



Authorgraph No.178: Andy Stanton

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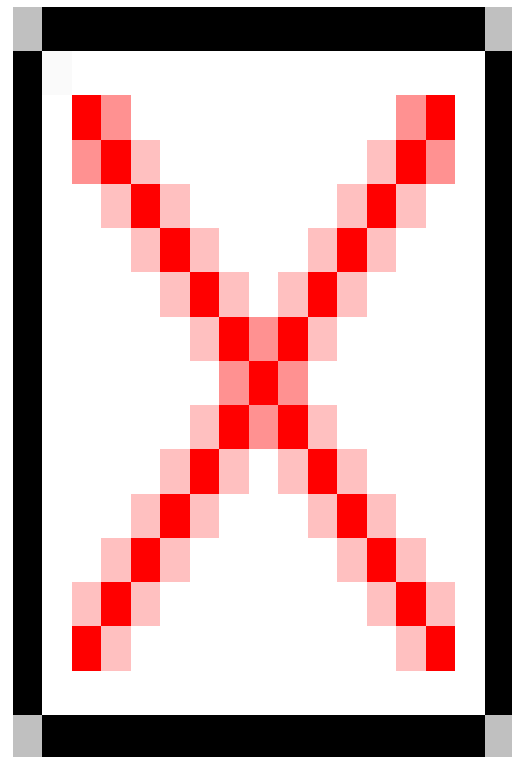
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Andy Stanton interviewed by **Clive Barnes**.

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Andy Stanton's love affair with comedy began early. Aged five, asked by his teacher to write a poem about snow, he came up with a song that he was asked to sing to the class and which he can sing even now, entitled 'I Hit Duncan Lamb on the Head with a Snowball'. Through primary and secondary school, whenever asked to write a story, as likely as not, he would produce something silly, much to the irritation and despair of some of his teachers. It was a compulsion that he cherishes. He still has some of the stories. 'I was born stupid,' he says. Of course, he wasn't; and he went on to study English Literature at Oxford.

Sitting across the table from me in a café in Primrose Hill, Andy is genially relishing both the pile of whipped cream on his Pavlova and his sudden success as a children's writer. For, although the passion for comedy was constant, there was no direct or easy route from university to where he is now. As he tells it, he was 'kicked out' of Oxford, and has been variously a stand-up comedian, film script reader, cartoonist, 'NHS lackey and lots of other things'. He touches on the disappointments and frustrations in his life before Mr Gum. Of leaving Oxford, he says, 'I tell the kids on school visits, I killed a man.' But, 'No I didn't kill anyone. They didn't like me and I didn't like them.' And, 'I spent all of my twenties not having a real job and it was looking like that was going to be my life - having lots of ideas that I never developed.' Then, on Christmas Eve in 2002, everything began to change.

Wondering whether he could write something to make his young cousins laugh on Christmas Day, and determined to see if I could finish something, get from A-Z, because usually I get from A to nearly B, Andy pulled out a doodle paragraph he had written about a nasty old man and a large friendly dog and built a comic story around it. And in that night, Mr Gum was born; although the Christmas Fairy didn't provide him with an instant endorsement. Next day, the cousins, aged between 9 and 14, sort of listened, some of them thinking this is a bit weird. But there was no great excitement. So Andy put the bearded old reprobate away again, only to rediscover him a couple of years later, tidy him up a bit, add another 3,000 words or so and send him off to an agent. Within four months, he had a publisher. Three years later, his first book, **You're a Bad Man, Mr Gum!**, was a bestseller, had been short-listed for the Branford Boase award and had won both a Red House Children's Book Award and a Blue Peter Award. More Mr Gum books followed, to win the newly established Roald Dahl Funny Prize and be shortlisted for the Guardian Children's Fiction Award.

Andy still seems a little dazed, but very grateful. I would have been surprised if I was successful even *slowly*. I thought at best we'd get publishers saying this is really funny but we don't know what to do with it. Egmont really got it. They understood it from day one. Egmont came up with the distinctive look of the books: the ready smudged pages, as if Mr Gum had already been poring over them with his disgusting fingers, and the wide margins at the top and bottom of each page so that relatively short books (about 10,000 words) have a satisfyingly chunky appearance and hold their place on the shelves in bookshops and libraries. Egmont also found his illustrator, David Tazzyman.

Andy had drawn cartoons since childhood and had always illustrated his own stories. He originally submitted sample drawings to Egmont with the first story and there were then months of uncertainty about whether he would illustrate the book or someone else. By then Andy was working on the second book and realising that perhaps he didn't have the full bag of tricks to make the illustrations work. It drove me really nuts. At the last moment, to his great relief, David was found. He took some of my designs and used them. He changed others. Now they work very closely together, particularly when a new character appears, like Captain Brazil in **Mr Gum and the Dancing Bear** where David worked to Andy's sketch and character references that included Napoleon and the pop legend Prince. I know that whatever crazy idea I come up with, David will anchor the reality of what's happening. I wake up every morning and give thanks that I don't have to illustrate my books.

Lamonic Bibber, the world that Andy and David have created, is one of bizarre characters and situations that, while they have only the slightest connection to life as we know it, nevertheless have their own crazy coherence. The central characters are the villainous Mr Gum himself, a miserable, child hating old man, and the good natured little girl Polly. Incidentally, she is only Polly to her friends. Her real name is a paragraph long and, if you want to see Andy suffer, watch him saying it from memory on the Mr Gum website. Around these forces for good and evil move a number of other figures, taking a larger or smaller part, some of whom, like Mr Gum's ally, Billy William the Third, the vile butcher, have been there from the first book, and others, like Alan Taylor, a gingerbread man with electric muscles, have come along later. Some usually get only a single mention in a book, like Billy McLeany, whose words always rhyme. Many have catchphrases, or idiosyncratic uses of words: Polly's speech is resolutely ungrammatical. All, for one reason or another, are utterly peculiar and memorable.

This cast of characters provides a familiar base for wildly unpredictable events. Andy uses nearly every comic device likely to appeal to the basest instincts of upper juniors (and the rest of us): the vile, the rude, the stupid, and the ridiculous; but, for those with more sophisticated tastes, there's parody too, and wordplay, and even irony. Yes, irony. The Spirit of the Rainbow, a heavenly child who descends at various moments to put the world to rights and dispense fruity chews, is always called home by his mum because it's teatime, he hasn't done his homework, or his aunt is visiting.

Even the expectations of the reading experience itself are there to be played with. **You're a Bad Man, Mr Gum!** seems to end with a lot of pages still to go, and the reader is told on page after page, **THERE IS NO SECRET BONUS STORY? GO HOME? BYE BYE.** Of course, there is. Andy calls this variously 'subverting the task', 'opening up the fourth wall' or 'mucking about'. And he loves it. He remembers his discovery of the similar piece of mischief he has worked into the latest Mr Gum: 'I was dancing around my room for 20 minutes afterwards, going Yes! That's really, really going to confuse all the kids in a good way.'

There are plenty of influences here. Anyone as old as me reading the books cannot fail to be reminded of the great Spike Milligan. Andy himself gives credit to **The Beano** and **Dandy**; to **The Simpsons** and the '80s TV sitcom **The Young Ones** and most of all to Roald Dahl, whose books Andy read again recently. He was particularly fascinated to rediscover Dahl's love of rhymes and songs, since one of the distinctive aspects of his own books is the irresistible urge of Andy's characters to give us a song - to such a degree that for much of one of the books the joke is that there isn't going to be a song. He plays the guitar and says 'he's really, really musical?' and/or 'loves making a racket?'. He has a tune for each of the songs in the book and, apart from the individual ditties, whole scenes of the books have been written 'to a groove or a beat in my head?'. References to other people's lyrics crop up regularly in the books: for instance, there's a 'jingle jangle morning?' (Andy is wearing a Bob Dylan T-shirt today); at another point, someone says, 'Good Golly, Miss Molly?'. Andy calls these tributes 'time bomb jokes?', hopefully setting off little (Richard) explosions of recognition in kids' brains when they meet the songs later.

If music, as Andy says, is 'a joyful thing?', then comedy, as someone else is bound to have said, is a serious business. Andy talks about 'endless nights of anxiety?' getting the books right. He talks about the difficulty of knowing how far to take an idea or wordplay, 'I've written swathes of stuff that had to be cut out?'; and of balancing narrative and jokes, 'Jokes always take narrative sideways, they kill narrative?'. The last was something he learnt at improvisational comedy classes (I told you it was serious). Potentially any idea might be a story in itself, and you need 'to find the big idea to contain all the little ideas?'.

Mr Gum has become a very big idea indeed. There are now seven books, including the new one. They have been translated into other languages and are selling well throughout the world. There's a website, where, among other Lamonical fun, you can play the foul game of Butcher's darts; watch Bag of Sticks, Mr Gum's favourite TV programme (co-starring a traffic cone) or find the tunes to the songs in the books. Here, you can also sign up for 'The Lamonical Chronicle?', Lamonic Bibber's own newspaper. Andy has a big role in all of this, and writes the Chronicle himself. He admits, reluctantly, to being a control freak 'but in a good way. I want to make sure that the kids are getting something as well thought out as the books?'.

He enjoys the enthusiasm of his readers: the kids who dress up as his characters for World Book Day; the stories that they send him, sometimes more surreal than his own; the school where The Ballad of Barry Fungus became a playground anthem; and the improvised chaos of class visits, where his stand up experience comes into play. He finds it exhausting and he's had to step back a bit to make space for writing but it confirms for him that 'all this has a useful result at the end?'.

His favourite children's book is Betsy Byars' **The Eighteenth Emergency**, which, he says, is 'both funny and thoughtful?' and he wants there to be more to his own books than laughs and mayhem. 'The kids really like the characters and I really like the characters and you have to be true to that and keep an emotional scene running underneath. Because otherwise nonsensical stuff gets really tiresome after a while and it can feel quite nihilistic. So I do try to keep the warmth underneath and I think that's what kids respond to?'. He knows that the books 'hit all the right buttons?'. They're liked by boys and girls, and reluctant readers enjoy them. 'They're kid friendly?'. And, when you read the books, you realise that, with all the knockabout craziness and quirky fun, there's also an affirmation of friendship and kindness that engages his readers.

In a few days after our interview, Andy is off to Los Angeles to work on a pilot TV cartoon of Mr Gum that, if everything works out (discussions are already two years old), will be broadcast here and in the United States. He looks and sounds like a man who has at last found where he belongs. 'It's a joy to be able to do all this stuff?', he says. 'I have an idea and I go to my publisher and I say can we do this? And nine times out of ten they say yes and we do it?'. He looks back on Christmas Eve in 2002 and believes, 'You only get a night like that once in a lifetime?'. He pays tribute again and again to Egmont and David Tazzyman. 'I am exceptionally lucky. I have always done things differently, or 'wrong?'. Finally, there's a good place for my 'wrongness?' to come out?'. He seems a good man, Andy Stanton!

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

The Books

From Egmont (illustrated by David Tazzyman):

You?re a Bad Man, Mr Gum!

978 1 4052 2310 2, £4.99 pbk

Mr Gum and the Biscuit Billionaire

978 1 4052 2815 2, £4.99 pbk

Mr Gum and the Goblins

978 1 4052 2816 9, £4.99 pbk

Mr Gum and the Power Crystals

978 1 4052 2817 6, £4.99 pbk

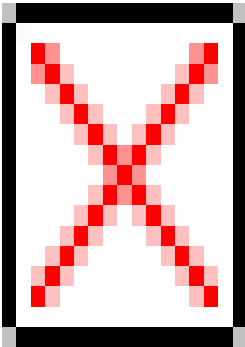
Mr Gum and the Dancing Bear

978 1 4052 4179 3, £5.99 pbk

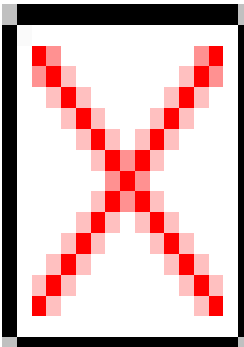
What?s for Dinner, Mr Gum?

978 1 4052 4824 2, £5.99 pbk

From Barrington Stoke:

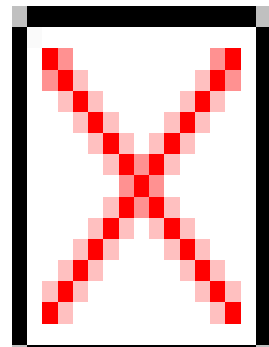


The Story of Matthew Buzzington, ill. Ross Colli



ns, 978 1 84299 633 1, £4.99

pbk



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