

Korky Paul podcast transcript

KG: How did you get into illustrating children's books from starting out your early career in advertising in Cape Town?

KP: At school I always drew, I was always drawing. My jotter books, as they used to call them, were just covered in drawings. My grandmother was a fantastic artist. She had a farm up in the Kalahari in South Africa and she did all these marvellous pen and ink drawings of the farm and of the animals. I mean there were wild animals on the farm like elephants and giraffes. She drew the Bushmen as well. We had all her drawings in our house and I was intrigued by her pen and ink work. When she got too old to draw, she gave me all her stuff. She was my great inspiration and my great encourager.

You know, my dad wanted me to be a lawyer. When I first got published he said to me, 'what are you using that stupid nickname for, Korky?' So I said, 'Dad - it is a memorable name and it is a great name to work under as a children's book illustrator.' He says to me, 'you've got a fine Scottish name, Hamish Paul, you know?' I said, 'I know Dad but it makes me sound like I'm an Edinburgh lawyer'. 'That's what you should have been!' he says.

So I went to art school in Durban and studied Fine Arts. That, surprisingly got me a job in an advertising agency (De Villiers Schonfeld) in Cape Town. It was fantastic. My boss was an amazing man. Sadly he died about three weeks ago (referring to the week of October 19th, 2020), he was in his 80s. He was incredible. He taught me so many things because I told him I didn't know anything about typography, design or layout. He said 'don't worry, we like your ideas, we like your drawing - we will teach you'. Which they did. So my time in advertising was an amazing training ground to think quickly on your feet for ideas and how to quickly sketch them and put them down. I learnt about typography, design and layout, all of which stood me in good stead to do children's books.

I worked there for about 4 or 5 years and then I fled South Africa because of the whole Apartheid regime. I bought a camper van and just went to all the art galleries in Europe. I landed up in Greece, ran out of money, and managed to get a job in a Greek advertising agency which was extraordinary.

Then I met a Scotsman. I was at a Thanksgiving party. I had never been to a Thanksgiving party but I had heard about how the Americans celebrate Thanksgiving. This was a Greek American who was my neighbour who invited me to his house for this party. I heard this lovely Scottish accent in the crowd saying 'I'm looking for an illustrator' as he had just joined this Greek publishing company. So I wandered over and introduced myself. He said 'bring your portfolio around'. He liked the work I had done but then he said 'look the thing is, the Greek publisher wants an English illustrator because it's a book called *Say it in English*. He wants it to have a real British look, you know in the architecture and that sort of thing.' He said, 'have you ever been to Britain' and I said I had been there for two weeks in the Summer but it doesn't matter I can get something for reference - let's just try it. I was brought in for the interview, he looks at my work and said, 'yeah, yeah that's good'. Then, as we are leaving the publisher says, 'Mr. Paul, your accent, where is that from? So James, this lovely Scotsman, said, 'Ah Mr. Stathialos, he is from VERY far south'. And we shot out the door.

So I did these books and eventually came to settle in the UK to join an advertising agency in London but I always wanted to do animation. I got into CalArts (California Institute of the Arts) in California. I went over there to do a year's Masters and Jules Engel was my tutor. He was this amazing guy who worked on a lot on all the early Disney stuff. I soon realised I wasn't a great animator so I came back to London and carried on working in advertising.

Then, one of my juniors (Ray Marshall) who was working with me came in one day. He always wanted to make pop-up cards, brochures and leaflets which were fabulous. We would present

them to the client and they would say 'oh that's great' and then we would present the budget and then their eyes would start watering from the prices. Anyway, Ray came in one day with a book called The Haunted House by Jan Pienkowski, which is a classic and it revived the whole pop-up industry worldwide. It was amazing. So I said, 'ok Ray - why don't we make a dummy, find a story and we will present it somehow?'

James Watts, my friend in Greece phoned me up to say that he was coming to England and wanted to know if we could meet up as he was on his way to the Frankfurt Book Fair. I said, 'Frankfurt Book Fair, what's that?' James said, 'it is the great big thing where people buy and sell projects.' I went back to Ray and said we had a new deadline - The Frankfurt Book Fair, it is in October. So now have something to work towards and because we worked in advertising we knew how to make up dummies and bind and make it look like a book. We had no idea what the specifications would be, we just made it look like a pop-up book - and we went to Frankfurt in his little mini. There we met Sherry Safran, who was a packager and she took it on and she sold it. The next thing we knew, we were in Columbia learning how to make pop-up books. It was so bizarre!

KG: So by this time, this is your second book project? You had done the one in Greece and then this is the second project, right?

KP: Yes, the book was published by Faber & Faber and by then I was working freelance in London for friends as an illustrator and as a designer. There was this magazine by Marshall Cavendish called *Storyteller*. It was a magazine of children's stories with a whole eclectic selection of different authors, different artists and different types of stories. It was the gravy train in the 80s in London for illustrators. Everybody worked for them, it was fantastic. You would get a subscription, collect them over a year and they would come out every two weeks. You would get these ring binders and you would have this collection of wonderful stories. It paid really well and about once a month I would get one of these stories to do the drawings.

Then, my younger brother Donald, who was working for Oxford University Press Africa, said to me - 'why don't I get you an interview with the editor of Oxford University Press Children's Books?' I said that would be great! So, in those days it was internal memos that were written, a sort of letter passed around internally. Donald sent this letter to **Mr. Ron Heapy**. You can imagine Mr. Heapy receiving this memo from a bloke in Africa sales, who has a brother that draws...

To his credit, he saw me. I went up to Oxford with my portfolio. I showed him my work. He said it was great, made some photocopies to put in the file and said the classic - 'don't call us, we'll call you'. But as I was walking out the door he said, 'hang on - have a look at this story... it's about a witch who lives in black house with a black cat and she's got various problems... give me three drawings.' It was part of a reading programme, one of ten in a section, its A4, paperback, staple bound. I thought, ok - it was better than nothing.

So I get on the train, I am reading the story and I think, my goodness, this is a great little story, it doesn't need to be part of a reading programme. I'll just do it as a picture book. The thing is, it was just my training in advertising to think outside the box, that's what I had been taught. Plus, what have I got to lose? So three weeks later I came back to Oxford with these three big drawings (I had went and looked at OUP's picture books and what their sizes were, they were 20% bigger), and I walk into Ron's office and he says, 'that's not what I asked for!' I said, 'just suspend your judgment and have a look, it is a great little story and it would be a pity for it to disappear into a reading programme'... and the rest is history.

It is now the OUP book that has the most colour editions, sold millions, and translated into many languages.

KG: It's the story they didn't know they wanted, but the story they needed!

KP: I'm still amazed!

KG: The drawings definitely captivated adults and children alike. I mean the amount of times it has been printed, all the editions that have been published, the languages it has been translated into - it is amazing. I must tell our listeners (or readers), because I can see you in your studio (on Zoom), there are sketches on the walls, and colours and materials. It looks like you live and breathe these characters. It looks like you take them from inside your head and put them on all the walls around you.

Where did this artistic inspiration come from - the use of colour and the type of personalities you give to characters like Professor Puffendorf and Winnie the Witch?

KP: The thing is, picture book texts are very much like movie scripts. For instance, Valerie Thomas, the author of *Winnie and the Witch*, wrote 'Winnie lived in a black house in the forest.' That was her description. So this is where you come in as the illustrator and you then expand upon that. The trick is to find a way into the story.

I do a lot of rough sketches initially and think about it. So I am thinking 'a little cottage' a witch lives in a little cottage like a little Anne Hathaway with a thatched roof, Tudor beams and all this nonsense. Then I thought - hang on now, this is very cliché. What is the opposite of cottage? Stately home! Winnie lives in a stately home, she lives in a great big house - why not?

That opened up the whole book for me because suddenly, when Winnie trips over, it doesn't say where Winnie trips over so now I had all these rooms in the stately home. She is coming down the great, big sweeping staircase, she is walking down what we call the passageway of the ancestors. Now I had all these rooms to draw things in.

I discover later that Ron had two or three other artists looking at this story and all their black houses were black silhouettes. Now my training as a fine artist told me that if you wanted to make black a cold black, put blue in it and if you want a warm black, put red in it. Don't use black on its own. It is such a strong pigment and can be quite dead. So I started using colours mixed in with other blacks so that I had this kind of palette of blacks.

Then I thought, witches usually wear black clothes. But hold on, Winnie loves colour. She keeps changing Wilbur into all these colours. So I made her colourful which also meant she could stand out against this black house. The story is about the black cat and the black mouse. It is not about Winnie dressed in black. The other thing - and I don't know where it came from - were her stripey socks. I see most witches who are being drawn now have all got stripey socks. They might still be wearing black but they have got stripey socks!

When you go through the story, you have got to break it down into this template where picture books have 32 pages. Of those 32 you have 24 for text and illustration but it is easier to think of 12 double paged spreads. I would go through this manuscript and I would do the pagination and try and break it down. You look for page 1 - that is introduction of the character. Maybe another character appears - that would be a good cue for spread 2. Then I go to spread 12 - which is the end and I kind of work backwards. There is no sort of pattern but you find a rhythm to the story. I think cliff-hangers like Winnie waved her wand... and you turn the page and there is a polar bear or something. That's the sort of things you gotta do.

The hard bit is the initial reading of that manuscript and finding your way and what location do you choose, what clothing do you choose. Valerie didn't describe Winnie's clothing at all. You don't have to and that is why I draw the comparison between movies and picture books. If you listen to a movie soundtrack with no pictures, it is difficult to follow and equally if you just watch the pictures without sound. And it is the same with a picture book. You could look at the writing and think that is not much substantial text but the substance you add to it as an illustrator - you make that contribution to it.

KG: It brings us in and it also makes us think, feel, and understand an actual character, we can visualise it. It feels immersive when you are flipping through the book and not just looking at the words but all the colours and the environments. We can picture the world, which is amazing because we almost get to peak into your head and see what all your imagination with this was.

In 1998, *The Oxford Times* wrote about your work that, in addition to kids, “adults respond to the gentle satire in which nothing and nobody is sacred.”

KP: When my children were little, I remember my son was showing a picture of a train and it was a steam engine. And he looked at me and said, ‘that is not a train, what is that?’ He had never seen one. This was a modern book and a train to him was the Intercity Express - that was a train, you know. I thought these illustrators were putting in nostalgic drawings of things and when I do Winnie I am going to make her modern. So she has an iPad, she has a phone, she has a computer but it is not an Apple, it’s a pumpkin.

KG: It’s just so clever!

KP: And you know she has operating system 13 because everything in Winnie’s life is 13. I started putting in stuff like she would have this washing machine that would be this amazing washing machine, food mixers, and she would have all this stuff in her house.

Somebody said to me ‘why is she in another kitchen, you drew a different kitchen in another book.’ So I told her ‘it’s a magical house, it’s huge, she has got all these rooms.’ And that’s what’s kept it alive because I can look at the house but then draw her in different rooms. So her bedroom is always different and I never tire of her - it is always making me think of a different angle, composition or look.

In Winnie’s happy birthday I had to draw an aerial view of Winnie’s house because she was having a garden party. I started drawing this view of her house and then I thought hang on, there is some space and I didn’t know what to put in there. I thought maybe I could put in some more trees, clouds or fields - no, I will just draw Winnie’s house. So Winnie’s house sprawls right across the left hand page, cross the spine and right up into the right hand page. This huge rambling place. It’s a massive, magical house.

And somebody else said, ‘ooh Winnie is looking a little bit plump.’ I said, ‘oh yeah, maybe she put on a little bit of weight’!

KG: I love how the characters are alive for you. If they are live to you, then they are alive to us. They change, they live, they age, it is just very believable honestly. It creates a believable world even in the rules of magic you create where the house keeps changing.

KP: Winnie’s hat is bent at the top. When I was drawing my first hat, I didn’t bother about a broom because a broom is kind of a fiddly thing to draw in there - I will leave the broom out and just draw her with a hat. I got to the edge of the rough drawing on the page and I couldn’t draw the point of the hat because there was no space. So I thought I would just bend it the hat over and then I will come back and straighten it. But then I looked at it and thought - hang on, that’s where the quirkiness lives, that’s what makes the hat a little bit different. So ideas are often happy accidents.

KG: How are those ideas going to translate into the upcoming book collaboration that is targeted more towards adults, *Oxford Z - A: 1000 Years of History in 26 Letters* written by Richard O. Smith?

KP: That was such a terrific project to do. I have known Richard for a while and I have done quite a lot of book covers for him. Then he introduced me to James Ferguson who owns Signal Books, delightful guy. Richard said he had this idea of doing this book of the A - Z of Oxford (I think he called it). I told him that, in my generation, A to Z was a map we all carried in our bags before

Google maps. Because it was a kind of quirky thing, I suggested we call it the Z to A of Oxford. So that is why we started with a zoo in Kidlington which was interesting.

It took a while because I was really busy at the time but last year I was able to sit down and do it because it was a huge project. Every time I was planning it out, it grew. We started out planning it as 48 pages then we asked Mr. Ferguson if we could go to 56 and then it ended up being a 96 page book. It was originally a paperback, it is now a hardback. It is a fabulous book and what was so nice was reading these quirky stories about Oxford and then fitting them all in. I couldn't fit in everything, so I told Richard that the ones that capture my fancy are the ones I would do. Because I wasn't going to rough out the whole book.

My favourite story is Parson's Pleasure where the Dons used to go for skinny dipping, which is on the Cherwell River down by Magdalen College. There were some Dons skinny dipping there (and this was in the 19th Century). A punter came by with ladies on board who were waving themselves because they had seen these men naked. So all the Dons quickly wrap towels around their waists except one Don. He threw the towel over his head. They all shouted 'what the hell are you doing?' and he said, 'well everyone knows me in Oxford by my face!'

I have done the drawing of the Dons in this scene but with a leaf on a branch covering him up. It was great fun to do, challenging actually because I had to fit in a lot of detail into quite small drawings. I remember James Ferguson asking to fit in a whole lot of other stuff. I told him this drawing is only 5cm by 6cm, I can't fit in the Oxford skyline as well!

KG: It is lovely hearing you talk about the specific drawings that you have done especially those that have stuck out to you or those that have interested you greatly. How did you choose the illustrations for the exhibition at The North Wall?

KP: It was a difficult one, the thing is I don't sell my original drawings. They are all carefully archived in portfolios, I've got a whole room which is just all archives - I can't part with it. I heard about these giclée prints, which are extraordinary because they look exactly like the original and I print them the same size as the original, so I don't doctor them or anything. The ones I chose were the ones who were the most difficult to do and that turned out better than I expected. Often you do a drawing and you just can't quite get it to work and then somehow - it works. The ones that I really struggled with and that turned out really well, those are the ones that appealed to me.

I also wanted to show the flavour of Winnie - how she has evolved as my drawing skills have developed - and you start getting into this character and you start finding out things about her and you start making up things.

KG: In all of these amazing projects you've done and obviously in very different forms for adults, for kids, in magazines, do you have another dream project that are itching to get your hands on in the future?

KP: Every project is a dream project. We don't know where things are going to appear. I might be doing a project on a word machine that teaches kids phonics. So that is a huge project I am getting ready to do. So every project is a dream project - you never know what is going to turn up on your doorstep.

KG: It is so nice to get insight and just to hear you talk about your own work and hearing you talk about your life experiences, I think it will really enrich the visit to all of these works that will be up at The North Wall and to be able to see Winnie, be able to see the influence of developing these projects and just enjoying it, getting into that world, getting into a space filled with beautiful drawings of something outside of the ordinary and outside of our own lives.

KP: I would also like to add that I had a wonderful editor called Helen Mortimer and she worked with me and Valerie on Winnie for about 14 years - and it was an amazing team. Sadly she has now left but I have a lot to thank Helen for. The art director Kate Adams - she put together the whole rebranding, the whole redesign, the logos, the fonts, and the typefaces and everything. She put the Winnie books together ready to be printed - all the paraphernalia that goes with it is done by our wonderful art director Kate.

KG: As we know, your work is deeply collaborative and we know that without all the parts coming together, it wouldn't be the same Winnie as we know her. On behalf of The North Wall we want to thank you and all the collaborators for all the tremendous work that you do and we are very excited to have you come to The North Wall, so thank you so much for featuring on our podcast for this episode.

KP: It was a pleasure.