

NEVER FORGET

The Beauty of Books

CHRIS RIDDELL

*He had bought a large map representing the sea,
Without the least vestige of land:
And the crew were much pleased when they found it to be
A map they could all understand.*

LEWIS CARROLL, 1876

BOOKS ARE GATEWAYS. They are doors. You can open them and step into another place, and time. Another world. They hold our futures, but are also a treasury of our formative memories. Books are where I've met some of my closest friends. Like Alsatian the Lion...

Yes, I misread Aslan in my head and thought for many years he was named for a type of dog. And he'll always be Alsatian, to me. Books change how I see the world. Every time I post a letter I think of my favourite book, *Flat Stanley* – that remarkable fellow who was squashed paper-thin by a falling bulletin board so decided to post himself to visit a friend. That's the kind of positivity I like to see in a person! Books also don't need batteries or recharging and are ready when you are. I had flu when my teacher read the last instalment of *The Hobbit* to the class, so I missed the Battle of Five Armies. Until I read it for myself...

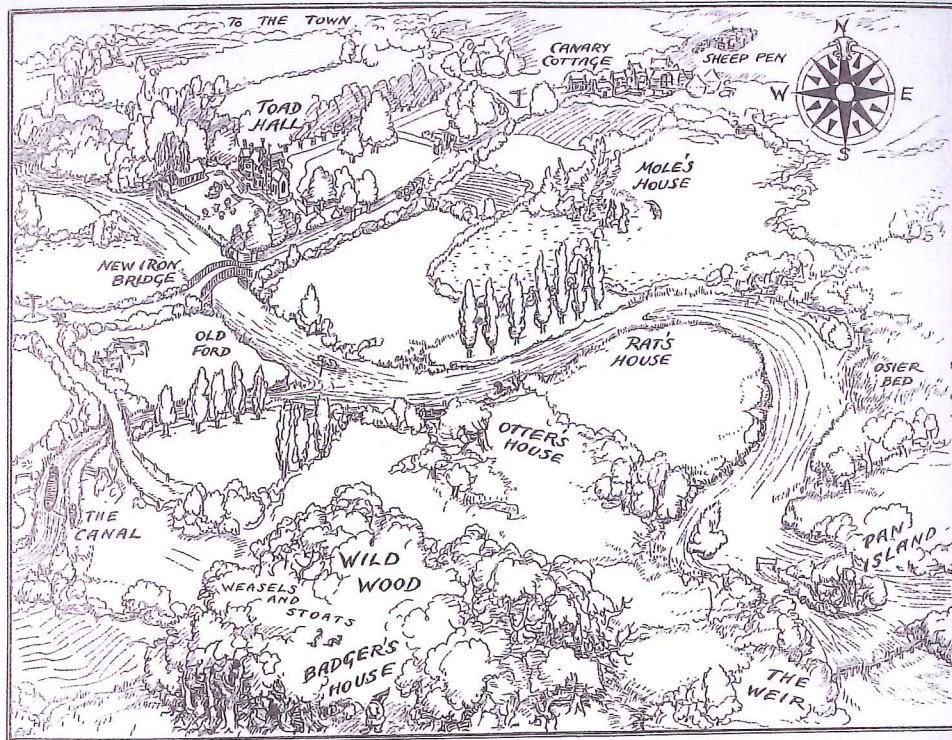
Books take me to faraway lands like Lilliput and Laputa, or lead me astray hunting for Snarks. And to lands like Earthsea, and The Edge. I loved Ursula Le Guin's world of islands but always wanted to know what was beyond the edges of the map, which is why, years later, I drew my own. I now spend most of my time drawing and writing in sketchbooks of all kinds. I have hundreds of them and draw every day. This is where my books are born, where I explore imaginary places and find my characters, all in the movement of pen and brush, and in the free play of my mind. I first met Mr Munroe here, and Ottoline, Ada Goth and their many peculiar friends. In opening a sketchbook I'll meet more tomorrow and probably head off again to somewhere new. Just doodling. Why not try it too?

I am part of everything I have read. My journey along this reading path began with Peter and Jane. I was determined to conquer the mountainous task of learning to read aided by these stalwart Ladybird Sherpas, but they didn't seem to do very much. One day, while struggling with them, I discovered one of their later adventures. Again, they didn't do very much, but this time it was in excitingly long and complex sentences. If only I could reach such heights. Yet soon fate intervened. In the library, I picked up a book, *Agaton Sax and the Diamond Thieves*. It was far beyond my reading abilities, but I didn't mind. I know now that it was written by a clever Swede, Nils-Olof Franzén, and illustrated in the English edition by the legendary Quentin Blake, but back then it was just fun; it had pictures, it had a story where things *actually happened*. I didn't understand most of it but I loved it. I wanted more books like this.



Librarians took me in. They gave me stories. *The Hobbit*. I discovered Mirkwood and climbed an oak tree with Bilbo Baggins and saw an armada of black butterflies fluttering above the treetops. I went in search of more. My school library was guarded by a heroic figure who protected the peaceful sanctuary with an implacable will. The library was my haven from the turmoil of the school day. The librarian was my guardian and her glamorous colleague was my muse. Miss Barnes held a short story competition. I won a prize for a science fiction tale inspired by Ray Bradbury's *The Illustrated Man*. In our *Edge Chronicles*, Paul Stewart and I made librarians our heroes. Varis Lodd is their leader, prepared to put her life on the line to defend the Great Library of the Free Glades.

The Edge Chronicles started with a map. Riddell drew it in one of his sketchbooks and then gave it to co-author Paul Stewart. 'This is The Edge,' he said, 'now tell me what happens there.' A colossal cliff juts out into the emptiness beyond, while sky pirates ply their trade above.



In the midst of a turbulent adolescence, I discovered a dropped school book. There was no cover to tell me what this novel was about, but librarians had taught me well. I picked up the book and read it. The novel was *Wuthering Heights*. I'll never forget it. A misunderstood outsider and aspiring art student, I found a novel in the school art room. It had a silver cover with a Jackson Pollock splatter design and an intriguing title. Librarians whispered in my ear. I picked the book up and read it. I later saw the silver cover in a bookshop. No ink splatter; I realized that my copy was an art room accident. The novel was *The Catcher in the Rye*. I'll never forget it. As a Sixth Form student, I found the best Saturday job in the world. I was admitted into the fabled world of libraries. I was allowed to date-stamp books, collect late fees and stack the bookshelves. It was magical. One day, while stacking, a book caught my eye. The librarians had taught me well. I picked up the book and read it. The novel was *Gormenghast* by Mervyn Peake. I'll never forget it.

Librarians are amazing people: they love turning children into readers by teaching them one of the most important life skills you can acquire, which is reading for pleasure. Not for tests, or attainment levels, or league tables, but the *joy* of losing yourself in the pages of a good book. Libraries are so important culturally, when you lose them, you lose part of our culture. So, once I had shaken off Peter and Jane and found fiction, I was away. I became omnivorous. I devoured books. I cherished them. Not just treasured books, but books of all kinds. That's why libraries are so important. You could come out with your arms full and try different things. To School Librarians, Public Libraries, Librarian Knights, Custodians of our Culture – you taught me well.

E.H. Shepard made this map for a new edition of Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* in 1931, which was in its thirtieth printing and had just been adapted by A.A. Milne for the London stage as *Toad of Toad Hall*.

OPPOSITE
Most of Riddell's Edgeworld is taken up by the Deepwoods, a vast and dangerous forest, but within it the Free Glades is a place of justice and equality, where the Librarians relocate after Undertown crumbles.

BOOKS TAKE ME BACK IN TIME. A list of my favourites could run for miles, and most of course are blessed with wonderful illustrators. I think of Pauline Baynes, who added new layers to the worlds of C. S. Lewis and Tolkien; John Tenniel for all things Wonderland and his artful satires in *Punch*; E. H. Shepard, another who started out as a political cartoonist, and who survived the horrors of the Western Front to sketch the idyllic scenes that charmed our childhoods, including *Winnie-the-Pooh* and *The Wind in the Willows*. Each time I see his endpaper maps I'm transported up the river, or through the woods, and I'm reminded how lucky those of us are to have had childhoods free from the terrors of war. And to have the freedom to read without restriction.

I stop again and think of others. I see Norman Hunter's inventive *Professor Branestawm*, so well captured by that genius of contraptions W. Heath Robinson, and later George Adamson. I've drawn Carroll's *The Hunting of the Snark* now myself, but what about the re-imaginings of Tove Jansson, Quentin Blake, Ralph Steadman, and again that genius Mervyn Peake? I can also see immediately the wry darkness of Edward Gorey and Charles Addams; or the innocence of delightful Shirley Hughes. And, good old Raymond Briggs. And, the incredible Maurice Sendak. Oh, where do I stop?

If only there were more days in the week. Just imagine having endless time to read and draw. That's my idea of Heaven. I can map it for you now. It's Autumn. Maybe a Wednesday, certainly mid-week. Let's say it's 3.30 in the afternoon. The sun is setting and so I turn the lights on. A thunderstorm has just passed. My studio is warm and cosy. My wife is here, painting. I return to my desk and the picture I'm drawing. I'm sketching the outline of an adventurous heroine, or perhaps I'm mapping out a new world. My pencils are sharpened and I have a fresh cup of tea. There is no deadline looming. I can't think of anywhere I'd rather be. I'm creating.

If given half a chance, back in the real world, I'd love to have the time to take on Peake's *Gormenghast*. Or, what about a new *Pilgrim's Progress*? Or, *Willy Wonka* and lashings of Roald Dahl? Or, perhaps even more Lewis Carroll? Word play and world building, that's what I enjoy the most. I'd love to map *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* some day. But ought it be mapped? Might you risk taking it too close to Oz, a touch too theme park, with yellow brick roads to follow and too many certain paths? It's an imaginary place that needs to confuse and ramble, to spin and shout. In my mind at least, it's a living thing, a land elusive like quicksilver, a will-o'-the-wisp. *But I long to try.* How random and disorientating could a map be while keeping all the information you need? What kind of new creatures might we find? A book of Wonderland deserves a map at the beginning. Can I do it?

We need books and writers of every stripe. We need libraries. We need fantasy and fiction every day, and now more than ever. Not just for escape, but for what all these things can show us of our own world. As my friend Neil Gaiman has said so well: 'A world in which there are monsters, and ghosts, and things that want to steal your heart is a world in which there are angels, and dreams, and a world in which there is hope.' We must not forget this.

Captain Slaughterboard Drops Anchor was Mervyn Peake's first book, published in 1939. As his crew die, the Captain makes a new friend in the Yellow Creature, and swaps a life of piracy for a happy retirement fishing and eating fruit.