

# An interview with...

SCHOLASTIC

## Brian Patten



PHOTOGRAPH BY STEVE TANNER

Brian Patten firmly believes in the power of performance and has travelled all over the world to give poetry readings.

### How were you taught poetry at school?

We were not taught poetry at school. I remember only two poems; one was by Keats and began 'Old Meg she was a gypsy, and lived out on the moor'. I liked it because it reminded me of an old person I knew.

There was one special teacher who told us stories and he inspired me to write. He is a teacher in a poem of mine called 'Geography Lesson'.

### Are there any famous people, particularly famous writers, who have also inspired you?

There are no special poets, just special poems which I love. Although, when I was 15, I was fascinated by a young French poet called Arthur Rimbaud who gave up writing when he was 20 years old and became, amongst other things, a gun trader in Africa.

I love the simplicity of the Robert Frost poem 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening'.

### How do you organise your writing? Do you have a particular time when you work?

For some reason, I usually settle down best to write at 4pm, but I spend a lot of time in between writing moaning about never writing again; then suddenly I can write constantly for weeks on end. Then it all stops again.

### At school, children are encouraged to draft their ideas for poems, to review their work and rewrite – more than once if necessary. Is this how you work? How do you know when you are completely happy with a poem?

I do rewrite. It is useful speaking your poem out loud (and even maybe getting someone else to). You usually find that you stumble over the bits of the poem that do not flow.

I can rewrite a poem twice – or 22 times – usually three or four times is best.



Brian Patten is one of the nation's most popular poets. His collections of poetry for children – which include the appealingly titled *Gargling With Jelly*, *Juggling with Gerbils* and *Thawing Frozen Frogs* – feature a delightful blend of the humorous and the serious.

With many of his poems covering topics like family, school life and pets, his work seems to hit just the right note with his young audiences.

Here, in an exclusive interview, Brian speaks of his inspiration for, and his approach to, his writing for children.

But it can simply be one line that is always wrong, not the whole poem.

### Which modern-day children's poets' work do you particularly enjoy?

Charles Causley. He is dead now, although I always believe a poet is alive as long as his or her work is. I also like the poems of Michael Rosen. He's wonderful!

### What kind of book would you choose to take on holiday?

A mystery novel.

### What do you enjoy most about going on tour and reading your poems on stage?

It keeps the poems alive and makes me want to write more.



The fantastic Mrs Beppo, from Brian Patten's novel *The Story Giant*.

ILLUSTRATION OF MRS BEPPO FROM THE STORY GIANT © CHRIS RIDDELL (2001, HARPERCOLLINS)