



Anthony Browne

Author Program In-depth Interview Insights Beyond the Slide Shows

Anthony Browne, interviewed in Calgary, Alberta on November 5, 2004. Anthony resides in Kent, England.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your highly acclaimed picture book, *My Dad*, is a bit of a departure for you from many of your other books depicting fathers. What was different for you in creating this one?

ANTHONY BROWNE: I was remembering what it was like to be a little boy who thought the sun shown out of his father; I actually thought my father could do anything. *My Dad* is very much a reflection of my own feelings about my father that I'd forgotten, because he died when I was 17. At that time, I'd just started to react against him or react against his politics, his attitude to length of hair and music and art. Then, within what seemed like just a few weeks of us starting that new relationship, he died. So the relationship was cut. Possibly, in an unconscious way, I blamed him for leaving. I wasn't aware of that, but I sometimes think that's maybe why some of the fathers in my previous books had not been as sunny and as bright as this one.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What put you back in touch with those feelings for your dad?

ANTHONY BROWNE: Finding his dressing gown really took me back. I was looking through an old suitcase where my mother kept photographs and birth certificates and things like that. Amongst them was my father's old dressing gown, which I hadn't seen for a number of years. As I got it out of the suitcase it was as though I was picking my dad up. It was so much like him. It's a very old, thick, tartan-patterned dressing gown. I could smell my father in a funny kind of way, and it really did feel like him. That transported me back to how I felt as a little boy who literally thought he could do everything.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your Willy books have won numerous awards around the world. They are about a small chimp that often feels outnumbered or outsized, seem to really resonate with your readers.

ANTHONY BROWNE: I get more letters written about the Willy books from children than all the other books added together. I think a lot of children identify with him.

The idea for Willy came from my own childhood. I was a younger brother — my brother is a year and a half older than I. All throughout my childhood, I was constantly trying to be as good as he was at anything, whether it was fighting or running or drawing or schoolwork. He was better than me at everything, and I grew up imagining that this is how life is. Willy is a chimpanzee who lives in a world of gorillas and they're all stronger and more powerful than he is. Willy comes to accept that, and he sometimes surprises himself by triumphing.

TEACHINGBOOKS: In your first Willy book, *Willy the Wimp*, is he actually smaller at the end?

ANTHONY BROWNE: I deliberately painted the last picture of *Willy the Wimp* so we don't know whether Willy is really smaller or whether we're just looking at him from further away. I thought of the ending as an open ending. It seems that we're back at the beginning, but we're not sure.

TEACHINGBOOKS: If Willy is you as a boy, is Hugh your brother in *Willy and Hugh*?

ANTHONY BROWNE: The obvious assumption might be that I'm Willy and Hugh is my brother, but I don't think that's true. I think both of us are both Willy and Hugh — I believe we've all got contrasting elements in us. That's partly what it's about, the two fusing together and complementing each other; two parts of the same person.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *Willy the Dreamer* isn't a one-story book. Each picture tells its own story.

ANTHONY BROWNE: The idea in *Willy the Dreamer* is that you make up your own story from the little clues in each picture. It was the most enjoyable book I've ever worked on because it was such a relief not to have a plot to follow. Each picture has its own story, and I didn't have to paint pictures to link part of the story to another.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did you come up with the idea for *Willy the Dreamer*?

ANTHONY BROWNE: *Willy the Dreamer* came from a period where I'd given up doing children's books; I'd lost a certain amount of interest in them. I decided to do a series of narrative paintings, and it turned out that they were stories. At that time, I came to realize that what fascinated me was words and pictures together — children's books — and I had an idea for a book that was just a series of dreamlike images; suggestions of stories. It started out as a book of dreams, but that didn't seem to be much of an idea for a children's book. It didn't seem to have anything to do with children. So, as is often the case when I'm trying to make a book work, I joined it with another little idea. This time it was Willy — I imagined Willy being the character who was dreaming, and that made it into a proper children's book.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You played "the shape game" as a child.

ANTHONY BROWNE: Yes. My brother and I played this game where one person draws a shape; it doesn't have to be anything in particular — just a loose shape. Then the other person transforms it into something, using a different colored pen.

The shape game has been a very important game for me. It's made me the kind of illustrator that I am, and I've been doing it in all my books.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You even created a book called *The Shape Game*.

ANTHONY BROWNE: In the book *The Shape Game*, I have realistic-looking paintings. For instance, my painting of the Tate Museum — when you first look at it, it just looks like a straightforward painting that I might have just sat in front of the Tate and painted. But, when you

look carefully, you'll see that I've been playing the shape game all over it. There are parts of the building that are lips and fingers. There are baseball players. I played the shape game through the book and, indeed, I have throughout my career.

TEACHINGBOOKS: In *Changes*, one object turns into another, sort of like playing the shape game.

ANTHONY BROWNE: *Changes* began with the concept of changing one thing into something very opposite, like a teakettle turning into a cat — a hard, manmade dead, shiny, cold object turning into the opposite: a warm blooded, soft, furry, alive creature. But I didn't know what to do with it. I didn't know how to make that into a story. It stayed in my head for a while.

Sometime later, I learned about friends telling their seven-year-old daughter, "We've got some fantastic news — your mother's going to have a baby." The girl was so upset that she cried and cried. When they told me this story, it clicked. I had the idea of a child looking at one thing turning into another and being anxious about things changing.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your book, *Voices in the Park*, has become a favorite for use in the classroom.

ANTHONY BROWNE: I suspect *Voices in the Park* is used a lot in schools because it's open to a lot of interpretation and it's kind of a complex way to tell a story. It's a very simple story, but because it's told four different ways, it actually seems very different.

Voices in the Park encourages children to see things from other people's point of view. That's one theme that I return to again and again in my books. I want children to see the world through other people's eyes and to imagine what it's like to be somebody else.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did *Voices in the Park* evolve?

ANTHONY BROWNE: I chose to revisit an early book of mine called *A Walk in the Park*, which was never published in the United States. I always quite liked the story, but I didn't like the original illustrations.

This time, I combined the idea of taking this very simple story and telling it from the points of view of different characters. I decided to tell the story with four different characters, in four different ways with four different styles of painting, four different typefaces, four different color schemes, four different ways of creating images. It seemed an interesting way to do a book.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please give an example from *Voices in the Park* of how different styles can show the different perspectives of characters walking their dogs.

ANTHONY BROWNE: We see Mrs. Smythe, the woman at the beginning, walking past what's probably her very large, detached house. Everything's beautiful and pristine. We have a blue sky. We have autumnal colors. The typeface is the kind of typeface a newspaper she'd read would use.

For the second character's style, we see the working class man. The colors are dark, and the season is winter. There's a very much colder and depressing feel to the pictures. He's

unemployed and looking through the paper for a job. The typeface is the kind a tabloid newspaper would use.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *Voices in the Park* also includes children and dogs — and these characters are not aware of or concerned about their differences.

ANTHONY BROWNE: Yes. The dogs play together immediately and eventually the children do, too. But, in the end, they all go back to their separate lives. *Voices in the Park* encourages children to see things from other people's points of view. I want children to see the world through other people's eyes — to imagine what it's like to be somebody else.

TEACHINGBOOKS: It appears that you do many subtle things in *Voices in the Park* to further this message.

ANTHONY BROWNE: There's a picture in *Voices in the Park* where the two dogs are racing around, as the text says, "Like old friends," and I've painted the mongrel dog with the pedigree dog's tail and vice versa. That's just a little way of saying there's no real difference between them. The two statues above the dogs represent the woman and the man in the story. They're set in stone; they're never going to change.

Another example of where I've used my art to further the message is in the illustration where Mrs. Smythe and her son, Charles, are walking home. She's just discovered Charles talking to a rather rough-looking child, and we can hardly see Charles. He's hidden behind her, and totally dominated by her. The text says, "We walked home in silence." But we can feel the anger of this woman. We sometimes say somebody's burning with anger; in this picture, one of the trees is actually on fire. It in one way reflects her anger, but it also reflects the feeling of autumn or the fall.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please describe your illustration process.

ANTHONY BROWNE: I tend to start with a very rough pencil dummy. Using the image of Mrs. Smythe and Charles and the burning tree, the dummy would show just the impression of the woman and the boy and the dog walking out of the park and just a suggestion of a park in the background.

Then I made a preliminary drawing to set things out more or less as they are now, with the park gates and the pavement and the trees in the park.

I create details like the burning tree as I'm painting the picture; it is one way to keep the feeling of spontaneity in my work. For me, the excitement of working on a painting like this is that I can develop aspects of the picture I feel will help to move the story on. And, things change as I'm painting the picture — suddenly a new idea will come in.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your artistic style has often been called surreal.

ANTHONY BROWNE: Yes. One of the things the surrealists were trying to do was to put disparate objects together in a common context. They thought it helped us see objects we usually take for granted — as if we're seeing them for the first time.

I use surrealism a lot is because I was very affected by surrealist paintings when I was young. I also believe children see through surrealist eyes: they are seeing the world for the first time. When they see an everyday object for the first time, it can be exciting and mysterious and new.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *Into the Forest* has an ominous fairy tale feel. What was the impetus for this book?

ANTHONY BROWNE: The ideas behind *Into the Forest* came from various places. One idea came from a childhood memory of my grandparents coming to visit for Sunday lunch. I went to meet them at the bus, and I had a new, shiny, plastic cowboy's rifle that I was very pleased with. I wanted to show it to them when they got off the bus. It was quite a long walk to the bus stop, and then they weren't there. Then, it started to snow, and for some reason I decided to walk and find them. I set off full of bravery, because I had the toy rifle with me. The further on I got, the more frightened I got; and the snow got heavier and heavier. Finally I got to their house, and my dad was there. He'd come to fetch them, but he'd gone a different way. So that's part of it.

The other original idea for the story came a long time ago. I'd been talking to a friend who told me about a little girl whose father had left them. The girl had written "Come home Dad" on bits of masking tape and stuck them around the house and in the garden. I always wanted to do something with that, wanting to use that in some way.

The book came together when I went to a writer's retreat for 10 days. I worked on a book idea for about half an hour and realized it wasn't going to be any good. I said, "What on Earth am I going to do for the next ten days?" I was depressed and a bit panicked, so I went for a walk. The retreat was in an old monastery set in a forest, and it was snowing. It was beautiful, but mysterious and dark and ambiguous. It brought back my original ideas, so I went back to work and the whole thing just flowed. The story came out fully formed.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You are a multiple award winner — you have won the highest international honor for illustration, the Hans Christian Andersen Award, as well as the U.K.'s prestigious Kate Greenaway Medal (twice) and the Kurt Maschler Award (thrice) among other recognitions. Which award are you most proud of?

ANTHONY BROWNE: The Kurt Maschler Award is particularly pleasing, because it's an award for text and pictures together. That's really what excites me about picture books. It's not so much that I'm interested in being an illustrator or being a writer but it's the two things coming together. I don't feel like a writer or an illustrator, but something else. A picture book maker, I suppose.

TEACHINGBOOKS: All those accolades after your artistic career began as a medical illustrator.

ANTHONY BROWNE: I was a medical illustrator for nearly three years, and I used to think that job had absolutely nothing to do with children's books. But, I've come to realize that painting realistic pictures of operations taught me a lot about telling a difficult story in pictures. In a way I'm still doing that.

I knew it was time to leave that job, though, when little figures started to appear in the operation paintings. I'd have little hidden figures creeping out of the cavity or something, which I hope only I saw. I needed that spark of imagination.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please describe a typical workday.

ANTHONY BROWNE: I live a pretty ordinary existence when I'm working on a book. I get up around 7:00, I have my breakfast, get ready and go to work in my studio — a little building in the garden. I work from about half past 9:00 until 1:00. Then, I have lunch, come back and work in the afternoon until about 6:30. It's like office hours, really. I feel I need that routine. Theoretically, I don't have to work every day, but I enjoy working so much that I do. Additionally, something about the routine of a proper day's work feels right.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do when you get stuck?

ANTHONY BROWNE: When I get stuck on a book I usually put it away in a drawer and get on with other things. I'll start a new book or answer emails or children's letters and try not to really think about what's wrong with the book. If I sit down and try to work out what I need to do or what's going wrong, then I'm lost. I know that only my subconscious that can solve the problems of what's wrong with the story.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell students?

ANTHONY BROWNE: I like to tell children what they probably already know: that they can all draw — that all children who can hold a pencil can draw. When I was their age, I didn't draw any better than them. The difference between me and most other adults is that I've carried on drawing; and only by doing that have I gotten better and better. Most adults stop drawing and they stop looking at pictures; they feel that that's part of their childhood. They feel they need to go onto other, more serious things. But I tell children that they don't have to abandon drawing or looking at pictures or looking at books with pictures or comics. They have an ability to look, and I think that we undervalue our ability to look. If they carry on drawing, they can be artists.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You have included famous works of art in some of your illustrations.

ANTHONY BROWNE: I like the idea of trying to make "Art," with a capital A, more accessible to children. I believe we undervalue the visual as a society. Too often I see children's education mean that they grow out of pictures — away from picture books into words — as though that's part of the development of a child's education; the development of a child into an adult. It is a great mistake to undervalue our ability to look and see.

I want children to realize that fine art doesn't have to be serious and heavy or even part of the educational process. We can just lose ourselves and see ourselves in a painting that was painted 500 years ago. If my books can help encourage children to use their eyes, then I would be very pleased.

Books by Anthony Browne

- MY BROTHER, Farrar Straus Giroux, 2007
- SILLY BILLY, Candlewick Press, 2006
- MY MOM, Farrar Straus Giroux, 2005
- INTO THE FOREST, Candlewick Press, 2004

- SHAPE GAME, THE, Farrar Strauss Giroux, 2003
- WILLY AND HUGH, Candlewick Press, 2003
- WILLY THE WIZARD, Candlewick Press, 2003
- ANIMAL FAIR, Candlewick Press, 2002
- WILLY THE CHAMP, Candlewick Press, 2002
- MY DAD, DK Books, 2001
- WILLY'S PICTURES, Candlewick Press, 2000
- VOICES IN THE PARK, DK Books, 1998
- WILLY THE DREAMER, Candlewick Press, 1997
- TOPIARY GARDEN, THE (written by Janni Howker), Orchard, 1995
- ANTHONY BROWNE'S KING KONG (from the story conceived by Edgar Wallace and Merian Cooper), Turner, 1994
- BIG BABY: A LITTLE JOKE, THE, Knopf, 1994
- DAYDREAMER, THE (written by Ian McEwan), HarperCollins, 1994
- NIGHT SHIMMY, THE (written by Gwen Strauss), Knopf, 1992
- ZOO, Knopf, 1992
- BEAR HUNT, Doubleday, 1990
- CHANGES, Knopf, 1990
- TRAIL OF STONES, THE (written by Gwen Strauss), Knopf, 1990
- BEAR GOES TO TOWN, Doubleday, 1989
- LITTLE BEAR BOOK, THE, Doubleday, 1989
- THINGS I LIKE, THE, Knopf, 1989
- TUNNEL, THE, Knopf, 1989
- ALICES ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND (written by Lewis Carroll), Knopf, 1988
- I LIKE BOOKS, Candlewick Press 1988
- KIRSTY KNOWS BEST (written by Annalena McAfee), Knopf, 1987
- PIGGYBOOK, THE, Knopf, 1986
- KNOCK, KNOCK! WHO'S THERE? (written by Sally Grindley), Knopf, 1985
- VISITORS WHO CAME TO STAY, THE (written by Annalena McAfee), Viking Kestrel, 1985
- WILLY THE WIMP, Knopf, 1984
- GORILLA, Candlewick Press, 1983
- HANSEL AND GRETEL (written by the Brothers Grimm), Franklin Watts, 1983
- LOOK WHAT I'VE GOT, Julia MacRae Books, 1980
- THROUGH THE MAGIC MIRROR, Greenwillow, 1977
- WALK IN THE PARK, A, Hamilton, 1977

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