



# Christmas Present: A New Dogger

By *AndreaMReece*

Created Nov '20

Article Author:

[Nicolette Jones](#) [1]

[245](#) [2]

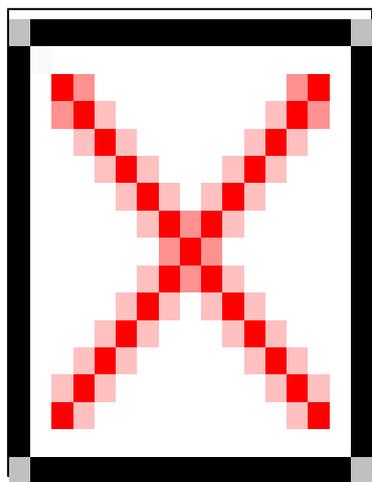
Article Category:

Featured author

Byline:

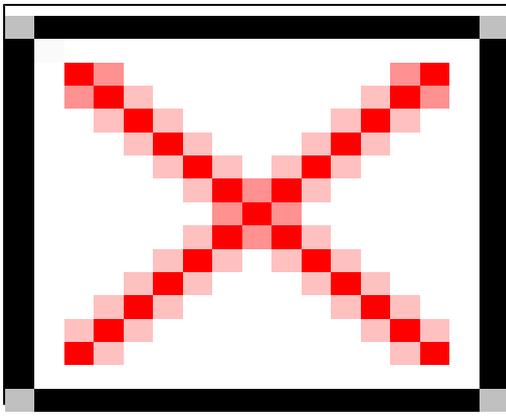
**Shirley Hughes** interviewed by **Nicolette Jones**

Forty-three years ago, Dave lost Dogger. His sister Bella, arguably the kindest character in children's literature, made a sacrifice to put everything right. This all happened in Shirley Hughes's picturebook, **Dogger**, about a lost toy, voted the public's favourite winner from 50 years of the **Kate Greenaway Medal** for illustration. And now, Dogger is back to make the season festive. **Nicolette Jones** interviewed **Shirley Hughes** about **Dogger's Christmas**.



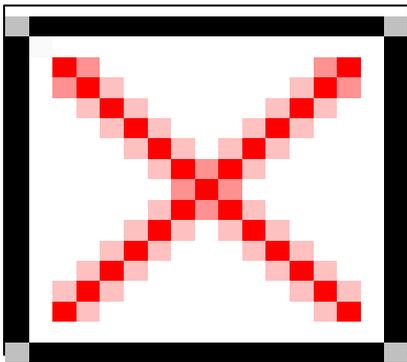
**Dogger's Christmas** is, in the spirit of the first Dogger book, full of kindnesses - of people doing things for each other: Dad cleaning the rabbit hutch, the family visiting the elderly neighbour, children greeting their grandparents, with faces full of delight. It is about a child's small drama, but also more broadly about how Christmases should be.

On a sunny autumn day on her front path Shirley Hughes showed me Dogger, cupping his brown plush body with one ear permanently upright from being pressed against Hughes's son Ed Vulliamy's cheek when he was little. It amused me that if you pull that ear down it springs straight back up again.



Dogger was originally a Christmas present, in 1959, from Great Uncle Hugh. He has been exhibited in galleries from the Walker in Shirley's native Liverpool to the V & A, and his whereabouts have always been known. But the inspiration for the story came from two losses: of a teddy bear of Ed's in Holland Park (near where Hughes still lives), and of a koala called Oscar that Shirley tossed out the window of a car on a whim as a child, and who could not be found when she finally confessed her folly.

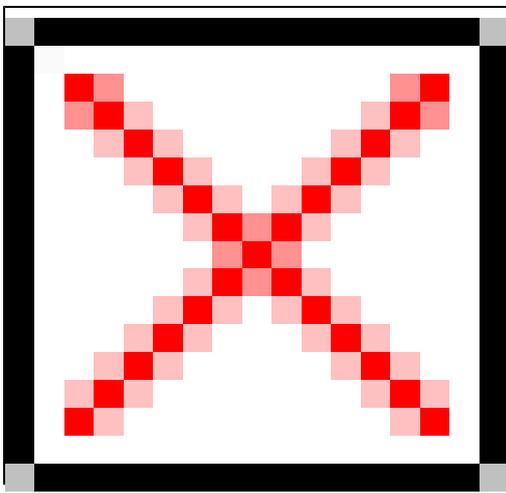
I talked to Shirley the same way her family has since lockdown began: from a chair half way down the path, while she sat smiling in her doorway. At 93, she looked well and cheerful, her clothes slightly bohemian, white hair ingeniously pinned up, stick within reach (relict of a fall in the autumn). Throughout the first lockdown, and since, she had been isolated.



Family (at a distance), work and the front path have sustained her. She spends mornings in her studio, and already, as **Dogger's Christmas** came out, was working on the next: **Alfie's Bedtime**, a story-within-a-story about how children resist going to sleep. In the afternoon she walks a block or two, supported by a wheeled shopper (which she calls 'my pushy thing'), asking for space as she goes along: 'People are very kind'. She feels fortunate. She worries more about families with children in small flats.

There are no mobiles or IT in Shirley's picturebooks, nor in her possession. Her late husband John, who died in 2007, learnt to use a computer and wrote a memoir of his life on it, but she declined, thinking she would be a bother to her family whenever she had a problem with it: 'I knew that I would be on the phone all the time to my son-in-law saying: 'Mark, I think I pressed the wrong key.' Shirley relies on the landline for contact with friends, and with her editor.

Shirley's own childhood was privileged but not idyllic. Her father was the founder of the department store T J Hughes, after starting out with a small draper's shop, but he died when she was very young. And the war brought deprivations for Shirley and her two sisters. 'My mother turned from a leisured lady with tea being brought to her in the garden by a maid, to a hard-pressed woman wearing an overcoat indoors because there was no heating, trying to make something over the gas stove, and eke out rations. It was very spartan.' We speculate about whether the bereavement fixed early childhood in her memory. 'Whether people's memories get clicked into a time because something happened I don't know ... ?



As a child, she says, 'I wasn't a great reader, but I was a great looker. My visual thing was looking at picturebooks.' She loved the detail of Arthur Rackham, and colour plates by Edmund Dulac with a piece of tissue paper over them, and *The Adventures of Mary Plain*. She drew a lot, and 'made endless paper dolls with dresses with tabs. Time was much more lavish in those days because we didn't have the telly. We listened to children's hour on the radio with Uncle Mac.'

Another early influence was the narrative painting at the Walker Art Gallery, such as *When Did You Last See Your Father?* 'The Royalists were the goodies. You knew very well that dad was hiding in a passage somewhere, with the little boy having to face the Puritans. Or *The Fisherman's Wife* looking sadly out the window and the man hasn't returned with the fleet. I grew up with pictures that told stories. I loved those.' (She advocates looking at one or two pictures when you take children to a gallery, and then keeping the postcards on the fridge.)

Shirley studied fashion drawing at Liverpool Art School, with other girls who were 'just waiting for that engagement ring on the finger' and with demobbed servicemen doing commercial art, with extraordinary skill. 'They were slick as hell'.

She remembers the misery of going to hops. 'When there was a dance the boys went round one way and the girls went round the other and when the music stopped they danced with the person opposite. There was a great shuffling and shouldering aside opposite Joan Bretherton. But,' she says with a humorous grimace, 'nobody was shouldering in towards Shirley Hughes.' Then she mimes a bit of disco dancing: 'It was such a good idea when everyone was allowed to just get up and go like this'.

At the **Ruskin School** of art in Oxford ('a much worse art school than Liverpool?'), she learnt lithography and, fortunately, how to do colour separations, which turned out to be her passport to publication, after trailing her portfolio round the offices of publishers. 'People would turn your folder over like this [turning her head away, and miming turning pages over] while talking to their secretaries, and tell you to leave your name and number.'

Now, her illustrations draw on a mental repertoire compiled in later years by filling sketchbooks with observations of how children look and stand and move. And her proudest achievement is having taught children to look. 'I want children to go leisurely through my books, to scrutinise. To turn back and look back, to slow down. To wander round the image. And when they have learnt to look, make sure it doesn't get lost in the pressure to learn to read.'

It is important to her to use the form of the book. 'With a double page spread you have to either pretend it doesn't exist or use it in some way - my most successful use was for **Alfie Gets in First**. So that the not-yet-reader can see ahead of the text how Alfie is solving the problem. I love the idea of the gutter if you can use it.'

When I ask Shirley what the hardest thing has been for her about lockdown, it seemed it was not being alone. Solitude is not new to her. She remembers the loneliness of living in a bedsit when she first came to London, and was trying to make a career. She says instead: Not being able to see the great-grandchildren, both still under two: the 'amazingly determined' Lena, and Gabriel 'who lies about giggling'. But then she adds: 'And everybody not being able to move about as they like. Even if I don't do it. If only everyone else could. It's very hard on the young.'

Her feeling for other people's plight during the pandemic has been conspicuous throughout our conversation. 'It's not so bad for me,' she says. And she asks me how it has all been for my family. Her lifetime's concern for others has also manifested itself in topical actions. She has recently added her name to a petition expressing love and support for trans people, and to another decrying the denial of free school meals for needy children in the holidays.

As we chat, the postman on the path next door calls 'Nothing today!?', like a cheery character out of one of Shirley's books, and I like the world more, seeing it through her eyes.

Like many of us, Shirley is not sure yet how her own Christmas will be spent, but says with confidence: 'Clara [her daughter] will think of something.' Meanwhile **Dogger's Christmas** is the one we all hope we can have.

**Nicolette Jones**, writer, literary critic and broadcaster, has been the children's books reviewer of the **Sunday Times** for more than two decades.

**Dogger's Christmas** is published by Bodley Head, 978-1782300809, £12.99 hbk.

Page Number:

18

---

**Source URL (retrieved on Sep '21):** <http://www.w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/245/childrens-books/articles/featured-author/christmas-present-a-new-dogger>

**Links:**

[1] <http://www.w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/nicolette-jones>

[2] <http://www.w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/245>