

The Model



THIS IS A STORY ABOUT JACK B YEATS

This is the story of Jack B. Yeats. Jack B. Yeats is one of Ireland's most famous painters. Jack was born in London in 1871 and at the age of eight he moved to Sligo to live with his grandparents, the Polloxfens in a beautifully big house that overlooked the harbour of Sligo town.

Jack was from a famous family in Irish history. His father, John, was a lawyer and gave it up to become a painter. Jack once said that his father was the reason he became a painter. His older brother, William Butler Yeats, is one of Ireland's most famous poets. The brothers would work together a lot in later years, with Jack doing the drawings for some of William's books and also Jack would write plays and design sets for William's theatre, the Abbey in Dublin.

His sister Elizabeth was called Lolly, and she was a teacher. She wrote books on drawing for early years. She also would become a famous publisher in Ireland, and had a company called Cuala Press. His sister Susan, who was called Lily, was a skilled embroiderer and formed the Dun Emer Guild, an Irish craft company with her sister Lolly.

Young Jack loved to sketch and draw. He constantly had a notebook with him. He drew people and fairs and circuses and days at the races. He also would make toys and he would carry them everywhere with him in a box he loved to call the Farm.

In 1879, when 8 year old Jack lived in Sligo, his house over-looked a much busier sea port than today. His grandfather was the owner of ships and there was probably a lot of talk of the sea in their house. And talk of the sea meant that there would be stories of treasure, of pirates, of smugglers and buried treasure! And smugglers that took things off ships! And Jack's imagination was filled with these amazing stories of the sea. Indeed, his own grandfather had run away to be a sailor when he was a boy and now he was the owner of ships. Jack grew a love for all things maritime and he loved the stories and they were part of his paintings and his books and his poems and his plays.

When he was much older he wrote to the mayor of Sligo once and said 'From the beginning of my painting life every painting which I have made has somewhere in it a thought of Sligo'.

After some years, Jack's family returned to London. But such was Jack's love for Sligo that he insisted on staying behind. Eventually, aged 16, he returned to be with his family in London. In London he often visited Buffalo Bill's traveling show at Earl's Court and his love for circus and festivals and fairs never left him all throughout his life.

He attended, for a while, the Chiswick and Spinster School of Art, where he met Mary Cottenham-White, who was also an artist and would soon become his wife. Aged 17 he began to earn money for his black and white drawings for a magazine called the Vegetarian. He began to get commissions for book illustrations and from poster companies. In 1894 he and Mary (or, as he called her, Cottie) were married and they moved to a place called Streat, in Devon.

It was while he was in Devon that he began to make toy theatre shows. Jack would write the stories, create the characters, build the backgrounds and prepare the whole show. Then, when it was all ready, he would perform it for the children of the village every Christmas. He talked about having bigger benches and a bigger opening in the theatre so that more children could see it.

We still have a lot of these scripts and images and some of them were turned into little books. Nearly all of the plays are set at sea or at a circus or involve treasure, adventures and fantastic names like 'James Flaunty' and 'Treasures of the Deep' or 'The Scourge of the Gulf'. He said once about his plays 'I write them all myself, so what should I say of them, but that I admire them all. But I like the pirate ones best.'

In 1910, Jack and Cottie decided to return to Jack's beloved Ireland and they settled in Bray. Ireland was a very different country to the one Jack had left. It was in the middle of a cultural revolution. Jack's brother William had founded the Abbey Theatre, and Jack would write plays and create sets for that very same venue.

In 1924 the Olympics were held in Paris. From 1912 until 1948 the Arts were an event in the Olympics! The art had to represent some sort of a sporting event. Jack entered his painting 'The Liffey Swim', which depicts a famous race in the Liffey held in Dublin every year. He was awarded the Silver medal, the first Olympic medal won by the Irish Freestate.

Jack continued to paint until his death in 1957. His favourite subjects were: horses, people, boxing and, of course, the sea. He wrote books and plays. He designed sets for theatres and he was also a poet. He loved model boats and he wrote a book for children called 'A Little Fleet', in which he tells the story of a group of model boats and their adventures on the Gara river.

Recently the Model Museum in Sligo received a parcel. It was a chest and in that chest was a collection of Jack B. Yeats' model boats, and also there was a series of paintings they didn't know existed! When the model boats were being cleaned they found a little guy, a little character with red trousers and a white shirt and he's reading a blue book. And he was folded up and hidden inside a boat. On his back was written the word 'Help'. Who could he be? Where did he come from?

Even this long after his death Jack B. Yeats is giving us adventures and stories and mystery! And it's our job to continue that adventure!