



Fairy Tale Visions

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Tony Bradman examines the work of **Tony Ross** and **Errol le Cain**.

Tony Bradman considers the work of two artists, **Tony Ross** and **Errol le Cain**, who offer children excitingly different versions of traditional tales.

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Tony Ross

What do John Lennon, fairy tales and mice have in common? Baffled? The answer is Tony Ross, one of Britain's best known illustrators of children's books.

The mice star in the books Tony has done with Bernard Stone, like **The Charge of the Mouse Brigade** and **The Tale of Admiral Mouse**. And lovers of good picture books will know that a large part of the Ross oeuvre is formed of up-dated fairy tales. I'll come back to these in a minute- but I suppose you're all dying to know where John Lennon fits in.

Liverpool School of Art is the connection, for Tony Ross studied there at about the same time as the late lamented Lennon. Not that there was much contact between the two. 'He wasn't a mate or anything,' says Tony. 'In fact he was quite a hard man, and I didn't like him all that much. I suppose he was a bit frightening, really.'

But if the 60s were years of influence for Lennon, they were formative times for Tony Ross. After art school he went into advertising as a graphic designer, and it was to stop himself going mad' that he began to draw cartoons for newspapers and magazines. 'I drifted into doing kids' books partly because I was fed up with working in black and white all the time. I got a yen to see my work in colour. I discovered to my pleasure that it wasn't too arduous. and soon I was hooked.

I said the 60s were formative years for Tony Ross because there's an element of that decade's characteristic cartoon style in his work. The Hugo books - **Hugo and the Man who Stole Colours**, **Hugo and the Ministry of Holidays** and **Hugo and Oddsock** - for example, are the adventures of a mouse who meets all sorts of strange characters. The graphic style, the rough, almost scratchy colour cartoons are redolent of the 60s. Looking at these picture books I was also strongly reminded of **Yellow Submarine**, the 60s cartoon par excellence. What could be more 'psychedelic' than the story of an old man who's going round stealing colours?

But there's more to it than that. The 60s was a time of opening doors, broadening people's awareness, a time when fairy tale - in the shape of the modern pop song, particularly some of the Beatles' later work - came back into its own in a popular way. Even Tony Ross's 'non fairy tale' picture books like Hugo have an element of fairy tale in them. What else

is a story in which a home made hobby horse flies you off through the window to Lostsockland but a fairy tale?

Naughty Nigel, the tale of a little boy who mishears on purpose everything said to him has the same magic. He finds himself in Nightland, at the mercy of a little old man who does the same thing to him. So when Nigel asks the man (who can grant wishes) for a Golden Rose, he gets a Golden Nose. Of course, Nigel is cured of his fault forever, as children often are in fairy tales. Tony Ross creates a world of fantasy where anything can happen, where a story unfolds with its own bizarre logic. and the end is fitting.

When he has turned to traditional tales - as he has done in books like **The Pied Piper of Hamelin**, **The Enchanted Pig**, **The Greedy Little Cobbler**, **Jack and the Beanstalk**, **Puss in Boots** and **Goldilocks and the Three Bears** - the same strengths are apparent. Those are quite simple: a bold, flamboyant use of colour in pictures which tell a story very simply, but idiosyncratically: well written texts which sometimes seem almost transparent, and work well with the pictures: and good design, a quality which can ruin the experience of a picture book for a child if its missing.

'I've always been interested in fairy tales, says Tony. 'I suppose it's because they've been told to children for generations, and it's nice to do them again for our times. It's a case of knowing the story and putting it down in an unsentimental way. I do them as I remember them, but I sometimes go back to the original sources to check on a name if there's a glaring gap in my memory. I couldn't remember the name of the marquis in **Puss in Boots**, for example - the Marquis of Carabas.

And then there's what looks at first like a completely different side to Tony's work - the books he's done with Bernard Stone, or **Hare and Badger**, a story on which he collaborated with Naomi Lewis. The pictures in these are finely detailed, more like miniature paintings than the bizarre cartoons of his other work.

'That's a bit of self indulgence. really. I draw very quickly usually, so it's nice to take a little bit of trouble over things sometimes. Perhaps it's a subconscious wish to be a real painter, or something.'

I have to add that when he said that. Tony Ross was laughing- and that brings me to the last point about his books. They're full of humour.

Most recently he's been directing his comic vision on **The Three Pigs**. The result of all that, a delightfully funny Tony Ross updating of the traditional story, is due out in April.

Tony Ross's books are published by Andersen Press.

Naughty Nigel, 0 86264 027 X, £3.95

The Three Pigs, 0 86264 039 3, £3.95

Errol Le Cain

You only to have to look through a bibliography of Errol Le Cain's to discover his main interest. Titles like **King Arthur**, **Sir Orfeo**, **The King's White Elephant** and **Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp** give the game away immediately. Errol Le Cain is interested in myths, legends and fairy tales, and the stories he has illustrated come from all over the world.

He was born in Singapore in 1941, and spent his childhood in the Far East. He spent some time in Japan, Hong Kong and Saigon and lived for five years in India. His interest in myths and legends took root in those rich and exotic years. and later on it became extended to the legends and fairy tales of the West.

One other formative influence was an interest in animated films. He began making his own at the age of 14, and this was the skill which eventually landed him a job with an advertising studio in London. His first book - **King Arthur** - in fact began its existence as an idea for a film which Errol Le Cain would still like to make.

That book featured intricate and finely detailed illustrative borders which have since become a major feature of some of his other books, and it's those words - intricate and detailed - which seem to sum up his approach. Take **Thorn Rose**, for example, the Brothers Grimm story more popularly known as **Sleeping Beauty**. Each spread features one whole page illustration on one side, faced by the text suspended in white space and surrounded by one of those gorgeous borders.

The pictures in **Thorn Rose** are, for want of a better word, painterly - and also based foursquare on a medieval tradition of art. There's no perspective, and the figures are placed in symbolic relationships. That's a big phrase, but what it really means is that Errol Le Cain has used the style of the middle ages to restore a time and place to a story which has been told so often it is now diluted. There are no two ways about it: his mastery of technique is superb. In the hands of other artists, using the style of the 14th century (suitably updated) could lead to static figures on a backcloth, however beautiful. Errol Le Cain gives life to stories.

And he's well aware of how all this technique translates into good picture books for kids, too. In a biographical note he prepared for his publisher, Faber, he says: 'I feel you shouldn't be dogmatic when talking about picture books. The range available to children should be as wide as possible, and the traditional classics should have their place with contemporary works.'

'Backstreet slums and fairy tale castles must all be there. It's too easy to impose your own opinions, thus narrowing and limiting a child's imagination.'

Errol! Le Cain can only be accused of widening children's imaginations. He's re-interpreted **Cinderella** and **Beauty and the Beast**, he's resurrected other Brothers Grimm stories like **The Twelve Dancing Princesses**, which is as rich and detailed as **Thorn Rose** - the two best books in the Le Cain canon as far as I'm concerned.

He's also done those 'eastern' books, like **Aladdin** and the **Little Dog of Fo** and **The Child in the Bamboo Grove**. Again, it's a case of the style of the pictures growing organically out of a text. **Aladdin**, for example, features its own illustrative borders, but this time they're round the main pictures and not the text. And would I be right in saying that this then helps the illustrations to look like Persian or Arabic miniatures of the middle ages? At any rate, Errol Le Cain hits exactly the right middle eastern style for this perennial story - and gives it a real pictorial shot in the arm.

He has this to say on the subject of how pictures and text should work together: 'I think the first task of an illustrator is to be in full sympathy with the writer. No matter how splendid and exciting the drawings may be, if they work against the mood of the story the picture book is a failure. I'm all for illustrations with a lot of relevant detail so that a child can discover fresh things with every look. And I like 'simple', bold pictures which are humorous or dramatic, subtly underlining and extending the story, giving the young imagination something to feed on. My idea of a perfect picture book is one with an imaginative text, simply told, and where the words and drawings belong to each other inseparably.'

Humour plays a part in both pictures and text in the superb **Molly Whuppie**. Errol Le Cain's latest picture book. It's an old story, in a version by Walter de la Mare. It's got everything you could want in a traditional tale - giants, magic, kings and princes, castles and chasms and dull-witted villains. If you want to taste Errol! Le Cain's work - and once you get into it there's more variety than is at first apparent - try this one for size.

Errol le Cain's books are published by Faber and Faber

Molly Whuppie, retold by Walter de la Mare, illustrated by Errol le Cain, 0 571 11942 5, £4.95

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