

# Hodgson's Choice

## The Storyteller



Michael Morpurgo

Michael Morpurgo is a bestselling children's author and one-time Children's Laureate. **Simon Hodgson** talks to him about poems, paper and the power of stories.

No-one has ever begun an interview with a poem before. In the noisy lounge of a London hotel Michael Morpurgo reads me 'My Own True Family' by Ted Hughes. "It's almost like a trumpet voluntary for the whole ecology movement," he explains gleefully, and it sets the tone for what is to come.

The poem wasn't chosen randomly. Hughes may have been Poet Laureate and Morpurgo the Children's Laureate, but they were friends and neighbours too, sharing the same stretch of a Devon river. "He felt this immense involvement with the natural world around him, which he had learned as a small boy. It all grew out of this young lad; eleven or twelve years old wandering the Yorkshire moors," says Morpurgo of his friend and colleague.

And as we explore his own work, it is obvious that Morpurgo shares similar passions. "This theme has come into many, many of my books. Usually an old man (I don't know why) living simply, close to nature, in harmony with nature, giving back to nature more than he takes from it and being protective of the world around him as it protects him. That seems to me to be elemental," he says. "What I have discovered over my time as both a parent and a teacher was how important this link is to the

natural world we come from and how separate we seem to have become from it; an extraordinary cut off between ourselves and what it is that nourishes us and gives us our life."

This motif – an old man living simply on a Pacific island – crops up in one of Morpurgo's bestsellers 'Kensuke's Kingdom', which has just been re-printed by publisher Egmont Books entirely on FSC-certified paper. The pages and even the covers can trace their origins back to known forests whose management practices have been independently checked by the Forest Stewardship Council, and the book proudly carries the FSC consumer logo on the front. It may seem a small step, but it is almost unheard of for a book to be marked in this way.

"There were two things that attracted me to it," says Morpurgo. "One is that clearly there is a major problem with cutting down the world's forests. The conservation of trees seems to be one of the great things that we can achieve. As Ted

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says in his poem if you plant two for one then you are heading in that direction.

"The second issue was how you actually make the paper. Coming from a background of farming I know that industry of any sort is inclined to pollute the land around. I knew anyway that paper mills are dirty places. I was quite surprised to hear that there was a paper mill where they claimed that the water they were putting back in to the river after the process was cleaner than when it came in. I said I wanted it proved to me, so we went over there [to Sweden], and sure enough it was. I thought 'Yay! Why don't all paper mills do this?' and indeed, why don't we do this with all our industries?"

Since 1976 Morpurgo has combined his children's writing with running a children's charity – 'Farms for City Children' – which he founded with his wife Clare. It does what it says. "The whole point of 'Farms for City Children' was to get children immersed in the countryside," he explains, "so that they could see the complexities of how it is that you grow food in surroundings where you are also trying to nurture wildlife, and you are trying to keep your rivers clean and you are trying to make sure your trees go on living, and how difficult it is."

In 1976 they started with nine schools visiting for a week each. In the last year they hosted ninety at their three farms. "They come for a seven-day week and there's a routine which is unbelievably structured. It begins before breakfast, and they milk cows and feed pigs, they move sheep. It's a regular farm

with its own economic viability (or lack of it). Proper farms – the point is they are proper farms. We are not serving up something which is a make believe farm. The work that the children do is vital to the running of the farm and it means something to them to do it because they can see that it is useful.”

This took the Morpurgos by surprise; they found that there was much more to it than teaching kids about the country. There was something fundamental in the kids' need to be needed. “Yes, the children were gaining knowledge and understanding of the countryside and where their food came from because they were actually doing it; they were planting the trees, digging up potatoes and seeing the worms in the ground, they were building otter holts, they were looking up at buzzards mewing in the sunshine. All that stuff was happening but what mattered was that they were doing it. Their self worth went up enormously because they were doing a job that was valuable.”

A lifetime spent writing for and working with children gives Morpurgo deep insight into what makes them tick. And – as children grow up to be adults – he knows a bit about the rest of us too. “There was a thing in the paper today, a list of what children desire most. Top of the list is money. Second is fame. It's what we've arrived at – that's the great passion. None of it is to do with inter-relating. If you do that you're considered to be a crank. Anyone who tries to be in touch and to encourage others to be in touch is mocked. You are almost seen to be a religious fanatic if you do this sort of stuff, whereas it is actually elemental to our survival. The trouble is that it is long term; everything to do with the environment is long term which of course means it needs to be done tomorrow. People don't get that. Long term simply is a gathering of tomorrows.”

So can it change, this culture of 'get rich, get famous and don't care how'? “You are in the business of converting people,” states Morpurgo. “But there's no point in thinking one can take a great dossier on the deep long term threats to the environment, because people aren't going to engage with what's going to happen three or four hundred years down the line.” So if not science, what? “Actually what they will engage with is what touches their heart,” he explains, “stories – and stories that get through to them.”

And as he hurtles off to his next engagement – reading Hughes' poems to an audience of children and adults – I find myself agreeing with him. I'll remember Hughes' oaks – circled around and threatening – long after I've forgotten the latest WWF report on the state of the world's forests. Words paint such rich pictures in our heads with those of great storytellers like Morpurgo perhaps the most vivid. Their passions will shape our thinking for years to come. Children who've read Morpurgo will be adults who think differently.

*Simon Hodgson is a senior partner at Acona, where he heads the Group's sustainable business practice.  
simon.hodgson@acona.com*

## MY OWN TRUE FAMILY

*Once I crept in an oakwood – I was looking for a stag.  
I met an old woman there – all knobby stick and rag.  
She said; 'I have your secret here inside my little bag.'*

*Then she began to cackle and I began to quake.  
She opened up her little bag and I came twice awake –  
Surrounded by a staring tribe and me tied to a stake.*

*They said: 'We are the oak-trees and your own true family.  
We are chopped down, we are torn up, you do not blink an eye.  
Unless you make a promise now – now you are going to die.*

*'Whenever you see an oak-tree felled, swear now you will plant two.  
Unless you swear the black oak bark will wrinkle over you  
And root you among the oaks where you were born but never grew.'*

*This was my dream beneath the boughs, the dream that altered me.  
When I came out of the oakwood, back to human company,  
My walk was the walk of a human child, but my heart was a tree.*

*Ted Hughes  
with kind permission of The Estate of Ted Hughes*



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