



AN INTERVIEW WITH LEVI PINFOLD, WINNER OF THE 2013 KATE GREENAWAY MEDAL

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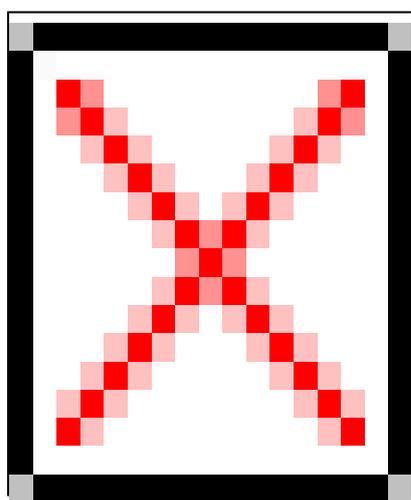
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Clive Barnes interviews **Kate Greenaway Medal** winner Levi Pinfold.

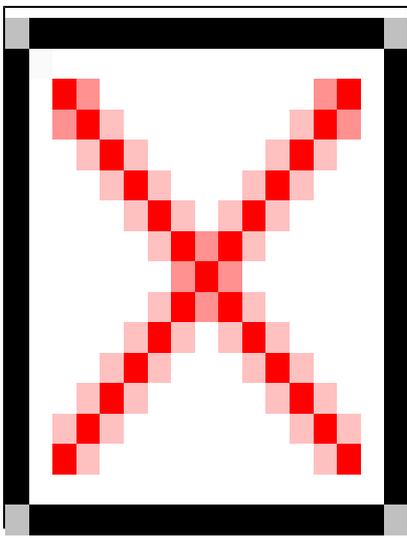
Levi Pinfold joined an elite band of illustrators when he was awarded the **2013 Kate Greenaway Medal** last week. Clive Barnes caught up with him at the packed award ceremony to find out more about this talented young illustrator.



When John Wilson interviewed Levi Pinfold on the BBC Arts programme *Front Row* last Wednesday, John jokingly commented that he was surprised that Levi hadn't come to the studio proudly wearing the Kate Greenaway medal that he had received before a packed theatre at the Natural History Museum earlier that day. 'I think I feel a bit too humble to do something like that,' Levi replied; as if winning the medal was an honour he had not even dreamt of. Even his acceptance speech at the ceremony had something trancelike about it, threatening to become all too tearfully real when he thanked those closest to him for their support.

Winning a Greenaway Medal so early in your career? **Black Dog** is Levi's second book - is an extraordinary event. It has been done before, of course, even with a first book, but it puts Levi in some exceptional company: John Burningham and Emily Gravett to name but two. But then **Black Dog** is a special book, bringing together a simple but resonant story with illustrations that are not only detailed and atmospheric but already seem to convey a unique imaginative world.

When Levi talks about illustrators who have inspired him? Sendak, Burningham, McKean, among others? it is clear that he is drawing on a whole history of modern children's storytelling in pictures. In his acceptance speech, he mentioned his love of comics as a teenager and, in particular, **The Sandman** by Neil Gaiman and David McKean as showing him the possibilities of narrative and illustration. When I had a chance for a quick word with him after the ceremony on Wednesday, I asked him why, then, had he chosen to create picturebooks rather than graphic novels? There were two main reasons, he said. The first was that the children's picturebook was the form that he felt compelled to create, that somehow his childhood reading had 'embedded' this in him, and now 'I am really enjoying writing for children.' The other reason was that, as he says, 'It takes me positively so long to do a painting that I couldn't possibly do a graphic novel.'



Black Dog is painted in egg tempera – quite an old painting medium – a process that requires the artist to mix pigments with egg yolk, this in itself is a painstaking business, but about which Levi admits to being ‘a stickler’ and ‘really geeky’: ‘I enjoy the process. It puts me in the zone to do the actual painting afterwards.’ The painting is as demanding as the preparation, since tempera dries very quickly and has to be built up in layers. It’s ‘a long time planning and a long time layering up,’ says Levi. But, applied with delicate brushwork, tempera enables the creation of the very precise detail that is one of the characteristics of **Black Dog**, whether it is the hairs of the dog’s coat, the glittering moisture of its nose, or the characterisation of the family in the story and the domestic interiors of their house. Working like this, a single painting can take Levi up to three weeks. So, not accounting for changing your mind and things that don’t quite come right, working flat out, a book with only about seventeen full page illustrations is going to take a year.

If so much work might not produce much of a graphic novel, in **Black Dog** Levi has produced a phenomenal picture book. The story is inspired by the idea of a fearful spectral black dog that appears in British folk tale and legend, a figure which fascinated Levi and which he researched in the hope of finding a story that he could use. The story’s final form became clear when he realised that this fearsome figure might be nothing more than a household pet inflated by people’s fears. In his tale, the parents and older children of the Hope family, in their anxiety, gradually build up the dog in the snow outside the window, until it’s the size of a monster and only Small, the youngest of the family, has the courage to go out and face it.

Levi tells me that he wanted **Black Dog** to be both scary and fun, and pictures of the giant dog in the bare icy landscape outside alternate with the warm, eccentric interiors of the Hope’s isolated and impossibly tall, and faintly Gothic house, filled with old fashioned furniture and domestic bric-a-brac, reassuringly detailed and solid (put together with a family’s love, Levi tells me).

Levi has elsewhere described the style he is aiming for as stylised realism. In a striking double page spread, when Small confronts her monster adversary head-on, the dog looks all too real, apart from the disconcerting yellow eyes: ‘I got really close up to dogs for that one,’ says Levi, ‘People might have thought me a bit odd.’ And then there’s another double page where Small and the rapidly dwindling dog visit a playground with elephant slides that look just like the elephant toy under Small’s big brother’s bed, weird but friendly, and even within the bounds of possibility. It’s a bit Mervyn Peake only a lot warmer and more playful.

Levi is in Australia with his girlfriend at the moment, but says he will probably come back in a year or two and then ‘just take things from there.’ When I ask him if he’s something of a rolling stone, he looks a little non-plussed. ‘When you’re working like this, you always have your zone. You always have your home with you. I always have a studio wherever I go, even if it’s just the back of the living room. So, even if I move, I’m still sort of in the same place.’ And when can we expect the next book? ‘Hopefully next year some time. It’s about a green baby,’ he says, with a smile, ‘Literally a green baby.’ Another folk tale inspired story, I think. I can’t wait to see what Levi makes of it.

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

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