



Authorgraph No.122: Debi Gliori

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Debi Gliori interviewed by **Lindsey Fraser**.

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Evening in Debi Gliori's household. Freshly bathed small children swathed in towels parade around the sitting room. Older ones joust with each other and their parents over homework, maths tests and ironing. The pace drops; Dad gives a spirited rendition of **We're Going on a Bear Hunt**, followed by **Mr Bear's Holiday**, an early copy of Mum's latest book. Leaving him encouraging the children on their way to bed, Debi grabs her coat and a torch and heads out into the night, up the garden, towards her studio. Once there, we are surrounded by foreign editions, promotional posters, family photographs, finished artwork, work in progress and overflowing ashtrays. A laptop glows from the table; her drawing board takes pride of place.

She shows me colour photocopies of the artwork for a forthcoming book of rhymes, recently delivered to Dorling Kindersley. We talk briefly about her worries for the publisher but Debi's anxiety evaporates as she takes me through the pages. She revels in the work, delighting in her visual interpretations of well-known verses, explaining the research behind her artistic decisions and some editorial negotiations: 'I'm doing a book of fairy tales next and they've told me I can do my own retellings.'

Debi Gliori has come a long way since her first book was accepted after several years 'papering the walls of my studio with polite and not-so-polite rejection slips.'

'I went to Art College in Edinburgh and I loved it. I had a new baby - I do things the hard way - so I didn't have much of a social life, but I felt bad that I was enjoying the work that much.' There followed a postgraduate year and mandatory touting of portfolio. 'I did lots of greetings cards which was soul destroying, lots of incredibly detailed work for ad agencies. Then my work somehow leapt off the slush pile at Walker Books.'

'I was so excited when they told me they'd publish **The New Big Sister** - the only book I know where the mother's throwing up on the first page. The Americans didn't much like that-but they did buy it. My bank manager sent me flowers.' She giggles over the memory. 'I thought Walker was doing me a *huge* favour.' **The New Big Sister** displays many Gliori characteristics. Knowing that parents are likely to read a favourite book hundreds of times, her text makes references which do not compromise the story but acknowledge the adult reader's presence. 'I agonised over that text - it did not come naturally, but I did get confidence from just being published. And having Sebastian Walker ring up to say how much he liked the book. That man was one of the all time publishing Greats to me - I was gobsmacked! I still miss him.' Debi describes the first time she met a child who had read one of her books. 'A friend and I were pretending to be a T-shirt company, exhibiting our wares in St Andrews. A little girl came in, pointed at my display of books and said, 'I've read that book.' I was over the moon and promised to dedicate my next book to her. And I did. *To Sophie Hicks - a promise kept.*'

Gradually the proportion of advertising work (which had paid the bills) to illustrated book commissions changed. Her

output was prodigious. 'My books are real life turned into stories. I use domestic detail shamelessly, and I remember what things felt like when I was a child. Sometimes it isn't until the book is finished and in the shops that I realise where the story came from. I wrote **Mr Bear to the Rescue** when I needed to be rescued, although I didn't know it at the time.'

Debi refers to Mr Bear affectionately as 'that ursine chappie' and describes the accidental route which led to the popular series. 'Mr Bear was originally Mr Badger. I'd seen him disappearing down a hole in **A Lion at Bedtime** and wanted to know more about him. But Francesca, my editor at Orchard Books, warned me that Americans don't like badgers and persuaded me to try bears. I'm not a bear person ' never had a teddy bear ' but I drew him a couple of times and began to wonder what he looked like from behind. When I drew him I discovered that he had this big baggy bottom and I was smitten!' With a film production company interested and never-ending inspiration within her front room, Mr Bear looks set to stay. 'He's a huge comfort, like getting into a lovely warm bath. And he's unashamedly autobiographical. If you look at the illustrations it's all in there. More than I realise, probably.'

Arguably her most powerful book to date is **No Matter What** . 'I remember sitting down at the drawing board in the late afternoon. It was getting dark. The text just appeared ready-made. I wrote it all down and when I got to the last line ' *love, like starlight, never dies* ' it said exactly what I meant it to say. I wish somebody had told *me* that.' It was especially important at the time because the book was inspired by the difficulty Debi's daughter had in accepting her parents' separation. 'She didn't know how to react so she'd take it out on us and then feel terribly frightened. I wanted her to know ' *every* child should know ' that no matter what, there is love for them.' Debi has received letters from people who have drawn their own comfort from the story. 'When people write to you, you do feel very responsible for everything the book might mean.' Her strong sense of humour lifts **No Matter What** clear of sentimentality. She delights in visual jokes and succeeds in blending emotional depth and humour seamlessly. She is reluctant to commit to another book featuring the foxes, Large and Small. 'I felt bereft when it was finished, but I know where they are. I don't have any great curiosity because they'll be all right. How would I follow that?'

Polar Bolero , due in summer 2000, bears all the Gliori trademarks. It is an elaborate, brilliantly coloured night-time fantasy which aims to dispel any resistance to sleep by the time the little bear returns, exhausted but content, to his cosy bed. 'I'd always wanted to know who might live in a fridge,' Debi says simply. So when you look at Little Bear's house, you'll see it's a fridge, and a rather elaborate and homely one at that.

She never wants for ideas. Her studio bears the beautiful evidence of a forthcoming book about Flora, a rabbit who began life as a walk-on part in a Mr Bear story. We look at the various babygrows she has appeared in, and the angle of her many siblings' ears as they cope with her temper tantrum. The pleasure is in the detail for Debi because she knows that children will spot it and share in her delight. 'I love the planning, the sketches,' she says, showing off the astonishingly detailed roughs for her forthcoming nursery anthology, 'that's when the hard work is done. I love working things out. People are amazed at the detail but I couldn't do it any other way.' The illustrations are piling up for the Bologna Book Fair where Debi is now a leading player.

But she is currently preoccupied by a project she calls *Opus Umpty*, her first novel. 'I never thought I could write anything that wasn't heavily supported by pictures but I adored writing this book. It's what I do to relax.' Asked if this is a working title she laughs, 'It's a nightmare! I've promised a really good bottle of champagne to the person who can come up with the right title. The publishers (Transworld) keep saying it'll come but I'm getting desperate.' She is very excited about this development in her career. 'I work very hard. People up there,' she points towards the house, 'rely on me. So it's really important that I enjoy what I do.'

Lindsey Fraser is Executive Director of Scottish Book Trust.

Photographs by Douglas Robertson.

The Books

From Orchard:

Flora's Blanket , 1 84121 555 4, £9.99 hbk (March 2001)

Mr Bear's Holiday , 1 84121 195 8, £10.99 hbk (May 2000)

Mr Bear's New Baby , 1 86039 409 4 £9.99 hbk, 1 84121 575 9, £4.99 pbk (May 2000)

Mr Bear's Picnic , 1 86039 067 6, £4.99 pbk

Mr Bear Babysits , 1 85213 843 2, £4.99 pbk

Mr Bear to the Rescue , 1 85213 983 8 £9.99 hbk, 1 86039 474 4 £4.99 pbk

Mr Bear Says Are You There Baby Bear? , 1 86039 410 8, £9.99 novelty

Mr Bear Says A Little Hush Please , **Mr Bear Says Tickly Under There** , **Mr Bear Says Can I Have a Hug?** , **Mr Bear Says Let's Go Outside** , large format board books, £3.50 each

Mr Bear Says A Spoonful for You , **Mr Bear Says Goodnight** , **Mr Bear Says I Love You** , **Mr Bear Says Peek a-Boo** , small format board books, £2.99 each

From Transworld

Tell Me Something Happy Before I Go to Sleep , 0 552 54506 6, £4.99 pbk

The Very Small , 0 385 60000 3, £9.99 hbk (September 2000)

From Walker:

My Little Brother , 0 7445 3612 X, £4.50 pbk

When I'm Big , 0 7445 3125 X, £4.99 pbk

The New Big Sister , Walker, 0 7445 3610 3, now o/p

Noisy Poems , 0 7445 6751 3, £9.99 hbk, 0 7445 6996 6, £4.99 pbk

From Dorling Kindersley:

The Dorling Kindersley Book of Nursery Rhymes , 0 7513 6695 1, £9.99 hbk (October 2000)

From Bloomsbury:

No Matter What , 0 7475 4110 8, £10.99 hbk

Give Him My Heart , 0 7475 3554 X, £12.99 hbk, 0 7475 4119 1, £5.99 pbk

From Scholastic:

Polar Bolero , 0 439 01372 0, £9.99 hbk (Summer 2000)



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