



Happy Anniversary to The Blue Balloon

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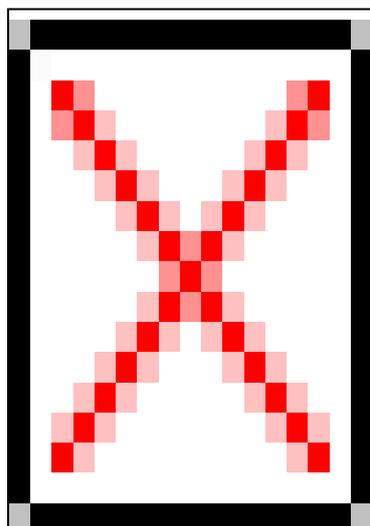
[Michelle Pauli](#) [1]

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Byline:

Mick Inpen is celebrating!

For 30 years Mick Inkpen's **The Blue Balloon** has been delighting small children and their grown ups with its magical story of a boy who finds a balloon and discovers it has 'Strange and Wonderful Powers'. The extraordinary balloon grows and expands, morphs and stretches. It flies into space and beyond the boundaries of the book into giant and concertina pages. Thirty years ago it also flew into the hearts of readers, securing Inkpen's reputation as a creator of much-loved characters. Mick spoke to Michelle Pauli about creating a classic.



In the foreword to the new anniversary edition of **The Blue Balloon**, Mick Inkpen reveals that the book's publication marked the first time that he 'began to feel like a proper children's author'. It was only his second solo picture book following a long period as a graphic designer, devising **Gordon Fraser** greetings cards, illustrating magazines and working on many joint projects with fellow author/illustrator Nick Butterworth. As a designer he was used to working to a brief and decided to create his own for his follow-up project for Hodder.

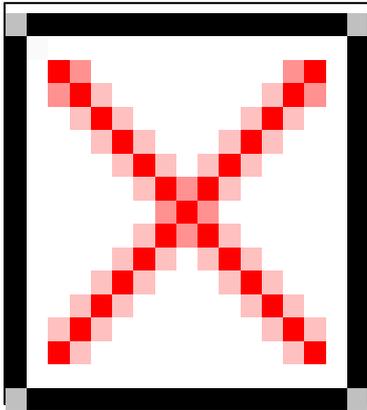
'I wanted a universal subject, one that both children and adults could relate to, and balloons are cheap, celebratory things with character - they can be farty or squeaky or floaty. I simply made a list of the attributes of a balloon and while I was making that list it occurred to me that there was no reason why my balloon shouldn't have 'strange and wonderful powers'.

Both the balloon and the book took off. Whereas Inkpen had previously felt 'slightly fraudulent' claiming to be an author, that all changed when he started to see piles of **The Blue Balloon** on bookshop counters. 'It was a tremendous boost of encouragement that affirmed what I had dared to suspect - that I was capable of making picture books that children would want to read,' he says. 'It was probably the most exciting moment in my career. From that year on I did think of myself as a bona fide children's author.'

The confidence boost helped Inkpen to feel more comfortable trusting his instincts about storytelling and language. He'd had doubts about including the word 'indestructible' in **The Blue Balloon** - was it too long, too difficult? He

decided that including one or two such words would probably be ok and felt vindicated when, a couple of years later, a friend told him that his toddler, having been read **The Blue Balloon**, was now in the habit of marching around the house declaring that he was 'indestructible'. The book also set Inkpen on a course of breaking conventions when he decided that his balloon should not be constrained by mere paper:

'Hence the giant pages and concertina folds which allowed it to stretch and expand beyond the edges of the page' and



led in turn to the dramatic irony of the end of the story, where it is the reader, not the boy narrator and owner of the balloon, who knows that the balloon is changing into rainbow colours as the page opens out,' he says.

This also feeds into the playfulness that Inkpen believes to be so crucial in children's books - and in life -- and that he has enjoyed throughout his work, playing with the conventions and structures of the picture book. Take the meta humour of a **Kipper** book where Kipper himself wonders on the first page of a picture book what kind of book it will turn out to be, or **Bear**, where a bear cub falls out of the sky into the book and the reader must decide, at the end, if he can be kept, or **This Is My Book**, in which the naughty Snapdragon eats parts of the letters in the text and delights in changing their meaning, turning 'this is my book' into 'this is my poo'.

Of course, **The Blue Balloon** is now celebrated as the book that introduced Inkpen's classic character Kipper to the world, although he was still on four legs and playing a supporting role as the little boy's pet dog at the time. However, it wasn't long before he was the star of the show. Hodder asked Inkpen for a follow-up to **The Blue Balloon** and he decided to tackle it strategically, aware that publishers seek repeat success and that what repeats best is character. Having decided to create a character that could appear large on every page and would spawn a series of books, Mick's wife Debbie suggested he take the dog from **The Blue Balloon** and give him his own book.

'Weirdly it meant that I didn't love Kipper as much for the first two or three years as I would have done had he been a more spontaneous creation,' reveals Mick. 'But I came to love him a lot. I then began to apply some of that playful creativity to the Kipper books so I did come to enjoy doing the Kipper books but it was a very different kind of birth, the first Kipper.'

Many more Kipper books followed, along with a series of animated films which totalled 78 episodes and was 'a great experience' but not one I would swap for the luxury of control in making picture books'. Now enjoying semi-retirement, Inkpen works with his daughter Chloë Inkpen, an acclaimed illustrator in her own right. Together they have created the **Zoe and Beans** series, the truly wonderful **I Will Love You Anyway** and **Fred** books about a naughty dog who cannot help but run away, and, most recently, **Mrs Blackhat**, a most contemporary witch.

Inkpen's partnership with his daughter has freed him up to focus on the words rather than the pictures in their collaborations, something he now views with relief.

'I'm not one of those illustrators who has pens and pencils in his top pocket and will always draw on napkins, so it's always been the creation of the book that's been the most exciting thing,' he says. 'When I know in my head that there's a beginning, a middle and an end, when there's a shape, I kind of almost resent that I've got to illustrate it. It's never been an itch that I've got to scratch.'

To be able to work with Chloë is 'just brilliant,' he concludes, happily. 'We have the same sensibility, we complete each other's sentences and we can barely remember who created what: we don't have a sense of being possessive about what we've created' it may not work if we didn't share the same genes!'

Michelle Pauli is a freelance writer and editor specialising in books and education. She created and edited the **Guardian** children's books site.

The Blue Balloon, 978-1444922561, £6.99 pbk

Kipper, 978-1444918168, £6.99 pbk

This is My Book, 978-0340989630, £6.99pbk

By Mick Inkpen and Chloe Inkpen

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