

A life in writing

Michael Morpurgo was interviewed during original War Horse rehearsals in 2007 describing his early career, how he wrote the novel, and how he felt about seeing his work brought to life on stage

I stuttered into writing. I wasn't a good reader at school: I read comics because I liked picture stories that moved fast. Then I read one book that changed my life – called *Treasure Island*. It was the first time I'd ever found that enormous thrill of going on an adventure inside a book. Sadly, that early enthusiasm did get trampled on by some teachers who – as happens now sometimes – were using texts for tests. I wasn't any good at that – I didn't write very well, my handwriting was terrible, my spelling wasn't much better, my grammar was dreadful. And you don't like what you fail at. So I decided I was going to be a rugby player instead. Books went out of the window for years and I became a really good rugby player.

I went into the army for a variety of reasons, mostly because I wanted to play rugby, and I knew I could travel. I didn't really think about what the army did, or what I was going to do there. And I didn't like it. I met my wife and she didn't like it either, so I came out rather fast and went to university. And at university – where I also wasn't much good at writing essays, because I still had very little self worth when it came to putting my ideas on paper – I read a book called *Gawain and the Green Knight*. And I remember feeling this terrific thrill going through me again, something I'd always remember.

I became a teacher after leaving university and found myself trying to engage the children in front of me. And to engage thirty-five 10- and 11-year-olds is really difficult. I decided I could do this by reading them stories: if I read one with a passion, they would listen. But I was reading a story one day that didn't work. I looked up and the children were all yawning, picking their noses and looking out the window. I went home and said to my wife, What am I going to do, I've got an entire book to get through – 14 more chapters? And she said, Don't go on boring them, you've done that once. Tell them a story – why read them a story – tell them a story. Go in there and tell it?, I said, They're 11-year-olds, they'll kill me. She said, Are you a coward? I said, Yes.

But I went in the next day and just delivered this story I'd made up. Those were 10 minutes that changed my life. I found that I could make all these children listen. I told a soap throughout the week. The headteacher

liked it and said she had a friend who worked in publishing and would I like to write the stories out and give them to her on Monday morning. I did. And I got lucky.

The writing process

I have a big problem with repetitive strain syndrome. How you write is very important, and it's taken me years to devise the best way of being. I used to write at a desk and the more enthusiastic I got, the smaller the writing was, the tighter the shoulder clamped up and I really did myself awful injuries. I remember saying to Ted Hughes that I was having great problems and he said, I stand up and write at an easel. So I did the same thing, but my feet hurt: so that was no good.

I read a biography of Robert Louis Stevenson and he was in a photograph, sitting on a bed. He had piled up all these pillows behind him, his legs were drawn up in front of him and he had a little exercise book. He was just sitting, relaxed. I tried it and it's brilliant, because your back and your legs are supported and you've just got this little exercise book on your knee. So that's what I do now and though I still write quite small, it doesn't hurt!

I never start thinking about writing a book until I have had many weeks, months and sometimes years of dreaming something around in my head. I call it my dream time and it's the most important time of writing. I didn't think of it at first: because I'd been brought up, as most kids are, to think I could do things quite quickly. Actually the better part of writing, I think most writers would agree, is that you have to spend an awful lot of time simply living in the world that you're going to be writing about. The characters will come out of that, they'll come out of the research. That takes time – and with me, it takes a lot of time. I have books that sit around in my head for 15 or 20 years before they ever even get themselves down on paper.

I can't plan it and there's no kind of recipe that works every time because every single book is different. But I try to find the principle. It's that business of letting it come slowly, not forcing the pace and somehow, when you're in the story, not being too anxious to finish it. Let the characters find a solution. When the characters are driving the story forward, then you know you've done something all right and you stop playing God yourself.

War Horse Learning

War Horse drawings by
Rae Smith

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The significance of *War Horse* in Michael Morpurgo's writing career

War Horse was my fifth book, but it was my first really decent one. The others had been decent enough, but not very convincingly told: the characters didn't come off the page.

When I look at them now, I feel ashamed of the first four. But *War Horse* seemed to be something a bit special and people seemed to think it was okay. Luckily it got shortlisted for the Whitbread Prize and everyone thought it would win. It didn't. But then I got really lucky. I came back home the next day, after the debacle at the Whitbread Prize, and went out with the children at our project, Farms for City Children, at 7 o'clock in the morning. I came back at about 8.30am and the phone rang. It was a very good friend of mine, who used to live down the road from us but is sadly no longer with us – Ted Hughes, who was President for Farms for City Children. He said, Michael, we'll go out for the day. He knew the state of mind I'd be in, I think. So we went fishing and ended up in a tea shop in Bideford. He leaned across the table – he hadn't mentioned the Whitbread Prize all day – and he looked me in the eye and said, "About yesterday. Prizes aren't worth very much you know, they're just a marketing tool. They're absolutely not to be worried about. And I'm here to tell you that you've written a fine book." And you think, Okay, I can do this.

Children and animals: An understanding

One of the reasons that books, films and plays that have animals as their central characters work rather well with children is because children seem to have a kind of built-in sympathy for the natural world around them. Normally it's for a cat or a dog, a goldfish or a guinea pig. It could, of course, be a horse, it doesn't really matter. What matters is that they know, without being told, that these are sentient beings: if you treat them right, it makes them feel good. Children really understand that, because they feel exactly the same. If they're picked up when they're young and they're cuddled and made to feel wanted, then they feel good. Maybe we lose that when we get older. We get to think of animals as creatures that we exploit for eating purposes, for sporting purposes, for war purposes – in the case of *War Horse* – and we can forget that they feel pain, they know what it's liked to be loved and they know what it feels like to be mistreated: it hurts them physically.

These animals which cannot speak for themselves – our central characters, Joey, Tophorn and others – they are victims of whatever it is that men are doing. It is man that invents wars, man who solves problems, man that ends up trying to kill one another. If we want to eradicate ourselves in this way, that's our business – but what we've done for thousands of years, is use horses or elephants, or whatever it is, for that purpose. Children know that's inherently unfair: millions of horses didn't volunteer to die in this way. They had no particular quarrel with the German horses on the other side. They were simply used up and suffered in the process. Children get that without being told at all. I think there is an instinctive sympathy, identification, empathy, with this animal that can't speak for itself, so a child wants to speak for it.

***War Horse*: whose story is it?**

Hand on heart, *War Horse* is not just the story of the horse. It is the story of all the men who fought in that Great War, and who died in it, and who were wounded forever by it, in their mind or in their body. It's also the story of the people whose land was fought over and whose lives were ruined.

Maybe that's why it works particularly now: when the book first came out, one of the reasons some people didn't like it was that they thought it irrelevant. We were in the middle of the Cold War. So, to all intents and purposes in the UK, war did not impinge on us any more. It was one of those things that was always a prospect and a threat, but we did not see daily on our television screens coffins being carried home, we didn't see bombs exploding in Baghdad. We'd just been through the Second World War, we didn't want to engage with it all.

In the last four or five years, certainly, and a bit more, we've all become aware that this is something young men all over the world, for whatever cause, are still going through. The First World War, I think, is the great metaphor for all wars because in a way, it was the most useless of all wars. This was absolutely a struggle between the great European powers, slicing up the world between them and deciding who should have the biggest slice of the cake.



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I think many people, many historians, look at the First World War and think, Well that was a waste, a complete waste of life. After that war, there was this short intermission of 20-odd years and then there was this Second World War, which, to my way of thinking, was a complete result of the First World War. And we know what damage that has done and continues to do worldwide.

It was all begun by this great conflagration of western powers unable to negotiate their way without humiliating one another. What seems to happen time and time again is that we fight away, we humiliate one another and we expect there to be peace. But it doesn't work that way and we all should know this by now. Suddenly this book about the First World War becomes much more urgent and relevant because of the suffering that we all know is going on around us.

How it feels to have work staged or filmed

Whenever I'm lucky enough to be approached by a film-maker, or a theatre producer, the first thing I look to is the record of the company, and of the people concerned— you need to know what it is they do. I've made mistakes in the past and got my fingers burnt once or twice – every writer has. Frankly you have to get lucky as well as be a little bit judicious. So when I was approached by the National Theatre about *War Horse*, it came on the back of a very good experience I'd had with the Bristol Old Vic for Simon Reade's production of *Private Peaceful* which had toured the country for two years. If I got a good director then someone could manage *War Horse*. But it wasn't until I was told about these extraordinary puppeteers from South Africa, Handspring, that I began to have very much confidence in it: the National Theatre wasn't likely to put its talent and money where it wasn't going to do something pretty special. But I could not conceive of how a story like this could be staged. Then I got to meet Tom Morris and Handspring – they all came down here to Devon. These people were very serious about what goes on inside a horse's head; they really wanted to know what motivated a horse, how horses behave. We went down to a farm locally to watch a horse being used to mow hay. And then we went to see the horses and men of the King's Troop Royal Horse Artillery, pulling their guns and grooming their horses. I could see that there was an enormous seriousness about the way

this thing was being approached. We were months away from any production, but it was being gone into in depth and with great intelligence. All that gave me enormous confidence that something extraordinary would come out of it.

They made a film of one of the workshops, of actors working with puppets which were not fully made but suggestions of puppets. And I was completely enchanted by how moving it was. Horses are really moving as they are but, funnily enough, a puppet is much more engaging. The make-believe horse which you know perfectly well is being worked by people (because it is so balletic and extraordinarily sensitive), touches your heart immensely. I knew from then on that we were going to be doing something quite extraordinary.

