



# Mr Gumpy and other Outings: John Burningham at Seven Stories, Newcastle

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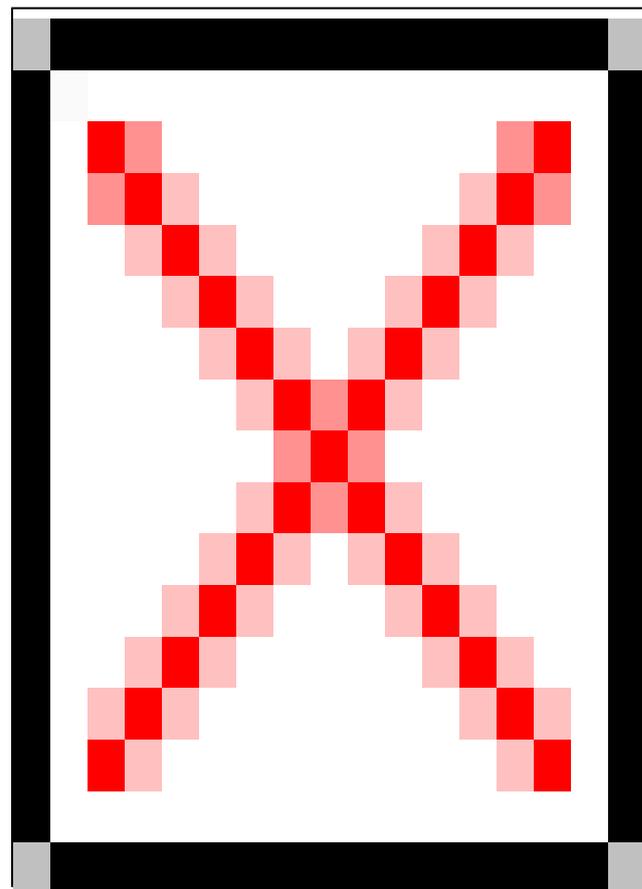
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**Julia Eccleshare** discusses a Seven Stories exhibition on John Burningham.



?Would you rather? be crushed by a snake, swallowed by a fish, eaten by a crocodile or sat on by a rhinoceros?? Poring over John Burningham's illustrated version of those choices has delighted readers since his innovatively structured picture book **Would you rather?** was published in 1978. Now, creating your own ?Would you rather?? is one of several interactive activities for visitors to the stunning John Burningham exhibition at Seven Stories. (Knitting a new coat for Borka and donning a carrot wig so as to be Stephen popping down to the shops as in **The Shopping Basket** are others?) **Julia Eccleshare** explains.

Entering the world of John Burningham is delightful and exhilarating. It allows you to feast on his creative imagination from **Borka** (1963), his very first picture book, through the classic and classically structured **Mr Gumpy's Outing** (1970) (both titles won the Kate Greenaway Medal) and on through his prodigious output including some of my own

favourites, **Come away from the water, Shirley** (1977), **The Shopping Basket** (1980), **Granpa** (1984) and **The Magic Bed** (2003) as well as specially commissioned titles such as **Oi! Get off our Train** (1989) and **Whadayamean** (1999), two books with a conservation message created for Japan's 'Expos', and the illustrations for Ian Fleming's **Chitty Chitty Bang Bang** (1964).

Ninety frames of single illustrations or spreads from the books are shown with additional comments from John explaining the genesis or giving extra information and comment. To **Mr Gumpy's Outing** he adds, 'It is a prophetic caricature? I get to look like him more and more each day?' with which all would agree. He also shows an early draft of Mr Gumpy revealing the boxy structural framework which underpins him from which aspiring art students can learn the principles of figure drawing.

Seeing Burningham's books gathered together in a collection, the extraordinary variety and multiplicity of art forms that he uses, each being the best response to the subject matter of each very different story, are brilliantly revealed, helping the viewer to understand why his books are so remarkable and have made and continue to make such an impact over five decades. Whatever media or style Burningham works in, one of the pleasures of seeing the actual artwork is being able to relish the original colours: splashes of brilliant reds, greens or yellows make their own statement against the soft background colours which Burningham so often uses.

### **Burningham is always on the side of the child**

But, if the visual style and artistic construction change from book to book, Burningham's empathy with his child readers never does. In different ways, Burningham is always on the side of the child and children instinctively respond to it. Reflecting this, the exhibition groups Burningham's titles into themes which broadly cover children moving from being weak to being powerful, children being independent thinkers and children responding to praise not punishment and thinking imaginatively about the environment.

The source of Burningham's delightfully original imagining of things and the inspiration behind his work (which was summed up by Morris Sendak as 'stunning, luscious, sexy, hilarious and mysterious and frequently just plain nuts') lies in his peripatetic childhood. This included attending nine schools? mostly progressive ones with a variety of teaching methods, spells living in a caravan during some of which he didn't attend school at all, and finally and most successfully, four years at A S Neill's famously progressive Summerhill where Burningham passed school certificate in English but, surprisingly, managed to fail art. Records of some of this and other memorabilia including early posters for London Transport, a model of Chitty Chitty Bang Bang, and wonderful photographs of a student Burningham and his young partner, now wife, Helen Oxenbury, flesh out the original mind and creative genius behind the stories and their pictures.

### **A joint venture**

One recent book not featured in this exhibition is **There's Going to be a Baby** for which Burningham called on Helen Oxenbury to provide illustrations to accompany his text. The familiar territory of the complex and sometimes overpowering feelings of an older sibling waiting for the arrival of a new baby is sensitively probed in the gentle, almost tentative dialogue in which the optimistic possibilities of what the baby might and might not do are juxtaposed with some of the fears and negative feelings that the thought of it creates. Helen Oxenbury's illustrations match both the delicacy and the humour of Burningham's text perfectly and, by the end, both words and pictures welcome the baby with hope in this inspirational fusion of talent.

**Julia Eccleshare** is the children's book editor of the **Guardian** and the co-director of CLPE (The Centre for Literacy in Primary Education).

'Mr Gumpy and Other Outings' is at Seven Stories, 30 Lime Street, Newcastle upon Tyne until March 2011.

John Burningham and Helen Oxenbury's **There's Going to be a Baby** (978 0 7445 4996 6) is published by Walker Books at £12.99.

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