

Beloved author-illustrator Raymond Briggs, dies at 88

Harvey Thompson
17 August 2022

Raymond Briggs, best known for his books *Father Christmas* (1973) and *The Snowman* (1978), died August 9 of pneumonia at the Royal Sussex County Hospital, where he spent his final weeks. His relatives praised the “kind and thoughtful care” of the hospital’s staff.

During a career spanning almost 60 years, Briggs wrote 26 picture books or graphic novels which he illustrated in his highly original style. He also provided the artwork for several other authors.

Briggs was born in London, in 1934, the only son of a milkman and a former lady’s maid. His parents met at the height of the depression. Their first meeting was wonderfully portrayed by their son many years later in the wordless opening sequence of the book *Ethel & Ernest: A True Story* (1998). Ethel, a young parlour maid working in the affluent central London district of Belgravia, had apparently been shaking out her duster from an upper window as Ernest passed by on his bicycle and confidently returned what he mistook to be a friendly wave.

At the age of 6, during World War II, Briggs was twice evacuated as one of the millions of children, who along with expectant mothers and the infirm, were sent away from heavily populated areas of England to escape the Nazi air raids. Briggs said he enjoyed what he later described as a happy but uneventful childhood. Despite outward appearances, however, anxieties over the ever-present threat of death and destruction cannot have failed to leave a mark on the impressionable boy (already 10 years’ old when the war ended) and undoubtedly accounts for these themes looming so large in his later work.

After the war, Briggs won a scholarship place at Rutlish Grammar School, Merton. But he found the compulsory elocution lessons elitist and disliked its emphasis on his least favourite subject, sports. Despite parental misgivings, at 15 he enrolled at Wimbledon School of

Art, hoping to train as a cartoonist. His interviewer, who considered cartoons the lowest form of art, told him it was neither a serious nor proper ambition. After deciding to study oil painting instead, Briggs focused on figurative drawing.

As part of his national military service, he worked in the Royal Corps of Signals, where he was mostly required to draw electrical and radio circuits. By the time he had completed his higher education at the Slade School of Fine Art, he was already receiving commissions from publishers and advertising agencies.

Prompted by the poor quality of some of the novels he was illustrating, he produced his own, *The Strange House* (1961), an adventure story, and gave it to an editor friend hoping for some constructive criticism. To Briggs’ astonishment, the editor had it published.

Around this time, he also got a part-time job as a lecturer teaching illustration at Brighton School of Art, which helped him survive when commissions dried up. He continued to teach until 1987. His tuition was much admired and appreciated by a generation of artists.

In 1963 Briggs married painter Jean Taprell Clark.

A breakthrough came for Briggs in 1966, with *The Mother Goose Treasury*, for which he contributed almost 900 illustrations and received his first Kate Greenaway medal.

His parents died in 1971 and his wife soon after in 1973, from leukaemia. This led Briggs to throw himself single-mindedly into his work. *Father Christmas* (1973) was the result. Devised in comic book fashion, Briggs took an iconic, mythical figure and depicted him as an ordinary worker doing an often tedious and repetitive job.

Many typical traits of Briggs’ later work were present, above all a genuinely felt sympathy for working people (Briggs’ father appears once in the story as his milk round and Father Christmas’ delivery route cross paths in the early morning). He has a feel for working class life,

with its difficulties and sometimes comic predicaments. Briggs drew the ire of conservatives for breaking social taboos, such as depicting Father Christmas on the lavatory and constantly grumbling about “Bloomin Christmas!”

A similarly grumpy but essentially warm-hearted character was *Fungus the Bogeyman* (1977), who lived among a breed of underground creatures who visit the surface to make things go “bump in the night”.

But it was *The Snowman* (1978) that became Briggs’ biggest ever commercial success, and with which his name is popularly associated.

In the beloved story, a young boy makes a snowman that magically comes to life later that night. They play in the house while the boy’s parents are asleep before flying across fields and seas to the North Pole. A strong bond forms between the pair. But the story ends the next morning, with the boy discovering the snowman has melted. The final searing image, with the boy’s back turned away, invites us to share in his grief.

An animated adaptation of *The Snowman*, involving a labour-intensive process using pastels and crayons on celluloid to preserve Brigg’s style of illustration, complemented by a memorable soundtrack, was first broadcast on British television in December 1982. It has been repeated every Christmas since.

Briggs was prepared to tackle much more complex themes. *When the Wind Blows* (1982) depicts a nuclear war from the viewpoint of a retired couple, Jim and Hilda Bloggs. One afternoon, the couple hears a message on the radio about an imminent “outbreak of hostilities”. Jim starts to make a fallout shelter as recommended in government advice. As they carry out similar futile actions, born of a naive trust in the authorities, the old couple gradually succumb to radiation sickness.

The official advice in the story was drawn from a real leaflet issued by the British government in 1980, “Protect and Survive”. *When the Wind Blows* was attacked by the right-wing media and politicians and Briggs was accused of “peddling CND [Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament] propaganda”. Briggs responded, “I wasn’t even in CND at the time. People have criticised me for making fun of rather dim working-class people. But it was the government who assumed people were thick enough to follow such ridiculous advice.”

The growing danger of nuclear war, as well as similar useless and therefore deadly advice give during the COVID-19 pandemic, is proof of the continued relevance of Briggs’ moving story.

When the Wind Blows inspired an excellent film

adaptation in 1986, with the central characters voiced by John Mills and Peggy Ashcroft, and a soundtrack by Roger Waters featuring David Bowie and Hugh Cornwell of The Stranglers.

Tributes to Briggs have mostly been silent on his next work, *The Tin-Pot Foreign General and the Old Iron Woman* (1984). An impassioned denunciation of the 1982 Falklands/Malvinas war begins with two quotes, one from Albert Einstein, “Nationalism is an infantile disease. It is the measles of mankind” and Samuel Johnson’s, “Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel”.

Briggs depicts a war over “a sad little island” between Argentina’s General Leopoldo Galtieri and Britain’s Margaret Thatcher, which is won by the Old Iron Woman at terrible human cost—“all real men, made of flesh and blood.”

At the victory celebrations staged by the Old Iron Woman, “the soldiers with bits of their bodies missing were not invited to take part... in case the sight of them spoiled the rejoicing.”

Briggs’ final book, *Time for Lights Out* (2019), is a poignant, funny and honest exploration of the experience of ageing and reaching the end of life in the form of a patchwork of verse, drawings and random thoughts.

Briggs’ work is admired, even loved, by millions of children and adults alike as he didn’t compromise with what he told them. A fidelity to ideas and principles, usually celebrating the downtrodden and castigating injustice, were always more important to him than what he should say and to whom. As he once told a reporter, “I don’t usually think about whether a book is for children or adults. After a child has learned to read fluently, at about eight or nine, then the whole idea of categorising them seems a bit daft.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact