

Introduction

I don't go looking for ideas for my stories. They just seem to come to me. I've always been very lucky that way. Of course, like any writer or artist, I keep eyes and ears and heart and mind open and alert; my feelers, my antennae always out. That is how all of us catch our dreams. Much of *Such Stuff* explains how I have done this with my books, which of course is why it is called "Such Stuff as dreams are made on". Not my words of course, but William Shakespeare's, from *The Tempest*. Reassuring to know that Shakespeare used the same source material for his dreams as I do: memories, history, war and peace, the lives of others, the times we live in, the people and places we know and care about.

I am also very receptive to the ideas of others for my books. So many have been suggested in the first place by friends and family, by publishers and illustrators (particularly Michael Foreman, the instigator of a dozen or more

of my stories, and the illustrator of this book too). In this case, though, it was my younger brother Mark who came up with the idea. Mark has very kindly often come along with his wife Linda to talks I have given at festivals, particularly in Scotland where they live. He had noticed that by far the most common question asked at these events was: "How do you come up with your ideas?". Sometimes it was a general question about inspiration, Mark said, but more often it was specific to one book. And over the years he had heard me tell the story behind just about every single one of my stories, heard me talk often of the seed of a story and the growing of it in my mind, in my research, in my dreamtime. And, Mark kindly pointed out, "because the question is so often asked, you do rather too often, repeat yourself. Then of course I have to sit there and listen to it all over again. Not that I am complaining, much. In fact not at all. It is really interesting for a reader to know what gives rise to a story in the first place, the history, the anecdotal background, the cause. So, why don't you write a book that definitively answers this question?"

So that is what we have done. In this book I have revealed the memories, stories and history, the people and the places, that weave themselves, dream themselves into many of my stories. Mark has researched the historical roots, the facts and figures of the historical truths and myths that do often run through my books. And Clare, chief collaborator on all my books over the last forty or

more years, and my wife too, has picked out an excerpt from each book, to encourage you to read the rest! Well, she is the daughter of a publisher. And Rosalind Morpurgo took on the huge task of reading all our scribbles and getting the manuscript typed and into good shape. So this is very much a family book, made together, by all four of us. We hope you enjoy reading it as much as we loved making it.

Michael Morpurgo.

PS If you allowed a PS to an introduction, I want to thank Michael Foreman, Gill Evans and everyone at the wonderful Walker Books for taking on this unlikely book and enabling it to happen. Thanks to William Shakespeare too who helped with the title.



War Horse

THE DREAM

For all sorts of reasons, when the time came in 1980, at thirty-seven years of age, I was ready to write *War Horse*, and later *Farm Boy*, too, which is almost a sequel, but not quite. To begin with, I was a child of war. I grew up in London just after the Second World War. Next door to us, in Philbeach Gardens, was a bombsite, where we played – no one ever invented a better or more sinister adventure playground. Right by my school, St Matthias in the Warwick Road, there was another bombsite, a forbidden and therefore fascinating place. You got the ruler on the back of your hand if you crawled in there. I got the ruler on the back of my hand a lot. We had rationing. Sometimes I was allowed to carry the ration book for my mother when we went shopping – maybe the first proper responsibility I ever had. One-legged soldiers sat on street corners, wearing their medals, begging. We played war in the streets and bombsites, in the school

playground, us against the Germans. If you were picked as a German, you had to die and lose in the end. We learnt *Achtung!* and *Heil Hitler!* from the war comics we read. We sang songs about Hitler, and learnt that Himmler was very “sim’lar”.

Then there were the tears, my mother’s tears on the anniversary of my Uncle Pieter’s death in the RAF. His photo was always there on the mantelpiece, a young man in his RAF uniform, looking right at me, I thought; I noticed later he was actually gazing into space. But I felt then he was looking into my eyes. I revered him, though I never knew him. He was the hero of the family, and in a way, still is, for me, anyway. I am seventy-one. He died aged twenty-one. He had been an actor, a promising one by all accounts. He only had two years on the stage. He never had a family, never had the chance of peace, never knew the contentment that the years can bring. I learnt very young that the grieving never dies, that the loss lingers.

As a schoolboy I read the poems of Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen and Edward Thomas, who had fought in an earlier war, the one that was supposed to end all other wars, the First World War. When I was older, I saw the musical *Oh! What a Lovely War*, the play *Journey’s End*, read *All Quiet on the Western Front*, witnessed in all this the courage and camaraderie, the killing, the grieving that so many had lived through. For a brief year I went into the army, in part at least because I was in awe of

those generations. Maybe I was testing myself, I don't know. But a taste of preparing for war, training for it, taught me rather quickly that I wanted to live my life in a world of peace, that peace was what these generations had been fighting for, peace and freedom, not simply a continuation of war.

Many, many years later, after years of teaching in junior schools, I found myself moving to Devon, with Clare and the family, to help with Clare's great project of bringing city children into the countryside and giving them an experience of farming life they would never forget. She called it "Farms for City Children". We set up the charity at Nethercott House near the village of Iddesleigh, a place as deep in the Devon countryside as you could find. I was already writing, and had been for a while. *Friend or Foe*, my Second World War evacuee story was just out, and there were one or two others as well. But so far I had written well within myself; my readers, very often the children I was teaching, rather more important to me than the stories themselves. It had been a means to an end: to get children enjoying stories, and writing their own stories too. So, as I was already a bit of a writer, I used to go one evening a week up the lane to Nethercott, and read to the city children by the log fire. Sometimes half of them were asleep by the time I had finished. Country air, I kidded myself.

We were new in the village, still finding our feet, getting to know people. We joined in the community. I rang

the bells in the church; Clare helped with the flowers. Everyone made us feel very welcome and we soon got to know who everyone was. There were three old men in the village who particularly interested me. They had been living there at the time of the First World War, I was told. Two of them had been soldiers, and gone to the war. I went up to the pub one day, and there was one of them, sitting by a fire: Wilf Ellis, in his eighties by then, an antique dealer in those days. We had bought only one thing from him, an oil painting of a fine racehorse called Topthorn, and thereby hangs a tale too! We got talking. All I said was: "I heard you went to the First World War, Wilf. That right?"

"I did," he said.

I thought that was it, that he would say nothing more. I could feel it was a question I should never have asked. But then, after a while, Wilf spoke up again. I don't think he stopped for an hour. It was an outpouring, to a comparative stranger, of all that had happened to him in the trenches. He had been gassed, hospitalized, wounded, his life spared by a German soldier. He talked of how they longed only to be warm, dry, not hungry, free of lice, how they longed above all for it to be done with, just to go home and see the ones they loved. They wanted the agony to be over. He took me down to his cottage later and showed me his trenching tool, his photos, his medals. As he was talking, two things occurred to me: that he was passing his story on to me, a young man (then), a

writer, and that for the first time in my life I was hearing about war not through a film, a play, a poem, a comic, nor a novel. I was hearing it straight from someone who had been there, lived through it.

Within a day or two, my interest quickened further. I went to see the other old soldier in the village who, I had been told, had fought in the war. He fished in the river and he had been Master of Foxhounds – that’s all I knew of him. Captain Budgett, he was called. He lived down the end of my lane and seemed only too willing to talk. “I was there with horses,” he said. He had been to Palestine, the desert, been captured and imprisoned by the Turks. It was obvious he wanted to talk more about the horses than the Turks. I let him talk. This was not a sentimental man, that was clear. But he spoke movingly about how much man and horse relied upon each other for survival. “My horse, he was my best friend,” he told me. “And I’m telling you, he listened, really listened.”

I think it was as he was talking that I first conceived the notion about writing a story about a horse in that war. This way, if the war could be seen and told through the horse’s eyes, I could follow a horse’s journey through the war as it was first used as a British cavalry horse, then captured by the Germans, then as it wintered on a French farm. This way, I thought, I could tell a story of that war from all sides – friend and foe, and civilian too – and this way, witness the universality of the suffering of war, of the pity, of the killing and the dying, and of

the longing and hope too.

One phone call to the Imperial War Museum the next day helped hugely. “How many horses went to that war?” I asked.

“About a million,” came the reply.

“And how many returned home afterwards?”

“About sixty-five thousand.”

So then I thought: the horses died in about the same numbers as the men, and in the same ways too, shot, blown-up, on the wire, in the mud. They died of exhaustion and disease. Now I didn’t just want to tell the story, I had to tell it, needed to tell it. But there was a problem that could not be solved, that seemed insurmountable. To tell the story, as I now knew I had to tell it, from the perspective of the horse, I was going to have to write it in the first person. The horse would be telling it, writing it. There is, of course, a rather famous book where this happens, but which was written a long time ago, when such a device might have been acceptable, *Black Beauty*. So iconic is this classic story that any book using the same technique might seem to be some sort of pale imitation. And then, of course, told in a horse’s voice, it could so easily become mawkish and sentimental. The more I thought about it, the more I worried about the voice. This was to be a serious book – yes, certainly at its heart a story about a boy and a horse and their love for each other, but also a story about the suffering of war and the longing for peace. Above all, it

had to be credible, and certainly not ridiculous.

Could I do this the way I wanted to do it? Could I risk using the horse's voice? Would even I believe in it as I was writing it? Could I become horse? Faced with this difficulty, I very nearly gave up altogether. But so much else was in place. I would set the story on the farm where I live, in the cottage where I live. I knew by now who had lived where at the time of the war. I had researched the lives of the working people, stood by their graves in the churchyard. I walked where they walked, was familiar with the fields they tilled, the ditches they dug, the streams and rivers where they fished; I knew the bluebell woods where the badgers roamed and where the swallows nested in the barns. I had even chosen the name of my horse – Joey, after a roguish, strong-willed foal we had on the farm. I had watched him growing, helped train him to a halter, lunged him. So much was ready, and I so much wanted to get on and write it. But I simply could not find the confidence to do it. I could not believe in the voice.

One small incident gave me the spur I needed. As I have said, I used to go up to read to the city children who came to stay at Nethercott. I would go up to do this, usually on their last night, before they returned to London or Birmingham or Bristol or Plymouth. So one dark November evening, after milking, I found myself walking through the fine drizzle up the lane and into the stable yard at the back of this large Victorian house, their home

for a week. There was one light on over a stable door. I saw a small boy standing there stroking the horse's head – Hebe, she was called, a Haflinger pony, and a great favourite with us and with the children. The boy was in his dressing gown and slippers. He was called Billy. I was about to call out to him to go indoors out of the rain, when I heard him talking to the horse.

Now Billy should not have been talking, because Billy didn't talk. Everyone knew that. I had been told by the teacher the first day the school arrived, almost a week before. "Michael," she said, "best not to ask Billy any questions because he won't answer, and if you try to encourage him to answer, he is liable to run off home. He's done this at school. We just leave him be. That's how he likes it. We think he must have a terrible stutter or something. He's been with us two years and he never speaks, not to us, not to the other children." But here was Billy talking to this horse, the words simply flowing from him, all about his day on the farm and what he'd done and how he was going home the next morning, and how he'd miss her.

I went to fetch the teachers. They had to witness this miracle, I thought. So I did, and we all stood there in the darkness, and watched and listened, in disbelief, in wonder. It was in those few brief moments that I realized something else. This wasn't just a miracle because Billy was talking. There was another one going on that I had not taken in until now. Hebe was listening. Captain

Budgett had been right: horses listen, really listen. Hebe was standing there because she knew at that moment she was loved and needed. Horses are sentient, feeling creatures. They have great need for affection, as we do. No, it is not sentimental. Of course it isn't, I thought. And if I can write it right, then my story might just work. I could try the voice. I could do it.

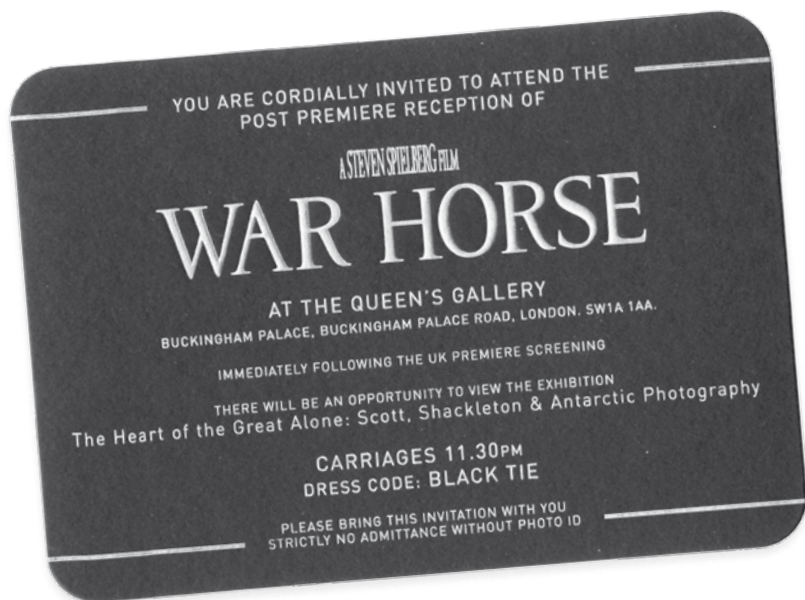
I made one concession though: I decided not to let Joey tell his story right away. I would set the scene, introduce Joey to the reader, and ask the reader without really asking, to make that leap of imagination, tell them that this was a story written for all the men and horses who went to that war, and especially for those who did not come home. In the little introduction set in the village hall in Iddesleigh, I wrote that there is still hanging today a painting of Joey on the wall, under a clock that stands always at five to ten. There is, in fact, no painting, but there is a clock. So the painting is a pure invention, a device.

For two decades this book of *War Horse* was hardly read – it barely sold a thousand copies a year. We tried to get a film going, wrote several scripts for it. No one was interested. Then Michael Foreman suggested I write a sequel, the story of Joey when he comes home after the war, when tractors were taking over from horses on the farm. Great idea, I thought. So I wrote *Farm Boy*, and Michael illustrated it beautifully. But *War Horse* was still hardly being read. So no one discovered there was

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no painting in the village hall, because no one was interested enough to come and look.

Then the National Theatre decided to make a play of *War Horse* – with life-sized puppets. Ridiculous idea, I thought. Well, I was wrong. In over seven years, more



*It was grand, but there were
no carriages waiting at 11.30!*

than seven million people have seen it globally.

The National Theatre has never had such a hit. Steven Spielberg came to see it and made a movie of it, seen

worldwide. Soon dozens of people were visiting our little village to find out where Joey was born, to see the village green where he was sold off as a cavalry horse to the army in 1914; and of course they would turn up at the village hall asking to see the picture of Joey on the wall, and the clock. There was a clock. But there was no painting.

Local people became a little tired of making lame excuses for the absence of the picture to these *War Horse* tourists. "Sorry, we can't find the key to the village hall door." "Sorry, the picture has been sent away to be cleaned." Something had to be done, they said. So in the end, we did something, something very naughty.

By great good chance, on the film set of *War Horse* we met the artist Ali Bannister who had been commissioned by Steven Spielberg to make the drawings of Joey for the film. Clare had a sudden brilliant idea. She asked her if she would do a portrait of Joey in oils, in the manner of the time, around 1914, as described in the book, sign it underneath as it is so signed in the book.

So that's what Ali did. She painted a portrait of Joey in the style of our Tophorn picture that we had bought from Wilf Ellis some time before, and painted it exactly as I had described it in the book. It was perfect. No one would know the difference!

We even had an unveiling ceremony in the village hall to celebrate. And now when visitors come and ask to see the picture of Joey, and they do, he is there looking down

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on them, ears pricked forward as if he has just noticed them standing there. "He's just like I imagined him in the book," one visitor from Canada was heard to say. Happy ending then!



*Ali Barincher's painting of Joey,
now in Fiddesleigh village hall*