

**M**ost readers of *Oxfordshire Limited Edition* are likely to have heard writer and broadcaster Michael Rosen's distinctive voice on BBC Radio 4's *Word of Mouth*. The prolific writer of children's novels, poet, broadcaster and the fifth children's laureate (2007-2009) has the enviable title of Curator of Stories at The Story Museum in Oxford's Pembroke Street.

Yet in 1964, Michael Rosen's life was set on a path to study medicine.

"When I started doing medicine, I was quite happy to get the old scalpel into rats, fish and the odd human body," he said. No wonder children love him!

But Michael's parents had passed on a love of literature – he had been writing satirical poems from the age of 12 – and so he quickly decided medicine was not his vocation and while at Oxford's Wadham College, changed course to read English.

In 1969, he became a graduate trainee at the BBC, working on *Playschool* and schools programmes.

## Sylvia Vetta talks to Michael Rosen broadcaster, writer, poet and The Story Museum's Curator of Stories

"After 30 months training, unless you screwed up, you had a permanent job," Michael recalled. "But in my case, they suggested I go freelance, effectively sacking me. It turned out that I had been blacklisted."

He had fallen foul of the BBC's vetting procedures. While a student, he had been arrested twice – once for demonstrating against the war in Vietnam and then after protesting outside a hairdressers in Oxford who refused to cut black people's hair.

At the time, Michael was unaware of the corporation's unsavoury vetting practice – but is was finally exposed in 1985.

Fortunately, Michael was bursting with creative energy – which led to great collaborations with illustrators such as Quentin Blake, Helen Oxenbury and Oxford's Korky Paul, and an amazing output of 140 books.

But where did that life journey start and what objects, books and works of art will the writer want to find washed up on the beach of our desert island?

Michael made a dramatic entrance to the world in 1946. The night he was born the church next door to his Harrow home burned down.

"I spent the first years of my life in Pinner. My parents were like exiles there. My brother and I have often scratched our heads about why they chose to live there.

"If there was one place not to be a Jewish communist in the 1950s it was Pinner. Their parents and grandparents were Jewish immigrants from Poland, Russia and Romania and as children they had been poor growing up in what is now Tower Hamlets.

"My parents were teachers, but they challenged everything – what was on the television and the radio, what we were told in



# Let me tell you a story

school and who we played with. It was kind of tiring but also bracing.

"They were comedians, poets and storytellers. It was like growing up with Lenny Bruce married to Isaiah Berlin – and that was just my dad, Harold.

"My mum, Connie, was more meditative, but she also loved gags and music. My father spoke German, French, Yiddish, a little bit of Russian and he knew Latin. A great mimic, he could do American – he had been in the American army because he was born in the USA, but had never naturalised."

"My brother Brian was hugely important – he was like a third parent. I thought he was brilliant. I remember him teaching me to read and, aged ten, he decided that everything he learned at school he had to teach me."

What reminds him most of his parents and childhood?

"If it is all three of them, it would have to be something we all looked at and thought about together," Michael said.

"This might be an old tent – we went camping all through my childhood – or perhaps a fossil. My brother collected fossils and has spent his whole life being a palaeontologist and marine ecologist.

"He studied geology here in Oxford. Perhaps the object that would bring us all together would be a polished Victorian tabletop made of carboniferous limestone, jam-packed full of fossils, which my brother would tell us about.

"My mother died in 1976 and my father married again. After he died in 2009, my stepmother Betty, who lives near us, gave



**Michael Rosen with the miner's lamp pin sold to raise funds in support of miners during the 1926 General Strike, which belonged to his paternal grandmother**

*Photograph: Damian Halliwell*

various collections of curiosities he had collected to me.”

Michael tipped the contents of a pot on to the table. Out of this microcosm of social history, he picked out one thing.

“It is a stick pin with a tiny replica of a miner's lamp. It was my grandmother's and I believe she was given in at the time of the General Strike in 1926 when she supported the miners.

“All dad had to do to get our attention was to open a trunk and pull out an object and he had a story to tell.”

Michael's writing career began with a play called *Backbone*, which he wrote while at Oxford but was performed at the Royal Court Theatre, London, in 1969.

It won the *Sunday Times* National Union of

Students Drama Festival Award.

His first book for children was called *Mind Your Own Business* and it came out in 1974. Illustrator Quentin Blake did some wonderful line drawings for it. But the publication that really pushed him into the public eye was *We're Going on a Bear Hunt*.

Michael said: “I did not really write it, I adapted an American summer camp song. It is like a folk poem that I adapted to work on the page. And illustrator Helen Oxenbury turned it into a modern epic family classic.”

His first award for poetry came in 1982 when he won the Signal Poetry Award for *You Can't Catch Me*.

Although he has excelled in so many different fields, his greatest love is poetry. Michael's poems often rely on snatches of

dialogue and memories of his own childhood. “I talk through my pen,” he said.

So why poetry?

“That came to me through several channels – the oral culture of my home was strong, full of rhymes and songs coming from both my parents. They rated poetry, taught it, recited it, listened to it on the radio,” Michael said.

“Various key people came through our house and through our lives. Someone like Geoffrey Summerfield, who edited a groundbreaking collection of poems for Penguin Education called *Voices* and *Junior Voices*. He would come into the house with bundles of the poems destined for the collections, lay them out on the floor and recite them. And then my mother

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**Michael Rosen  
with Tom Thumb  
'chapbook'**

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was doing poetry broadcasts for the BBC Schools service. So poetry was ever present."

"I started working for BBC World Service on *Poetry Please* and *Poems by Post*, when I was asked to present *Treasure Islands* (1989-1997), a series of programmes for Radio 4 on children's books. I felt so strongly about the importance of these programmes, that I enrolled for an MA in Children's Literature at Reading University to upgrade my skills.

"While I was doing that, Bill Boyle, the then controller of Radio 4 pulled it off air, despite good listening figures. The reason he gave was that it was ghetto programming. He said the BBC would continue coverage of children's books in other ways but quite clearly they have not given it any priority.

"The irony is that they stopped it in 1997, just as a new era in mass popular children's book was starting. The first *Harry Potter* book was published followed soon after by Philip Pullman's trilogy. I am often asked why parents do not read as much to their children and why there is a decline in reading for pleasure.

"If children read for pleasure their academic achievement improves. The biggest study (University of Nevada) was of 27,000 children over ten years in samples taken from all over the world.

"It shows that, when there are books in the home, children do three years more schooling. I have lobbied Labour and Conservative ministers about it. OFSTED recommended that every school should encourage reading for

pleasure as the way to raise attainment. That is the way children get to understand the written code. To get it, you have to do lots of it. It can be comics, magazines, as well as novels, but you have to want to do it."

As an illustration of the importance of reading for pleasure, Michael told me about his collection of historic chapbooks – another potential island choice

"Chap probably means cheap. A penny sheet like this one, which was printed in about 1820 and tells the story of Tom Thumb, would have



to be folded and cut. The tradition of selling ballads and these books on the street was how people came to know poems and stories. It was often a means of becoming literate.

"There were chap books on religious stories, political and crime topics too. One of the pressures for mass education came from the hundreds of thousands of these already circulating. Later on, comics and newspapers took over their role."

Michael's books have amazing titles like *Mustard*, *Custard*, *Grumble Belly* and *Gravy*. What child could fail to love reading that?

With all his children's books, TV programmes and his regular visits to schools to enthuse the pupils with his love of poetry, he was a natural choice for Children's Laureate in 2007. He was the first poet to hold the post.

Michael has not avoided expressing forthright opinions. One of the issues he was confronted with, at that time, was the question of SATs tests for seven year olds. He gave an example from his own daughter's school.

"The teacher started talking to me about various marks," he said. "She started saying, 'level this' and 'attainment target that' and I had no idea what she was talking about.

"Then I said, 'well, how is Elsie getting on?' and we began to have a proper conversation.

"Testing does something to children, something to teachers, something to parents, something to the whole conversation about education. Love books and school will be a cinch – over-test children, sterilise the English language, and you only make it harder."

Michael is father of five children and two stepchildren. Nowadays, he lives in Dalston, Hackney, with his third wife Emma-Louise Williams and their two children.

The English Association gave his *Sad Book* an Exceptional Award for the Best Children's

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Exceptional Award for the Best Children's Illustrated Books of 2004, in the four-to-11 age range. It deals in part with bereavement, and followed the publication of *Carrying the Elephant: A Memoir of Love and Loss* which was published in November 2002, following the death of his son Eddie, who features as a child in much of his earlier poetry. Eddie died of meningitis aged 18.

I asked Michael if he thinks story can help children deal with traumatic issues like bereavement?

"I don't personally use the word 'help' but I can see why people do say that," he said. "I try to find words which acknowledge the fact that the reader or listener does a lot of work too! When we read and listen this is a process of interpretation and reflection. If stories 'help', it is because they are part of how people find it possible to help themselves.

"Stories carry ideas and feelings bound together and attached in some way to people, creatures and beings who we believe in. Because ideas and feelings are so intertwined, stories offer people many opportunities to think about how we could or should behave."

Michael's mastery of the art of storytelling has given him a unique role in the developing Story Museum in Rochester House in Pembroke Street.

"Oxford has been a crucible for some great stories and storytelling. As we know, Tolkien and C S Lewis were great scholars of literatures that were not written in modern English. They were linguists and philologists," Michael said.

"It interests me that those thousands of hours poring over the structure and meaning and history of words did result in part with them both coming up with their fantasies."

Have those imaginative outpourings from our city come together at the story museum?

"As far as I know there is nowhere in the world which celebrates story as a medium or process. There are many museums and places which celebrate, say, authors, or various kinds of 'telling' – illustration, theatre, film and so on.

"There are children's literature museums and indeed museums of or about culture. But 'story' as a concept covers every possible which way of narrating – anything from newspapers to paintings, folktales, novels, films, cartoons, gossip, memoir, narrative poetry and so on. Now with this in mind, how might a place celebrate this diversity? That's precisely what the staff at The Story Museum are thinking about right now!" he added.

"My role is to help construct what we call the 1001 Stories Project. This is a resource not just of great stories but a way of thinking about how narrative works in many different ways in our lives.

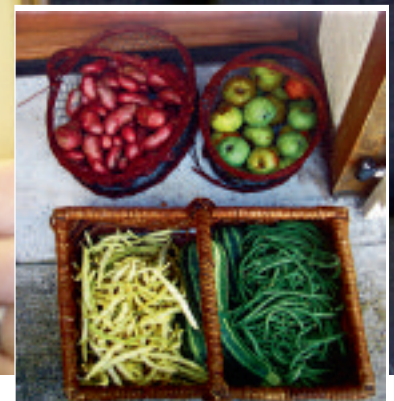
"When we watch, say, the *X-Factor* we are told we are looking at a talent show, but in fact, we are looking at a set of carefully constructed stories about rags-to-riches, or the redeemed villain or anti-hero, or the poor little posh girl.

"These are narratives embedded in our culture going back hundreds of years and are being 'told' under cover of something else. I hope The Story Museum would not only be a place where you hear, watch and make incredible stories, but it would also enable us to think about how story gets into everything."

We had come to the moment when Michael had to make a final choice of item to take to the desert island.



**Michael Rosen with woodcut purchased at a market in The Hague. Inset: the box of vegetables he found outside the family's house in France**




"When we married, Emma sold her house and bought a converted barn in the Limousin. We enjoy spending time there. One day we arrived to find a box of fruit and vegetables on the doorstep, left for us by neighbours. That kind of generosity happens all the time."

Michael took a photograph of its colourful arrangement – the veg is real but the photograph looks like a work of art.

Michael also suggested another item for his island: "Emma bought this woodcut in a fleamarket in the Hague. It is of a barefoot

chap with a stick and we love pictures of ordinary people going about their lives."

But finally he said: "I will take a poem.. Raymond Carver's poem about locking himself out of his room and then looking back into his room and not being able to see himself." 

■ To learn more about Michael's prodigious creative output visit the website: [www.michaelrosen.co.uk](http://www.michaelrosen.co.uk)

■ For more information about events at The Story Museum visit the website: [www.storymuseum.org](http://www.storymuseum.org)