

Classic Poetry Series

Michael Rosen
- poems -

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Michael Rosen(7 May 1946)

a broadcaster, children's novelist and poet and the author of 140 books. He was appointed as the fifth Children's Laureate in June 2007, succeeding Jacqueline Wilson, and held this honour until 2009.

Family and early years

Michael Rosen was born in Harrow, London, the son of Connie Isakofsky and her husband Harold Rosen. The family background is Jewish, "from the Jewish East End tradition" as Rosen puts it. Rosen's father Harold (1919–2008) was born in Brockton, Massachusetts, in the United States to Communist parents and settled in the East End of London at the age of two, when his mother returned to the country of her birth. While a member of the Young Communist League he met Connie Isakofsky, his future wife and Michael Rosen's mother, in 1935. Harold was a secondary school teacher before becoming a professor of English at the Institute of Education, London, and Connie a primary school teacher before becoming a training college lecturer; she also broadcast for the BBC. Producing a programme featuring poetry, she persuaded her son to write for it, and used some of the material he submitted. Their ancestors came from Poland, Russia and Romania. Michael Rosen was brought up in Pinner, Middlesex, and went to various state schools in Pinner, Harrow, and then Watford Grammar School for Boys, and, having discovered the range of Jonathan Miller, thought: "Wouldn't it be wonderful to know all about science, and know all about art, and be funny and urbane and all that." Subsequently, in his own words:

... I went to Medical School, started on the first part of a medical training, jacked it in and went on to do a degree in English at Oxford University. I then worked for the BBC until they chucked me out and I have been a freelance writer, broadcaster, lecturer, performer ever since – that's to say since 1972. Most of my books have been for children, but that's not how I started out. ...

Sometime around the age of twelve and thirteen I began to get a sense that I liked writing, liked trying out different kinds of writing, I tried writing satirical poems about people I knew.

Career

After graduating from Wadham College, Oxford, in 1969, Rosen became a graduate trainee at the BBC. Among the work that he did while there in the 1970s was presenting a series on BBC Schools television called WALRUS (Write

And Learn, Read, Understand, Speak). He was also scriptwriter on the children's reading series Sam on Boff's Island. But Rosen found working for the corporation frustrating: "Their view of 'educational' was narrow. The machine had decided this was the direction to take. Your own creativity was down the spout."

Despite previously having made no secret of his radical politics he was asked to go freelance in 1972, though in practice he was sacked despite several departments of the BBC wishing to employ him. In common with the China expert and journalist Isabel Hilton among several others at this time, Rosen had failed the vetting procedures which were then in operation. This long-standing practice was only revealed in 1985.

In 1974 *Mind Your Own Business*, his first book of poetry for children, was published. In due course, Rosen established himself with his collections of humorous verse for children, including *Wouldn't You Like to Know*, *You Tell Me* and *Quick Let's Get Out of Here*.

Educationalist Morag Styles has described Rosen as "one of the most significant figures in contemporary children's poetry". He was, says Styles, one of the first poets "to draw closely on his own childhood experiences ... and to 'tell it as it was' in the ordinary language children actually use".

Rosen played a key role in opening up children's access to poetry: both through his own writing and with important anthologies such as *Culture Shock*. He was one of the first poets to make visits to schools throughout the UK and further afield in Australia, Canada and Singapore. His tours continue to enthuse and engage school children about poetry in the present. In 1993, he gained an M.A. in Children's Literature from the University of Reading; he also holds a Ph.D. from the University of North London.

He is also well established as a broadcaster presenting a range of documentary features on British radio. He is the presenter of BBC Radio 4's regular magazine programme *Word of Mouth* which looks at the English language and the way it is used.

The English Association has given Michael Rosen's *Sad Book* an Exceptional Award for the Best Children's Illustrated Books of 2004, in the 4–11 age range. The book was written by Michael Rosen and illustrated by Quentin Blake. 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 after the death of his son Eddie, who features as a child in much of his earlier poetry. In 2004, Rosen published *This Is Not My Nose: A Memoir of Illness and Recovery*,

an account of his ten years with undiagnosed hypothyroidism; a course of drugs in 1981 alleviated the condition.

Rosen has also been involved in campaigning around issues of education and for the Palestinian cause. He stood for election in June 2004 in London as a Respect Coalition candidate. He is also a supporter of the Republic campaign.

Rosen was the subject of the BBC Radio 4's Desert Island Discs programme on 6 August 2006.

Chocolate Cake

I love chocolate cake.
And when I was a boy
I loved it even more.

Sometimes we used to have it for tea
and Mum used to say,
'If there's any left over
you can have it to take to school
tomorrow to have at playtime.'
And the next day I would take it to school
wrapped up in tin foil
open it up at playtime
and sit in the corner of the playground
eating it,
you know how the icing on top
is all shiny and it cracks as you
bite into it,
and there's that other kind of icing in
the middle
and it sticks to your hands and you
can lick your fingers
and lick your lips
oh it's lovely.
yeah.

Anyway,
once we had this chocolate cake for tea
and later I went to bed
but while I was in bed
I found myself waking up
licking my lips
and smiling.
I woke up proper.
'The chocolate cake.'
It was the first thing
I thought of.

I could almost see it
so I thought,

what if I go downstairs
and have a little nibble, yeah?

It was all dark
everyone was in bed
so it must have been really late
but I got out of bed,
crept out of the door

there's always a creaky floorboard, isn't there?

Past Mum and Dad's room,
careful not to tread on bits of broken toys
or bits of Lego
you know what it's like treading on Lego
with your bare feet,

yowwww
shhhhhhh

downstairs
into the kitchen
open the cupboard
and there it is
all shining.

So I take it out of the cupboard
put it on the table
and I see that
there's a few crumbs lying about on the plate,
so I lick my finger and run my finger all over the crumbs
scooping them up
and put them into my mouth.

ooooooooommmmmmmmm

nice.

Then
I look again
and on one side where it's been cut,
it's all crumbly.

So I take a knife
I think I'll just tidy that up a bit,
cut off the crumbly bits
scoop them all up
and into the mouth

oooooommm mmmm
nice.

Look at the cake again.

That looks a bit funny now,
one side doesn't match the other
I'll just even it up a bit, eh?

Take the knife
and slice.
This time the knife makes a little cracky noise
as it goes through that hard icing on top.

A whole slice this time,

into the mouth.

Oh the icing on top
and the icing in the middle
ohhhhhh oooo mmmmmm.

But now
I can't stop myself
Knife -
I just take any old slice at it
and I've got this great big chunk
and I'm cramming it in
what a greedy pig
but it's so nice,

and there's another
and another and I'm squealing and I'm smacking my lips
and I'm stuffing myself with it
and

before I know
I've eaten the lot.
The whole lot.

I look at the plate.
It's all gone.

Oh no
they're bound to notice, aren't they,
a whole chocolate cake doesn't just disappear
does it?

What shall I do?

I know. I'll wash the plate up,
and the knife

and put them away and maybe no one
will notice, eh?

So I do that
and creep creep creep
back to bed
into bed
doze off
licking my lips
with a lovely feeling in my belly.
Mmmmrnmmmm.

In the morning I get up,
downstairs,
have breakfast,
Mum's saying,
'Have you got your dinner money?'
and I say,
'Yes.'
'And don't forget to take some chocolate cake with you.'
I stopped breathing.

'What's the matter,' she says,
'you normally jump at chocolate cake?'

I'm still not breathing,
and she's looking at me very closely now.

She's looking at me just below my mouth.
'What's that?' she says.
'What's what?' I say.

'What's that there?'
'Where?'
'There,' she says, pointing at my chin.
'I don't know,' I say.
'It looks like chocolate,' she says.
'It's not chocolate is it?'

No answer.

'Is it?'

'I don't know.'

She goes to the cupboard
looks in, up, top, middle, bottom,
turns back to me.

'It's gone.

It's gone.

You haven't eaten it, have you?'

'I don't know.'

'You don't know. You don't know if you've eaten a whole
chocolate cake or not?

When? When did you eat it?'

So I told her,

and she said

well what could she say?

'That's the last time I give you any cake to take
to school.

Now go. Get out

no wait

not before you've washed your dirty sticky face.'

I went upstairs

looked in the mirror

and there it was,

just below my mouth,

a chocolate smudge.

The give-away.

Maybe she'll forget about it by next week.

Michael Rosen

Down Behind The Dustbin

Down behind the dustbin

I met a dog called Ted.

'Leave me alone,' he says,

'I'm just going to bed.'

Down behind the dustbin

I met a dog called Roger.

'Do you own this bin?' I said.

'No. I'm only a lodger.'

Down behind the dustbin

I met a dog called Sue.

'What are you doing here?' I said.

'I've got nothing else to do.'

Michael Rosen

Once

Once there was a boy who
wanted to be beautiful
and a girl who
wanted to be strong.
The boy was worried
that he wasn't beautiful enough.
The girl was worried
that she wasn't strong enough.

One day they went out to seek
their fortunes.

But there was nothing.

There was nowhere for them to go
Nothing for them to see
No one for them to meet.
There was no story for them
to be in.
They couldn't even meet each other.
You may have thought they had already met
but they hadn't
because there wasn't anywhere
for them to meet.

Until you came along
and decided that you can do
something about it.

Michael Rosen