

# HIGH PROFILES

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## **Michael Rosen**

The prolific writer (and former Children's Laureate) interviewed by ***Simon Jones*** at the Royal Festival Hall

10 February 2016

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# What Are We Doing Here?

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## Michael Rosen

is a prolific writer for children and a passionate defender of their interests. His poetry is generally light-hearted; his politics are anything but.

**Simon Jones** talked to him at length at the Royal Festival Hall.



PHOTOGRAPHY: ANDREW FIRTH

**You were Children's Laureate from 2007 to 2009 and have published more than 140 books for children. Do you remember the day you decided you wanted to be a 'children's writer'?**

I didn't, I got *captured*. In 1974, I was writing for adults about my childhood – as an adult, in the voice of a child, like James Joyce. I thought I was being terribly sophisticated and ironic. But when I tried to hawk this stuff to adult poetry publishers, they turned their noses up at it. In the end, a children's publisher took it on and then suddenly the children's book world took me in its big, hugging arms, in the way it does. It's not like the adult world at all. Instead of 'Who are you? You're a bit of a newcomer,' it's: 'Oh, here's an exciting new person and he wants to read his funny poems!'

So, suddenly [my poetry] wasn't ironic, it was: This is what my childhood was like. And I'm sitting in front of a thousand children going

*Down behind the dustbin  
I met a dog called Jim.  
He didn't know me  
And I didn't know him<sup>1</sup>*

– and they're going, 'Do more!'

### **Why were you so keen to write about your childhood?**

I wanted to try and get to the stuff that went on between me and my brother and my parents and my teachers – which is, for whatever reason, endlessly fascinating to me. Now, psychoanalysts would have a lot of fun with that. It's a form of regression, a form of 'playing out' (as they would put it).

### **Can you tell us about the kind of home you grew up in?**

My parents were what Hitler described as 'Jewish Communists'. They were teachers and we lived in Middlesex, though they had been brought up in the East End, which to me was a magical, mythical place, like Narnia. So, there we were, in a flat over a shop in Pinner with its suburban houses and parks and schools. My mum was at home there, but for my first 10 or 12 years in the world my dad felt really fish-out-of-waterish about it.

His mother was a rather extraordinary Bohemian-Communist working-class woman who was poverty-stricken because she had had polio. She basically sponged off her relatives so she could bring up her two kids – I've seen the house in Whitechapel, a tiny little two-up-two-down.

My mum came from a much more conventional background – her father worked in the *shmatte* trade, making boys' caps in a sweatshop, and her mother tried to start up little shops selling hats.

They were probably the only Jewish Communists for about 10 miles around. It was the height of the Cold War and friends would say odd things to us like 'Why don't you go and live in Russia?' and I'd think: 'I don't really *want* to go and live in Russia!'

### **Did you feel like a fish out of water yourself?**

There were times when I felt very different. A little boy at my first school said, 'My mum says you should come to synagogue,' so I did go for a while. My parents and my grandparents found this hysterically funny – I can see my grandfather, my *zeyde* as you would say in Yiddish, just weeping with laughter that his Communist daughter and son-in-law had let me go.

I dropped Judaism when I was about eight, because I got lost at Chessington Zoo and they shouted at me – you know the way children see these things. But then when I went to secondary school, suddenly I was surrounded by these Jewish boys who said: 'What *shul* do you go to? Are you going to be bar mitzvah'd?' I'd say to my dad, 'Harold, are you bar mitzvah'd?' – I didn't call him 'Dad', because they were Communists – and he just fell about laughing.

My parents were probably the only Jewish Communists for 10 miles around. Friends would say to us, 'Why don't you go and live in Russia?' and I'd think: 'I don't really *want* to...'

At that point in the arc of Jewish life for these boys, fashion was terribly important and they'd spend hours talking about the exact cut of trouser to wear. I didn't quite understand that. For me, what was much more important was that you went on the Aldermaston march.<sup>2</sup>

I ended up in Watford Grammar and there I was the only Jewish kid, and very aware of it now because suddenly there were boys making anti-Semitic jokes, which I'd never encountered before. They'd say, 'Where do you hide money from a Jew? Under a bar of soap!' and I'd go, 'Sorry? What?' It was just weird. I remember my parents saying, over and over again, 'We haven't got any money, because we spend it all on holidays.' (Not in Miami or something – we would go camping or youth-hostelling.)



I don't think any of them had quite seen something like me before and there was always this undercurrent of people going: 'What are you exactly?'

And then I played rugby, which didn't fit at all.

**Did you feel that your family had different values to everyone else?**

A lot of Jews say: We are Jews and there's a full stop at the end of that sentence. We are Jews, end of. What's good for us is good for Jews; what's good for Jews is good for us.

At some point, my parents had junked that, and they junked it for universalism – which they found in Marxism, or the form of adulterated Marxism that came out of the Soviet Union. They believed that the Soviet Union was a harbinger of [a world where] everyone was equal and all the rest of it.

For a variety of reasons, they left the Communist Party in 1957, the year I went to secondary school, but they – or we, in the way families work – decided they would still go on being socialists. I remember supporting the bus workers' strike [in 1958]. Merlyn Rees, who went on to become Labour Home Secretary, was a history teacher at my school and I remember going out electioneering for him and sticking leaflets through people's doors in the '59 election. I had a sense that that was different from most of the other kids in the school.

**How did those democratic, egalitarian values work out at home?**

My dad was very, very tough on my brother, who is four years older than me. (There was a child between us who died, who was hardly ever referred to.) My brother is brilliant, but you would have thought he was lazy and stupid. I can see myself, as a child, seeing my brother getting told off and my brother would then 'play out' these rows in our bedroom. Looking back on it now, I can see that by doing take-offs of my dad he was trying to rid himself of my dad's sort of oppressive presence in his head. I loved my dad dearly but I'm still quite disturbed that he behaved like that towards my brother.

It's even more problematic for me because he treated me differently. By the time I'm

going through the routine of exams and all that stuff, my brother has sort of battered down the fortress of my dad, so when my dad starts on me it's become a kind of pantomime. As he says, 'Michael, have you done your homework?', my brother's standing behind him going, 'Michael, have you done your homework?' And as my dad starts pointing, there's my brother pointing. And of course we just weep with laughter. And my dad realises that he can't sustain it, so he then takes the mickey out of himself. I feel so emotional about it now. My poor old brother has sort of taken the brunt of it and he's turned my dad, who was a crocodile with him, into a pussycat.

**So, your brother's 'playing out' brings us neatly back to your performances today.**

Yes. He played out in order to get some release and relief, and for me it has the same function. So, when I stand in front of children and I say, 'Never let me see you doing that again!', I can *feel* that I'm purging my dad out of my body through my prodding finger. I'm purging him, aren't I? [The early psychoanalyst] Melanie Klein used to do it with dolls. Well, I do it through me.

Or, I had a teacher who was *really* on my back for a year when it was 11-Plus – and it's still in me, the rage about the 11-Plus and all that.<sup>3</sup> So, I say: 'I had a teacher who was so strict, she wouldn't let you breathe in class. She'd say: "No breathing!"' Now, the kids have seen me doing that on the video<sup>4</sup> and so I get a whole school shouting: 'No breathing!' And in that moment the demon that is Miss Williams sort of fades from view, because there's 300 children all shouting with me: 'No breathing!'

A lot of it is purging.

**It seems to me that your memories of childhood are not about any grand narrative but about the interplay of different people's personalities.**

Yeah. I mean, there were grand narratives going on – like, in 1962, when I'd just gone into the Sixth Form, we suddenly got evicted from our flat because the Tories in their wisdom ended rent control and enabled landlords to just go in and boot people out. We ended up living in half of a very modest little cottage on the edge of Rickmansworth – it was basically two bedrooms and an outside toilet. I was incredibly angry – I had been *desperate* to move somewhere cool like Muswell Hill, where my friends in CND lived.

**You said that playing rugby 'didn't fit at all'. Because you can't play rugby if you're Jewish? Or if you're a Communist?**

Yeah. Or you can't be a Jewish Communist if you play rugby.

It is my experience in life that people think they've nailed one bit of you and then there's this other bit that they can't. I could name 30 places that I've been in in the last six months and in every one of them there's somebody going, 'What are *you* doing here?! I thought you were...' and they cite some other bit of my life. If you write poems, obviously you can't write stories; or if you write for children, you can't write for adults. People are very odd.

I've worked at the BBC on and off now since 1969 and I can be in the foyer of the BBC and

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a producer can come up to me and say: 'What are *you* doing here?' I don't understand it. Is it me? Me and my wife, we just pee ourselves laughing about it. We could be at the National Theatre and somebody comes up to me and says, 'What are *you* doing here?' and I go, 'Well, I'm seeing a play' and they go, '*Really?*' Or somebody will say to me, 'I saw you doing some funny poems on YouTube' and I go, 'Yeah?' and they go, 'Why d'you do that?' and I go, 'Well, I believe in making my poetry accessible.' And they're looking at me going, 'I thought you only wanted to talk about dialectics.' And so it goes on.

**Weren't you, in effect, fired by the BBC – for being a Communist?**

Yeah. They told me they thought it would be better if I went freelance. I only found out later it was because they thought I had dangerous, subversive views.



**Do you enjoy that feeling of surprising people?**

Not particularly. It nearly always makes me feel uneasy, actually.

The idea that you can be catholic, or universalistic, about culture, politics, food, whatever, runs counter to a lot of the way people think. People are more comfortable being tribal, sectarian, factional, even when they're quite nice about it – you know, 'I'm *this*, you're *that*, so I'm not the same as you – but, you know, let's get on.' Which is fine – I'm quite happy with that. But if you say, 'Well, actually I'm quite like you,' that sometimes makes people feel slightly threatened, because they've worked so hard to be who they are and to be identified within a certain 'room' in their lives.

**Isn't that the British model of assimilation, that everyone should live here in their own way in their own subculture – whereas in France one is French first and foremost?**

I think that's what they're trying to do now, isn't it? In every primary school I go into, there's a big wall that says 'British values'. And I look at this stuff and I think: Well, they're values but they ain't British. All of that lovely stuff about tolerance and justice and the rule of law – well, yeah, but not for everybody and not all the time!

You can see that our rulers are trying to work out a new model of integration, but of course they always talk as if there is a sort of core, to do with the Monarchy and Parliament and [other] institutions – which nearly always involve the institutions that *they've* succeeded in – and that that is the sort of true nature of British society. Whereas my experience is, if you're going to talk about a culture common to people in the different parts and different layers of British society, you're really pushing it beyond the fact that most of us are mutually intelligible speaking English.

You know, I travel on the Tube all the time and I often look around and try to guess where people are from originally, them or their parents. I kind of listen in – are they speaking Polish, or is that Russian? And is that Igbo? I mean, it's incredible, really. Of course, you then get Nigel Farage turning that into some sort of cause for complaint.



If you said to me, ‘What are you, Michael?’, I’d say I’m a Londoner, because I’ve lived nearly all my life in London. I never see myself as particularly English or particularly British, unless I go abroad – and then people start saying: ‘So, Prince Charles is getting married again!’ Because they immediately assume that you follow the Royal Family, like, every second of their lives, you know? And you go: ‘Well, no, that’s not me. I’d be quite happy to live in a republic like you.’ And they go, ‘No!’

**You turned down an OBE, didn’t you?**

Am I allowed to say that? Yes, I did, yeah. How hypocritical would it be for me to say: ‘I am a republican – Michael Rosen OBE?’

**Do you have any sympathy with someone who loves the country or culture they’ve inherited but is fearful of losing it to immigration?**

I have every sympathy, but I would want to say that what we’ve been taught about migration is false – and this is absolutely fundamental. Let’s not just talk about people, let’s talk about the wealth that we create. Vast amounts of it get shipped [out of the country]. The whole crisis that we hit in 2008 was because our banks, in their infinite wisdom, took our money and invested it in dodgy stuff, OK? And the consequence has been, to use the words of a Tory minister, misery for millions. OK? Now, I call that ‘migration’, OK? That’s *our* stuff that’s been migrated and we have had to compensate for it through taxation, through [quantitative easing] and now through austerity – you know, cuts: cutting libraries, cutting schools...

So, I say: As long as wealth can migrate, then people can migrate. That’s my bottom line.

**It’s clear that you have embraced your parents’ values as your own...**

Fundamentally, I do believe in that universalistic emancipation, that nobody is better or worse than anybody else on account of how they are born and how they are made and that we have to come up with some system that treats all people equally and dishes out justice fairly. The world will destroy itself [otherwise].

Humanism tells me that this [world] is all we’ve got. There is no heaven, no supernatural being of any sort whatsoever. There’s nowhere else for us to go. We have the resources of ourselves and, broadly speaking, nature – that’s to say, the materials of the Earth – and that is it. My view is that collectively we have to work out the best way to distribute those [resources], to use our productive capacities for the benefit of everybody. That’s the core.

I look around and I see people of my generation who discovered [these values] through Bob Dylan or the counterculture, or else they found themselves working in a local authority or a school or a factory and, seeing and feeling the daily reality, have come to similar conclusions. For some of them, it was like an epiphany (to use a Christian word) – there was a moment when they felt: ‘Hang on a minute!’ And sometimes people say to me, ‘When did *you* discover all this stuff?’ And I go: ‘Well, it was slightly different for me – I think it was in my mother’s milk!’

**Do you think you would have adopted the values you have if you hadn’t (as you put it) imbibed them in your mother’s milk? I’m asking because I know you are**

Nobody is better or worse than anybody else and we have to come up with some system that treats all people equally. The world will destroy itself otherwise

**an advocate of widening children's horizons in their schooling and (for example) including humanism and atheism in religious education.**

Well, I believe that the more we expose ourselves to ideas that are new and interesting, and sometimes alien to us, the better we get to understand the world and the better we are able to deal with many of the contradictions and inequalities that face us. And my view is that you can arrive at these universalistic and egalitarian ideas from all sorts of positions. You can be Hindu, you can be Muslim, you can be Christian, you can be Jewish, you can be not religious – I'm not going to put any preconditions on it.

**A lot of literature for children implicitly expresses the values of the right, but why does it seem to be only left-wing writers who promote their values explicitly?**

There are some children's writers – I won't name names – who, broadly speaking, have a right-wing viewpoint, but there is a sense that children's literature is kind of progressive in that it's a form of emancipation, a form of development. If you go back to the origins of children's literature with the Puritans, the whole point was that you were saving children from the devil. And improvement remains at the heart of children's books.



Also, we believe in the emancipatory role of literature itself, so that, in the act of interpreting, the child has a sense of him- or herself as having power, having agency. The reason why we oppose so much of what the Government does in relation to literature is because it deprives the child of agency. Last night, I sat with my 11-year-old doing a comprehension exercise on *Night Mail* by W H Auden (which came out of a radical tradition, that a postal worker has dignity and does a good thing for society):

*This is the night mail crossing the Border,  
Bringing the cheque and the postal order...*

And we sat there, me and my son, ruining that poem. The first question was: What is the idea of this poem? And he said, 'The rhythm of the train.' Do you know what? That's



wrong. He'd have got no marks for that, because the 'idea' of the poem (for what it's bloody worth) is that it is a poem about a train taking letters from London to Glasgow. The rhythm of the train is the poem's 'technique', which is what you're supposed to write about in question five!

This is the awful, mind-numbing crap that I had to do with my son, not to help him but to help the school avoid getting taken over by some huckster who runs an academy chain. At the end of it, he hated the poem and he probably hated me as well. Do you know what he said at one point? He said: 'Yeah, but what's the *answer*, Dad? You're just guessing.' I said: 'Well, it's poetry. It is guessing.' And he just looked at me as if to say, 'What an idiot my dad is! He thinks it's just guessing.'

Of course, there is a strand that runs through children's literature that isn't improving. Take the *Beano*: Dennis the Menace does naughty stuff, has the hell beaten out of him and you open the *Beano* the next week and he does exactly the same. He is utterly irremediable. So, there is a kind of anarchic element that runs through children's books that is neither right nor left, and some of us have inherited that tradition, me included.

#### **You obviously really like children...**

Yes.

#### **What have you learnt about them from writing so many books for them?**

One of the crucial things it's taught me is that children are in a power structure. We always describe it as love and care and nurture, but a lot of the humour of children's books – think of Roald Dahl, think of 'Horrid Henry' – is because they engage with it as power. Quite often, it's a bit awkward to talk about that when we write about children's books because we have to look at ourselves as parents. I'm a parent and, just like everybody else does, I've parented really badly [as well as] maybe sometimes quite well. And part of that is because there have been times when I haven't figured out this power thing, how you enact it.

We say, 'We really love kids!', then do a lot of kid-hating things – you know, controlling, containing, punishing, telling them they're not good enough, basically

#### **Once you become a parent, you realise that there is a hierarchy of importance in our society and that children are clearly at the bottom of it.**

Yes, indeed. I suppose we've got this awful dichotomy between saying, 'Aah, we really love kids!' and then actually doing a lot of kid-hating things – you know, controlling, containing, punishing, telling them they're not good enough, basically. Most of education actually involves telling the majority of kids they're not good enough. I mean, sometimes it's so naked what they are doing, sorting sheep from goats (as they see it) – and they're using literature, the thing that we think is emancipatory, in order to do it.

#### **Have you seen children change, for better or worse, over your lifetime?**

I think I've seen parents change. I've seen them being more anxious, more blinkered – I mean, blinkers have been put on them, so they think that there isn't time to read books, there isn't time to talk, there isn't time to go to museums and stuff, because what we've got to do is do these pre-test test booklets. You see them in bookshops walking past Michael Morpurgo, Shirley Hughes, Malorie Blackman – never mind all that, let's get to the spinner with *Teach Yourself Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar!*

The Government is telling us that the fate of the nation rests on this because we are 123rd in the international table of people who can do punctuation, and we're supposed to go: 'Oh, my God! We're *that* low?' No one says: Does it matter? Does the fate of British capitalism really rest on whether your kid knows where to put a bloody comma?



**Do you think the politicians are just wrong-headed, or what?**

They're trying to create a system that gives knowledge to the unknowledgeable – that's how they see it. But they're then the victims of their own ideology, because the only system they can think of is a system of tests and exams that has failure built into it, because they have a bell curve and they pre-decide how many will pass and how many will fail. When I was at school, my teacher stood in the middle of the classroom and said: 'Everybody on this side will pass, everyone on this side will fail.' So, even as they think they're liberating children by creating this new, 'knowledge-based' curriculum, they're separating sheep and goats. And they're doing it from five years old – well, four now, with baseline testing.

And then they've got a double bind, which works like this: they say, 'Anyone can pass this exam,' not 'Everyone can pass this exam.' So, you go into the exam – your teachers have done everything they can – and you fail. Whose fault is it? It's yours. Very clever people from [the Secretary of State] downwards have said: 'This is the most perfect way we can assess you.' So, the only person responsible for your failing is you. You're not even armed with a critical apparatus to say that the system is crap.

Luckily, I was. For better or for worse, my parents would describe and demolish the 11-Plus and the GCSE system even as I was doing them.

**If the system is so oppressive, why do you think people put up with it?**

I fundamentally believe that our parenting and our [schooling] convince a majority of people that they are not good enough to take collective action to better society, or strong enough to oppose what's going on. And the exam system embeds in our minds that if

you're no good it's your fault, and people become absorbed in trying to deal with the fact they are 'not good enough'.

I mean, I'm a very arrogant, egotistical sort of person at some levels myself, but I often catch myself saying I can't sing. Well, actually I'm not bad. So, why do I say it?

**As a Christian, I believe that every child is made in the image of God and my worldview requires me to want the best for every one...**

Yeah, I like that. I've often encountered that when I go to Catholic schools and in the staff rooms people talk in those terms. In other schools, it's all about how this child has failed at this and this child hasn't done that – and I'm not blaming the teachers, I'm really not, because they're worried. But there's still something inside Catholic teachers – anyway, that I've met – that says that these children are valid as human beings. And as a humanist I feel that that's the essential starting-point. What can these children do, and how can we bring them on?

Obviously Catholics will say they are 'made in the image of God' and I'll just say 'made'.

**What is your take, as a humanist, on human nature? Are we essentially good?**

I am always very reluctant to be tied down on this, because I think the very term is a bit dodgy. When you say, 'What is human nature?', I just say: 'Us.' What I mean is that human beings are the human beings created within the societies that we live in. We can never get away from that. There's nowhere round behind us, nowhere else for us to be.

So, if you ask me, 'What are you?', I will say: I am the product of my circumstances but also the person who has reflected on those circumstances and acted on them. So, I'm both acted on and an agent. Yes? We are all both created and creators.

**That's broadly existentialist, isn't it?**

Right. The only problem with existentialism is that it tends to demote history. If you're a *pure* existentialist, your argument is that you just act on the world as it is; but I see that everybody around me bears the marks of the people who came before them. You know, I was born in 1946 [into a society] scarred by everything that happened – and finished – in 1945, and all sorts of aspects of my life are to do with events that preceded it.

So, we are born into a society not of our making and we take our positions within it and in response to it. In that sense, I am a historical existentialist.

**You're also an optimist, aren't you?**

Oh, absolutely! We are created within the world that we arrive in – and then we create a new world.

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1 See [bit.ly/2aKWkA6](http://bit.ly/2aKWkA6).

2 The first march, from London to the Atomic Weapons Establishment in Aldermaston, was in 1958.

3 The 11-Plus exam was essentially a form of intelligence test that was used throughout England and Wales from 1944 to 1976 to decide which type of secondary school each child should attend.

4 [bit.ly/2aGqLG0](http://bit.ly/2aGqLG0)

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## Biography

**Michael Rosen** was born in 1946 and educated at Harrow Weald County Grammar School and, latterly, Watford Grammar School for Boys. In 1965, he began training at Middlesex Hospital Medical School, but he quit after a year to do a degree in English at Wadham College, Oxford. He gained an MA in children's literature from Reading University in 1993 and a PhD from the University of North London in 1997.

His first literary success came in 1969 when his play *Backbone* was staged at the Royal Court in London and won the *Sunday Times*/National Union of Students Drama Festival Award.

In the same year, he joined the BBC as a graduate trainee, presenting a series on Schools TV called *Walrus* and writing scripts for *Sam on Boff's Island*. He was effectually sacked in 1972 and has worked freelance ever since. He has presented *Word of Mouth* on Radio 4 since 1996.

His first book of poetry, *Mind Your Own Business*, was published in 1974 with illustrations by Quentin Blake, who was to become a regular collaborator. Scores of books and anthologies followed, including *You Tell Me* with Roger McGough (1979); *You Can't Catch Me* (1981), which won the 1982 Signal Poetry Award; *We're Going on a Bear Hunt*, illustrated by Helen Oxenbury (1989), which won the Smarties Grand Prize among many other awards; *Michael Rosen's Sad Book* (2004), which won an Exceptional Award from the English Association; and the autobiography *All About Me* (2008). His most recent output includes *The Bus is for Us*, *Uncle Gobb and the Dread Shed*, *Don't Forget Tiggs!*, *Mad in the Back* and *Don't Mention the Children* (all 2015) and *What's So Special about Shakespeare?* (2016).

For adults, he has written *Carrying the Elephant: A memoir of love and loss* (2002), *This Is Not My Nose: A memoir of illness and recovery* (2004) and *In the Colonie* (2005).

He served as Children's Laureate from 2007 to 2009.

He has taught children's literature as a visiting professor at Birkbeck, University of London, London Metropolitan University and Middlesex University, and since 2014 has been professor of children's literature at Goldsmiths.

He stood unsuccessfully as a Respect Coalition candidate for the London Assembly in 2004. He has been a columnist for *Socialist Worker*, and contributed poems to the collections *Emergency Verse: Poetry in defence of the welfare state* (2011) and *Poets for Corbyn* (2015).

He has won many awards, including the 1997 Eleanor Farjeon Award, a Sony Radio Academy Silver Award in 2001 and a Gold Award in 2003. He has honorary doctorates from Exeter, Nottingham Trent and Worcester Universities, the Institute of Education, University of London, the University of East London, the Open University and the University of the West of England.

In 2008, he was made a Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres.

He has been married three times and has five children and two stepchildren.

*Up-to-date as at 3 August 2016*