



war horse

Michael Morpurgo, former Children's Laureate and author of *War Horse*, talks with Tony Kane

Michael Morpurgo's book *War Horse* has become an incredible National Theatre production, currently playing to packed houses and breaking box office records - despite predictions to the contrary. Some critics considered that the subject matter of the play was a bit on the heavy side to have a broad appeal to children. Michael told me that the reaction to the book was initially similar: 'When I first wrote it as a book some thirty years ago it didn't sell very well. Some said it was not a suitable topic for a young persons' book. However it gradually picked up in sales, and now it is a play it has really taken off.' Michael told me that there are currently three new productions of *War Horse* which will be touring the world next year, and the film, directed by Steven Spielberg, is about to start shooting this month.

For those who do not know the story, it tells of two horses who go to the front during The First World War and suffer the horrors and degradation of that conflict. 'The horses are a metaphor for the suffering of the ordinary soldier during a war,' said Michael. The horses are magnificent full size puppets and play a leading part in the performance. 'How are the horses made?' I asked. 'They are mostly constructed of wood and plastics. They receive very hard wear during the performance,' said Michael, 'so we have a repair shop on site to fix them when they get broken - as inevitably they do. Initially they were made in somebody's garage but recently we have set up a small factory in South Africa to satisfy the demand for the puppets.'

'What was your reaction when you first saw the play?' I asked. 'I was enchanted by the puppets and the whole emotional mood of the play. I saw people walking away in tears.'

Michael is one of the most renowned children's authors of his generation. He was Children's Poet Laureate in 2003-5 and has over 100 books under his belt. 'War is an unusual topic for a children's book but you consistently use it as a theme,' I noted. Michael believes that you should never talk down to children. 'Children nowadays are well aware of the complexities of life; the violence and issues that face us all. As a country we have been at war for the last ten years and they see the pictures of coffins draped in Union Jacks coming home, and seriously injured and maimed soldiers. I write about things that we all care about - universal themes - suffering that is on the screen in the corner. When *War Horse* was first published we were in the middle of the Cold War so war was not such a reality. Now with high tech communication everyone has access to instant news so it is on everyone's agenda - young and old. When I was young we were sheltered, to some extent, from the problems of the world but now children are much more exposed to it.'

'Quite a few of your books have a theme of unhappiness at school. How much of your writing is autobiographical?' I wondered. 'I was a normal child of the 50s when it was usual to send a child off to boarding school at the age of seven. My parents were in the middle of a divorce and I didn't see my father very much so I didn't cope very well at first. I felt loneliness and homesick in my early years, and at the start of a term and half terms but, like other children I got over it. I think as long as children do not feel alone, they enjoy doing things with other children. In those days, just after The Second World War, we were not such a 'touchy feely' society and children's



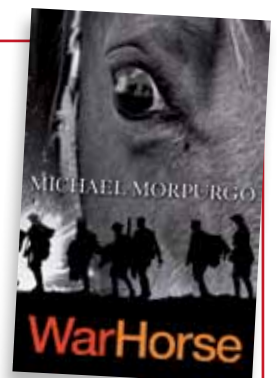
feelings were not taken into account so much. I don't blame my parents, the advantage for an author is it tends to give a spur to writing in later life.'

Another source of inspiration is Farms for City Children, a charity which he and his wife Clare set up 30 years ago. 'It was really Clare's idea, her baby, the most important thing in our life, apart from our family. We came down to the West Country when we were young and we wandered the lanes in Iddesleigh.' It struck them that many young urban children need a break from the stress and strains of life in London and other big cities, so they set up a farm where children could get away from the influences of the big city. 'The project has been so successful that it has now grown into three farms with 1,000 children visiting each year and a total of 75,000 over the whole period. It's not a play farm; the children simply work alongside the adult farm workers. We are proud of the charity - it gives us a reason to get up in the morning. My wife and I are not so much hands on these days; we are well over 65, and leave it to younger people with enthusiasm and ideas. But we are still Directors of the project.' Michael told me that it was a valuable source of material for his writing to observe how young people react to being close to animals.

'What current day issue are you interested in?' I asked, 'Afghanistan,' he replied. 'I have a new book, *Shadow*, coming out in October that tells the true story of a platoon of soldiers who are ambushed while on patrol and their dog disappears only to return 14 months later after having lived with an Afghan family. The family emigrates to England where they are refused permission to stay. It describes the traumas we put immigrant children through in this country.'

See more, learn more

Michael Morpurgo will be at Wimbledon Bookfest on Saturday 2 October in conversation with actress Virginia McKenna of the Born Free Foundation. They will be talking about their love of animals. For more information visit www.wimbledonbookfest.org



Competition

If you would like to see the puppet horses, visit Sandown Race course on Variety Club Day- 21 August. To book tickets visit www.sandown.co.uk call 01372 47 00 47. T&L has teamed up with Sandown Park to offer exclusive tickets to both the day and a private reading with Michael Morpurgo. 1st prize a pair of tickets to both the reading and the event. 3 runners up will receive a pair of tickets to the event. To be in with a chance of winning visit www.timeandleisure.co.uk/competitions

War Horse is currently at the New London Theatre in Drury Lane
www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/warhorse