



# 50 Years of Babar

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**Tony Bradman** meets **Laurent de Brunhoff** and talks about his association with the famous elephant.

**Laurent de Brunhoff** talked to **Tony Bradman** about his association with the famous elephant.

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In 1931 Jean de Brunhoff was persuaded by his uncles - who were publishers - to publish a book he'd made from a story his wife had told their two sons. More Babar books followed, and popularity in France was succeeded by popularity elsewhere, including Britain, where the **Daily Sketch** serialised **Babar's Family** and **Babar and Father Christmas**.

Sadly, Jean de Brunhoff died of tuberculosis in 1937, at the age of 36. Laurent, the eldest of the de Brunhoffs' three children, and one of the original two Babar converts, helped to prepare the two last stories for publication in book form by doing some colouring. That, it seemed, was the end of Babar.

Laurent wanted to be a painter. Once the war was over, he went to live and paint in Paris. His father had been an impressionist painter as well as the creator of Babar, but Laurent was more interested in abstract art, and exhibited some work.

One day 'I got to thinking that it was sad that there would be no more Babar stories. So I thought why not do one myself, and I started with cousin Arthur, who was almost a teenage character. After all, I was only 23 myself at the time.'

**Babar and that Rascal Arthur** was well received. Laurent says that many people didn't notice the difference between it and the original Babar stories. 'They thought that the Babar stories hadn't appeared for such a long time because of the war. Mind you, looking at it now I think it's far from perfect graphically.'

Now Laurent is 56, older than his father ever was and he has done more Babar stories than his father. He's had his problems. 'There began to be a conflict between what I wanted to do as an artist and keeping faith with my father. I did try to stamp my personality on my books. I think now that the burden of my father has been lifted.' Some people say Laurent's books are not as good as his father's. 'I'm not being big-headed, but I do think some of my books are *equal* to my father's. I think that old criticism is just people being funny.'

More recently the Babar books have been strongly attacked for their attitudes and values. Some of them, critics say, display distinctly colonialist ideas, which are unacceptable today. Babar 's relationship with the 'primitive' elephants of the tribe, and the results of his kingship present impressionable young children with unhelpful, even damaging, ideas.

It's true that in the original Babar books he went to "civilised" countries and took back "civilisation" to his own country. Obviously we're more aware of these things nowadays, and if my father was alive today he wouldn't do such a story. I don't think it's particularly important anyway. Children won't be led into thinking along "colonialist" lines. I

don't think a work of imagination will instil racial prejudice into children and I believe it's wrong to over-criticise books for this.'

This dismissal of the power of words and pictures to influence comes strangely from 'an artist'. Be that as it may, Laurent did take steps to have one of his books taken out of print in France and the United States. 'I had written a "black savage" into one book, and after it was finished I found it disturbing and worrying. So I had the book dropped.'

Criticism hasn't prevented the Babar books from being enormously popular. The stories have been adapted into cartoons and for the theatre and appear in many different languages.

What's the secret of all that success? Laurent puts it down to the de Brunhoff family temperament. After the initial invention by Madame de Brunhoff, de Brunhoff pere never 'test-marketed' a story on his sons.

'I don't do that either. If you have to keep asking, then you can't write for children. I think that, like my father, I'm a sort of a dreamer, almost like a child. I like to travel in an imaginary world which is a mixture of reality and dream. And that's a children's world.'

Babar books are published by Methuen. The latest, published in September, is **Babar and the Ghost**, 0 416 21480 0, £3.95.

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