



Authorgraph 233: A.F. Harrold

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[Charlotte Hacking](#) [1]

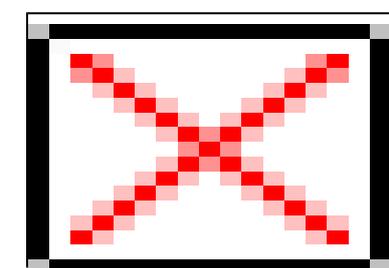
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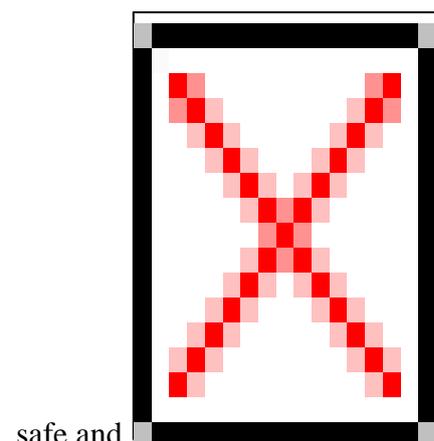
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A.F. Harrold interviewed by **Charlotte Hacking**



I'm a poet. My bio has always said A.F. Harrold poet. I never described myself as a novelist, I always feel like a poet who has got lucky with the prose he's written. A regular on the poetry and cabaret scene, including the Edinburgh Fringe, the enigmatic A.F Harrold describes himself as somehow stumbling into becoming a children's author. I was delivering poetry workshops for schools. One day some kid asked me if I'd written any stories and so I wrote the first **Fizzlebert Stump** novel, and the rest, as they say, is what's happening now. What is happening now is a vast amount of critical acclaim for his trio of Gaiman-esque novels; [The Imaginary](#) [3], **The Song From Somewhere Else** and [The Afterwards](#) [4], very different from the wildly comic **Fizzlebert Stump** series.

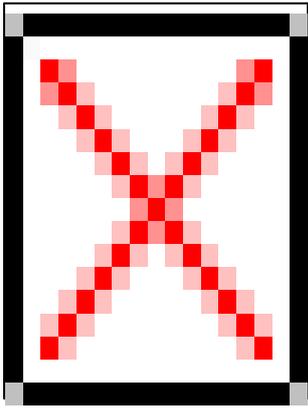
His second contract with Bloomsbury was for two books: the third **Fizzlebert**, plus another book. Instead of playing it



safe and pitching another sequel, he proposed **The Imaginary**. I remember handing that in with a sense of trepidation, because they'd bought me as a funny writer and I'm suddenly handing in this book that isn't a comedy; that is longer, darker and stranger than anything I think they'd been expecting. They could have turned around and said, 'No, this isn't what we wanted, we prefer your funny work?', but they loved it and the rest is history?.

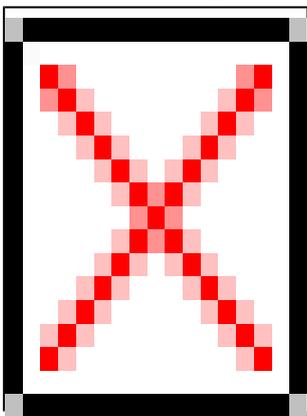
After winning the **2015 British Book Design Award**, with the judges describing the book as 'breathtaking', it is hard to envisage that **The Imaginary** was not conceived as an illustrated novel. The original idea, for a longer book with more serious themes, was to incorporate illustrated chapter headers. Bloomsbury had commissioned Emily Gravett to make some initial samples and Harrold was immediately struck by what she delivered. I think my favourite thing of Emily's is the initial notebook of Imaginary ideas and samples. They contain the most incredible and fascinating

variants on all these characters we know.? Bloomsbury quickly realised the potential of the collaboration and after seeing more from Emily, the decision was made to produce a more lavish book with colour illustrations throughout.



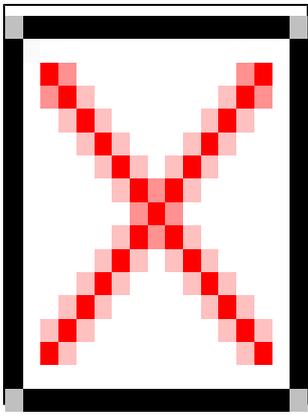
Although he was still writing **Fizzlebert Stump** books, Harrold knew he wanted to write another book in the style of **The Imaginary** and needed to think about how this could work. ?I struck upon the idea of taking the cat from *The Imaginary*, Zin Zan as he was then, who acts as a conduit between the ordinary world and the imaginary world and writing three books with him in.? Originally conceived as ?a mere plot device; I needed something to stop Rudger from fading away? the cat became pivotal to the development of the other two books and its role has developed throughout. ?In **The Song From Somewhere Else** it?s slightly different, it knows more; about these other worlds and the doorway between each and it sets things in motion, it?s much more proactive. In the third book, it?s much more of a literal *psychopomp*, taking the living into the underworld, and then its role at the end of book brings things to a close.? Why a cat? ?Cats see things we don?t - they have other worldly qualities. Think of the cats in Neil Gaiman?s **Sandman**, the cats in Egyptian mythology, Kipling?s cat in **Just So Stories**, there?s that ?apartness? that a cat has.? The fact that cats are so common also supports the darker mood of the books, ?In the same way that I think (Dahl?s) **The Witches** is far more terrifying because of the fact that any woman could be a witch behind those masks. Who is it that we run to for protection? It?s our mums. The horror is best when it?s something normal and everyday.?

His second novel, **The Song From Somewhere Else** saw a new collaboration with an equally prolific illustrator, Levi



Pinfold. ?I knew as I was writing how different the voice was to **The Imaginary**. It didn?t feel to me like it would be an Emily book, Emily didn?t think so either, but Levi came on board and made that book what it is, which is beautiful and special in a different way.? So special indeed, that it won the **Amnesty CILIP Honour for Illustration 2018**. Of his process on working with the two he notes, ?It?s not a collaboration in the Reeve and McIntyre sense, but I love seeing what they do with what I hand over. I?ve learned to trust my illustrators. I?ve changed bits of the text to incorporate ideas they?ve both put into the illustrations, they see things much more clearly.?

He knew that the last of these books, [The Afterwards](#) [4], would be ?An A.F. and Emily book? and the process began with a clear visual marker, ?I was reading David Almond and Dave McKean?s **The Savage** at the time and I had an image appear in my mind of a girl coming around the side of an armchair and in the armchair was her dead mother in the underworld or the afterlife. Then I wrote a paragraph outline of the girl going into the underworld, finding her dead mother, the cat helping somehow and coming back again. Then I sat down a day or two later and started writing.?



Whilst careful not to give away any direct spoilers about the book, he describes **The Afterwards** as 'a book about friends and about death.' This theme of death, central to his adult poetry collection **The Point of Inconvenience**, runs through into his writing for children. His beautifully poignant poem *The Taste of a Biscuit*, displays so well that writing for children, as well as being humorous, can be used to express emotion and as a form of catharsis, which also evident in his prose. 'When I got to the last chapter of the Imaginary, I looked back and realised that the book was about me facing up to being orphaned, about my Mum's cancer and her death, but I am aware that I never really realised this was what it was all about until afterwards. I wrote the words, 'The End' at the end, then I went straight back to the beginning and added that Christina Rossetti poem, which Mum had wanted at her funeral.' Coming to **The Afterwards**, he was aware that the parallels were far more obvious. 'All three books are about loss, about forgetting, about remembering' but also recognises that this is a book about rebirth, 'which I'd realised was why I had set it in Spring; they start the book coming back from a walk in the bluebell woods which immediately sets it in Easter time, much earlier than the summer holidays when the other books were set. But again, none of that was thought about until afterwards when I was looking back on it, it just felt right at the time.'

There's a wonderful lyricism across his writing, figurative and poetic language flows throughout his work. 'Great children's writing', he tells me, 'whether funny or serious, is much closer to poetry. You're looking at text that's sparser, more condensed, more immediate.' He feels **The Afterwards** is closer to being a verse novel in prose than a prose novel, but rather than this being a pre-conceived choice, 'years of writing poetry, reading it and listening to music has just made my voice somewhat poetic and these things just spill in.' It was the designers at Bloomsbury who came up with the ideas for the typesetting, parts of which resemble concrete poetry, 'because it was poetic to begin with and because it was a shorter story, we had more space to play with for that sort of thing.'

His most recent poetry collection for children, **Things You Find in a Poet's Beard** moves from the cleverly comic to the deeply reflective, as with his novels and I'm delighted to find out that there is more poetry on the horizon. A single poet collection is in the making, scheduled for 2020, is currently 'in search of an illustrator'. In the meantime, a lavish gift book anthology of food poems, illustrated by Katy Riddell is in production. 'It's a book I'm really proud of', he tells me, 'full of a really great selection of poems from children's poets, adult poets, performance poets. It's got a really diverse range of poets which was really important to me.' It seems timely that poetry will be his central focus for the next few years. As he says himself 'Poetry is where it begins and ends, and it's the thing I'm most wedded to, embedded in, maybe. It's the thing that I began with, when I was a teenager.'

Charlotte Hacking is Learning Programme Manager at the [Centre for Literacy in Primary Education](#) [5], a charity working to improve literacy in primary schools.

[The Afterwards](#) [4], 978-1408894316, £12.99 hbk

The Song From Somewhere Else, 978-1681197883, £6.99 pbk

[The Imaginary](#) [3], 978-1408850169, £7.99 pbk

Fizzlebert Stump: The Boy Who Ran Away From the Circus (and joined the library), 978-1408830031, £5.99pbk

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