

## Walking Through the Wardrobe: *The Story Museum* in Oxford

Cara Bartels-Bland



[photo credit: The Story Museum]

*It must be a magical place where you can walk through a wardrobe and find yourself in another world. These things happen only in books? Well, in the Story Museum, books come alive.*

In the heart of Oxford, that city whose name evokes mysterious echelons of academia and fantastic literary worlds, lies hidden a beautiful but unassuming brick building called the Story Museum (<http://www.storymuseum.org.uk>). Fittingly situated in the city in which Lewis Carroll, J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis and Philip Pullman imagined their timeless fantasy worlds, Oxford has been numerous described as a place where you can find secret passages, hidden doors and walking gargoyles. What better place to open a museum, in which, I promise, you can walk through a wardrobe and step out into the snowy woods of Narnia.

The museum, which was founded in 2003, is still in its youthful stages, with the first exhibition, *26 Characters*, opening earlier this year. The exhibition is a collaboration

of twenty-six well-known and well-loved British authors and storytellers such as Philip Pullman (*His Dark Materials*), Jamila Gavin (*Coram Boy*), Terry Pratchett (*Discworld Series*), Michael Morpurgo (*Waiting for Anya*), Anthony Horowitz (*Alex Rider*), Julia Donaldson (*The Gruffalo*), Benjamin Zephaniah (*Refugee Boy*), Malorie Blackman (*Noughts & Crosses*) and Neil Gaiman (*Coraline*). All twenty-six authors chose a character from the book they loved most as children, and not only transformed themselves into this character but also designed an individual space, a fairy-tale landscape, to which their character belongs. As a visitor you walk through these fantastical story spaces, and experience the characters through sight, sound (there are recordings of book extracts read by the authors), and sometimes even smell. You can step into the woods of Middle-Earth (with Charlie Higson, author of *Young Bond Series*, as Boromir), onto the planks with Long John Silver (aka Philip Pullman), and as promised, through the wardrobe into Narnia (with Holly Smale, *Geek Girl*, as the White Witch). Striking pictures of the twenty-six authors hang in every space, dressed up as the character they are portraying.



[photo credit: Racing Minds]

While walking through this museum, you get the sense that it is not polished, not set in stone, and that this is how it should be. There are rough bits of masonry, holes in the walls, and no heating, which means one thing: there are no boundaries. In this venue you

can touch all of the exhibits, you do not have to keep your voice down and there are plenty of interactive features for everyone to enjoy. Perhaps most notably the Throne: a red velvet affair, raised upon a podium and adorned with bronze trumpets. Visitors create a fantastical book title (mine was *The Messy Mermaid of Mystery*) with which they walk up to the throne in a stately manner, seat themselves onto the velvet and have the throne announce their title with blaring trumpets.



[photo credit: Duncan Saunders]

The Story Museum's goal is to facilitate education in such a way that you do not realize you are being educated. They organize school visits, talks and other educational programmes. They regularly have school groups come into the museum, for which they plan workshops involving creative writing. A favourite activity is emulating the writing style of authors participating in the exhibition. As Kim Pickin, the joint director, points out, the Story Museum continues the story industry, which Oxford is so famous for, with

---

the history of the building itself, the history of the city and the history of the many remarkable storytellers connected with Oxford's ancient stones.

So if you find yourself in Oxford, get yourself to the Story Museum, and visit the *26 Characters* exhibition (ends February 2015), but remember, never close the wardrobe behind you.

With thanks to the Story Museum, Rochester House, 42 Pembroke Street, Oxford OX1 1BP and special thanks to Alex Coke, Kate Sayer and Kim Pickin for showing me around and answering my questions.

**Cara Bartels-Bland** is a PhD candidate in English at the University of Oxford. Her research focuses on representations of the nonhuman in medieval and modern literary landscapes. She teaches undergraduate courses on children's literature and fantasy and is the convener for CLOC (Children's Literature Oxford Colloquium).