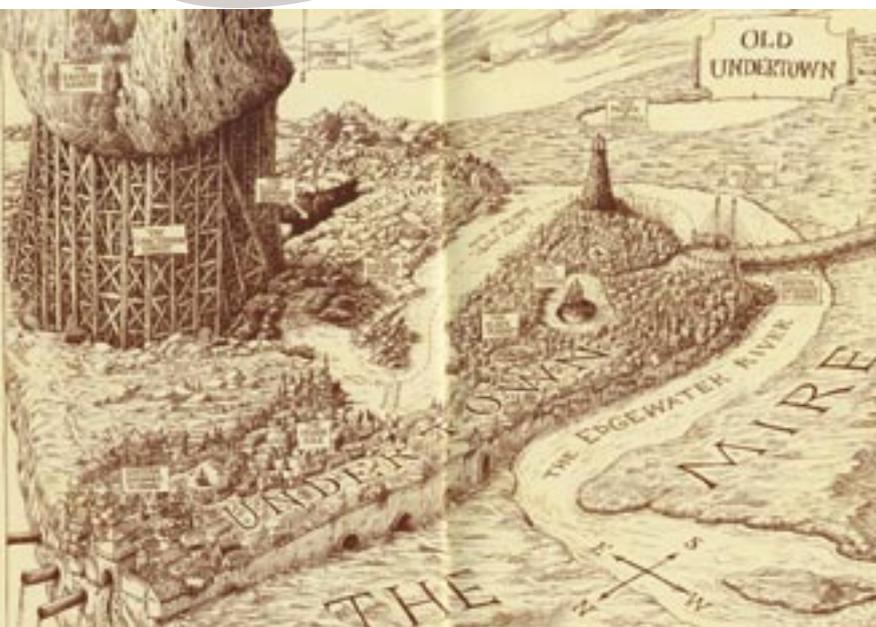


# The CHARTS OF THE SKYPIRATES



**Art history:** Riddell's studio contains displays of dustjackets and tiny paper Lilliputians he made to ensure that drawings for *Gulliver's Travels* were to scale.

Fantasy doesn't sell. Teenagers won't buy books with pictures. This is what illustrator Chris Riddell and writer Paul Stewart were told in the 1990s. A million copies of the Edge chronicles later, they tell Ruth Prickett that their success rests on attention to detail – from architecture and economics to fashion and cartography



**In the beginning was a map.** There aren't many authors who would admit that their hugely successful series started with an illustration. But then there aren't many partnerships that work like that of Chris Riddell and Paul Stewart, co-creators of the phenomenally popular fantasy series the Edge chronicles.

The story goes that in the mid-1990s Chris Riddell, already a well-known children's illustrator and newspaper cartoonist, came up with a map of the surreal Edge world. He and Paul Stewart used this as the basis for their first collaboration, *Beyond the Deepwoods*. They showed it first to his publisher who was entertained, but dismissed it, telling them: "There's no future in fantasy". Stewart's publisher, however, was more confident, and the Edge legends were born in 1998, the same year the second Harry Potter book was published, but before Harry Potter mania had every publisher reaching for his chequebook.

Riddell provided the hundreds of intricate line drawings that appear throughout the text, but his

input was not restricted to illustrating Stewart's pre-conceived story. Just as the first book had begun with a map – which appears on the book's endpapers – so many of the fabulous inhabitants, monsters, cities and forests of the Edge existed in Riddell's sketchbooks long before they appeared in the stories.

Riddell has quite a lot of sketchbooks. "I love them," he explains. "I buy them wherever I find them – the more exotic the better. At any time I'll have six or seven on the go from small pocket books to large folios." He takes them everywhere with him, but argues that he doesn't feel that he spends a lot of time on them because he uses waste time, for example while waiting at airports or travelling on trains.

Some notebooks are reserved exclusively for Edge places and characters – a massive range from law-abiding wood trolls, glamorous sky pirates, ferocious shrykes and shy banderbears to the dreaded gloamglozer, which you really wouldn't want to meet up a dark alley. A pretty book from Il Papiro in Florence contains the people, complete with detailed outfits. The look of the moment in the Edge world is medieval squire meets modern punk, and, since all the drawings are in line, cross-hatching, stripes and cheques are clearly the new black. "These are characters who might one day come to life, but I don't know what will happen when I start one." Riddell says.

A larger notebook, elegantly bound in goatskin by Riddell's local bookbinder, opens with a title page spikely inscribed with the word "Sanctaphrax", a city of feuding academics built on a giant flying rock featured in the books. The rest is full of beautifully written notes punctuated by perfectly finished drawings, each framed with a black border, many of which appear almost exactly in the published stories.

Riddell and Stewart take this book very seriously. They describe it as "stream of consciousness". "Once it goes in the notebook it becomes fact. It exists and you have to live with it," Riddell explains. "It means Paul has to deal with historical inconveniences just as you do in real life."

"Once something's in there it's historical fact," Stewart interjects. "He says 'no that's wrong, it's the other way round. Look it's in that picture.'"

The sketchbook habit started while Riddell was at college in Brighton, but he claims that he drew compulsively even as a small child. The high quality and immaculate presentation of his notebooks reflect his belief that all books should be a pleasure to hold. "When you pick up a book you should be delighted by its look and feel, by the typeface and the paper as well as the pictures," he says.

One of the peculiarities of the Edge chronicles is that they feature a warrior class of heroic librarian-knights, who fly beautifully crafted Rowland-Emett-style flying machines in their mission to protect the great library. This reflects Riddell's own concern that cultural history is essential to identity. It is just one of the themes permeating the books, which depict a society that is entirely multicultural, multi-species and, largely, meritocratic.

Despite this, the Edge world is no paradise. Its creators are not afraid to deal with death, slavery and cruelty to people and animals, although the unpleasant demise of a gentle banderbear in the first book did attract letters. "If a child gets upset it means they are involved in the world," Riddell points out. "I remem-



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**1 Swift work:** Riddell's version of *Gulliver's Travels* comes out this month.

**2 Here's to you Mr Robinson:** the illustrations for *Fergus Crane* reflect Riddell's admiration for Heath Robinson.

**3 Tall tales:** *The Story Giant* was a collaboration with Brian Patten.



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ber getting terribly upset when Ginger dies in harness in *Black Beauty* and I want kids to feel that involved.”

Some Edge creatures appear in the notebooks alongside copious notes about their habitat and dietary requirements, but then don't feature in the books for years – or they make just one brief entrance and are never seen again. “But we know who they are and what they are and where they fit in,” Riddell says.

This pedantic, even obsessive, concern for accuracy is typical of the team's whole approach to the series. Riddell describes the chronicles as “*The Forsyte Saga* with pointy ears”, since it is gradually emerging that the books deal with five generations of one family. He compares it more to Victorian novels, with their concern for economics, politics and social change, than to conventional modern fantasy. “We look at how people rise and fall and economies get strong and wither and then we stir the anthill with a stick and see what story comes out,” he says. He feeds this interest by reading travel and cultural history books by authors such as Patrick Leigh Fermor, Eric Newby and, recently, Norman Lewis and Robert Byron.

“One of the great treasures of travel writing is that it mirrors the journey that children go on through a book. If you ignore the detail you take them on a journey wearing blinkers,” Riddell explains. He argues that the holy grail for an illustrator is to become synonymous with a book they illustrate and believes that the Edge chronicles have given him that opportunity. “We've taken my strangeness and silliness and Paul's ability to turn these into a wonderful story and we

**4 Flight of fancy:** Riddell recalls *The Swan Stories* as a personal favourite.

**5 Knight sailing:** armed librarians protect the great library in the Edge chronicles.

**6 Hearing aid:** the Edge is populated with many weird and wonderful creatures such as this mind-reading ghost waif (Vox).



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have surprised ourselves with books we are immensely proud of,” he says.

There are now seven Edge chronicles (the latest, *Freeglader*, is published this month) and the series will end with book 10, but Riddell and Stewart have plenty to keep them busy. Their latest venture is *Fergus Crane*, which follows the now familiar pattern of a map (on the reverse of the dustjacket) and line drawings throughout the text. It also has pictorial chapter headings (fish riding bicycles) and tailpieces. Here, however, the inspiration comes from Edwardian fantasy classics – think mad machines and boy's own adventures rather than trolls and goblins.

“Fergus Crane is my visual homage to Heath Robinson,” Riddell says. “I am a big devotee of Heath Robinson. Unlike other Golden Age illustrators who got famous and then fell from favour he just got more and more popular. I love his invention and I admire his use of line. He describes volume and space brilliantly.”

His Edge drawings, however, often reflect Riddell's admiration for darker illustrators from the weirdness of Mervyn Peake's Gormenghast illustrations to Edward Gorey's contemporary gothic. “I think a lot of us still look to Peake, because he wasn't afraid to be very very dark,” Riddell says. “He's influenced me a lot because he worked in longer fiction and, of course, because he worked in black and white.”



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**8 Hooked on classics:** Riddell was delighted to find similarities between the *Edge* and *Gulliver's Travels*.

**9 Until nest time:** the hero of one *Edge* trilogy is watched over by a caterbird.

The scarcity of modern black and white illustration is an issue near to Riddell's heart. "I'm amazed that black and white isn't commissioned more. It's such a great tradition and we're in danger of losing it in the UK." He points out that 20 years ago no one would have contemplated publishing J K Rowling's *Harry Potter* books without pictures. Now, however, he argues, publishers are wary of printing any books for children older than eight with illustrations lest they be seen as babyish.

He adds that he would leap at the opportunity to illustrate *Harry Potter*, but that the pictures should offer something new and should be different from the images in the films. "J K Rowling is not a visual writer so there are great opportunities," he says. "It would be nice to see it treated with a spikey, awkward approach, to twist it round and make it strange – maybe give it a whiff of Vienna secession."

It is hardly surprising that Riddell draws on a variety of heroes and influences in each new project. His own career has spanned political cartoons for both the *Observer* and the *New Statesman*, as well as picture books for very young children and illustrations for poetry and for non-fiction children's history. One of his personal favourites is *The Swan's Stories*, a version of Hans Andersen's tales, to which he contributed 24 colour plates as well as line drawings.

He is surprised when non-illustrators ask him whether he finds it hard to switch between these styles. "There is a clear link between my work for newspapers and my work on children's books. I don't pick up one artistic hat and drop the other, one style feeds the other and they inform each other," he says. "It's not unusual – it stems from a long tradition of artists doing a wide variety of work, people such as James Thurber."

Riddell won the Kate Greenaway medal in 2001 for his work on *Pirate Diary*, a day in the life of a young boy taken on board a pirate ship. This followed the successful *Castle Diary* and, he says, was incredibly hard work, since it involved researching every detail from architecture and costume to 18th century rope-making techniques. The effort was clearly not wasted however, since Riddell got the medal and Stewart used pictures from *Castle Diary* to inform work on their *Free Lance* series – shorter books about a medieval knight aimed at teenage boys who are poor readers. Riddell describes this series as "Chaucer meets Chandler – and they have a fight".

After the stress and intensity of the diaries, Riddell was delighted to be asked to illustrate a new version of *Gulliver's Travels*, which is published this month. "It's one of the canon of illustrated books, but it has not already been claimed by one of the greats," he says. "I would be less keen to do a version of *Wind in the Willows* since for me Ernest Shepard is a hero and his version is the classic. This was a wonderful opportunity to do a modern version of *Gulliver* that was idiosyncratic and personal to me."

He and Stewart were surprised, and delighted, to reread *Gulliver* and discover how many links it has with their *Edge* world. "It's lovely to see that the fantasy scenes we've been doing come directly from Swift," Riddell says. Swift's political satire and hard-edged, timeless imagination are, of course, ideally suited to Riddell's talents. And, like the *Edge* series, this book also begins with a map.

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The latest Edge chronicle, Freeglader, and a book of Edge maps, are both published this month, along with Riddell's new version of Gulliver's Travels. The Edge chronicles are also being published in the US for the first time.