

Date: 17<sup>th</sup> June 2010  
Author/Interview subject: Michael Morpurgo (MM)  
Interviewed by: Janice Forsyth (JF)  
Other speakers: Audience (Aud), Girl (G), Mark (M) Teacher (T)

JF: Hello there. I'm Janice Forsyth and a very warm welcome to today's virtual author event, coming to you live from the BBC in Glasgow. It's one of a series of events organised by the Scottish Book Trust in association with the BBC. Now if you're watching us live online I bet you'd like to know that you're part of a massive audience of many thousands of students watching in schools across the UK, so a very warm welcome to you. And indeed if you've taken part in one of our previous sessions you'll know that there are more real live children here in the studio with me. There're our audience here and they are from two primary schools in Glasgow, from Hill's Trust Primary and Copeland Primary so why not say hello to one another. You watching on the web, you can wave to the kids here and you wave here to that camera there. And you can make lots of new friends. Hello! You can shout hello too!

Aud: Hello!

JF: I hope you're doing that back to them. We can hear you. Great! Lots of new friends made. Now as you guys already know, you know much more about computers than I will ever know in my lifetime so you won't be surprised to hear that occasionally the image that you're watching may freeze or buffer, or, as we like to say in Scotland, shoogle around a wee bit. Now you know what to do if that happens don't you? You do nothing because it's completely normal during an internet broadcast. You just wait until it continues and gets back to normal. However I am not going to make you wait any longer for the brilliant writer that you're all here to see today. Michael Morpurgo has written so many well loved children's books, some of which have been into films and plays. He's an extraordinarily busy man so we're absolutely delighted that he could take a break from writing to join us today, so out there in your school and here, a huge warm welcome please for, yes, Michael Morpurgo.

Aud: [Applause]

MM: Hello. Hello you people. Hello!

Aud: Hello.

MM: Here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to talk to you for just a bit about writing, where I get my ideas from, how the thing works. I'm not a virtual writer. I'm a real writer. I'm flesh and blood and I make mistakes and I don't do it right. I haven't got the perfect way of doing it but I've got my way, and my way is the one I intend to pass on to you people. And what I want to do now is to start by saying that you do not start a story like this – have a look at that. It's an empty page. And a lot of people think you start with an empty page and a pen. Or an empty screen and a keyboard. Not true. Every writer you've ever read, I don't care who it is, start's their books a long long time before they every look at a blank page and before they ever get out their pen or their keyboard, because what writers do is this. They spend their lives looking, as you're looking at me now, listening as I hope you're listening to me now. Thinking, reading, feeling and all the time during your life, partially when you're young what happens is this. All those thoughts, all those sounds, all those sights gather in your head and you collect them in your memory and you store them. Without that memory store you can't write, so what it means is that you have to have an interesting life. You have to go out there and meet people, go to places, talk to people and ask awkward questions and listen to the answers and read lots of books and go to lots of movies and play lots of games. You do all these things and then later on, if you do want to craft a poem or craft a story, which I do, you are never at a loss. When you look at that empty piece of paper, you know what it is you're going to be writing about. So what I aim to do now is this, to tell you my way of doing this and I'll talk to you about one or two stories. I know some of you here have read a book called Cool. Put up your hands up if you've read Cool, will you? Put your hands up if you've read it. Put your hand up if you haven't read it. Grotty children! Put you hands down again. I aim to talk you a bit about Cool and a little bit about the story, a book of mine that has just come out, which I'm very enthusiastic about because we're always enthusiastic about our latest books. But first of all here's what I do. I wait until something touches my heart. Something catches my imagination. And then I don't immediately start writing. I dream it out. Hands up those of you who dream at night time. Put your hands up. Hands up those of you who daydream in classroom at school. Come on, be honest! Hands up! Put your hands down. I hope there are lots of teacher's hands up as well because I was a teacher once and I did daydreaming in class as well. Actually it's all part of education, dreaming, and it's fine. So what I do is I dream this idea, this beginning of an idea into a story. I still don't write it down. I dream it out, I think it out. I try to imagine the people who are going to be in the story. I try to feel where the story's going to

go and then when I'm ready to write I've got my own particular way of doing it. I go to my bed. Imagine this horrible green chair is not a horrible green chair but a bed. I go to it, I pile up my pillows, I get out an exercise book, not one like this, this is a little note book, an exercise book. These are books I pinch from schools that I visit, and I draw my knees up in front of me, pile the pillows up behind, and, this is the important thing, start writing, but actually I don't write. I learnt a cunning way of doing it. Hands up those of you who find it quite difficult to start writing a story or a book. Hands up! Hands up if you find it difficult! Well me too. Join the club. Put your hand down! So what I do, because I still find it difficult after 120 books, I still find it difficult to get started and I know the way to do it and I'm about to tell you my secret. Don't start writing at all. Speak it. Hands up those of you who know that you tell stories better than you write them? Hands up. How come, do you think, that we can tell stories more easily than write them? Why is we like to speak them rather than write them? What is it? Any idea? Well it's because speaking is easier. Why is speaking easier? You tell me. Any answers? Yes? Why is speaking easier?

G: Because if you want to write something down and you don't know how to spell it it's just easier to say it.

MM: It's much easier to say it because you don't have to bother, do you, about choosing the words, about the spelling, about the hand writing. You just say it! I mean think, think, think, when you were extremely little all of us, when you were first born, when you first came out, this was the first word you said, you did not write it, the first thing you said was "Whaa! Whaa! Whaa! Whaa!" You did not think to yourself, now how do I spell Whaa? You just said it! You've been going whaa ever since. We talk, talk, talk, talk the hind leg off a donkey we talk. It's much easier to tell a story. Hands up those of you here who have ever told a lie? I said put you hands up if you've told a lie? You can join that club too. You're good at it. You're completely brilliant at it. All books are are lies that you're allowed to tell. I mean they're not true! Hands up those of you who thought Harry Potter was true? You sad child!

Aud: [Giggles]

MM: The point is all these stories are things you can make up, and we love telling them but it's writing them down that's the problem because all of us get worried. We think, well hang on, I can't spell it. I've got to do this. It's going to get marked, and you get all worried about it so I don't think about that at all. I speak it. Watch me. From my head where the story's been dreamed up, down my arm, through my fingers, through my pen onto the page, and you're thinking "hehehehe that's just writing." No it's not! It's speaking it down onto the page, and I don't check the

spelling. I know the teachers here will be really really cross but I'm going to say something you'll like in a minute. Speak it down onto the page, don't worry about spelling, don't worry about punctuation, just get it down. It's like a sketch. Sketch it out. Then when you've done a chapter, then write it out neatly. That's quite important so that other people can read it. Then put in punctuation. Why do you think full stops are important? Why are full stops important? Yes? You end up?

G: Run out of breath.

MM: And if you run out of breath what happens? You die! All the teachers are trying to do when they say "Put a full stop" is to stop you dying! So put full stops in! Put commas in. That's fine. So you've got your entire thing down and then you can hand it to someone else and they can read it. But with me, of course, what I do, because I'm a professional writer, I do it every single day my life, I will go back and read it out loud and that's brilliant. If you read it out loud you can find out all the things that are wrong with it, change a few words and then I do the next chapter, the next chapter, and before you know it you've got a book, and that's the best thing in the world because, now I'll talk to you about this book in moment, what happens is that a year after you've written it and you've sent it off to your publisher, an envelope arrives at your house and you open it up and it's got your brand new book in it. It's like having a baby. Hands up those of you who've ever had a baby? You! You will know all about it then and I will talk directly to a teacher here. Generally speaking, in your experience, roughly how long is pregnancy?

T: Nine months.

MM: Nine months. To make a book like this it's twelve months at least of pregnancy. So you really have to work at it. This came out of me. It's my baby and when it appeared – watch watch watch watch – unlike your baby madam, my baby has my name written on it.

Aud: [Laughs]

MM: None of you came out with your name written on you. It's brilliant! And then you open it up and you think, you sweetie pie, yes it's beautiful. We're all very proud of our new babies and we don't like anyone being rude about them. Anyway that's the whole business of making a book. Cool. I want to give you an example now of one book I made which some of you here will have read and some of you out there might have read and if you haven't you can jolly well go and read it. It's called Cool. I will tell you first of all why I wrote it with a title like that, and it's this. I hate the word cool. I hate it because people like you use it all the time.

Everything is cool. I have seven grandchildren. At least four of them use it all the time. Everything is cool. So you come out of a pizza place and you say how was your pizza? And they go "cool." And you ring them up two days later after they've just done a physics exam, which they were very very worried about and you say how was your physics exam? And they go "cool." And so I say to them don't use that word for a pizza and a physics exam! You can't do that! And they say "cool it Grandpa." I don't like the word. I've always hated that word and I wrote down once I hate cool, I hate cool, I hate cool. I write things like that in little black books like this. Little note so that I don't forget it. I wrote down I hate cool, I hate cool, I hate cool. I didn't think it was ever going to become a book. And then really strangely a sad sad thing happened which made me use this and I'll tell you what it was. I had a relative, a step father, who had what's called a stroke. It's very serious when you get old, he's a very old man, and what happens is, really, that old people very often get one stroke and then they get another stroke and sometimes it paralyses them and sometimes they go into a coma. Sometimes they wake up from a coma. A coma, as you know, a deep sleep, a deep sleep, and I was in hospital sitting at his bedside and he had had a stroke or two and he was in a coma. Now when you're sitting next to someone in a hospital it's never a nice experience. Hands up those of you who've visited a friend or a relation in hospital? Now you know it's not fun. It's not fun for them and it's not fun for you. Put your hands down. But when someone is lying there and you can't even speak to them, you just don't know what to do so here's what I did. I took along a book and I was sitting there reading a book. A doctor came along and he says "Oh Mr Morpurgo, how is he today?" And I say "fine much the same as he was yesterday and the day before. He hasn't woken up. He hadn't woken up" And he said something that really surprised me "Look, do you know what would be really good? Why don't you read that book aloud to him? Because I've been a doctor for a very long time and sometimes, just sometimes, people in a deep sleep, in a coma like this, wake up because they recognise something. A voice, a smell, something makes them wake up. Why don't you read the book out aloud?" So I read the book out aloud but he didn't wake up. He died. But whilst I was sitting there it did make me think and it troubled me. Because I was thinking to myself maybe he can hear me now. Maybe he knows I'm here. Maybe he just can't say anything because everything is shut down. All he's got is his brain working but nothing works. The hands. The eyes. Nothing works and how awful it must be to be trapped inside your body. That's what I thought. And then I thought, well, I want to write a story about this, so after he died I thought I want to write a story, in a way in memory of him I suppose. So I thought I'll write story about a little boy, and this little boy, he runs off into the road after his dog, and the reason he's sent out is because he said the word cool too often to his mum, and his mum

sends him out to take the dog for a walk. The dog runs under a car and the boy runs out after it and next thing you know he's in hospital and the whole of the rest of the story is about how everyone, his family, his friends try this and that to wake him up and that's how I wrote Cool and why I wrote Cool and it was a fascinating story to do because it's really sad but it started with something really stupid which is the title of it Cool. Now the Elephant in the Garden – this book, the one that's just come out. No one's read it because it's only just coming out at the moment. I listen to the radio a lot. I don't sleep very well and in the middle of the night about two years ago I turn on the radio because I couldn't sleep and I heard this amazing story and I will tell you the story and it will amaze you too. It was a story about Belfast and it was during the Second World War. It was about a lady who worked in the zoo there. She was the elephant keeper in the zoo at Belfast zoo. Now you will know that during the Second World War bombers came over from Nazi Germany and bombed the big cities all over the UK. They did that to knock out the factories, to knock out the docks and in Belfast they built a lot of ships and there were a lot of factories and they were expecting the bombers to come. This lady went to work one day and the director of the zoo called all the people who worked there into his office and said "Look I've got something terrible to say to you but I've got to tell you. We've had orders that if the Germans come to bomb Belfast we have to shoot all the animals in the zoo. All the big animals had to be shot because if the zoo gets bombed and the cages are broken they could get out into the city and that would be dangerous so whether we like it or not we've got to shoot them, and we've got to be ready to do that." He was just preparing them mentally that they were going to have to do these dreadful things to these animals that they all loved. This lady went up to him afterwards, really upset, and said, "look you can not do this to, I understand why, but you can not do this elephant of mine." She had brought up an elephant on her own, virtually, because the mother had died, on a bottle and loved this elephant. It was only a couple of years old, quite small and she adored it and it was very very tame, and she said look this elephant is no danger to anyone. And he said "I can't make exceptions if the bombers come. I've got to do it. they'll come at night. You won't be here to look after her" and she said "Oh yes, I've got an idea. I will take the elephant home to my garden each night and bring it back to work in the morning that way I will be looking that elephant 24 hours a day. It will never be out of my sight. I guarantee it will do no-one any harm" and he gave in. And the true story was that this lady used to go to work at Belfast zoo and every evening she would go back along the street with her elephant and keep it. It's true! And I'm thinking in the middle of the night, it can't be true. It can't be true. I woke up at about half past six and I thought, did I hear that story right? Did I hear...? I went to google. I googled up Belfast, blitz, elephant, zoo and up came a photograph of the very

lady that I'd been hearing about the night before. You can do it yourself. It's called Belfast Telegraph. There's this photograph. Black and white photograph of the lady in her garden with her elephant! And I'm thinking yes! Brilliant story! It was just wonderful. I thought and now I've got to write the story, but now I'm thinking no, no, no. I've written stories already about the blitz in England. I didn't want to write another story about war time here and I had a funny moment when I thought wouldn't it be much more interesting to write a story about the other side because we bombed Germany. It was that kind of a war. It was bombing one city, bombing another city. So I thought, what's the worst bombing that happened in Germany. What do I know about? Dresden. A city called Dresden which we bombed in 1945. There was a great firestorm and many many ten of thousands of people died. I googled up Dresden and what came up was this, was that in the zoo in Dresden that an order went out that when the Americans and the British came to bomb, which they would do, all the animals were going to have to be killed, so I simply changed the story round and this story, and you can see from the front cover, it's the story of the planes going over and these American and British bombers going over and you can see the raging fire and it's a story about a family, a boy, a girl, the mother who is an elephant keeper, and I'll just read you a tiny bit from it and then I'll shut up, if you're lucky. Don't go to sleep. I can feel you dropping off. They're not dropping off here. I won't let them. They're trying to. Here we go. This is from the middle of the book. This is a story told by an old lady in a nursing home to a nurse and she's talking about when she was Sixteen. She's German so she calls her mother Mutti. You must remember that. Ok. This is not the beginning of the story but the bit you'll find interesting.

*My sixteenth birthday was on the 9th of February 1945, a day I shall never forget and not because I had lots of presents or lots of friends to the house for a party. There was no money for that and besides no one was in the mood to celebrate anything. Mutti and Karl had made me a birthday card and gave it to me at breakfast. I remember it was a kind of a collage full of cut out pictures of circus life with clowns and acrobats and jugglers and horses and elephants of course, lots of elephants because of Mutti. I put it up on the mantelpiece behind Pappa's photograph before we went off to school that morning. When we got home in the evening Mutti was not there. This did not surprise us. We had got used to her being late home these days but on this particular evening she was even later than usual. I was beginning to get a little worried when I heard the garden gate squeaking open, then Mutti was calling to us from the garden. She was coming in through the back way. I thought it was a bit strange but did not think anything more about it. I was just relieved she was home. She came in the back door, stamping the snow off her boots. She was carrying a sack over her shoulder. "Potatoes" she said, dumping the sack on the floor and sitting herself down*

*heavily at the kitchen table. She was breathless and glowing from the cold, and happy too, as happy as I'd seen her in a long time. "I shall make a potato soup for your birthday, Elizabeth, with a little ham; I have a little ham left. I shall make you the best potato soup a mother ever made for a daughter and, and, and, and I have a present for you. A surprise." "A surprise?" I said. "Of course!" She laughed "You can hardly have a birthday without a surprise can you? And I promise you it'll be the biggest surprise you ever had too. It is outside in the garden. I think it is maybe a little too big to bring inside." Karl got to the window before I did which irritated me because to my mind this was my birthday, my surprise, not his. I pushed him out of the way. I could see it was still snowing outside but at first I could see very little else. By now Karl had rushed to the back door and opened it. "There's an elephant in the garden, Mutti" he cried. "Why is there an elephant in our garden?" Then I saw her too, a huge shadow that moved and became an elephant as it came towards me into the light from the window. Mutti had her arms round me and was kissing the top of my head. "My secret, remember?" she whispered. "Happy Birthday Elizabeth." "It is Marlene" cried Karl leaping up and down in delight "from the zoo. It's Marlene." "Is that really her?" I said. I was still not sure whether my eyes were deceiving me or not. "It took a while to persuade the Herr Director but in the end I managed it," Mutti told him. "I told him the truth that if anything happened to her it would break my Karl's heart and I am also convinced him that Marlene needed me night and day now, that without a mother she might just pine away and die of sadness. I had to be there with her all the time."*

Well, you'll understand how a little story on the radio became the story in this book, and that's what I do. I pinch stories. I rob stories so don't tell me any of your stories or I'll pinch them. Much much better if you've got stories of your own. You write about them because you know your stories a lot better than I do. So that's what I do. It's quite simple. I think I've just about finished. Could you all sit up? Sit up! Sit up! Sit up! Take a deep breath. One, two, three, [breathes in] hold it. And go. [Breathes out] And you lot there do the same thing now. Forty thousand of you. Take a deep breath, all of you again. One more. [breathes in] Hold it. Hold it. And go. [Breathes out] One more. One more. A big deep one. Ready? [breathes in] Hold it. Forty thousand children die in Scotland, because they didn't breathe, silly twits. You may now breathe! This is to breathe oxygen into your brain so that the questions you might be asking, although I'm going to be answering in a minute, might be more interesting. I'll shut up. Thank you very much.

JF: Fantastic. Thank you Michael. Round of applause please, and you as well. Thank you.

Aud: [Applause]

JF: Gosh, it's sunny here today, isn't it?

MM: Yup. Hat on.

JF: Hat on. As long as we can still see you. Good hat isn't it? Yeah. Now we have had lot and lots of questions for you Michael, as you might imagine so thank you very much, wherever you are in your schools all over the country. While Michael gets his breath back let me just name check some of the schools who sent questions in and apologies in advance. You can imagine it would take us hours and hours and hours to get through them all but we'll try to get through as many as possible. Big thanks from us to you at Bishop Winnington Ingram School in Middlesex. If I name your school give us a cheer because we can kind of hear you. Kirn Primary School, closer to home, the P5 class there in Dunoon. Inverkeithing High School, the reading cafe, which sounds really cool. Oh better not say that word, sorry. St John's Academy in Perth, Townhill primary school in Dunfermline, P6, Barassie Primary School in south Ayrshire and Bottesford Junior School in Scunthorpe. Just some of the schools who've submitted questions. But if think our first one we're going to take actually from somebody who's here in the audience with us. Delightful young man from – which primary school are you from, sir?

M: Copeland Primary.

JF: Copeland Primary in Glasgow. What's your name?

M: Mark

JF: Very good hair, Mark. Close up on the hair. What's your question for Michael?

M: Can you tell us a little bit about your work with the Olympics?

MM: Well, since I don't think that they'll select me for the 100 metres I thought maybe I could do something that I can do relatively well. Why are you laughing? Do you think I can't run fast or something? You're quite right. How can 67 year old gits get into the 100 metres? You can't, so what they can do, 67 year old gits, is to tell tales. And here's what happened really. They came to me and they had created these two characters. I had nothing to do with them, but they created these two characters and they said please could you tell us the story of how they came into being. And I through the idea of them was very interesting because apparently they're making, down in England, a huge great steel girder to go over the Olympic stadium and the idea was that a bit of steel from this girder had fallen off and landed in a sort of puddle on the floor of the steel works, and somehow they

had morphed themselves into these two creatures. They were really saying to me, tell us the story of how it happened, so I invented this whole story of a grandfather who was working at the steel mill, last day, it was, I think, have we got a clip of it or something?

JF: Yeah, I think we do. We can have a little look at that now.

[Clip plays] Wenlock and Mandeville know it's time to go. Their journey is just beginning. So many adventures to have. So many people to tell, but they will meet again in London in 2012.

MM: That's the grandfather and grandmother who made them

[Clip] They'll be there. You'll be there. The whole world will be there.

MM: And that's the Olympic stadium. So that's the end of the story. You may not have seen the beginning, but that's all I did. It's just a 3 ½ minute little film to get the whole idea of where these two creatures came from. There is something quite interesting about them and that is that there's, what are they called? Those creatures?

JF: They're called...I've been rehearsing this...

Mm: Wenlock...

JF: Wenlock and Mandeville.

MM: Wenlock and Mandeville, and the reason is interesting. I didn't know it but apparently when they started the Olympics again, right at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a Frenchman who started it came across a school teacher in Much Wenlock which is down in Shropshire in England, and this school teacher had started a sort of Olympic Games with all the other villages around, and so he came over and he saw how it was being done in a school in the UK, and he through ah ha ah ha ah ha. We'll go back and we'll use that and the Greek model of all these nations coming in and joining in and joining in friendship to make game and he remade the Olympics but this tiny little village and this school master and these school children had a little hand in it, and so one of them is called Wenlock, and the other one, I don't know if you know this, but when they started the Paralympics, the Olympics for those who may be have lost a leg or they've got other disabilities and therefore they can't partake in the normal Olympics, some doctors at a hospital called Stoke-Mandeville decided why can't we have our Olympic games? Excuse me. And so they started at this hospital down in England an Olympic Games and that now is worldwide, so in a way I won't say we started the Olympic Games, we started football, that's another

thing, but we at least a hand in how the Olympics Games look today, so I thought it was a story worth writing.

JF: Brilliant! And we're not going to forget those names now, are we? Wenlock and Mandeville. Great questions. Thank you Mark, and I think other people around the country also asked that question. Alex Scott also from Calderwood Primary School in Rutherglen in Glasgow P4/5. Hello. Thank you for the question. I'm sure others were asking that too. Okay. Michael, here's one that's been sent from Pitcairn Primary School in Perth and Kinross and I'm wondering if you've given us a clue to this from what you said earlier on when you were talking about the book *Cool*, but maybe it's not that book, the question is what is the Saddest book that you've written?

MM: Ah. Well, quite a lot of them are sad really, but the saddest I suppose would be a book I did called *Private Peaceful* which is a story of a soldier in the first world war, two brothers who leave the farm they're working on, near where I live in Devon, down in the south west of England, and they go across the sea to fight in this terrible war, the first world war and you may know about it. You may know that these armies in 1914 -18, the great war, as they called it, fought in trenches and there were millions, I mean millions of soldiers on both sides, so there was our side, that was the French and Belgians and ourselves, and Canadians, and all sort of people from all over the world fighting against the other side who where the Germans and their allies. Because these armies were so strong they came together like this, and they couldn't defeat each other. They couldn't go forward and they didn't want to go back so they did the only thing they could do. They dug into the ground and their little trench holes became long trenches that stretched all the ways from Switzerland to the English Channel. 400 miles of trenches and then these armies sat there for over 4 years and shelled each other and shot at each other, millions of soldiers died. Millions of them. Some soldiers were so upset by it, so shocked by it, that they couldn't go on any more. They ran away and if they were caught they were tried, a very short trial and some of them were shot. There were over 300 soldiers on our side, only, who were shot for cowardice or desertion. Two of them were shot because they fell asleep on sentry duty, if you please. I was so upset when I heard that that I thought I want to write a story about one of those soldiers and one of these two brothers who goes across to fight in this war. They're both *Private Peaceful*, they're both brothers, but one of them suffers that fate and it was the saddest thing I ever wrote.

JF: Thank you for that Michael. And we have another question which is also from Pitcairn Primary in Perth and Kinross, and we've had a preview of the brand new

book about an elephant, and other animals there at that zoo, why are most of your books, is that true, most of them? About animals?

MM: I've never counted but I think there are a lot of them, certainly. And it's really simple. I told you I look around me. I listen when I'm inventing my stories. Getting ideas for my stories. I live on a farm. I am surrounded by 120 cows, 500 sheep, horses, donkeys, ducks, chickens, geese, and we always used to have cats and dogs, so there are animals everywhere, and I'm not, I have to say to you, I'm not particularly fond of animals. What interests me is how people get on with animals and animals get on with people. That's what really fascinates me, so for instance when I wrote this book *War Horse*, which is a story of a horse that goes to the first world war, what interested me was not necessarily the horse, but how the horse is looked after or the opposite of being looked after, he's treated badly by either the British or the Germans or the French, whoever hands he falls into, so it is the relationship between animals and us and how, I don't know if you've noticed this but old people, very often, really love to be able to stroke a cat or a dog. It gives them reassurance. Young people, very very small children just love to feel them, love to look in the eyes of them. I think there's a really close relationship between us and the animals that share this world with us and that's really one of the reasons I write a lot about animals.

JF: Thank you. Our next question comes from the P4 class from Lucas J Berry. Cool name. I seem to be saying cool all the time now because I think shouldn't. Touch Primary School in Dunfermline. Lucas J Berry. The question – short and simple – did you like writing at school?

MM: No. I was really really bad at writing at school. This is mostly because teachers would tell me I was bad at writing at school and it was probably because I was bad. I tell you what the reason was really. I grew up at a time when schools were very very different, when teachers used to stand there and simply tell you what to do and you did it. Thursday at my primary school, St Matthias off the Warwick Road in London, and I'd be there aged seven. A teacher would come in and say it is writing time and she'd hand you out a piece of paper and then she'd hand you out a pencil, and she would sharpen them and she made this horrible face when she sharpened pencils and I've never forgotten it. She used to go like this. And she'd hand you your pencil back and then she'd go [clap, clap] you have 45 minutes. Complete two sides and this is the subject you will write about, and she would go to the blackboard and she would write up one word. Never more than one word. Let us say, giraffe. And she would go and sit down and do her marking and she would simply say get on with it. I would sit there, looking at my empty piece of paper, and looking at the blackboard, and I'd be going like this... giraffe?

What? What do I know about flaming giraffes? Do I want to write about giraffes? No! But I've got to write about giraffes otherwise I'd stay in for detention. Did I want to stay in for detention? No! You knew you had to complete two sides, and she would check for it, I knew, so here's what I did in my first writing lesson. In order to complete two sides I learnt one thing. I learnt to write really big. I mean you have never seen such big letters in all your life. Three words a line maximum, and she loved punctuation so I sprinkled punctuation everywhere, all over the page, and do you know what the silly woman used to do after 45 minutes? She used to do [Clap, clap]. That's it. Now let's see who's going to stay in for detention today. And she would come up and she'd pick up the piece of paper and say. Mmhm Mmhm, if you'd done two sides she'd put it on the pile and out you went to play. Yeah. That was writing. Excuse me, what the stupid lady should have done is, fine to write about a giraffe but what should you do if you write about a giraffe, you need to know about giraffes, so read us a poem about a giraffe, read us a story about a giraffe. Take us to Africa! Do something to stimulate the interest in a giraffe. Then I would have learnt – watch watch – how a giraffe drinks. You don't know how a giraffe drinks? I will show you because then I could have written about it. A giraffe drinks like this. It's got four legs. Can't do four legs but imagine this is what they do – watch. Because it's really funny. They go like this. [does giraffe impression]

Aud: [laughs]

MM: Brilliant! If I'd have known that and if I'd have watched their mouths moved when they ate I could have written twenty pages on giraffes. Stupid woman. There we are. But that's why I was no good at writing, then I when I became a teacher, which I did for ten years, I taught in schools, I thought the only way I'd want my children to write, that I was teaching, is if they interested in something and that's what I tried to do. Get them interested, and then you can write anything.

JF: And I'm sure all the teachers watching across the country with the pupils, you're much better than Michael's teacher, aren't you? Yes. And the teachers here, of course. Now let's see how many more questions we can fit in one or two form Caldercuilt Primary School, P5 in Glasgow, Michael. We enjoying reading your book This Morning I Met A Whale. What inspired you to write it and – this is good - are you going to write any more interesting books.

MM: What's the name of that horrible child?

JF: Strangely anonymous.

MM: Strangely anonymous. I don't know if the books will be interesting. I will try to make them interesting. This Morning I Met A Whale came from, really, something which truly happened, in fact I think it happened almost again in Glasgow, not long ago. In London about five years ago they saw a whale swim up the Thames. I don't know if any of you remember this. Didn't one happen in Glasgow or something recently?

JF: I think so.

MM: Anyway, what happened, the truth is that very often they become disorientated out at sea and they just find their way into the channel. They swim up these rivers and very often they die but my story is about a boy who comes across this whale and wants to save it. He loves this whale and it turns out the whale has come to give him a message about what's happening in the oceans out there, but it was all inspired really by this whale that swam up the Thames five years ago and there was a huge kerfuffle for two days. They tried to save it and in the end they put him back on a boat and tried to take it back out to sea, but it died on the way, sadly. You'll have to read my story to find out if that what happens, but that is what inspired it. True story. Almost all my books are inspired by something that really really happened.

JF: Thank you very much. I think we've got time for maybe one final question from Connel in Argyll P6/7 Lochnell Primary School, from Louise, so it's not a cheeky question. It's quite a nice question. It's time blow your own trumpet like an elephant. What would you consider your greatest achievement?

MM: Not my books. I hope. I don't know. My grandchildren, or something like I would say. They're the ones that go on after you've gone. I'd like to think there are one or two books that I've written which if you read them stay in your head, and that you later on, when you've got your own kids, you might say well I read this book, can't remember the name of it, a silly man who wrote it but it was good and it was about a horse or an elephant and go and get it from the library. I would like that. That would be, that would be an achievement I suppose, but I would say my grandchildren, really.

JF: Wonderful. Well, great to end on a note that's to do with children, and I guess the message is I hope you've been inspired wherever you've been listening, whether you've been here in Glasgow with us or across the country. It doesn't take much, it could be a dream, something you heard on the radio, just jot it down and don't worry about the spelling, initially. Sorry teachers. That's where we're going to have to leave it. Thanks to all of you, wherever you are for your terrific questions. Apologies again. Obviously there's not time to get through them all. Michael,

thank you for your brilliant answers. Given us lots to think about, and thank you, all of you here from the two primary schools in Glasgow. The next live event, incidentally, is with author Charlie Higson. I'm sure you've read some of his Young Bond books and that's going to be on Thursday the 7<sup>th</sup> October at 11 o'clock in the morning so I do hope you can join us for that, but for now, wherever you are and whatever school you in, we can hear you, you know, and hear another huge round of applause for the brilliant Michal Morpurgo.

Aud: [Applause]

MM: Thank you.