



Curating an Exhibition with Seven Stories

*Be a Collections Detective
and explore Michael
Morpurgo's archive!*



At Seven Stories we are the custodians of a unique and ever-growing national archive of modern and contemporary children's literature. Today, the Seven Stories Collection includes material by over 270 authors and illustrators, including Michael Morpurgo.

Seven Stories collects all sorts of material relating to children's books - not just the finished work, but all that goes into the making of a book. Our Collection includes things like rough artwork, draft manuscripts, dummy books, correspondence, editors notes, proofs, and anything else that helps us explore how books are created.

Back in 2016 we had an exhibition dedicated to Michael's life and stories and below you can take a virtual tour and look at some of the information we put together for this exhibition, as well as some of the very exciting items that were featured in it.

Michael Morpurgo: Childhood and Becoming an Author

Childhood

Michael Morpurgo is one of Britain's greatest living authors for children. His work spans forty years and a career that has seen the publication of over 150 books for children, exploring a vast range of topics from historical events, natural history and the environment, to adventure and family life.

Born in 1943, Michael spent his early years in London with his brother Pieter, mother Kippe and stepfather Jack. His happiest memories are of his mother reading to him at bedtime from *Aesop's Fables* and Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories*, and from poets like Walter de la Mare and John Masefield. At the age of seven, Michael was sent to boarding school and his life was turned upside down.



Michael as a young child, circa 1945.
Copyright unknown

Homesickness and academic struggles made Michael miserable for much of his primary school life, but by the time he moved to secondary school he had discovered great personal attributes of charisma and friendliness. A natural leader and keen sportsman, he became Captain of School and seemed perfectly suited for a career as a British Army officer. He began his training at the Royal Military College, Sandhurst in 1962, only to find it was absolutely not for him. By 1964 Michael had quite a different future ahead of him - as a husband, a father and a teacher.



Michael with the rugby team, second from right, King's School Canterbury, circa 1958.
Copyright unknown

Michael Finds his Voice

Clare was twenty and Michael just nineteen when they met and fell deeply in love. For over fifty years they have steadfastly supported each other to realise their dreams.

The daughter of Allen Lane, founder of Penguin Books, Clare grew up with an eager social conscience. When she received a valuable inheritance from her father's estate she knew it was a chance for her and Michael to make a real difference to children's lives. They both believed that children who were stuck in inner city classrooms all day were missing out, so, in 1975, Michael gave up formal teaching and the couple bought Nethercott Farm in Devon. With sheer determination and hard work they set up the charity, Farms for City Children.

Michael found his voice as a story-maker in Devon. There he became friends with poets Ted Hughes and Sean Rafferty who taught him to be true to himself and write from the heart. There he worked the land, cared for the farm animals

and watched the seasons turn. There, too, he welcomed thousands of children to share his experiences.

'From this total immersion in a place, I was finding that, at last, I had a story of my own to tell and a voice of my own with which to tell it.'

Michael Morpurgo



Great friends:
Ted Hughes, Clare Morpurgo, Carol Hughes, Michael Morpurgo.
Copyright unknown

From Teacher to Story-maker

Teaching provided Michael with opportunities: he reflected on the results-driven education that had deprived him of the joy of reading and writing; he examined what inspired the children he taught; he criticised the system that prevented children from exploring the world just outside the classroom door.

Despite constant clashes with old fashioned teaching styles and rigid curriculums, Michael was an enthusiastic teacher. At one school he was encouraged to read to the children at the end of each day. Remembering how he had enjoyed his mother reading to him as a child, he soon discovered that he could fire the children's imaginations best with stories he made up himself. The headmistress asked Michael to write

his stories down and she sent them to the publisher Macmillan. *It Never Rained* was published in 1974 and Michael hasn't stopped writing since.

From these first, tentative steps as a storyteller in a Year 6 classroom in Kent, Michael has become a true champion of children and young people's culture, creativity and right to read and enjoy stories. He was instrumental in setting up the Children's Laureateship in 1997, and he himself was appointed Laureate from 2003 to 2005. His services to children's literature were recognised in 2006 when he was awarded an OBE.

Michael's Inspiration and Process

Dreamtime

When Michael writes, he feels emotionally connected to the people, animals and places he is writing about. He knows that he must care profoundly about the story for it to turn out well.

He finds inspiration in the real world, everyday activities, conversations, news articles, foreign travel; yet not every idea has the potential to develop into a book. First Michael must live inside the story and get to know his characters as if they were close friends. He calls this 'dreamtime'. Sometimes he walks the lanes around his home, picturing the story and telling it out loud to the birds and the sheep.

When he feels he knows the story, and likes it enough to write it, he remembers the fear he felt at primary school when faced with a blank sheet of paper. He thinks that maybe he won't be able to fill it. Luckily for his readers, and children everywhere, Michael enjoys facing up to this challenge!

Although Michael's books are set in the real world, he weaves fact with fiction to create resonant tales that live on in the memory long after the last page has been turned.

'I am a grower of stories. I am a weaver of dreams, a teller of tales.'

Michael Morpurgo

Storyweaving

Sometimes writing can seem like a kind of magic, conjured by capturing ideas from our ordinary lives and weaving them into a new story.

Michael does this a lot. He takes inspiration from real people, animals, places or artefacts and builds stories around them. Sometimes it even works the other way round - his commissioned painting of Joey which was first described in *War Horse* and now exists as an artefact. Occasionally he takes a well-known tale and re-tells it, adding his own twist.

Our group of Guest Curators discovered that Michael writes about things he loves, and that he enters 'dreamtime' before beginning his stories, so they tried it for themselves! Working with Seven Stories, the young people used drama to respond creatively to objects and to experience characters' thoughts and feelings. They explored

Michael's archive, talked about what they found interesting and wrote the beginnings of their own stories.

The group worked with professional artists Ben Jeans Houghton and Sophie Soobramanien to design and build a new set of "Artefictions" inspired by both Michael's writing and their own.

Understanding the way that professional authors work can unlock the door to imagination and aspiration in our own creative writing. In this project, the blend of reality and fiction at the heart of Michael's writing process inspired a group of young people to become writers, curators and artists. Perhaps you could be next?

Against a Backdrop of War

Michael is often asked why he writes books set during times of war and conflict. His answer is twofold. Firstly, his mother's grief for the brother she lost during the Second World War was ever present during Michael's childhood. It was a hole in the family that could never be filled. Secondly, he has always felt a passionate concern about the devastating effects of war on the lives of children in particular.

It is hard to keep today's children from hearing about the wars and disasters that are occurring all over the world. Michael's fiction frequently portrays real events through the eyes of children or animals. By encouraging his young readers to engage emotionally with the experiences of his

characters, Michael hopes they may develop the skills to think critically about the causes and effects of war and conflict and, more importantly, a strong desire to live in peace.

'It may seem that I seek out causes to write about. It doesn't happen that way. Rather, they seem to seek me out and very often it is children themselves who bring them to my attention. I have a hope that a new generation will one day rise above prejudice and suspicion, hurt and hatred.'

Michael Morpurgo

A Sense of Place

Michael has lived near the village of Iddesleigh in Devon for over thirty years. He has immersed himself in the local community and its people, animals and landscape have shaped and nurtured his writing. It is of critical importance to Michael's sense of self to feel that he belongs.

As a child Michael was at his most content during holidays from boarding school. In 1950 the family moved to a large house in the village of Bradwell on Sea, set in the heart of Essex marshland. The house was said to be haunted, and the surrounding countryside was windblown and atmospheric. Michael spent long days wandering the lanes and cycling to the ancient chapel of St Peter by the Wall where he felt an intense connection to those who had been there before.

Searching for a spiritual connection to a landscape has inspired many of Michael's books. He observes a place carefully, like the Isle of Bryher in the Scillies for instance, and soaks it up, imagining himself there in the past, the present and the future. Above all, he values the true sense of belonging that comes from an 'elemental connection and empathy with the natural world.'

'I know it lying under the stars on a summer's night. I know it watching buzzards floating over the valley where I live. It is a learnt belonging from children who stop to gaze, to breathe in the world about them, to feel part of it.'

Michael Morpurgo

Explore Michael Morpurgo's archive and create your own mini exhibition

When we put together exhibitions, we will look through lots of exciting items and pick the ones that hold the most meaning and help tell a story about the author and their books and which we think will engage the audience the most and evoke a response. This is called curation.

Below you will be able to explore some of the items in Michael's collection and have a go at creating a story around each of them by using Michael's process of storyweaving (you can be as imaginative as you like, as there is no right or wrong answer).

Choose which ones you want to focus on and write exhibition labels (print as many as you need) using some of the prompts below by coming up with your own history and background for each object or using some of the above information about Michael's life.

What.....is the object or photograph?

Who.....did the object or photograph belong to?

Where.....was the object or photograph found?

When.....was the object or photo discovered?

How.....was it discovered?

Decide which order to exhibit them in and put together a mini exhibition in your classroom.



JOEY
BY CAPTAIN JAMES S. NICHOLS, AUGUST 1841



THE ROYAL MILITARY ACADEMY SANDHURST



**ROLL OF OFFICERS, LECTURERS
WARRANT OFFICERS
AND
OFFICER CADETS**

TERM

SPRING 1963

JANUARY, 1963—APRIL, 1963



A. M. Heath & Company Ltd. AUTHORS' AGENTS
40-42 William IV Street London WC2N 4DD

Telephone: 01-836 4271 (4 lines) Telegrams & Cables: Script London
Registered in England Registration No. 175027

Directors:
Cyrus Brooks
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Michael Thomas
Hester Green

June 5, 1975

Michael Morpurgo, Esq.,
Newnham Farmhouse,
Wickhambreaux,
Canterbury,
Kent.

Dear Michael,

Kestrel Books have returned THE WALL with this comment:

"Thank you very much for letting us consider THE WALL. While we read it with interest, and certainly found it well written, I'm afraid we felt that it lacked a kind of novelty, and was hampered by a constant analysis of events."

I would not agree with this comment and the book is now on offer to Hamish Hamilton. I will let you know when there is any further news.

With best wishes,

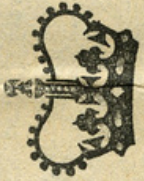
Yours,

Osyth

Osyth Leeston

Charges to pay
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At _____ m
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= OVERNIGHT = MORPURGO ALAMEIN COMPANY VICTORY

COLLEGE ROYAL MILITARY ACADEMY

SANDHURSTCAMBERLEY =

PLEASE RING HOME = MORPURGO ++

~~MORPURGO MORPURGO~~ ++H TS777/TGMS LN

For free repetition or doubtful words telephone "TELEGRAMS ENQUIRY" or call, with this form B or C at office of delivery. Other enquiries should be accompanied by this form, and, if possible, the envelope.

Chapter 8

For just a few short moments we found ourselves in a world
 in training. We pulled our way round the cables keeping our line as best
 we could. Up ahead there was the top of a gully deep with
 was the bittered remnants of the wood - just below a hiding
 that directed the horizon as far as the eye could see. The
 nothing but a baked wire. "Although the wire was
 they to his teeth. They said the wire would be gone. They said the guns would

back with the wire. "Oh my God."
 The wire was still there. I still have no sound in my right & left ear.
 While we were in the
 almost instantly
 I turned up and looked at the tip of the tower. It was 2000 ft. or so high
 looked for amongst us. The guns pointed up. All around us was fire & ^{and}

the ground had horses and I do remember in my 4th and 5th. I remember
 being other side of
 erupted through horses' sides down into the air. The fire & the sound of metal
 overhead. I don't know if it was a shell or a bullet. I don't know if it was a shell or a bullet.
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On my back Taper chose to jump me with his knees and I felt
 his line acting and about so that he could find it again. I don't know
 his hands for
 however, his fingers seem to cross as he saw the carriage and him.
 Only a few horses reached the wire, but Tipton and I were amongst them.

There were about a few holes though the wire and some of us found a
 any strength, and came up the felt air of breathing and but they were
 empty it then. The fire was now far higher up in the air than the trees and so the

60/10/50/70/100



44014210

Clare & Michael Morpurgo
Langlands
Iddesleigh
Nr. Winkleigh,
DEVON.
EX19 8SN.

CUT OPEN ALONG HERE

(DO NOT) RUN OUT OF ENVELOPES!

c'est pas une telegramme ... !

Name of Object:

History of Object:

Origin of Object:

Name of Object:

History of Object:

Origin of Object:

Creative Writing Task Sheet

Now that you have had a chance to create your own mini Michael Morpurgo exhibition and write your labels, how about using some of these objects as a starting point for some creative writing?

Creative Writing Activity 1

Write the first page of the story that your chosen object inspired, e.g. if a painting of a horse inspired War Horse, write equivalent of the first page of War Horse – what kind of story would this inspire (genre). What sort of world would it be set in? When might it be set? Who might be the main character(s)? How could you open the story – describing the environment, the character's usual routine, an action sequence, etc.

Creative Writing Activity 2

Write a diary entry about the day you first encountered/collected your chosen object, e.g. where/when did you find it? Did you find/buy/steal/make/inherit it? Describe your senses – how did it sound/smell/look/taste/feel? How did you feel when you found it?