

Let me tell you a story



Sarah Grayson

Photographs: Steve Wheeler

Though the much-loved Children's Bookshop in Broad Street has sadly gone, you have only to walk into any children's book department in one of the city's large bookstores to be really heartened by the range of fiction and non-fiction available today.

The welcome return of *Jackanory* to BBC1, and some recent dramatisations 'for all the family' of classic children's books such as *When Marnie Was There* and *The Midnight Folk* on Radio 4, suggest a renewed and growing appreciation of the vital role of stories in children's lives — as a source of huge enjoyment first and foremost, but also as a way of encouraging imagination, creativity, and a sympathetic understanding of the world and other people.

An exhibition at the West Ox Arts Gallery in Bampton Town Hall this month will provide an opportunity to see work by four popular local illustrators supporting a project which aims to establish a centre for children's literature — both past and present — here in Oxford.

The Story Museum — patrons Philip Pullman and Jacqueline Wilson — is already active in taking writers and illustrators out to family centres, schools, and public places such as theatres, for workshops, storytelling, and 'Meet the Author' sessions. It is hoped that

Julie Webb meets two authors active in campaigning for Oxford's Story Museum

sufficient funds will eventually be raised for a home of its own in the city's planned West End re-development.

As well as serving the traditional functions of a museum through research facilities and permanent collections of material, the centre would house a children's reading room, a performance space, and a programme of daily events.

Two of the authors exhibiting at Bampton, both very keen to see the museum get off the ground, are Mini Grey and Sarah Garson.

Mini, whose *Biscuit Bear* won the 2004 Smarties Prize for children's books for under-fives, has been involved in the 'virtual' museum's activities for the past couple of years. "There is a limited number of good things for children to do in Oxford — my seven-year-old niece and I have tried them all out and we could certainly do with more," she said.

"The city is crammed with authors and illustrators and it's produced so many well-known children's books that it is a great place for a Story Museum. I've been to the northern equivalent — the Seven Stories in Newcastle — and it is fantastic."

Mini came to writing and illustration via an English degree, theatre design, and several years of primary school teaching, but her enthusiasm for stories began in early childhood, so she knows how inspiring the right book at the right time can be.

"When I was around six, I bought Dr. Seuss's *One fish, two fish, red fish, blue fish* at a jumble sale for about 3p. It was wonderful — on every page there were these

weird creatures all over the place. Then my Auntie Mavis gave me *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and I became desperate to find Narnia and started hanging round lamp-posts! And I loved the drawings of Tove Jansson — I find little relatives of her Moomintrolls cropping up in my own work sometimes. At 12 or so I was influenced by the Victorians like Arthur Rackham and Heath Robinson.

"The exhibition at Bampton is about books, and illustration has to do a job as only one part of a whole, so the pieces on the wall, which will be from my first book, *Egg Drop*, and my last, *The Adventures of the Dish and the Spoon*, are not the finished thing— there will be some complete books as well so children can see the full process."

There will be a chance for children to chat to Mini about her work, and their own if they want to, on January 13, when she'll join Sarah Garson at the gallery for a 'Meet the Author' session.

Sarah, who didn't consider children's work until approached by a publisher at her first exhibition after graduating in illustration from Middlesex University, remembers nevertheless how important certain books were to her as a child.

"The ones I liked best were quite simple stories but with very involving illustrations — you could pick them up time after time and still find something new. Books like the Ahlbergs' *Jolly Postman* and *Burglar Bill*, and Raymond Briggs' *The Elephant and the Big Baby*. I liked *The Wind in the Willows* too, and *The House at Pooh Corner* — E.H. Shepard is a great illustrator — and I had a big, dog-eared, collection of the *Flower Fairies* passed down from grandma."

She regards it as an important part of the museum's work to bring stories to children without the variety of books at home that she and Mini were lucky enough to have.

One of her recent commissions was for Booktrust, the charity whose Bookstart project delivers a package of books free to every baby, including the one she illustrated, *Bookstart Rhymetime*.

At Bampton, she will be showing work from two not-yet-published books, *Daydream Francis* and *The Grump*, for which she has also written the text.

Sarah and Mini will bring some of their sketchbooks and 'roughs' for children to look at.

"I think it's reassuring for children to see that things can start off messy and illegible. My ideas often begin as little scribbles and thumbnail sketches and then evolve — sometimes straight off but sometimes over weeks and weeks," Sarah said.

Such ways of stimulating children's own creativity through a better understanding of what goes into the work of their favourite artists and writers are central to the Story Museum's objectives. Central too will be frequently-changing interactive exhibitions that help visitors to appreciate Britain's great heritage of children's stories in new ways.

"Oxford is a very cultured place," said Sarah, "and there are lots of children here. Most of the culture, though, is not hands-on. There is an amazing collection of 20,000 pieces of children's literature in the Bodleian, for instance, put together by Iona and Peter Opie, which few people apart from scholars see. Art and literature made for children should be accessible to them — not behind glass."



Mini Grey

■ West Ox Arts Gallery exhibition, Bampton Town Hall, January 7-28 — featuring work by Korky Paul, Sue Heap, Mini Grey and Sarah Garson. Open Tues-Sat 10.30am-12.30pm and 2-4pm; Sun 2-4pm only. 01993 850137 Children's events on January 13: Korky Paul talk and workshop 10.30 am; 'Meet the Author' with Mini and Sarah 12.30pm. For more information about The Story Museum call 01865 790050 or visit the website: www.storymuseum.org.uk