

Quentin Blake: 'I never wanted children. But I do invent them.'

His illustrations endeared him to millions of Roald Dahl fans and made him rich. Yet Quentin Blake insists he has no special affinity with children. So does that explain why, at 80, he's started drawing female nudes?



Image 1 of 6
Quentin Blake, 2012 Photo: JON TONKS

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6:30AM GMT 05 Nov 2012

Recently, [Quentin Blake](#) received a postcard from an admirer. It began, “Knowing how much you love children...” Blake is a very mild man, but as he tells me this, a rather affronted look comes over him. “I thought, hold on, I’ve never said that. I mean, I do like children, but only as people. Not as if they’re a special category.” He gives a sigh. “But people do have these ideas about me that aren’t necessarily true.” It’s eight years since I last interviewed Blake. He’s about to be 80 — his birthday is next month. As I ring the bell of his Earl’s Court flat, I’m a bit apprehensive about how the intervening years might have treated him. But when he answers the door, I see that he looks no different – literally no different at all.

He’s still faintly gnomish with a bald pate and sprigs of grey hair sticking out at funny angles over his ears. He still talks in exactly the same way too, haring off on any tangent that presents itself, but somehow managing to hang on to his original theme. And he even dresses the same – at least he’s wearing a pair of his trademark spotless white shoes.

Nor has there been any let-up in his work-rate: he still goes at it like a maniac, scarcely ever having a break. “I’ve never quite worked out how to do holidays,” he says. “I’ve got a house in France which I suppose is a kind of holiday house. But it’s really only so I can go on drawing when I get there. I’m never far away from the feeling that I want to be getting on with something.”

But if Blake still looks the same and works at the same hectic pace, it turns out that much has changed in the past eight years. The main thing is that he’s been doing a lot of murals for hospitals and mental health centres, which also appear in a new collection of his recent work, *Beyond the Page*. There are now Quentin Blakes on the walls of a mental health centre in Chelsea, an eating disorders unit in Victoria, a residential centre for the elderly at Hillingdon Hospital and a hospital for sick children in Paris.

As well as allowing him to work on a much bigger scale, these have sent his imagination roaming into hitherto unexplored territory. “It’s been a wonderful new challenge. Each job is different, of course, but I suppose what I’ve tried to do in every case is bring some colour into what might otherwise be pretty monochromatic lives.”

Everything Blake does takes shape in one room of his flat; a large, rather gloomy space with shelves crammed with books of his illustrations. He’s lost track of how many he’s done, but says it’s over 300. In many ways he seems so unworldly you don’t expect him to have an entrepreneurial bone in his body. Yet a glance at the floor suggests otherwise. In one open cardboard box, I spot row upon row of tightly packed Quentin Blake oven gloves. You can also buy Quentin Blake greetings cards, fabrics and wallpapers – all of which must have made him an extremely rich unworldly man.

On the other side of the room, by the window, is his drawing board. Blake takes me over to have a look, padding across the carpet in his white shoes. There are bottles of ink and jamjars full of quill pens, some made from vulture feathers, some from turkeys – fans now send him feathers from unusual birds for him to make pens out of. Everything is arranged neatly enough, yet there’s still an air of chaos hovering over his drawing board. A sense of exuberance waiting to be unleashed.

This exuberance is present in everything Blake does. It’s one of the things that makes his work instantly recognisable. With the minimum of pen strokes, he can convey character, mood and, perhaps most strikingly of all, movement. The night before our interview, I read one of his children’s books to my six-year-old son. When I asked him what he thought of the drawings, he said, approvingly, “Very lively”.

The same could be said of another of Blake’s new ventures – a series of female nudes entitled *Sporting Girls*, which he has done for an exhibition opening on December 12 at the Marlborough Gallery in London. These girls are big all right – very big – and they cavort about with legs kicking and breasts bouncing.

For all sorts of reasons, you don’t normally associate children’s book illustrators with eroticism. Yet it’s plain that Blake, when in the right mood, can draw a sexy nude with as much panache as he can an Oompa Loompa.

“Ah...” he says, beaming delightedly. “I’m pleased you liked them. I suppose people might be a bit surprised. They do tend to assume that because you do children’s books everything must be bland and optimistic. I mean, I’ve got a pretty strong line in optimism myself, but there are other things to life, aren’t there?”

But there's something else that makes Blake unique among illustrators – and it might just be the secret to his success. He never seeks to impose his vision of how a character should look. Rather, he always allows space for the reader to contribute something of their own. To fill in the gaps with their imagination.

“What I try to do is create a kind of tolerance that the mind of the reader can work within,” he says. “When I draw a character, I try to make it defined – but not to close it up completely. It's as if I'm a go-between between the writer and the reader.”

For as far back as he can remember, Blake has been drawing. The son of a civil servant, he grew up in Sidcup with a pencil in his hand – or so family legend has it. Does this imply that he was a solitary child?

“Mmm, solitary-ish. Not that I didn't have friends. In fact, I still have friends that I had at grammar school. But I didn't do sport, or anything like that. Far too busy drawing.” He gives an unexpectedly hearty laugh.

He drew at Cambridge too, where he studied English. By then he had already started contributing cartoons to *Punch*. However, his first trip to the *Punch* offices, aged 16, didn't go too well – he looked so young he was assumed to be the son of another visitor. Undeterred, Blake started sending in cartoons: a rough version to begin with, then a more polished one if he got a commission.

“The art editor told me one day he thought my roughs were better than my finished drawings. That was quite a turning point for me. I realised I had to let myself go a bit.” One of the other myths about Blake – along with his loving children indiscriminately and being a kind of beneficent eunuch – is that he started drawing for children because he felt a special rapport with them.

“No, no,” he says, waving a hand dismissively. “Nothing like that. I know some children's writers write for specific children, or for the children they once were, but I never have. I just thought children might like my sort of visual humour.” He never had a plan of action; he just told himself he'd carry on until he was 30 and then take stock. “Then I realised I'd passed 30 and so I just kept going.”

He turned out to be a natural collaborator – mainly, I suspect, because he doesn't have much of an ego. “I've always thought that the writer is the front end of the horse, as it were. It's useful if you get on personally with whoever's written the words, but I don't think it's essential. Someone like Michael Rosen, for instance – we first worked together more than 30 years ago. I see Michael, but we never go to each other's homes or anything like that. However, I remember once overhearing him talking about our collaboration. He said, ‘It's very simple. I give the book to Quentin and he just goes off and does it’. I was very encouraged that he felt he could trust me in that way.”

Of all Blake's collaborations, it's the one with Roald Dahl that he's best known for. It was a partnership that got off to a far-from-promising start. “I think we first met in Tom Maschler's office when Tom was running Jonathan Cape. Maschler had asked Dahl why he'd never done a picture book, so he'd gone off and written *The Enormous Crocodile*. I did that and *The Twits*, but then we rather came apart over *The BFG*.”

Being tight with money, Maschler only commissioned 12 illustrations. Dahl wanted far more and flew into a tremendous rage when he saw the proofs – “and Roald was someone who knew how to be angry”, says Blake. “He thought I was being lazy, when in fact I was just doing what I'd been asked to do.” Dahl fired off a furious letter to Maschler – “There is no way I will permit a

major children's book of mine to be published with only 12 illustrations... This is cheese-paring to the ultimate degree... It is also an insult to my book... I will not agree to your publishing *The BFG* unless properly and fully illustrated in the same manner as all the others."

Maschler backed down and Blake started again. Soon afterwards, a parcel arrived at his door. "When I opened it I found a large sandal." This, Dahl wrote, was what the BFG should be wearing – not the clumsy knee-length boots he'd been in before.

It proved to be a perfect partnership – in large part because Blake's natural optimism and gentleness balanced Dahl's much less forgiving view of the world. I wonder if he'd ever been shocked by the nastiness of Dahl.

"Not in person because we always got on very well, but in the books... Yes, once or twice. I was a bit shocked by *The Witches*. That's pretty frightening and it did take me back a bit. Also Roald dealt in revenge, which I don't approve of. But the only time I said anything was when we did *Revoltin' Rhymes*. I thought it was a bit too rude and I wrote and said, please remember that parents read these to their children. I thought he might object – but it was fine.

"There was also a problem with one of the poems in which a wizard went off with Sleeping Beauty. It seemed to me she was a bit young and Roald hadn't given her enough time to grow up. I pointed this out and he said, 'Oh no, we can't possibly have that – it's paedophilia!'"

As their collaboration went on, the two men developed a routine. After Dahl had written each book, Blake would go down to his home, Gipsy House outside Great Missenden, where they'd discuss how the illustrations would look.

"I think we knew how each other's minds worked. And we respected one another a great deal. I remember when I was doing the illustrations for *Matilda*, Roald told me the way I'd drawn her wasn't how he'd envisaged her, but then he said, 'it works so let's stick with it.'"

More than 20 years ago, I went to Gipsy House to interview Dahl. Slightly to my surprise, he couldn't have been more charming, showing me his writing hut with its battered armchair and the board he used to write on, and also pointing out the enormous postbox on the fence by the front gate. "You have no idea how many of those little buggers write to me," he said.

I remember that when Dahl spoke of Blake, he did so with enormous admiration, but also with a kind of awe that Blake had given shape to creatures that Dahl had only glimpsed, indistinctly, in his mind.

"After a while Roald used to say to people, 'Of course, the way the public thinks of these characters is the way Quent [sic] has drawn them'. However, that was fine by him."

With Dahl, Blake usually had a pretty clear brief to work to, but a lot of the time when he starts drawing he doesn't really know what he's going to do. Then, when he looks at what he's done afterwards, he often wonders where it came from. This happened recently with a series of murals for a children's hospital. Blake, without knowing why, started drawing pictures of children in trees. It was only later that he saw how apt they were. "The fundamental idea, I realised, was that if you jump, or fall out of a tree, there will always be someone to catch you." And just occasionally when Blake is drawing, he will have a very strange sensation. "I do every so often have this odd feeling that I'm meeting someone else while I'm doing it." What sort of person — your inner self?

"I suppose so," he laughs. "Although I don't know what my inner self would be like." Which brings us to something else about Blake. It's not only the process of drawing that's mysterious.

He is too. Although he's not deliberately secretive, there's something closed about him. He only talks about himself reluctantly – always saying “you” if he can avoid saying “I”.

He's close to a niece of his, and to a god-daughter, yet he's never wanted children of his own. “I never had the strong drive that some people have – but then I invent them.” He's never married either, although there have been girlfriends along the way. “It was an accident of circumstance that I never married,” he says carefully. But even as he's telling me this, he sounds distanced, not that interested, as if he doesn't think his own life is really worthy of note.

Nor does he want to dwell on being 80. “Oh, I think I'm relatively sanguine about the whole thing. At the same time, though, I find myself rather offended by the idea. I know that's stupid, but there it is. One of the things I'm glad about is that I'm not having a retrospective to mark my birthday – I'm actually having an exhibition of new work. So,” he says, “I suppose that rather sums up what I think about it.”

‘Beyond the Page’ by Quentin Blake (Tate Publishing, £15.99) is available to pre-order from Telegraph Books at £13.99 plus £1.35 p&p. Call 0844 871 1516 or visit books.telegraph.co.uk

This article also appeared in SEVEN magazine, free with the Sunday Telegraph.