



Authorgraph number 207: David McKee

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[Clive Barnes](#) [1]

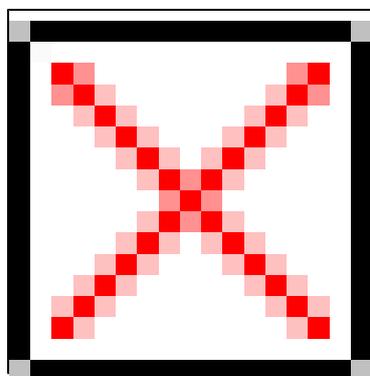
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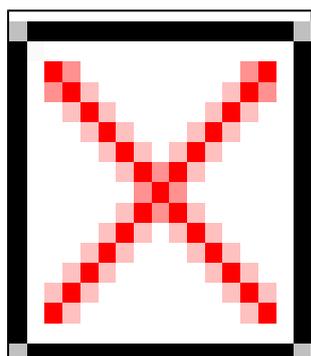
David McKee interviewed by **Clive Barnes**.



Andersen Press is celebrating Elmer's 25th anniversary this year, but Elmer himself is much older. The first version was published by Dennis Dobson as long ago as 1968, and was one of my daughter Jenny's favourite books when she was a toddler in the early 1980s. Still, if Andersen is overlooking the book's longer history, it is perhaps justified. It was the redoubtable Klaus Flugge, Andersen's founder, who, when Dobson stopped publishing, insisted that Elmer should not die, and sent the resurrected patchwork elephant out into the world in brilliant new colours to become one of picturebooks' most readily recognisable characters.

It's not a decision that Klaus can ever have regretted, for, at a quick count, there are over thirty **Elmer** titles in the Andersen catalogue, including joke, pop up and colouring books. His stories are translated into over twenty languages, and there's a new story, **Elmer and the Monster**, out this year. David McKee says that, having lived with Elmer for so long, he now feels that all he is doing is setting down the stories that Elmer continues to share with him.

For some illustrators David's **Elmer** oeuvre might be enough in itself. But since he began in children's books he has



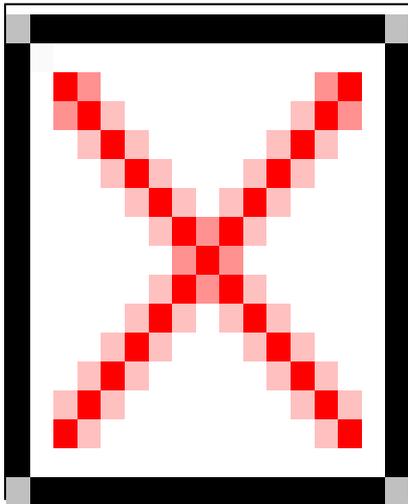
had over a hundred books published where he is credited as writer and illustrator, and has been the illustrator for as many books written by other authors. Along the way, he has also written the **Mr Benn** TV scripts and founded **King Rollo Films**, which made many TV films for younger children, including another iconic character, **Spot the Dog**. He says, 'I did a lot of stuff. I keep saying to young people, do as much as you can when you're young.

Because as you get older you get so many obligations. Life generally fills up and it's harder to work 24 hours a day.?

It was his skill at drawing that first took him into children's illustration. Like Quentin Blake, he began young by sending cartoons to newspapers and, by the time he left art college, found that he could support himself simply by doing that. He made an impact in the children's book world with his third and fourth books, **Mr Benn**, **Red Knight** (1967) and **Elmer, The Story of a Patchwork Elephant** (1968). His work usually combines humorous and characterful drawing with a bold use of colour. The way that David describes the appearance of Elmer, in which a painting in the style of Paul Klee became somehow superimposed on the drawing of an elephant, suggests exactly the confluence of his two interests in paint and drawing. And, if you turn to the original Mr Benn, pages of pen and ink drawing alternate with richly coloured double spreads.

If you look at the recent Elmer books, the sky will change from yellow to green to pink to blue. If it's just green trees and blue skies, it looks so damn boring

Between the two incarnations of Elmer, there was one more **Elmer** and four more **Mr Benn** books for Dobson; the appearance of two more book characters, **Melric the Magician** and **King Rollo**; the writing and drawing of thirteen **Mr. Benn** TV episodes; the making of a series of films for the **Save the Children Fund**; the launch of **King Rollo Films** (still in production today); and the appearance of a number of notable individual picture books. It was no surprise then, that when Elmer reappeared he looked different. His story was pared down, demonstrating how picture book storytelling had evolved in twenty years, and his jungle surroundings were changed utterly, influenced by the intense colours and strange plants that had begun to appear in David's other picture books.



The colours, David says, are influenced by his admiration for the Fauves, a group of early twentieth century French artists, including Derain and Matisse, who used strong contrasting non naturalist pure colours in their paintings. Here, although David admits he possibly favours certain colours and contrasts - "I notice there's often a citrus green and a pink, which are strangely discordant" - there is no need for consistency. "If you look at the recent **Elmer** books, the sky will change from yellow to green to pink to blue. If it's just green trees and blue skies, it looks so damn boring. It's not a real world. It's a picture book world. And I've got the right to have blue trees or any other trees that I want." To a child of the sixties, the strange shapes of McKee trees, like his intense colour contrasts, bring back memories of psychedelic art posters, but, for David, the influences are both nearer to home and further away: the light and flora of the South of France, and Henri Rousseau's jungle. The McKee trees became such a feature of his books that David remembers he was invited to take part in a project with a London school in recreating them on the pillars under the Westway flyover.

David is interested in other non-naturalistic ways of seeing and telling: "Picture making is not like photography." The **Mr Benn** books introduced a playing with perspective, in which it was possible, for instance, to see both sides of Festive Street, where Mr Benn lives. This has now become characteristic of his work. Like the device of being able to see inside a house and outside simultaneously, this storytelling manipulation is influenced by medieval painting and Persian miniatures but it also derives from David reading picture books with his three children, with the book on the

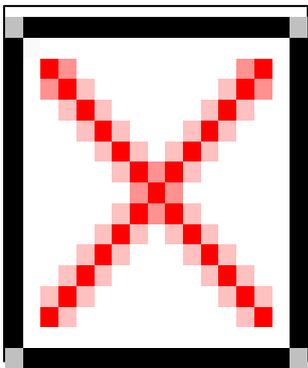
floor, and a child on each of its other three edges but everyone still being able to follow what was going on.

What could be more surreal than a patchwork elephant?

The Surrealists seem to be hovering somewhere about his individual picture books, particularly in the 1980s, when his stories are sometimes mysterious and their endings occasionally sardonic. His only work to explicitly acknowledge them is **I Hate My Teddy Bear** (1982), where two children and their teddies play in a world of largely unexplained events and characters. Yet Mr Benn himself surely owes something to Magritte; and, even if we have got rather used to Elmer, what could be more surreal than a patchwork elephant? If many twentieth century artists were seeking to move away from representational art to look at the world anew through the eyes of the primitive, the naïve or the child, and acknowledge, through thinkers like Freud, the role of the unconscious and fantasy, then perhaps David brings something of that artistic sensibility back to children themselves.

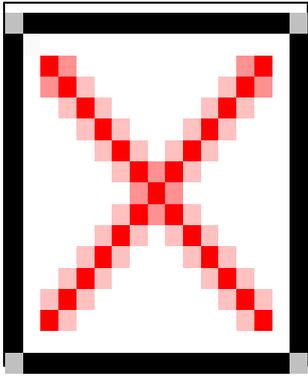
David's pictorial talent is in the service of a gift for character and narrative. Of Elmer, Mr Benn, King Rollo and Melric, all of which have their own series of books, David says, "They say all art is self-portraiture and I think it's me probably just speaking through them. They all have something that is constant about them, in the way that they are." And I can see what he means, although neither of us can put our finger on it. I suggest they are all "quietly adventurous". Not quite right but perhaps it says something of their appeal to children. His characters are vulnerable, curious, and, if not actually seeking adventure, happy to take it on when it appears.

David says he is aware of his child audience when he is writing, "But not very? It's still basically for me." Many of his stories, even in the character driven books, take the shape of a fable, offer a message to the reader, and imply a wide audience that could be adults or children: "When I was young it was wartime and books were not so much around, but my favourite stories were the fables and the parables in the Bible, because they meant something. My parents were very moral people and I'm probably the same. I'm also conscious that a picturebook is the one book that is shared by adult and child and I have to work with that."



The responses of some adults to David's books have occasionally been fiercely critical. Of these controversial books, **Not Now Bernard** (1980), recently reborn as a play at the Unicorn Theatre, is perhaps the most celebrated. Here Bernard figures so little in his parents' concerns that, when he is eaten by a monster in the garden, they scarcely notice. It was one of three major picture books of the time that commented on possible shortcomings in parent and child relationships, preceded by John Burningham's **Come Away from the Water, Shirley** (1977), and followed by Anthony Browne's **Gorilla** (1983), and some adults took rather too much to heart the suggestion of a child-eating monster lurking in the garden. David says that in letters to him, children seem to realise that "the monster is Bernard really, isn't he?" and that some children take it as their favourite book. Monsters figure quite frequently in David's books: "We've all got monsters in us and a lot of our time is spent in subduing that."

David is concerned about adult reactions to some of his books, particularly when he feels that what he has intended



has been misunderstood. A situation that he felt had happened recently when **Denver** (2010), a book about a small town's envy of a rich man stirred up by a mysterious stranger, was described by Polly Toynbee in **The Guardian** as 'Ayn Rand for baby beginners, trickle-down economics for trustafarian toddlers, a nursery Hayek for every little Conservative.' For David it was actually about how other aspects of life other than money make life worth living and a concern with merely material things brings only discontent and unhappiness.

It could be said that fables have always been open to contrary interpretations, and the feeling that he might be misunderstood has never stopped David from trying to make a point. Throughout his career, he has returned to the subject of conflict and the futility of war, a preoccupation that he puts down to the losses of the Second World War he witnessed as a child in Plymouth. In 1972 there was **Six Men**, a brilliant parable, recently reissued, entirely in black and white line drawing, incidentally demonstrating perfectly what David can achieve with the minimum of resources. In 1978 there was **Tusk Tusk** in which the trunks of warring black elephants and white elephants mutate into guns and fists. In 1985 there was **Two Monsters** in which monsters living on opposite sides of a mountain reduce it to rubble in their rage; and in 2005, written in a swift response to the Iraq War, [The Conquerors](#) [3], a tale of how the victims overcome military might through cultural resilience rather than violence. As David points out, even the **Elmer** books contain messages about, for instance, individuality and tolerance. 'What I like doing is provoking discussion, especially for schools. There are subjects that can and should be talked about in stories.'

David's body of work offers contradictions. The creator of two of Britain's best loved characters for children, Mr Benn and Elmer, he has also created books that have sharply divided opinions. Prolific and energetic, greatly gifted as an illustrator and a writer for children, producing work of high quality for fifty years, and commercially successful, he has perhaps had less critical recognition than he should have done. But his work is being continually rediscovered and it must have been satisfying to him that it was Tate Publishing that decided to reissue **Mr Benn**, **Red Knight** (2011) and **Big-Top Benn** (2010) in their original format. Perhaps more telling, though, considering McKee's own argument in **The Conquerors**, is the engraved paving slab outside No 54 Festig Street in Putney, paid for by the residents, marking where David was living in the 1960s. This was the house that, recreated in the books, was next door to Mr Benn's on Festive Street; and the paving stone is surely a sign of how firmly embedded David's books and characters are in the British cultural consciousness.

Clive Barnes has retired from Southampton City where he was Principal Children's Librarian and is now a freelance researcher and writer.

Elmer, Andersen Press, 978 1842707319, pbk, £6.99

[Elmer and the Monster](#) [4], Andersen Press, 978 1783440535, hbk, £11.99

Not Now, Bernard, Andersen Press, 978-1849394673, pbk, £6.99

[Denver](#) [5], Andersen Press, 978-1849393898, pbk £5.99

[Two Monsters](#) [6], Andersen Press, 978-1842708316, pbk £5.99

The Conquerors, Andersen Press, 978-1842704684, pbk £5.99

Mr Benn Red Knight, Tate Publishing, 978-1854379900, hbk £8.99

Big-Top Benn, Tate Publishing, 978-1854379610, hbk £8.99

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