

WILL YOU BE MY FRIEND?

A Conversation with Sam McBratney

How did you become a children's book writer?

I don't believe that I had any choice. My mother used to tell me, "Your nose was never out of a book," and from the habit of reading came the imperative to write. From my late teens on, I wrote down my thoughts and actions—not a diary so much as a kind of summing up. To this day I need to write things down to know what I think, and therefore admire politicians and public figures who can stand up and say what they think without notes.

As a graduate of Trinity College Dublin, history was my first love, and I was first published as a writer of historical articles. Writing for children developed from my work as an educator.

What do you think accounts for the longevity of *Guess How Much I Love You*?

Longevity is such a suitable word in this context—you get bestsellers, often lovely books, that are here today and gone tomorrow. So why has *Guess* lasted? It just seems to me that the story about the Nutbrown Hares is . . . *true*. It describes what people feel; it describes a force. I say this because for twenty-five years people have written to me and told me so.

What has surprised or pleased you most about the reaction to *Guess How Much I Love You*?

Its universality. I cannot visit all of the sixty-odd domains where Little Nutbrown Hare and Big Nutbrown Hare speak to one another in a different language, but I have been to China, to Europe, to the USA, and seen for myself how the words and Anita's wonderful drawings work the same magic.

How did you approach writing a sequel twenty-five years later?

After a great deal of thought. You'd be surprised how many people think that writing a picture book is like dashing off a quick letter for tomorrow morning's post. When writing about the hares, I aim to describe moments of emotional significance but with loads of humor and the lightest of touches. This story is about one of those moments, and I've been working on it for a few years now. Little Nutbrown Hare's world suddenly glows with the discovery of friendship.



What kind of books did you like to read as a child?

I read whatever came my way, which wasn't a lot. In 1950 I was seven years old. I had never heard of, say, spaghetti, and the idea of a whole banana for oneself alone was for the birds, so no picture books, either. I mentioned that my mother said "Your nose was never out of a book," and I'd love to be able to ask her, "What books? Where did they come from?"

My dad used to bring home once a week, in his large gabardine pocket, the *Beano* and the *Dandy*, which were great. By the early 1950s, I was reading my dad's Zane Grey westerns. To this day I find it a bit odd that I can't say I had a favorite book.

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I have favorite moments from books that have stayed with me: Robin Hood shoots an arrow and says “Bury me where it lands”; Jim Hawkins hides in a barrel of apples; the lame boy fails to make it through the mountainside; and so on. One story that made a great impression on me was “Rip Van Winkle.” I loved the idea of playing about with time. In my own writing I have looked forward (science fiction) and backward (historical fiction).

What changes have you seen in reading and bookmaking since you first started creating books?

The sheer variety of reading materials is the biggest change, I think. I remember going to the Bologna Book Fair and walking around the displays, shaking my wee head in wonder. There didn’t seem to be any need for me or anyone else to write yet more books for years to come!

How do you think we can keep children engaged in reading with so much competition?

I am optimistic about the future of the book. This touches upon my own experience, outlined above. While I am absolutely convinced of the value of reading books with children, I do have to acknowledge that nobody ever read books to me. I was, and remain, a reader by temperament. Many children are not readers by temperament. Let’s not fret unduly about that, but get on with doing the best we can for the many children who are.

