forgotten and I can do them again.' At the moment he is squaring up to the challenge of Shakespeare. 'I think that is coming before I'm up to it too. Leon Garfield who is writing the

stories is having problems - I can't think of anything more daunting for somebody who reveres Shakespeare to the extent that Garfield does. It's like having a go at the Sistine Chapel. Everytime the project is put back I breath a sigh of relief.' But there is also a sense of urgency. 'Rackham did his best things when he was young, and Dulac. Kay Neilsen died penniless in Hollywood. They didn't get another go.' He's done some samples. 'They were really first preconceptions. You have to get the obvious ones out of the way. You have to dig a bit deeper.' The real work starts this year and the book is now due for Christmas 1984.

Christmas 1983 will see another Foreman classic, **Christmas Carol**. 'It was a tremendous thing to be asked to do Dickens.' He has just finished work on it and the illustrations are stunning. 'I'm consciously trying to change with every book I do now. Sometimes I worry about my style. Sometimes I think at least my work doesn't look like anyone else's. It's evolving I know. In **Christmas Carol** partly under orders from Joanne (Goldsworthy), I've been trying to get away from blue!' In progress is another book with Terry Jones to follow the very successful Fairy Tales written for Terry's daughter, Sally. 'This one is for his five year old son. He's demanded one big story about Vikings - all blood and thunder. It's like Saturday morning pictures, a cliff hanger in every chapter. I'm enjoying it because the book is being born as we go along.'

By the summer there should be a space for 'one of my own books'. He has just bought a house in St Ives, Cornwall where he plans to spend a lot of time with Louise, his second wife, and Ben, their new baby. 'I save the books that don't need much research for Cornwall. I'm doing black and white illustrations for three poetry books for Kestrel over the next three years. I'll be able to sit in the garden and do them. Usually I save the black and whites for the evening and do colour in the day.' If that makes Michael Foreman sound like a workaholic it's not far wrong. 'I have to be drawing otherwise I'm wasting my time. I love writing but it has to be done in situations where I couldn't possibly be doing anything else - on planes, or waiting for people. I work all day, every day.'

At least he did before young Ben came on the scene. 'It's now rare for me to do more than two hours without interruption. I take Ben to the shops, the park.' But there is compensation not only in the obvious joy Ben brings but in the ideas he is generating in his father. 'That's why I'm trying to leave a few gaps. I turn down at least one book a month. And I'm conscious of doing too many; but there are very few of those I do accept that I could even begin to consider not doing. I turn down ones there doesn't seem much point in doing. The story may be nice enough but it's not telling you anything. There are lots of books around I can't see why people have done them. They are just occupying another space rather prettily.'

For Michael Foreman to whom time is precious, who looks on his work as a privilege and who has a great respect for the children who are on the receiving end of books, that is just not good enough.

Some of the Books

Moose Puffin, 0 14 050.0731 1, 90p

Dinosaurs and all that Rubbish Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 02234 7, £3.95 Puffin, 0 14 050.098 7, 95p

War and Peas Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 89013 6, £2.95

Land of Dreams Andersen Press, 0 86264 022 9, £4.50

Hans Andersen: His Classic Fairy Tales Translated by Erik Haugaard, Gollancz, 0 575 02188 8, £6.00

The Brothers Grimm: Popular Folk Tales Translated by Brian Alderson Gollancz, 0 575 02446 1, £6.00

City of Gold Peter Dickinson Gollancz, 0 575 02883 1, £6.95

Sleeping Beauty and other Favourite Fairy Tales Translated by Angela Carter Gollancz, 0 575 03194 8, £6.95

Fairy Tales Terry Jones Pavilion, 0 907516 03 3, £6.95

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