

David McKee

Born 1935. Children's author and illustrator.

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1. Introduction



This chapter and chapters 2 to 7 were archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the www.biography.jrank.org website.

British author, illustrator, and filmmaker David McKee has been described as a "contemporary master of the children's parable" by Listener reviewer William Henry Holmes. Holmes' praise has been echoed by other reviewers, who cite McKee as a prolific contributor to the picture-book genre, his works considered unusual, amusing, and even thought-provoking. Focusing specifically on a preschool and elementary-grade readership, McKee's works include picture books, stories, and he has also illustrated a large assortment of books by other readers. In addition, he has written scripts for television series based on his characters.

McKee is well known in his native England as the creator of series books featuring Mr. Benn, an unassuming banker who becomes involved in fantastic adventures when he tries on different suits of clothes; Elmer, a jovial elephant with a patchwork hide; Melric the Magician, a sorcerer who struggles to maintain his position in a medieval court; and King Rollo, a childish monarch. The author is also known for individual picture books such as *Not Now*, *Bernard and I Hate My Teddy*, which have been viewed by some critics as controversial due to their satiric views and surrealistic art. As an illustrator, he is recognized for providing the pictures for series of books by such authors as Michael Bond, Hazel Townson, and David Tinkler as well as titles by L. Frank Baum, Christine Nöstlinger, Ursula Moray Williams, and Robert Swindells, among others. He has also illustrated books by his wife Violet McKee and son Chuck McKee.

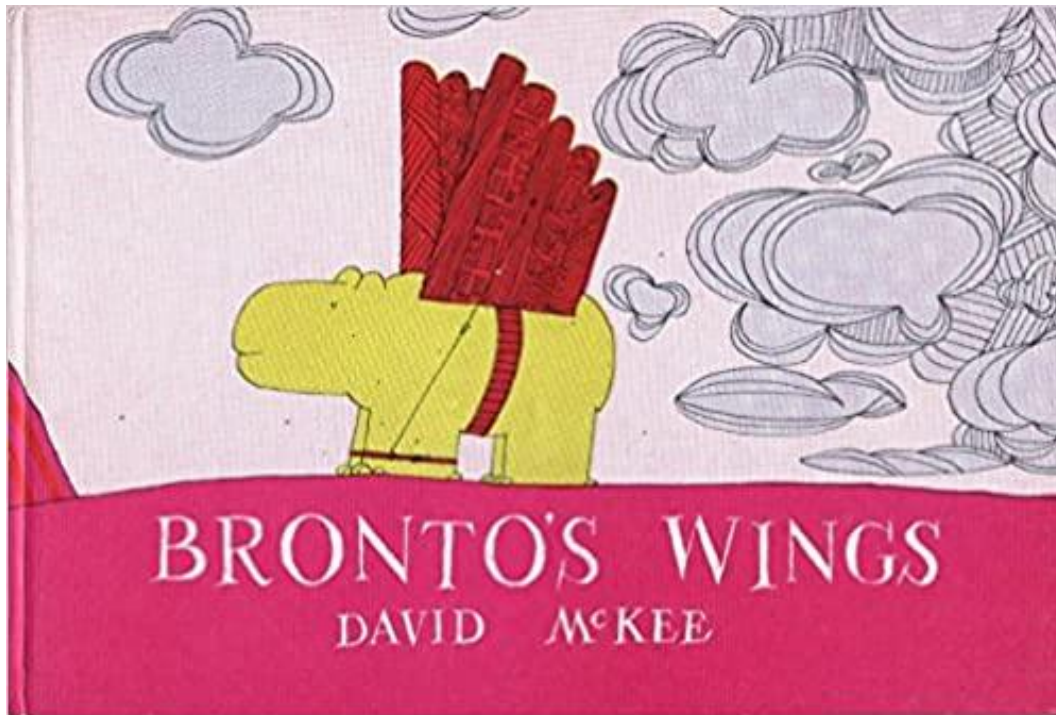
McKee's works reflect what Stephanie Nettel called in *Books for Keeps* "his own quirkily surreal vision of life." He blends reality and fantasy in stories featuring human, animal, and imaginary protagonists that show how easily ordinary life can become extraordinary. Although his works are filled with humor and topics with child appeal, McKee also addresses serious issues, such as the futility of war; the importance of communication, equality, tolerance, and emotional warmth; the development of self-knowledge and self-reliance; and respect for individuality.

He is often praised for creating moral tales that demonstrate his insight into both childhood and the human condition. The tone of McKee's books ranges from gentle and lighthearted to darkly humorous and absurdist, and he sometimes ends stories with sudden ironic twists that playfully skew the concept of the happy ending. As a prose stylist, he uses language that is considered simple yet subtle, while his artistic style is both recognizable and accessible. McKee's illustrations, which range from colorful paintings to black-and-white line art, range from delicate drawings to detailed double-page spreads. Often lauded for the smooth interplay between his text and his illustrations, McKee has also been commended for his graphic, contemporary style, his varied use of perspective, and the originality and beauty of his work.

Although some critics have found McKee's books too idiosyncratic and sophisticated for children, most observers acknowledge him as a gifted writer, artist, and humorist whose works are both entertaining and substantive. Gillian Klein, writing in *Twentieth-Century Children's Writers*, called McKee's work "direct and appealing to children. He is on their side," while a reviewer in the *Junior Bookshelf* claimed: "No one does a funny picture-story better than David McKee."

2. Early Career

Born in Devon, England, in 1935, McKee received a degree from the Plymouth College of Art before entering the British Army; he served as an instructor in the Royal Army Educational Corps and earned the rank of sergeant. In 1959 he received a second degree from the Hornsey College of Art and became a freelance painter and illustrator. He began his career by doing cartoons for newspapers and for the satirical magazine *Punch*.



In 1964 McKee published the first of his books for children, *Bronto's Wings*, the story of a dinosaur who yearns to fly so that he can join the migrating birds going south for the winter. Writing in *Growing Point*, Margery Fisher noted that the "eccentric illustrations . . . are most impressive . . . and there are plenty of the tiny details children like to search for in picture books." One of the first books McKee wrote while in college, *Two Can Toucan*, was published in 1964 and was still in print, with new illustrations by the author, in 2001.

3. Mr. Benn



David McKee lived in Festing Road, Putney, London. He depicted it in Mr. Benn Red Knight as the home of Mr. Benn.

In 1967, McKee published the first installment in his popular "Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. Benn" series. In Mr. Benn, Red Knight, mild-mannered British banker Mr. Benn, who normally wears a conservative black suit topped by a black bowler hat, is transported back in time when he tries on a suit of armor at a costume shop.



Mr. Benn discovers the Red Knight outfit in the costume shop.

After rescuing a dragon and riding the beast triumphantly, Benn goes home to dream of more adventures. A reviewer writing in the Junior Bookshelf called Mr. Benn, Red Knight "a most exciting and unusual book," while Gertrude B. Herman claimed in School Library Journal that McKee's "marvelously inventive illustrations" place him "firmly among modern English artists" such as Michael Wildsmith and John Burningham.

Other books recounting the continuing adventures of Mr. Benn after his visit to the costume shop include Big Game Benn, Big Top Benn, and Mr. Benn, Gladiator. In 123456789 Benn McKee describes how the banker

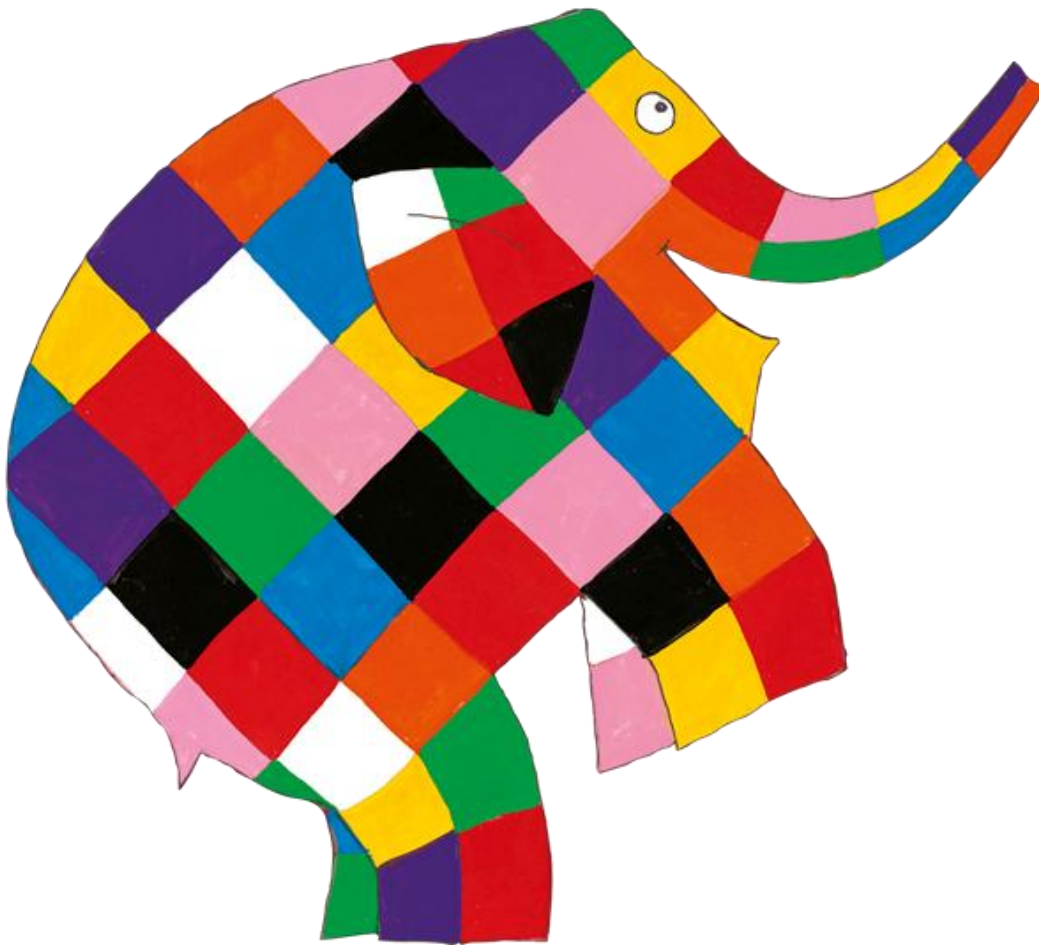
finds himself in prison after trying on a convict's uniform. Noting the gloom of the prison and the sad state of its inmates, Mr. Benn solicits the help of head convict Smasher Lagru to transform the facility into a happier place using the prison's paint and the many skills of his fellow inmates. Writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, Selma G. Lanes noted that "the experience, wholly engrossing and humanizing, makes for a refreshingly novel tale," while a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer wrote that McKee's tale contains "such inspired silliness that it could brighten the viewpoint of the most pragmatic computerizer—it could even blow his mind."



An illustration from Mr. Benn Big Top.

In *Big Game Benn*, our hero is transported to the African jungle after he tries on a hunter's clothes. Posing as a guide, Benn thwarts a group of hunters by appealing to their vanity, having them exchange their guns for cameras. Writing in *Growing Point*, Margery Fisher called *Big Game Benn* "a comic statement about conservation" before concluding that McKee lightens his message with his "subtly teasing colour-range and odd perspectives and the offhand brilliance with which he suggests a jungle atmosphere."

4. Elmer the Patchwork Elephant



One of McKee's most loveable characters was introduced to young readers in 1968, when the author/illustrator published *Elmer: The Story of a Patchwork Elephant*. In this story the colorful Elmer decides that he wants to be like the other elephants in his herd. When he dyes his multicolored patchwork grey, the other elephants don't recognize him; he also notices that they do not seem as cheerful now that he is without his colorful skin and jokes. After a rain storm washes off the dye, Elmer decides that he is happy in—and with—his own skin, and the other elephants declare a holiday. A reviewer in *Publishers Weekly* noted that "McKee's gentle humor and love of irony are in full force in this celebration of individuality and laughter," while J. A. Cunliffe wrote in *Children's Book News* that McKee's colors "have the jostling brilliance of a fairground."

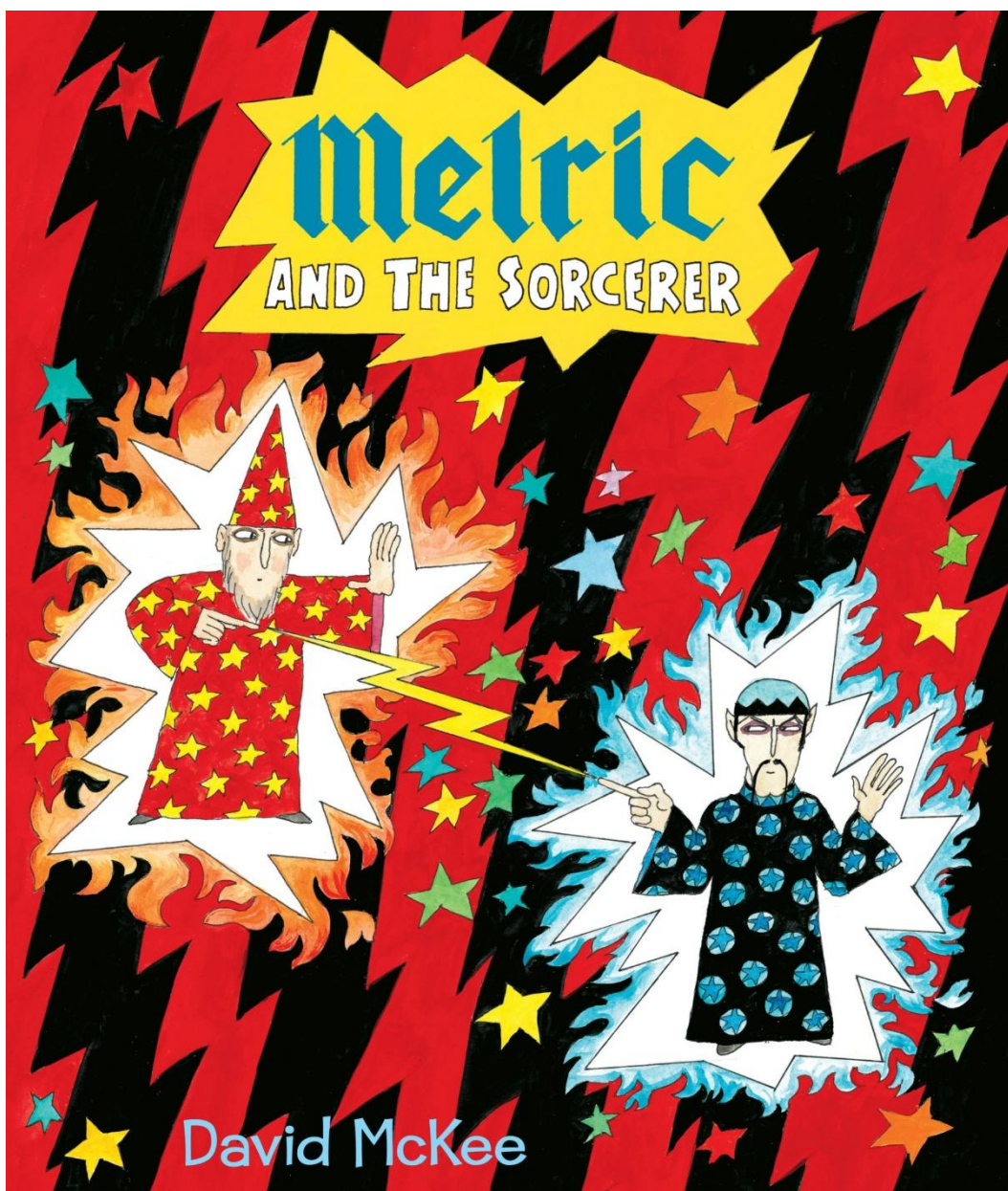
The "Elmer" series, which has also been adapted as a television series airing in Great Britain, has continued to grow in the decades since it was first introduced, and includes such titles as *Elmer Again*, *Elmer and the Lost Teddy*, *Elmer and the Kangaroo*, and *Elmer and the Hippos*. In *Elmer Again*, Elmer paints all of the other elephants to look just like him, but then realizes the importance of individuality. Writing in the *School Librarian*,

Carol Hill stated that "just to open this book is to be confronted with a kaleidoscope of shape and colour" and went on to predict that Elmer Again "is so delightful that it will be read again and again."

Elmer and the Kangaroo finds the little pachyderm on a rescue mission: to see what is distressing a kangaroo in the jungle. Learning that his new friend bounces but not jump, Elmer explains that there is little difference between bouncing and jumping, inspiring Kangaroo with enough confidence to enter the upcoming jumping contest. Another problem is neatly solved in Elmer and the Lost Teddy when the little elephant helps Baby Elephant track down a lost favorite toy. Noting the illustrations colored in "jelly bean hues," Booklist contributor Ilene Cooper wrote that "fans of the series will welcome Elmer's return."

In 1994, McKee also created the board books Elmer's Colours, Elmer's Day, Elmer's Friends, and Elmer's Weather, for the youngest Elmer fans. These works, which introduce language and other concepts, are noted for their humor and for the brightness of their pictures. In a review of these titles in *School Library Journal*, Linda Wicher wrote that Elmer's Friends, "the most sophisticated of the four, leaves readers with the message that we can be different and still get along." Another supplement to the series, Elmer's Pop-up Book—published in the United States as *I Can Too!*—finds Elmer meeting a variety of jungle animals, each of which insists that it possesses a specific talent the little elephant lacks, such as flying, flapping, stretching, and swinging. By good-naturedly reinterpreting the definitions of these skills, Elmer proves the other animals wrong. In her review of what she described as a "cleverly crafted" moveable book, *School Library Journal* reviewer Lucy Rafael stated that McKee's "message is clear: anything is possible when one thinks positively."

5. Melric



The Magician Who Lost His Magic is the first of McKee's books about Melric, a magician who serves an impetuous, childish king and who learns lessons as he attempts to retain his job. In the series debut Melric loses his powers until he learns that magic must be used for sensible purposes.

Reviewing *The Magician Who Lost His Magic* for *School Librarian*, Gabrielle Maunder stated that "McKee has two great gifts which will be familiar to those who have seen his former books . . . ; these are his ability to tell a ridiculous story with an absolutely straight face, and the other his talent to make each spread interesting by the way in which he divides it into sections." Mary B. Mason, writing in *School Library Journal*, added that *The Magician Who Lost His Magic* is an "effectively told story" featuring illustrations that are "characterized by expressive, comic detail."

In *The Magician and the Sorcerer* Melric is confronted by Sondrak, an evil and ambitious sorcerer, but by drawing on the power of laughter Melric is able to defeat the threatening sorcerer by making those around Sondrak laugh at him. A reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement* noted that McKee's "illustrations offer all kinds of comic detail to delight the mind and eye," while Edward Hudson referred to the author/illustrator in the *Children's Book Review* as "a man full of ideas and with a sense of humour which enables him to convert them into words and pictures which will appeal to young children."

The Magician and the Balloon, published in the United States as *Melric and the Balloons*, outlines how Melric uses his gentle magic to save the country from the king's meddling. Writing in the *Junior Bookshelf*, Marcus Crouch commented, "If you want proof that the ideal illustrator of a picture book is the author, then David McKee provides it."

6. King Rollo



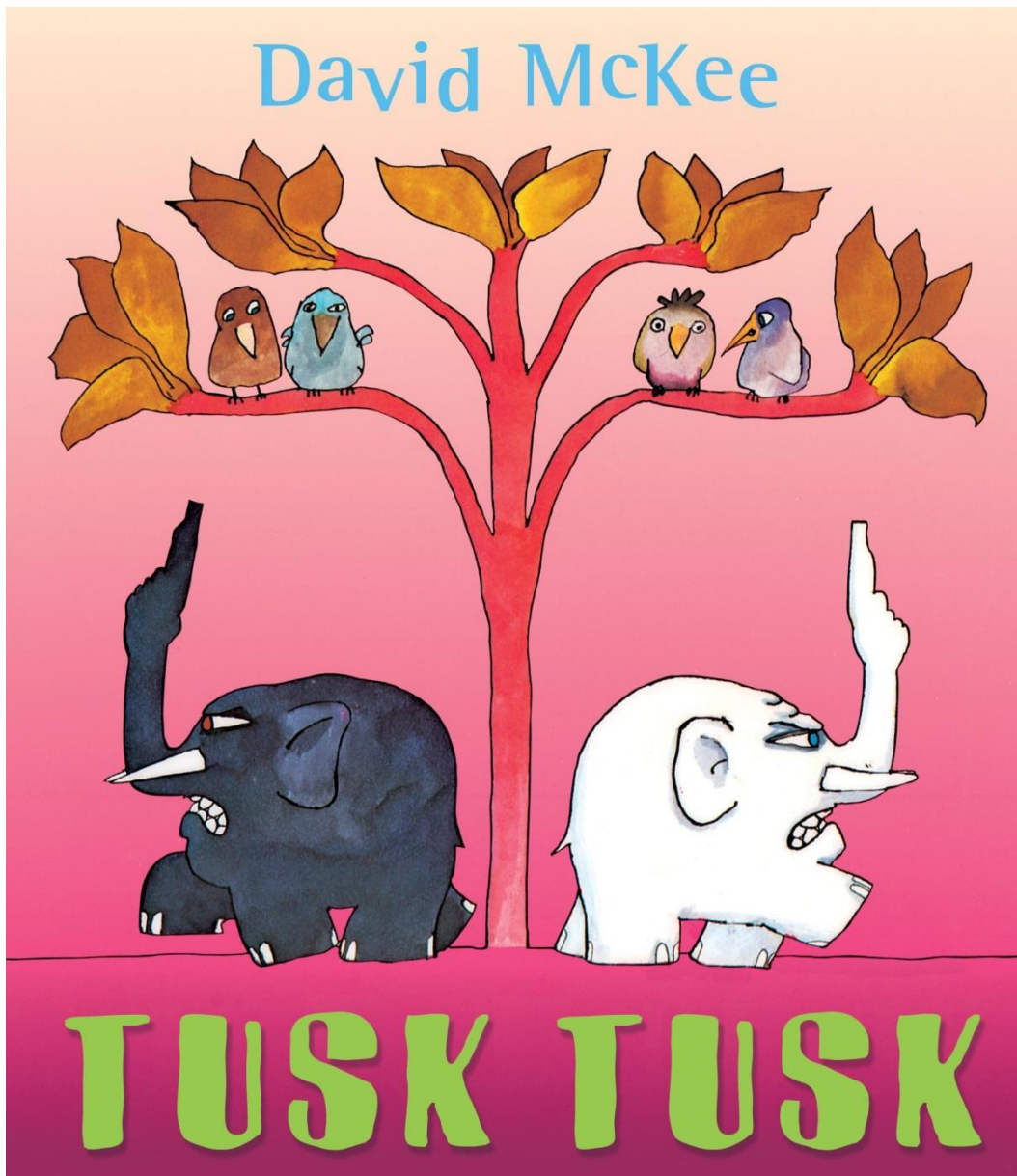
The "King Rollo" series features a chubby, ingenuous king who, despite his beard, is truly childlike. Because of his position, King Rollo gets to do all sorts of adult things children often wish they could, but he approaches all of his activities with childlike innocence and curiosity. According to Annette Curtis Klause in *School Library Journal*, the king "rolls, bounces, waves, and prances through his small world, always with a sense of true delight and discovery." Other members of Rollo's kingdom include Queen Gwen, Rollo's competent partner; Cook, who is a bit fearsome but is always ready to serve up some sage advice for the miniature monarch; the Magician, who has great respect for the correct use of magic and is as afraid of Cook as King Rollo is; and Hamlet the cat, who is both observant and always ready for adventure.

McKee published his first three books about Rollo—*King Rollo and the Birthday*, *King Rollo and the Bread*, and *King Rollo and the New Shoes*—in 1979. In these works, which are published in a small format designed to fit the hands of preschoolers and early readers, Rollo attempts to tie his shoes, makes a birthday cake for his queen, and tells the magician to change a farmer's simple loaf of coarse bread into a variety of appetizing dishes. A critic for *Kirkus Reviews* noted that the stories contain "some slight, raffish charm and varying amounts of substance—varying, that is, from almost none to as much as one might expect . . . given the format." Writing in *School Library Journal*, Bessie Condon Egan concluded that the "King Rollo" books add up to "a good series for lower elementary-age beginning readers and good bedtime fare to share with pre-schoolers." Egan also predicted that "King Rollo is bound to be a hit with American audiences."

The difference between the royal left and the royal right serves as the focus of King Rollo and the New Stockings, which unites Rollo with Hamlet the cat and other characters in the popular "King Rollo" series.

Produced in a larger format than the first volumes in the "King Rollo" series, King Rollo's Playroom and Other Stories contains four new tales about the little king. In the title story, Cook advises the king to clean up his many toys; when Rollo steps on some of his toys and breaks them, he realizes he should have listened to Cook. "The simple storyline and the clear, attractive pictures make these an excellent first series for very young children finding out about their world," concluded a reviewer in Books for Keeps. Writing in the Times Educational Supplement, Naomi Lewis commented that, "Zany as they may seem, the King Rollo books have more in them than you would think." Noting that King Rollo's Playroom is "at once witty and childlike," the reviewer concluded by advising, "Don't wait to enter the glorious Rollo world if you're four or less." Describing the series in the British Book News Children's Books, Audrey Laski noted that McKee's "most popular books are probably the King Rollo picture-strips.... King Rollo is Everychild, doing things children like to do, supported by Queen and cat, enjoying life even when things go wrong; these are cheerful and reassuring books." As with the character of Mr. Benn, King Rollo achieved additional popularity through the animated films and television shows created by McKee's studio, King Rollo Films.

7. Later Books



While his series books have proved immensely popular with younger children, McKee received much of his adult attention in response to a trio of individual titles he wrote in the late 1970s and early 1980s: *Tusk Tusk*, *I Hate My Teddy Bear*, and *Not Now, Bernard*. In *Tusk Tusk* the author describes a time when the elephants of the world were either black or white. Hating each other for their color, the elephants fought each other to the death, except for a few pacifists from both groups who fled to the jungle; later, their peaceful descendants emerge as grey. The book ends on an ironic note: the grey elephants discover that they once again fall into two groups—those with little ears and those with big ears.

Writing in the *Times Educational Supplement*, Carolyn O'Grady praised the colors chosen for the book and added that McKee's "illustrations are

especially ingenious: trunks become guns, revolvers, and hands to point an accusing finger." Elaine Moss wrote in the Times Literary Supplement that, "Like Michael Foreman, David McKee can use humour and his considerable talents as an artist to make young people think about current issues." In a review for the School Library Journal, Ruth M. McConnell felt differently about Tusk Tusk, noting: "The moral is muddled as a final cameo shows elephants with medium ears clasping trunks . . . , while the ironic caption of 'Viva la difference' under the opening cameo of a pachyderm-punch-out will also be lost on small fry."

In an interview with Audrey Laski for the British Book News Children's Books, McKee denied that his postscript is bleak: he views it as a message "to the adult that the child will be" and as a remembrance that "we have to live with all the differences." He also noted that some teachers banned Tusk Tusk from their classrooms as racist. Laski commented that this "is a dotty response to a book whose overriding impulse is passionately anti-war and with his lighthearted pen and watercolor illustrations, McKee spins a tale with a timely moral about the family of man in his 2004 picture book *The Conquerors*. one that is actually no more about race than about any other divider."

The author/illustrator returns to his pacifist theme in the 2004 picture book *The Conquerors*, which focuses on military conquest between nations in a fable-like context.

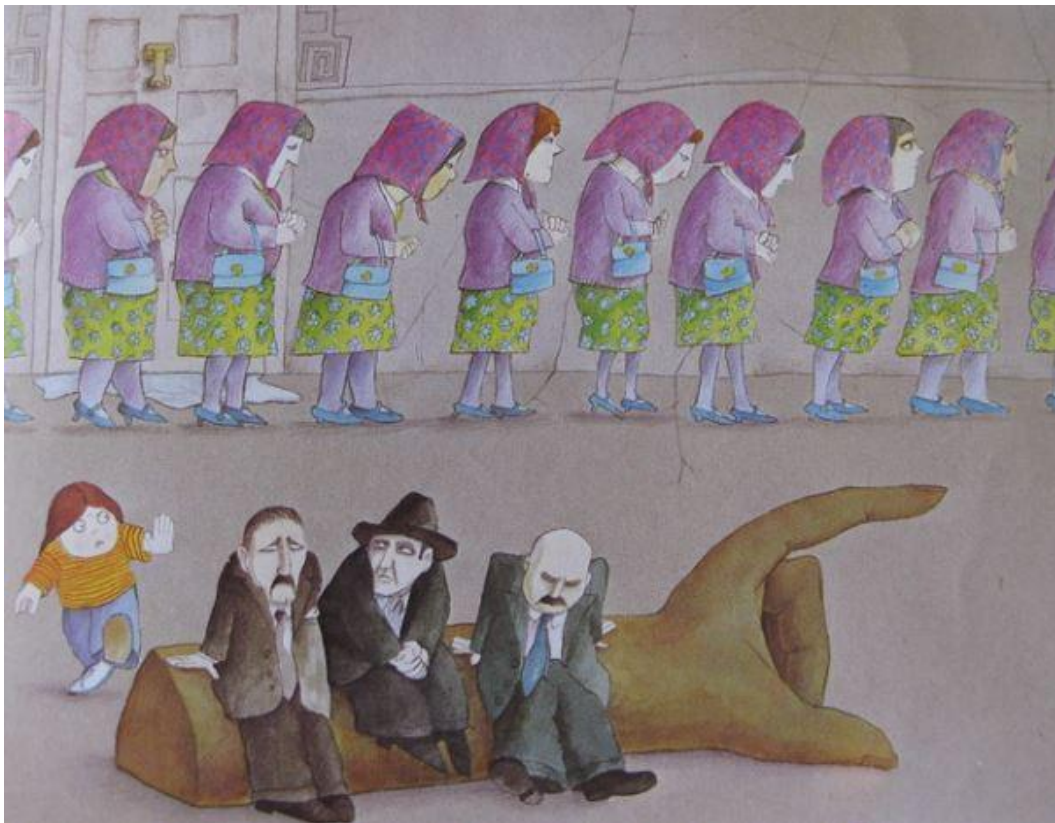


Illustration from 'I Hate my Teddy Bear'.

I Hate My Teddy Bear is often considered McKee's signature work as well as his most surrealistic. In this book, two small children, Brenda and John, are sent outside while their mothers socialize over a cup of tea. After leaving their "hated" bears—toys so familiar to the children that they have become boring—under a tree, they play a game of one-upsmanship, boasting that their teddies can do things like fly, sing, and count backwards. The bears carry on a conversation of their own, finally agreeing that they are equally talented. At the end of the story, the children carefully retrieve their bears, demonstrating, in the words of Margery Fisher of *Growing Point*, "all the time the happiest of alliances."

McKee's watercolor illustrations tell a separate story, however, depicting a background where adults move heavy loads of huge hands and feet and perform activities like palm-reading, painting, conjuring, and spying. The final illustration shows all the giant pieces being mounted as statues for a sculpture exhibition.

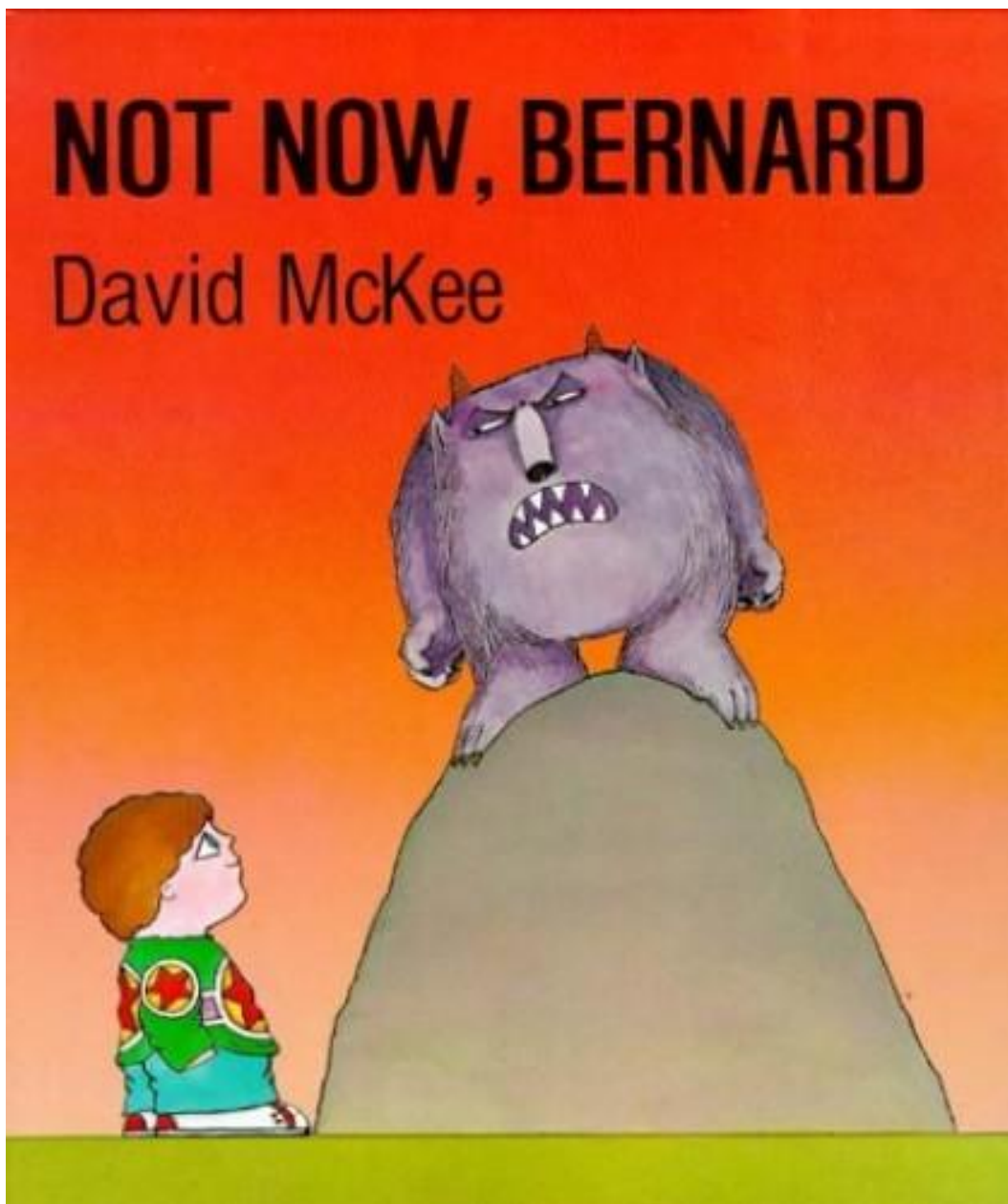
Writing in the *Times Educational Supplement*, Naomi Lewis called *I Hate My Teddy Bear* "a most remarkable book" and "a brilliant foray into the surreal—or far more likely, a demonstration of the real: that the centre of any happening is never where we think." Mary Butler Nickerson commented in the *School Library Journal* that, "Although activity is portrayed, . . . it is surreal, unexplained, and gratuitous and overwhelmed by the preponderance of isolated sad-faced children who sit and stare.

The sense of dislocation and desolation is strong. This is a book for children?" Gillian Klein questioned in *Twentieth-Century Children's Writers*. "The divergence of text and picture in *I Hate My Teddy Bear* is practically subversive." In her review in *Picture Books for Young People 9-13*, Elaine Moss wrote: "Make of this surrealist picture book what you wish, but don't miss it so long as you don't mind not being sure what it's all about." Speaking about *I Hate My Teddy Bear* to Laski, McKee increased the mystery, quipping: "Primarily, it's a love-story."

In *Not Now*, David McKee features a child whose self-absorbed parents answer his every statement with the refrain of the title. Throughout the book, the boy's distracted parents never look at Bernard, not even when he tells them that there is a monster in their garden ready to eat him. Not even after the monster devours Bernard and takes his place in the family do his parents change their response. At the end of the story, Bernard's mother puts the monster to bed in Bernard's room, despite the creature's claim that he is a monster. Writing in the *Times Educational Supplement*, Carolyn O'Grady predicted, "A lot of adults, I'm sure, will hate David McKee's *Not Now*, Bernard. Kids love it. . . . Even very young children see the joke and apparently couldn't care a jot about poor Bernard, transferring their affections immediately to the lovable gruesome monster."

Aidan Warlow, in *School Librarian*, said of the book, "As a satirical comment on neglectful parents, it works. As a picture book for infants, it doesn't." A reviewer in *Publishers Weekly* concluded that *Not Now, Bernard* is "a bizarre, negative picture book that should be for grownups. 'Taint funny, McKee."

Responding to McKee's comment that children relate first to Bernard and then to the monster, interviewer Laski concluded in *British Book News Children's Books* that, "Presumably, they understand instinctively . . . that Bernard has cheerfully become, rather than been engulfed by, this rather engagingly ugly violet-coloured beast."

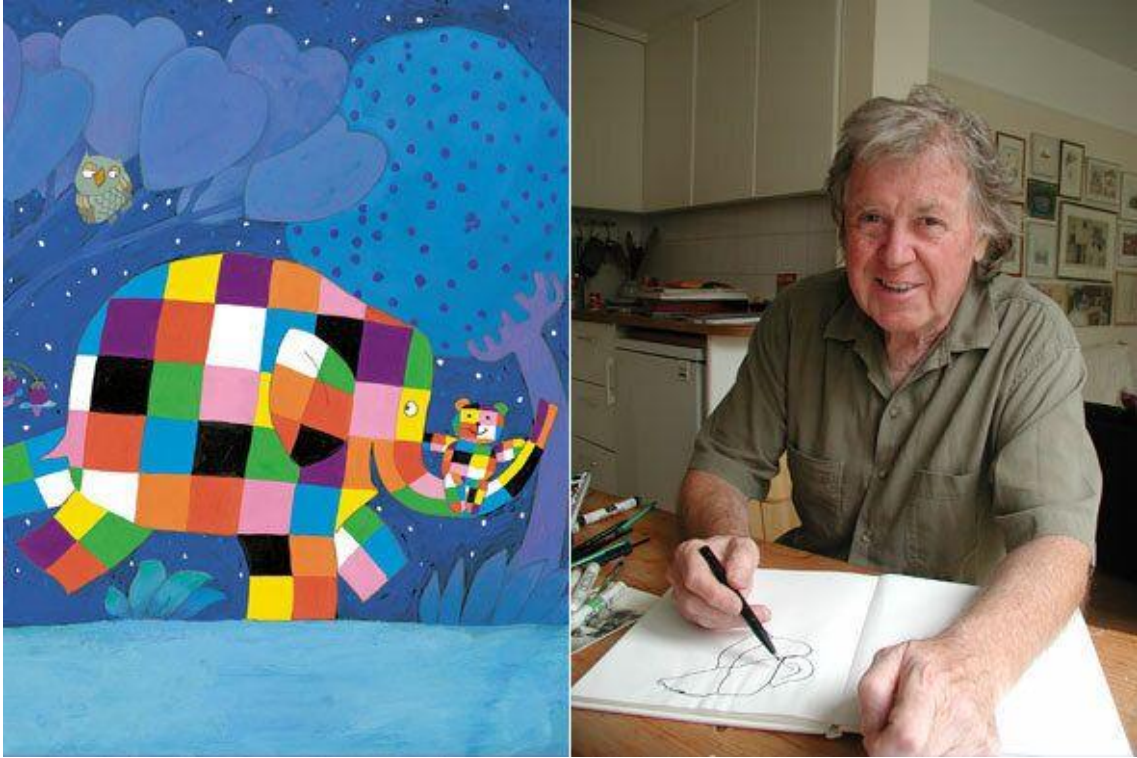


McKee defends the right of a picture book for children to be, as he told Laski, "another art medium." As he noted in reflecting on the art of book illustration: "You start with a clean piece of paper, you make a mark on it

and immediately it's wrong—you spend the rest of the time trying to put it right." Of the inspiration for his books, he explained that "It's not as if you write them at all, it's as if you listen to them being told." He concluded, "Most of us have got more than we realize. . . . I really enjoy life and I know I enjoy it."

8. Mark Amstead Interview

The following interview by Mark Amstead with David McKee was archived here in 2021, with thanks and acknowledgement. It was published in the Guardian in October 2003.



David McKee is glad his name is more famous than his face. "Being an artist makes you a voyeur," he says, "and it's difficult to be that if people are looking at you."

The 68-year-old author and illustrator of a host of children's favourites including Mr Benn, Elmer the elephant and King Rollo is content with his hermit-style way of life.

His parents were hard working country folk from South Devon (his father worked for an agricultural firm selling tools) and they had a terrific sense of the value of what they had, rather than aspiring for what they didn't have. A strong work ethic was instilled at a young age through delivering meat to the local butcher before school.

He is still an early riser today, having got up at 5am on the morning of our interview to work on his latest book - a new long Mr Benn story.

"Having my childhood during the war meant there was an absence of toys and I learned to be happy with my imagination," he adds. "So I didn't have any great desire to go chasing money."

After attending art college, David's early work was selling drawings to newspapers. He initially worked for Punch, The Times and Reader's Digest plus all the dailies that had space to carry cartoons. This provided him with enough money to do what he truly loves, which is to paint. But his success with books began when the first Mr Benn book was launched in 1967.

The inspiration for all of Mr Benn's neighbourly characters came from the street where he lived at the time, in Putney. The house he bought there for £4,300 in the late 50s would be worth around £300,000 today, he imagines. But more interesting to him is the way that some of his neighbours recognised themselves in the books.

He helped establish the production company that made Mr Benn into a series (and he still owns a one-third share in King Rollo films) but he put his own time into creating them on an unpaid basis. The BBC advised him that after their purchase of the series he would make most of his money on merchandising, so he didn't think to include any clause about repeat fees in his contract.

In fact there was no merchandising and the BBC has been able to repeat the series endlessly at no further cost.

"I've had so many reactions from people who've said, 'You changed my life,'" he explains. "I can't imagine how Mr Benn actually did that for them, but I've met people that are able to recall whole episodes word perfectly. I think it represented a sort of value in their life - which is very important."

If David didn't gain many riches from Mr Benn, it did have value in terms of raising his profile - "and that's the kind of riches I prefer," he adds. "My father used to say that money can't buy you happiness - but then again he also said if money's the root of all evil I'd quite like a root in my garden!"

David prefers to live an uncluttered life - he doesn't like to wear a watch and he doesn't crave toys like fast cars. He used to drive around in Jaguars but he's happy now in an old Ford. When he does spend it's mostly focused on improving his space and making sure he has a conducive environment for writing and painting.

He has a flat in Kensington, which cost him £82,000 in 1989 and is now worth more than £250,000, a house in the South of France, bought three years ago for £500,000 and now worth more than £750,000 and a rented apartment in Paris. He enjoys travelling between them frequently but most of his work is done in the South of France. "It's where I love being," he says simply.

His partner, Bakhta, is French of Algerian birth and shares his outlook to money. "She's just a happy person and doesn't ask for anything," he says. "If we walk hand in hand that's enough."

How he spends it

Best buy: He bought a Picasso ceramic bowl for £300, knowing it was worth about £1,000. Later he saw exactly the same bowl priced at €4,400 in a gallery.

Collects: Drawings and African art. Bakhta works in an African art gallery in Paris.

Prefers to pay: In France he uses cash to pay his gardeners and cleaners and he uses British credit cards because most of his income comes from Britain. David only uses cheques to pay household bills.

Worst buy: A couple of shirts he bought that fell apart the first time he wore them. His clothes budget is "disgustingly low", he says, and some of his t-shirts are 10 years old and fraying.

Tipping: In France the service is always added but he still leaves another 5%.

Greatest extravagance: Expensive meals out.

Investment: He has one pension, which will give him £4,000 a year in two years' time. He didn't increase contributions because he never wants to stop working. "I don't really work - I've just got a way of life," he says.

Debt: He dedicated an early book to the Midland Bank because they'd been so considerate to him. He has never worried about borrowing because he knows royalties will come in every six months.

Lottery: If he or Bakhta won the lottery they would spend it on supplying water to the village where she was born in Algeria. Anything left over would go to the family.

9. Emily Drabble Interview

The following interview of David McKee by Emily Drabble was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from a YouTube video produced by the Book Trust.



Could you tell us about your favourite stories as a child?

Winnie the Pooh was first read to me in the primary school. That's where I first encountered the wonderful story of the footprints which get more and more as they go round the copse. It was the first Winnie the Pooh I had ever heard. More recently I heard the Alan Bennett version reading Winnie the Pooh. I can't remember what it's called. Probably the House at Pooh Corner. There's something magic about that apparition of the book. And I just love those stories. I love the peace and the depth. And life is so just like it should be in those books, you know. They are still my favourite stories.

And the other story which I always quote is Treasure Island, which I think is so perfect. It scares the life out of me - all that business with blind Pugh and the black spot, dear me. And it's got as hero a young man, and such characters. Just a great story. Hard to beat that.

I probably didn't read them as a young child; they were read to me as a young child in school. Both those books were books that were read to me. We didn't have many books. What we had was story tellers. Everybody seemed to tell stories. My mother told stories. And at the school the teachers told stories. In the scouts later, which I joined when I was about eleven, someone used to come and tell stories every week. He would tell ghost stories about the local area. I was brought up in Tavistock in south Devon. It could probably compete with New York for spiritual movement. It has certainly got a lot of ghosts and ghost stories.

When my father talked about what was going on in the war it was always came over somehow as a story he was telling you. And it was simple, I just started telling myself stories. There was nobody else there, so I would tell myself a story. And then later at College people would say 'Tell us a story Mac'. And it's like singing Blues or something. You just jump in and once you're going it just rolls. You're both the story teller and also the audience. At the beginning you don't know where it's going. It's wonderful. And it's not complicated writing stories.

How and when did Elmer first come to you?

I like drawing elephants at the time. I was drawing a lot of cartoons with elephants. And elephants are just so nice. It's just such a nice image. I was painting, and my paintings were often squared up. I was very influenced by Paul Klee, the fine line. I was influenced by his thinking a bit. You know, his attitude to drawing. That drawing is taking a line for a walk. The joy of that taking a line for a walk is fantastic. When it's really going and you feel the pen bite into the paper, and you feel the hair on the back of your neck stand up. A little bit of sweat comes under your eyes. It's great!

So I was drawing elephants anyway, and painting the often square paintings. And then one day, for some reason or other, I squared up an elephant and put the colours on the elephant. After the elephant the name came. Elmer seemed to be the right kind of name. And after the name the story came. So people say do you draw the pictures first, or does the story come first? There's no rule. Sometimes it's the story and sometimes it's the image. And in Elmer's case it was the image before the story. For me what was important in the story was the fact that the recognised Elmer before the rain came and washed down the colours. His character was not dependent on his colours. They knew it was Elmer even though he didn't look like Elmer.

Are you amazed at the impact and longevity that Elmer has had?

I stay outside all that, because a lot of the stuff that goes on I miss. So it's probably bigger than I realise. I am inclined to be a bit of a hermit anyway, and not keep up with all that kind of thing. But when someone says it is in 64 countries that's great, because all those children are reading it, and they're all liking the same story. Then later they learn to be different. You have to be taught to be different, apparently.

The other characters are interesting. Eldo, for example, was based on an Ashanti ring that I have got. It's quite a big ring and you wear it on your finger, and it's gold with a diamond-shaped decoration, very much like I have drawn Eldo. Eldo is short for Eldorado, gold elephant obviously. The idea of the grandfather was just something I liked. And I made him do things with Elmer that my father did with my children.

Super El was because my grandson would dress up as Superman or Batman and the costumes had to be correct. If there was something wrong with them they'd get upset. They'd say: 'Batman couldn't go out like this, he wouldn't be allowed'. Zelda, with the el in the middle was based a lot on my mother, because she had got deaf. You would say something to her like 'Is Mrs. Graham still living in the corner', and she'd say 'No, don't let's go there today, I'm tired of that place'. She'd see my face, and she'd say 'Alright, what did you say?'

I guess that a lot of children with the deafness of older people are used to that. The colours of Zelda are colours that my mother would wear a lot - that blue and violet. And Rose, I think she came because I'd written the poem. How does it go. There once was an elephant named Rose who blushed from her head to her toes. I think it's that one which is quoted at the beginning of the book. I'd written that, I think, and then the story came afterwards. Also it is quite nice how you can accept one, when Rose was on her own, because there was no sort of problem. But then later, there's still no problem in the book because I don't like problems, then later there's a whole herd of elephants that are that colour.

How do you feel about Elmer becoming a symbol for inclusion and acceptance?

It's just something which is a bit special. A couple of weeks ago I had a letter from a girl of fourteen who at the age of four was given Elmer, and she was especially tall, too tall for her age when she was very young now the others are catching her up. She said she was different, and it was only Elmer that saved her. She said if she was feeling down she would get out her Elmer. She said Elmer saved me. When you get letters like that it's nothing to do with me, it's to do with Elmer. I'm just lucky to be the one that put him there.

