



**Federation of Children's Book Groups**  
Conference 2009 at Worth Abbey 3<sup>rd</sup> - 5<sup>th</sup> April



*“a huge inspiration”*

*“a great  
conference...a  
memorable weekend”*

*“another wonderful  
conference...a really  
enjoyable day”*

*“a magical experience  
surrounded by people  
passionate about  
reading”*

*“inspired by the many  
brilliant speakers”*

*How do authors approach the writing process?*

*How do they plot and craft their narratives?*

*Does writing for picture books differ from novels?*

These were some of the topics covered during the 41<sup>st</sup> Federation of Children's Book Groups Conference at Worth Abbey by a host of well-known and new faces from the world of children's literature. For those who could not come this year, and for those of you who did spend the weekend at Worth but could not go to all the events, here are just some of the insights the authors, illustrators and publishers generously shared with us all.



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Friday 3<sup>rd</sup> April

**Michael Rosen, Children's Laureate**



We were delighted that the Conference was opened by Michael Rosen, Children's Laureate, who read some of his favourite poems about the foibles of his early family life and the affection that surrounded him as child. He described how in his childhood: 'stories stroke us' and 'books fly around'. He also shared some his experiences in schools and his work with primary schools encouraging children from all backgrounds to enjoy reading.

### **Campaigning for the Book**

Michael was followed after dinner by a typically pugnacious and combative talk from **Alan Gibbons**, winner of the Blue Peter Book Award and author of *Shadow of the Minotaur*, *Caught in the Crossfire*, *Rise of the Blood Moon* amongst other books. Alan is leading the Campaign for the Book against proposed library closures and announced the reprieve of the libraries in Wirral at the Conference. For more information about Alan's campaign visit [www.fcbg.co.uk](http://www.fcbg.co.uk) to download the Spring 2009 Newsletter which has an article written by Alan about his work.





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Saturday 4<sup>th</sup> April



Saturday was a whirl of activity with 20 authors, illustrators and publishers regaling enthralled audiences with demonstrations using Samurai swords (**Chris Bradford**, see right), on the spot illustrations (**Jan Fearnley**, **Petr Horacek** and **Jackie Morris**) and intriguing admissions of being 'haunted' by their book characters (**Jenny Downham**). The conference theme 'Juggling with Words' led to fascinating and in-depth panel discussions between the authors and the audience about how stories are crafted and shaped, the different writing processes adopted and how each author approached the issues of narrative development, whether they carefully plotted every chapter, whether they improvised or if they had no idea at the start where the story would go.

### The Creative Process

The first session of the day involved award-winning translator and editor of the Ultimate Book Guides, **Daniel Hahn**, in conversation with authors, **Damien Kelleher**, **Jenny Downham** and **Michael Grant**. Each author described how they approached their work, Damien carefully plotting for logic and momentum, ensuring resolution within the last third of the book whilst Jenny prefers improvisation, taking the bits of her writing she liked best. In contrast, Michael never plots, enjoying the fun of not knowing what will happen until the last few pages of his book!



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Jenny used the term 'iceberg writing' – where so much is never written in the book – in fact she kept a diary for 2 years as if she was her character. Research was pivotal for all the writers; Michael used the concept of a 'series bible', compiling character checklists, maps of the locality, ferry timetables and schedules that he researches long before he starts the actual writing.

### Challenging Fantasy

**Patrick Ness**, in conversation with **Nicky Gamble**, explained how carefully he considered his readership, challenging their assumptions. In writing his award-winning novel, *The Knife of Never Letting Go*, he asked himself some difficult questions:



- *Can people ever just be different without being exploited or torn down?*
- *What is the role of women in society?*
- *Are people inherently evil or is it just their actions that are evil?*

Fantasy writing is not just fantasy; it tells us something about the world we live in now.

### Juggling with Words and Pictures

In a complete change of tone, the session before lunch focused on 'Juggling Words and Pictures', with **Jackie Morris** talking to illustrators **Jan Fearnley** and **Petr Horaček**. In fact, to delight us all, it was as much illustrating as talking, but we were treated to fascinating insights into the creative world of the illustrator. Petr admitted that some of his ideas come from children's drawings as well as from sketchbooks and photographs. He extolled the virtues of the board book, allowing young readers to play with the book as well as read it.



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This connection between reading, illustration and texture was developed by Jan, who described how a potential loss of her sight encouraged her to explore and express texture in different ways in her picture books. Jan learned to knit Fair Isle, knitting her main character *Milo the Armadillo* and sewing fabrics on to the pages of her book before scanning them in to create a completely different juxtaposition with her drawn graphite line. For those knitters in the audience the knitting pattern for Milo can be downloaded from the Walker web site: <http://www.walker.co.uk/milo-armadillo.aspx>



**Above: Jan drawing Milo for the audience and Milo in knitted format.**

In the final part of the session, Jackie vividly re-enacted scenes of her practising how a dragon might pick up a cake, in order to help her illustration be as realistic as possible. She explained how she weaves different references into her books; in *Tell Me A Dragon* to be published by Frances Lincoln shortly, she refers to the Ucello painting of St. George and the Dragon. For her picture books grow around images.



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#### Seminar selection

After lunch delegates were spoiled for choice with a variety of seminars to choose from: historical fiction writer **Marie Louise Jenson**, Samurai sword wielder **Chris Bradford**, award winning **Sophie McKenzie**, **Nikki Cornwell** who writes about other cultures, **Justin Richards** author of several of the Doctor Who books and **Maggi Gibson**, cabaret artist and poet who has just published her first teenage novel.

#### Fresh Talent



**Rachel Ward** **Sharon Dogar**

**Barry Cunningham**, Managing Director of The Chicken House, then introduced two relatively new writers for teenagers: **Sharon Dogar**, author of *Falling* and **Rachel Ward**, author of her first novel *Numbers* and discussed with them how they juggle creatively with their ideas. Sharon spoke passionately about how her characters bully her, she hears their voices incessantly as she see the stories unfolding, whereas Rachel played with ideas. She decided that she wanted to write an edgy and challenging book that worked with the concept of mortality, using the 'What if?' question to stimulate ideas. However, as Barry pointed out at the end: writing a book is only part the story, the reader also has a part to play. Until a book is read it's only half a circle.



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### Happy Birthday Gruffalo!

**Julia Donaldson** entertained us twice this year, firstly with a bravura performance before dinner, celebrating the Gruffalo's 10<sup>th</sup> birthday and then on Sunday morning talking with **Mary Byrne** about her new venture into teenage writing.



### Axel Sheffler, The Gruffalo and Julia Donaldson

Saturday came to an end with a typically robust and energetic talk from **Meg Rosoff**.





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Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> April

#### Books to be questioned

The last day started with a provocative talk from **David Fickling** about the role of books, stories and how we can encourage non-readers to share our love of books. David challenged us all: we are bad at talking to people who don't like books. In some respects we have misused books by controlling their distribution. Books should be freely available and uncensored. Stories are there to be questioned, books are for children to "trouble their little minds and get them thinking and asking questions". Perhaps comics could offer an alternative for some of the more disenfranchised?



#### David Fickling and F. E. Higgins

#### Where do ideas come from?

For **F.E. Higgins**, whose session followed David's, one of the most prolific sources of ideas for novels is the Internet, although she finds ideas all around her. The difficulty is not so much finding an idea as turning the idea into a plausible plot. Rather than work logically through the chapters, Fiona writes a chapter or describes a character and then moves them around. But she is fortunate: she lives in the most haunted village in Kent!



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### New directions

Is it easier to write picture books or books for older readers? That was one of the questions posed by **Mary Byrne** to **Julia Donaldson** as Julia talked about her new venture into teenage writing, *Running on the Cracks*.



### Julia Donaldson and Mary Byrne

Julia described how she came to writing through performing songs in French in Paris, before moving into writing playscripts and educational writing. Julia considers the writing process for longer books is easier as chapters can be planned. By knowing the plot she has a 'map' and a 'torch' although she does not always have the detail. She explained how the 'voices' of the teenagers come from her own experience and from that of others. However she agreed that: 'Endings are difficult'.



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**Linda Newbery, Susan Gates and Daniel Hahn**

### **Final conversations**

The final conversation was between **Daniel Hahn, Linda Newbery** and **Susan Gates**. Daniel quizzed both writers on their approach to writing. Linda described how she starts with a place and an atmosphere, for example an interesting old house, before 'gathering the ingredients' to decide on the ending and key moments in the plot. Susan agreed with concept of ingredients; for her they simmer for some time, maybe from reading the news or articles, gathering snippets of information...Did you know that the pee of small animals glows in the dark? Writing for them both is a constantly creative process, although Linda finds the second chapter hard – often she ditches it for the third!

### **And the final session...magic**

Appropriately for the conference theme, **Tim Bowler** talked about the magic of words. Words are underestimated: is a picture worth a thousand words? Does music



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begin where words end? He argues that words have a physical presence and worth and that putting words together creates magic. In his *Blade* series, Blade juggles with words creating new words and changing meanings.



**Tim Bowler and Worth Abbey**

If this inspires you to come to our next Conference visit our web site or call 0113 for more information. Members and non-members are welcome.

### *Thank yous*

The Federation of Children's Book Groups would like to thank all the publishers for their support of the Conference and Worth Abbey for their hospitality. We would particularly like to thank all the authors and illustrators who made the weekend so inspirational and the panel hosts for their immaculate preparation and stimulating questions.

For more feedback and comment on the Conference visit the blogs: Scattered Authors Society and [fcbgchair.blogspot.com](http://fcbgchair.blogspot.com) and the Federation web site, which will have links to photographs from the weekend.