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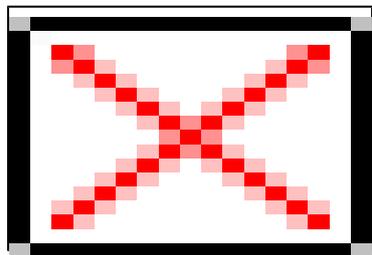
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Byline:

Tony Bradman on the lasting appeal of the Bard

April 23rd 2016 will be the four hundredth anniversary of Shakespeare's death and the cue for many celebrations and special events. Shakespeare fan **Tony Bradman** writes about the lasting appeal of the Bard, and the challenges of bringing the man and his plays alive for today's young people.



Whenever I do a school visit to talk about my books I can always guarantee that one of the children will ask me a simple question: 'Who is your favourite writer?' My answer is William Shakespeare, of course. I mean, what's not to like about our national poet and playwright? His work might be over four hundred years old, but it's still at the heart of our culture - the plays are performed, filmed, written about, and discussed endlessly. We use words and phrases he first coined - 'as luck would have it', 'give the devil his due', 'for ever and a day', 'a tower of strength.' No other writer has had such a massive influence.

I first encountered Shakespeare's work in the sixth form. I did English Literature as one of my A Levels, which meant I had to study a couple of his plays - **The Tempest** and **Othello**, to be precise. I was hooked from the first few lines of both, and soon started reading as many more of the plays as I could get my hands on. I went to see some performed, and watched filmed versions too.

Like any true fan, I have always wanted everyone else to love Shakespeare as well. Many people do, although there's definitely a feeling his work is 'too difficult' for children, especially those of primary age (Key Stage Two). Children at secondary level (Key Stage Three) are supposed to know about Shakespeare and to read a couple of the plays - it says so in the National Curriculum. But I've heard plenty of grown-ups who didn't enjoy Shakespeare at school say he shouldn't be inflicted on kids. And even some fans think that being exposed too early to Shakespeare might simply put children off anyway.

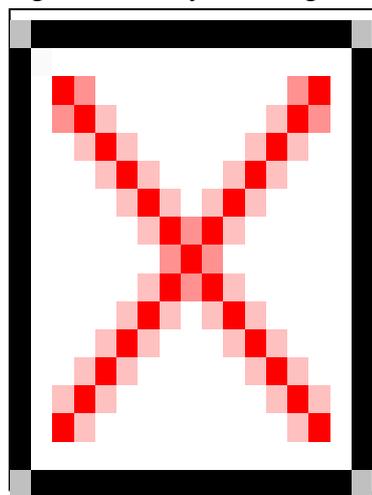
One solution has been to try and introduce kids to Shakespeare through adaptations and re-tellings. I've done three of those myself for A&C Black - short prose versions of **Julius Caesar**, **Macbeth** and **Richard III**. Yes, I know it's a total travesty to take the work of the greatest writer of English and remove all the complexity and nuance, but it was enormously interesting to get right inside the plays and find out how they work. I also tried very hard indeed to preserve at least a flavour of the original - and they are great stories that have stood any amount of fiddling about and adaptation over the centuries.

I have a particular fondness for several other re-tellings, such as Andrew Matthews' brilliant little versions for younger

children of a number of the plays, with perfect illustrations by Tony Ross (Orchard). The two volumes of **Shakespeare Stories** by the great Leon Garfield are still available from Puffin, and well worth looking at - Michael Foreman's illustrations are a delight. And I really like the **Manga Shakespeare**, graphic novel versions of a dozen plays including **Hamlet**, **Macbeth**, **Twelfth Night**, and **A Midsummer Night's Dream**. They're fresh and very contemporary, each one like a movie version on paper.

It occurred to me that another way of encouraging kids to get interested in Shakespeare would be with some stories about the man himself. That's not as easy as it sounds - we have very little biographical information about him beyond the facts of his birth, marriage and death, and his involvement with the London theatre under the reigns of Elizabeth I and James I. But that's an advantage - it means there are plenty of gaps you can fill with your imagination and empathy. You have to do plenty of research as well, but I don't mind that - in fact I absolutely love it. There are the plays and poems too, and although it's a mistake to think of any writer's work as an infallible guide to his or her life, it certainly helps.

So with the big anniversary looming I came up with a couple of stories, and both are being published by Barrington



Stoke. The first is a comedy set in Jacobean London called **The Boy and the Globe**, and it's about an orphan boy called Toby Cuffe who meets Shakespeare towards the end of his life and career, at a time when the middle-aged playwright is struggling with a variety of problems and a feeling that his career is over. He needs to come up with a hit play to see off the burgeoning competition, and Toby comes to his aid. No plot spoilers, but if I say that my favourite play is **The Tempest** ('Our revels now are ended?') then you'll have an idea of where this story ends up. The illustrations are by the excellent Tom Morgan-Jones, and he's really caught the spirit of the story.

The second is a more serious tale called **Master Will and the Spanish Spy**. We do know a certain amount about Will's family, in particular that his father was a reasonably wealthy businessman in Stratford when Will was young. But things went pear-shaped financially for Shakespeare senior when Will was in his mid-teens, and there were some troubled years afterwards. It was a very troubled time in England too - a once-Catholic nation was now officially Protestant and threatened by Catholic Spain. The story is about Will's difficult relationship with his ambitious, over-reaching father, and the boy's first contact with the world of the theatre. There's a thriller sub-plot too, and it was fascinating to write.

I have a feeling there will be a torrent of books about Shakespeare this year, and masses of events. But am I ashamed of adding to it all? Not a bit. I have a suspicion that the insubstantial pageant' of tributes to Shakespeare this year will fade, and 'leave not a rack behind'. But if my stories can persuade even just a few children to look at Will's work, then I'll be a very happy fan indeed.

The Boy and the Globe by Tony Bradman illus Tom Morgan-Jones is published by Barrington Stoke, 978-1781125038, at £5.99 and available now. **Master Will and the Spanish Spy** also by Tony Bradman illus Tom Morgan-Jones and published by Barrington Stoke will publish in August.

The **Shakespeare Stories** series by Andrew Matthews, illustrated by Tony Ross, is published by Orchard Books at £4.99.

Shakespeare Stories by Leon Garfield, illustrated by Michael Foreman, is published by Puffin Books, 978-0140389388, £16.00

The **Manga Shakespeare** series is published by SelfMadeHero, price £8.99.

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