

# inkwell

## Mr. Successful

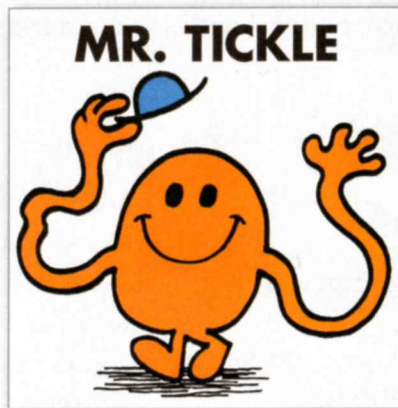
On the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the creation of the Mr. Men Little Miss series, WD spoke with author Adam Hargreaves on his father's legacy and taking over the family business.

BY SANDRA EBEJER

S ometime in the 1960s, a young boy named Adam Hargreaves asked his father, Roger, what a tickle looked like. Roger responded by drawing Mr. Tickle, a round orange man with extraordinarily long arms that could stretch to tickle anyone, anywhere. He developed a simple story around the character, and in 1971 published *Mr. Tickle*—the first title in what would become his enormously popular Mr. Men Little Miss series.

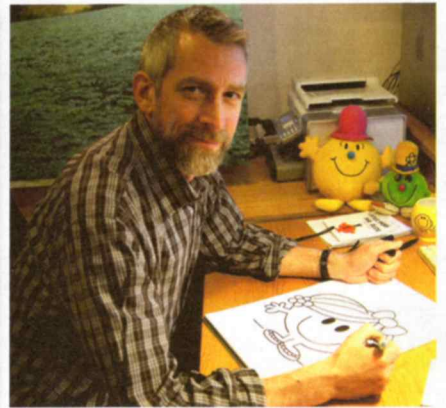
Featuring amusing storylines, bold illustrations, and colorful, one-dimensional personalities (such as *Mr. Bump*, *Mr. Cool*, and *Little Miss Whoops*), the books have entertained families worldwide for 50 years. More than 350 Mr. Men Little Miss titles have been published in 17 languages, with new titles added each year, and 250 million copies have sold since the series' launch.

When Roger Hargreaves passed away suddenly in 1988, Adam left his career in farming to take over his



father's work. Since then, Adam has introduced new Mr. Men Little Miss characters and has evolved the series to include partnerships with pop culture notables, including the Spice Girls and *Dr. Who*.

This year, in honor of the series' 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, fans can vote to determine which will be the next two Mr. Men Little Miss characters. Readers can visit MrMen.com through March 31 to select this year's newest personalities. The two books based on the top picks will be published later this year.



WD recently spoke with Adam about his father's work, his own writing process, and the series' continued popularity.

**Your simple question inspired the first Mr. Men Little Miss book. What was your father doing at the time? Was it his goal to be an author?**

He was a copywriter in advertising. He was a creative person, but he'd always had an ambition to be a strip cartoonist. [He] attempted a number of different ideas, but none of them

had taken off. And then the Mr. Men came along, and he ended up as a children's author.

### ***He passed away at a young age.***

Yeah, he was only 53. It was a terrible surprise. He had a stroke in the morning and died by the afternoon, so it came right out of the blue and knocked us off.

### ***You were pursuing a career as a farmer at the time. What was that period like?***

It was a strange time. I mean, it had never occurred to me that I would ever be involved with Mr. Men. Although I loved art and was reasonably good and had been to art college, I'd taken a different route. I was working on farms at the time, milking cows and working on arable and beef farms, so I had no experience [writing books] whatsoever.

[My father] had a licensing agent and a publisher, but [otherwise] it was it was a one-man band; it was just him. So, my mother suddenly inherited this company. I was getting disenchanted with farming and offered to help run the company. It never occurred to me that we'd write new characters or that I would write books; [it was] just character drawings and package design for the licensing.

### ***The Mr. Men Little Miss illustrations seem basic, but was it challenging to mimic someone else's style?***

It was surprisingly challenging given how simplistic they are, and my style of drawing is completely different than my dad's. Although he could draw a lot better than Mr. Men look, he purposefully drew them in that style because he wanted something that children could recognize and draw for themselves. I think he

wanted something that looked childish. It took me a long time to feel comfortable drawing them.

### ***There's a lot of repetition in the language—using terms like "up and over, over and up," or "neat and tidy, tidy and neat" repeatedly—and a breaking of the fourth wall, where the narrator talks directly to the reader. Why do you think your father wrote in that style?***

I'm not certain. I think he liked the idea of talking to children as well as telling the story. Because if you involve the child in the storytelling, they become part of it. At the end of *Mr. Tickle*, it [asks], can you imagine if Mr. Tickle's arm was suddenly sneaking up around your doorway? It puts them in into the story in a way, and I think that's what he was trying to do. I think it is a unique way of writing that he had.

He wrote another series of books called *Timbuctoo*; with Mr. Men, he never really had an editor—it was a friend of his who had a print company who published the books. He was just a printer, not a publisher. But the second series of books [he] did, *Timbuctoo*, was with Hodder & Stoughton, so he had a proper publisher and an editor. And the editor wrote to him and said, "You know, you can't start a sentence with 'But.'" And he wrote back to her and said, "But that's the way I write. Kind regards, Roger." [laughs]

### ***You've written Mr. Men Little Miss books based on the Spice Girls and Dr. Who. How do you decide what partnerships to take on?***

That's led by Sanrio. They come to me and then I look a bit astounded for a while and try to get my head around

it. [laughs] But they've worked out really well. It surprised me. We started with a *Dr. Who* one and I couldn't imagine how the two might work together, but they did and they were good fun. I was pleasantly surprised.

### ***Do you ever get writer's block?***

Yeah, quite often actually. I enjoy illustrating much more than writing. I find writing quite hard. Sometimes ideas just come out instantly. Other times, it's a bit of hashing around with it until something comes out. I find that if I spend a couple of days exploring the subject and then leave it, often an idea'll pop into my head [while I'm] doing something else. But I find it's better not to force it. Other times, I find if I just start writing without any particular idea in mind, then it can develop quickly just by writing down nonsense. It'll start formulating into the story. It gets my mind working on a topic.

### ***Mr. Men Little Miss characters often pop in and out of one another's books. Do you intentionally try to use many characters, or does that just happen based on the story?***

It depends on the story, because I've done a lot of titles based on the original characters, but with themes—we've got an adventure series, a fairy tale series. I try and get as many characters in them as possible so they're all living in the same world.

Interestingly, when you look at the first dozen [or so] books, they never meet each other. The Mr. Men just live in the real world. I think that's the essence of the idea: What fun could [my father] have by putting this is one-dimensional character that only had one trait [in the real world]? How would they operate? What sort of jobs would they get? How would

they get up and have breakfast in the morning? When they went to the shop, how would that unfold? He saw each of them as living in the real world, even though he drew it in the Mr. Men style. I think as time went on, he started to draw other characters in. Its premise changed over time, to a degree.

**What advice would you give to someone who wants to write or illustrate books for children?**

In terms of writing the story, for me it's about having fun with the topic. That's my approach to children's writing, which is based on my father's approach. You need a lot of perseverance. I think that's a key factor. And a lot of practice. Even though Mr. Men is not my style and it's simplistic, it's made me a far better illustrator because it's made me knuckle down to finish things, and

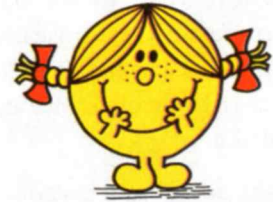
that constant drawing and using my hand has definitely improved my drawing skill.

**Why do you think the books have been such an enormous success for so long?**

I think my dad struck upon the perfect idea. A lot of children's characters are the personification of something: Thomas the Tank Engine, Winnie the Pooh, that sort of thing. He ended up personifying human characteristics and traits we all recognize. You know exactly what they are. So, you have this close affinity with them because you can always recognize a bit of yourself in each of the characters, and that makes it more personal. I think that's shown by the fact that in licensing it's not just children's products we've had success with, it's also adult products for greetings cards, T-shirts,

**LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE**

By Roger Hargreaves

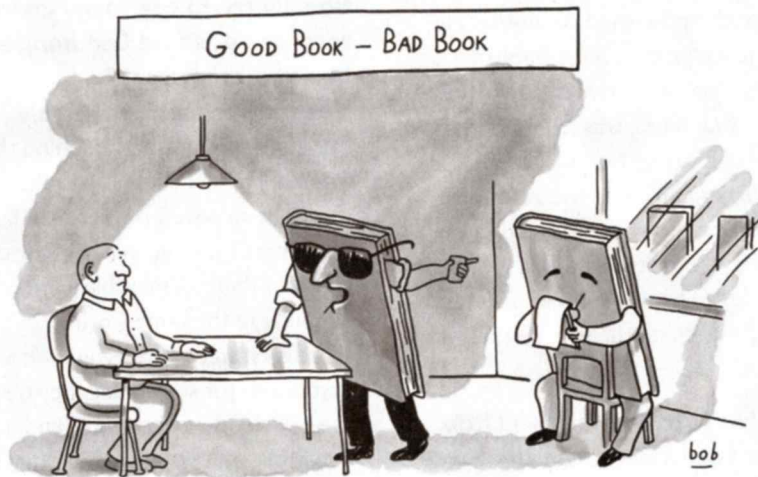


whatever. There's a nostalgia trip in that, but also, it is just the fun of finding a personality that suits a friend or yourself. I think that's a great part of what's given it its longevity. I think also that's coupled with the style of illustration that my dad chose because it's so graphically bold and unique in its own way. It's instantly recognizable.

**What do you think your father would make of the fact that 50 years later we're still seeing new books coming out?**

Well, he would have been quite surprised. I don't think he thought that it would be as successful for as long. And I know he would have been incredibly chuffed to have got to the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary and for Mr. Men Little Miss to still be such a such a worldwide phenomenon. He would have been very, very chuffed.

**Worth a Thousand Words**



"Trust me, my partner here is no page-turner."

**Bob Eckstein** is a *New Yorker* cartoonist and *New York Times* bestseller and has two new books out: *The Elements of Stress* and *the Pursuit of Happy-ish in this Current Sh\*tstorm* and *All's Fair in Love & War: The Ultimate Cartoon Book*. @BobEckstein

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