

# Literacy Time

## PLUS+

Author Profile

## DAVID PARKINS

**On 19 September 1998, Dennis the Menace had a baby sister. Her arrival brought to a climax a series of events which had been unfolding, week by week, in the famous children's comic strip *Dennis the Menace and Gnasher*.**

Dennis had become increasingly suspicious while his mother had been expecting this new baby. He couldn't understand why she was feeling sick all the time, and why his father seemed unusually happy. And they wouldn't tell him what was going on. Dennis was so angry at being kept in the dark that he refused to appear in one week's issue of the comic. He came back to a big surprise: the arrival of a new baby sister.

These were memorable days in the life of *The Beano*, the comic in which *Dennis the Menace and Gnasher* appeared. Not only was the comic celebrating its 60th birthday, but these were also the first Dennis the Menace cartoon strips drawn by an artist new to the team: David Parkins.

David made his mark in more ways than one on this famous comic strip and its well-loved characters. It was his idea to name Dennis' new sister Bea (short for Beatrice),



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which he chose because it echoed the name *Beano* (especially when her mother is heard shouting “Bea! No!”), as well as the yellow and black striped romper suit which she wore when he first drew her.

For many people, being an illustrator for *The Beano* would be success enough. But for David Parkins’ this has been only one part of a hugely successful career in publishing, which has seen him illustrating countless picture books, fiction and poetry books and text books for children, and political cartoons, magazines and newspapers for adults.

### Getting started

David was born in Brighton in Sussex, although his family moved to Grantham in Lincolnshire when he was about six years old. He attended Spitalgate CE Primary School and went on to The King’s Grammar School, where he gained a certain notoriety by drawing caricatures of the teachers.

Surprisingly, although David spent nearly all his spare time drawing, he didn’t study art at secondary school until Year 11, when he attended an after-school art class. After leaving school, David spent a year at Dyfed College of Art in Carmarthen, doing Wildlife Illustration; then he went on to Lincoln College of Art for 3 years.

He left art college in 1978 and began his career producing illustrations for educational publishers. “Effectively,” he explains, “I drew the little pictures you



get in school textbooks. Maths, English, geography, French, German, history... you name it, I probably did an illustration in a book about it somewhere.”

And then, of course, along came the work for the publishers of *The Beano*. He drew Dennis the Menace (not to be confused with the American character of the same name) until recently, when his other illustration work made it difficult to keep producing three pages of comic strip a week, and he decided to stop. However, David still illustrates their annual covers and the odd strip occasionally. He admits, “Nothing I do earns me as much ‘kid cred’ as working for *The Beano*. Nothing! Sad, isn’t it?”

### From Prowlpuss to politics

In children’s books, David’s illustrations have complimented the words of some of the very best authors. His picture books include *No*

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*Problem* and *Tick Tock* by Eileen Browne, *Prowlpu* by Gina Wilson and *Webster J Duck* by Martin Waddell (all Walker Books) as well as the stunning *Gilgamesh* by Geraldine McCaughrean (OUP). In fiction he has brought to life the pages of *Nothing To Be Afraid Of* by Jan Mark (Kestrel Books), and *Dodos Are Forever* (Viking Kestrel) by the fabulous Dick King-Smith as well as stories by authors like Sally Grindley and Penelope Lively.

Demonstrating his range, David has also illustrated for the science journal *NATURE*, the *Times Higher Education Supplement* and the *Times Educational Supplement* – he has illustrated Morris Simpson's Diary for almost ten years. And his political cartoons make a frequent appearance on the pages of *The Guardian*.

Then there are his illustrations for poetry collections by John Cuncliffe, Paul Cookson, David Harmer and Nick Toczek.



### It's the 'little things'

Paul Cookson, who is currently *Literacy Time PLUS* Poet-in-residence and has collaborated with David on numerous projects, told us: "I first met him at a school in Lincoln

and we've been friends ever since. When I was still a part-time teacher I invited him in to my school to do a cartoon workshop and he was brilliant with the kids – showed them how to draw cartoon faces (showed me, too – in fact I regularly use that workshop in my own school visits)."

Paul continued: "What I love about David's work is that it makes me laugh. I love the detail, the little things. Also, as a poet I know I can trust David to bring out the best in the poem in his artwork. I don't think I've ever been disappointed with his interpretation of my words – he doesn't just get it right but adds to the poem and compliments it ... brings it to life. I always think that my own books are much better for having David's work in them. While I love *The Beano* styles, what is really great about David is his versatility and range: he can do anything – the clever clogs!

"I remember once going round to his house and he was drawing a picture of Dennis The Menace. He let me draw a



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blob of jelly on the original artwork. So, I've contributed to the cover of *The Beano*! How cool is that? Anyone who lets you do that has got to be all right!"

### Life beyond the page

"The trouble with being an illustrator," says David, "is this: you rarely get to move away from the drawing board. So not a huge lot happens worth writing about."

But when quizzed more deeply, David does, of course, have lots to talk about. He is married to Angie and has a stepdaughter, Lucy, a great stepson, Wills, and a daughter, Hattie. The family recently – along with their two cats, Bob and Beezer – moved from their home in Lincoln, in the UK, to Ontario in Canada – where, David claims, "they forced us to learn to ice-skate".

With the help of email and a high speed internet connection, David is able to continue to work for the same publishers in the UK, Canada and USA that he worked for before his family

left – although his schedule, he says, was "not so much disrupted as obliterated by the move".

### Inspiring young cartoonists

David's work started to appear in *Literacy Time PLUS* when Paul Cookson became the magazine's Poet-in-residence in July 2008. His black and white line drawings for poems like 'The Jumper Granny Knitted' and 'The King of All the Dinosaurs', and his bright and appealing covers for Paul's poetry collections, caught the editor's eye. So the *Literacy Time PLUS* team were delighted when David agreed to write and illustrate a specially commissioned poster explaining, in comic book style, how to 'Create a cartoon strip'.

"I just know that this resource is going to be a big hit in schools," says Editor Helen Watts. "It's a really fun, step-by-step introduction and I bet children will be itching to try producing some cartoon strips of their own. And I hope to be able to feature lots more of David's work in the future."



**Create a cartoon strip** appears in the November 2008 issue of *Literacy Time PLUS* **Ages 7 to 9** (No 62) and can be downloaded from the *Literacy Time PLUS* website. This resource is subscriber only.

More information about David Parkins and a complete list of his work can be found on his own website at [www.davidparkins.com](http://www.davidparkins.com)

