



Obituary John Burningham

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Created *Jan '19*

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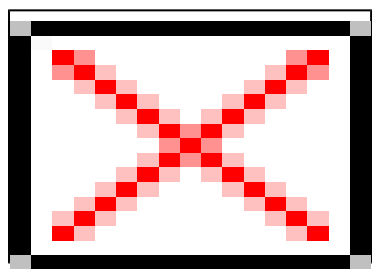
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Obituaries

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John Burningham remembered by **Clive Barnes**

John Burningham 27 April 1936 - 4 January 2019



Clive Barnes remembers **John Burningham**.

John Burningham, who died aged 82 on 4 January of pneumonia, was one of the giants of picture book creation. The creator of over forty books which have sold more than four million copies worldwide, he was a master of storytelling and illustration. He created prize-winning classics loved by generations of children and parents and restlessly explored what kind of stories might be told to children through the interaction of text and pictures.

John was born in Farnham, Surrey in 1936. He was brought up in an unconventional family and was sent to a succession of progressive co-educational boarding schools, which he later recalled as a time of constant personal displacement. He eventually arrived at the most famous of these: A. S. Neill's Summerhill. Here students could choose how they spent their time, and John spent all his in the art room. He then studied at the Central School of Art, where he met his future wife, and future fellow children's illustrator, Helen Oxenbury; and in 1960 he had a break-through commission to design posters for London Transport. At the same time, in a small ring-back notebook, he was writing an illustrated story for children, [Borka: The Adventures of A Goose with No Feathers](#) [3]. This was published by Jonathan Cape in 1963 to instant acclaim, winning the Library Association's **Kate Greenaway Award** for illustration.

Following the success of **Borka**, John worked for more than half a century on creating picture books that he both wrote and illustrated. He began his career when he and his contemporaries were able to take advantage both of advances in the technology of colour lithography and a growing market for their work both nationally and internationally. **Borka** and the four other animal tales that followed it between 1963 and 1969 demonstrate some of the qualities which were to characterise John's career: the ability to combine character portrayal with sweeping painterly landscape; the holding together of surreal events with dramatic timing and emotional truth; and a deep sympathy for outsiders. But it was in 1971 that [Mr Gumpy's Outing](#) [4] initiated possibly the most innovative and productive phase of his career.

Mr Gumpy's Outing, which won John's second **Greenaway** medal and a clutch of other awards, has been credited by some critics as opening up the possibilities of the picture book, perhaps even inventing the modern form. Rather than using a conventional narrative structure, it employs a series of repeated encounters as two children and a number of animals board Mr Gumpy's boat, each time being warned by Mr Gumpy to behave themselves. Once they are all aboard, they inevitably do all the things they were told not to, and the boat tips them and Mr Gumpy into the river in a glorious double-page soaking. Apart from its innovation in form, and its sunny evocation of a day on the river, the book is also a subtle and subversive examination of the relationship between adults and children: a theme that John was to return to repeatedly in the books that followed.

John took a long time over every book and wanted to do something different each time. With **Come Away from the Water, Shirley** (1977), he pushed at the boundaries of picture book storytelling again. Shirley presents the reader with two stories running in parallel across its double pages, on one side a portrayal of a rather dull visit to the seaside with two caricature adults dozing in their deck chairs, on the other the technicolour adventures imagined by the little girl who has come to the beach with them. In the 1970s and 1980s John was perhaps at the height of his powers, producing titles like **The Shopping Basket** (1980), **Avocado Baby** (1982), and **Where's Julius** (1986). His work in these two decades has not lost its power to surprise, delight and engage its readers, including the joyous tom-foolery of **Would You Rather** (1978); the moving evocation of love and loss in *Granpa* (1984); and the eloquent advocacy of environmental concern in **Oi! Get off our Train** (1989).

John worked from a basement studio in a house in Hampstead, whose interior and garden he had transformed through an eclectic personal collection of old furniture, miscellaneous fittings and architectural fragments which reflected his respect for the craft of their anonymous makers. He was able to indulge his interest in architecture when the West Japan Railway Company invited him to design three railway carriages and two earthquake-proof station buildings for **Expo 90**. He illustrated two children's books by other authors, one was **Wind in the Willows** (1983); the other was Ian Fleming's **Chitty, Chitty Bang, Bang** (1964), for which John provided the original illustrations and, in model form, the first version of the car itself. He also published books of illustrations for adults. While he and Helen each enjoyed huge success, they collaborated on only one title, **There's Going to be a Baby** (2010), for which John supplied the text and Helen the illustrations. In 2018, they were jointly honoured with a **BookTrust Lifetime Achievement Award**.

John was a quiet man who was working until the end. Modest and not given to self-analysis, he was exacting and ambitious in his work, and was content to let it speak for itself. For many of my generation, who shared his books with children at work and at home, and whose children have gone on to share them with their children, his loss is not just of a remarkable author but of someone who had made himself, although we might never have met, in some way a part of the family.

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