

**Clare Bowditch ABC 774 radio interview with author Mark Carthew Nov 20th, 2017 –  
\*Recorded live to air at ABC Recording Studios, Southbank, Victoria, Australia.  
ABC Afternoons with Clare Bowditch - Nov 20<sup>th</sup> 2017, 1:05pm**

**CLARE:** Christmas is not too far away. I wonder, do your family have special Christmas traditions without which it doesn't actually feel like the big day? Text me if you like. 0437 774 774. I got thinking about Christmas traditions when this next book that we're going to discuss landed on my desk. It's called *A Christmas Surprise*. It's Marvin and Marigold's adventures. Two gorgeous little mousies. It's by an author of over a hundred books, many of them educationally based, Mark Carthew, who joins us on Afternoons. Welcome to Afternoons.

**MARK:** Lovely to be here, Clare.

**CLARE:** Mark. A hundred books? Over a hundred?

**MARK:** Yeah, a lot of those were in educational publishing. I was privileged to be part of the Teacher Release to Industry Program for a year, so worked in publishing there, and that was fantastic, as a development editor, so I really sort of cut my teeth on all that.

**CLARE:** I dare say a lot of what you do, from what I can see of your work, is about education around values and encouraging children to ask questions. With this book, *Marvin and Marigold's A Christmas Surprise*, which is part of a series, what was the story that you were hoping to tell?

**MARK:** This is a story about kindness, empathy and friendship. The first book in that series was called *Marvin and Marigold: The Big Sneeze*, and it's, you know, 'Ahh... Ahh...Choo!', and it was about the boy mouse had a problem with sneezing and it was causing the houses to crack and to crumble and the house you can see in front of you - the audience can't see that, but they might be able to see that later on.

**CLARE:** What Mark's referring to there, is an enormous mouse house here - is it a papier mache? It is a replica of a house in the book that's sitting here on the desk here in the Afternoons Studio next to me. A gorgeous, almost a gingerbread-looking house, with two little mice sticking out the front door. We have sent a photo out on Twitter of that picture, but yes.

**MARK:** Yes, my lovely wife, Carolyn, made that. It took her over three weeks. There's two houses and they're an exact replica of Simon Prescott's illustrations. He's a UK-based illustrator and he's done a wonderful job of all the illustrations, and so I have made some sets and props. I'm a primary teacher by profession. I have come back to teaching after a little break doing my PhD and, as part of touring around, it's lovely to have sets and props, of course. Children love that.

**CLARE:** Yes. I wonder, Mark - I'll put you on the spot here - but could you just read us a couple of the first pages?

**MARK:** Oh, look, I absolutely could. It's difficult to know where to start, but Marigold receives a tree from her mother, and it starts off like this.

*"On the 1<sup>st</sup> of December, Marigold Mouse  
Found a rather large box at the front of her house.  
Mm. 'Miss Marigold Mouse, Bussleton Road, Mouseville. Fragile,' is the sign.*

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*'What could this be?' she wondered out loud,  
As branches and baubles fell out on the ground."*

And as she unpacks it, she looks outside, and I'll skip a couple of pages but she says:

*"Then looking outside, she saw Marvin next door,  
Sitting alone with a sock on his paw.  
So she called up his number on her little mouse phone,  
'It's Christmas time, Marvin. Don't spend it alone.'  
'But I don't have a tree in my little mouse house,'  
'And no presents to give,' sobbed Marvin the mouse."*

And it goes on, of course, and she brings him in to help decorate the tree and, of course, the tree is a very important part of this story, because it holds so many memories, and I don't know if you decorated a tree when you were little.

**CLARE:** I did, yes.

**MARK:** In our family, we've got a tradition of decorating that tree, and each one of these things on the tree have a special memory.

**CLARE:** You've just recently completed, I understand, your PhD and had the ability or the opportunity to research some of the things that are of interest to you. What have you found out about the importance of, I think routines and values and the stability in a family home?

**MARK:** Look, some recent research coming out of the University of British Columbia has certainly said that children who are kinder are happier, which is something as parents and teachers we all realise I suppose; but I think in this troubled world, kind kids are just so important. It's such an important message, and we all know that picture books particularly are a very powerful way, not only to learn to read, but to learn some very special things about life. That message of kindness and empathy is something that I, in this particular series focuses on - the next one coming out next year is *Marvin and Marigold - A Stormy Night*. It's about fears and about a stormy night but, of course, in that, these two mice help one another and build their resilience.

**CLARE:** How do we teach children things like kindness and empathy? Isn't that just something you're either born with or not?

**MARK:** Look, I think there could be an argument there, but I also think that stories can provide something that maybe just brings home some of those special things that as parents we'd like to think that is a natural thing, but maybe - as a primary teacher I see it all the time - we can. We can actually do things to help children deal with their problems, make them more resilient to get through their own moods, anger management, all these types of things. In primary schools and early childhood, even through up into the secondary years, there are programs and ways of trying to help people deal with those issues, but literature is certainly one of those ways.

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**CLARE:** We're with prolific author, Mark Carthew, speaking about his latest book, *Marvin and Marigold: A Christmas Surprise*, and the potential benefits of introducing your children to kind characters, to empathetic characters through their storybooks. I feel in this book there's also a sort of - a theme of possibility. The possibility that even if we haven't been brought up with traditions around Christmas, around holidays, that give us comfort, we always have the right to create our own traditions, don't we?

**MARK:** Oh, absolutely, and I think in our family we have so many of these reflected in the book and you would have seen the Christmas stockings we had. They're embroidered with our kid's names and reflected in this story, importantly an M and M for Marvin and Marigold. We also have the tradition of sitting around our open fireplace to unwrap and share present giving. We love our open fireplace and it's one of the great things about being part of Melbourne is you get all four seasons, as you know, Clare.

**CLARE:** Yeah.

**MARK:** And we hang up our stockings. The kids' beautifully embroidered stockings, once again, made by my wife, and her sister, Elise. They get hung up every year. And like our other children Laura and Simon our eldest boy, Michael getting married in a couple of weeks' time, still loves his stocking-.

**CLARE:** Eldest boy? How old are your children?

**MARK:** Oh, 31 and 28 and 25, and they're beautiful kids.

**CLARE:** There you go.

**MARK:** We still have that tradition of gathering around the Christmas tree and reminiscing about some of the trinkets, and in the book I've got here:

*"They found all sorts of trinkets that sparkled and spangled,  
twinkled and twirled and jingled and jangled."*

And all those types of things are on our tree, but each one's got a story.

**CLARE:** Why do we rhyme, Mark? Why do we write - and so often in children's books? Like, when I hear you speak in rhyme, I just - you know, part of me just feels about five again. That happy feeling of everything making sense, in a way.

**MARK:** Well, it's interesting as I also write songs. I started off as a songwriter and a playwright as well, and I think when you love music and you love songs, the rhyming aspect of language sort of embeds itself in our psyche. And that's what I did my PhD on; exploring the kinaesthetic and the poetic aspects of rhyme and song and music, and how powerful that is. And we all know that from when our kids were little, and I'm sure there's plenty of mums and dads and grandparents out there know that also; that when you do those nursery rhymes and those finger plays, they've got a very strong rhythmic quality about them.

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**CLARE:** And parents as well. A term that I heard the other day on the weekend. And brothers and sisters and all the rest of it. Yes, we all - if we're lucky, we have someone to read a story to.

**MARK:** Indeed.

**CLARE:** Mark Carthew is with us. A prolific writer. Marvin and Marigold. Look, I know you've got many more stories to write. If you've written a hundred already, I'm sure they're always bubbling in your head, but I'm endlessly curious about creative spaces. Your desk, where you write. You know, how do you turn on the new -.

**MARK:** Oh, that could get a bit embarrassing, my desk. Yeah.

**CLARE:** Tell me. Like what is the space in which you write your books?

**MARK:** Oh, look, I'm fortunate, I've got a couple of writing sort of spaces, but the one where my computer is and books - I'm surrounded by books. I was fortunate to grow up in a family coming from my grandfather through to my parents through to our own family, my wife and her family; we've always loved books, so there's books everywhere. I'm a strong believer, as an educator and as a primary teacher as well, that the best way to learn to read, and to learn to write for that matter, is to read books, and our family has always been surrounded by quality books, so there's - if you went into - my study looks a bit like a library and it's full of - these days with art works around as well, because I think the joy for me of creating picture books is working with wonderful illustrators, like Simon Prescott, like my friend, Mike Spoor and Anil Tortop, who's just illustrated *The Great Zoo Hullabaloo!* for me; and that was recently short listed for the Speech Pathology Awards, along with the first *Marvin and Marigold*.

**CLARE:** Congratulations.

**MARK:** And working with illustrators is just one of those joyful things for a picture book writer.

**CLARE:** Well it's been delightful to meet you and to talk to you, and congratulations on all of your success of marrying a good story with some good lessons as well.

**MARK:** Thank you. Pleasure.