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THE UK'S
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MAGAZINE

FROM US, AND
QUENTIN BLAKE
 THE BIG FRIENDLY ARTIST AT 80

MAGGIE SMITH REVEALS HER NAUGHTY SIDE
SCISSORS, SOAP AND SHERRY CHRISTMAS AS A FIFTIES MIDWIFE
FAREWELL, 2012 PHEW! WHAT A YEAR THAT WAS



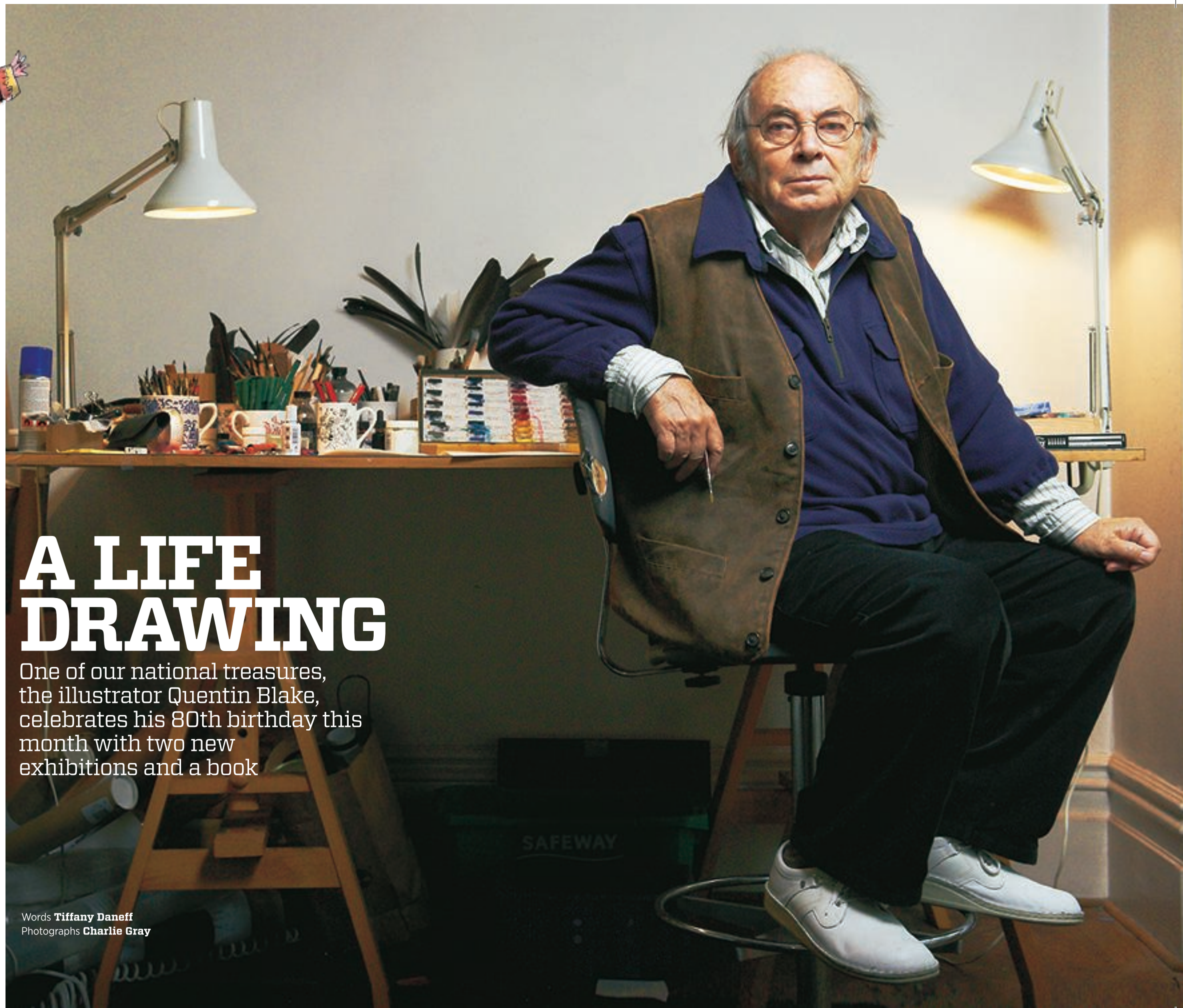
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HE DRAWING TABLE BRISTLES WITH PENS AND BRUSHES stuffed into an array of breakfast mugs – fat, stubby children’s crayons, feather quills, calligraphy pens, wide nibs, thin nibs, ink-stained nibs and brushes of every size – fistfuls and fistfuls of them.

‘It’s got a bit fuller since you were last here,’ admits Quentin Blake, ushering me into his studio in Earls Court, West London. The shelves bulge with the great collection of books he has illustrated over the years, those written by Roald Dahl being his most famous. Boxes of books and proofs and sheaves of paper are stacked around.

Old Quent, as Dahl called him, looks just as he did when I first interviewed him 18 years ago. Incredible to think he is 80 this month. I search for signs. Is he slightly more stooped than before? No, maybe not. There are the familiar, gentle but enigmatic features, the same well-worn corduroys and white shoes and that absorption with his work which has, in the past 12 years, taken him out of his studio and into the real world, as revealed in his new book *Beyond the Page*.

‘That’s my thinking chair,’ he says pointing to a saggy, black leather, Eames armchair. ‘I sit there while I think.’ Quentin always stands to draw, placing an original outline sketch on the light box and overlaying this with watercolour paper. It enables him to see enough of the sketch below to guide the hand but not so much that he is tracing. He starts with the most difficult bit – an expression or



A LIFE DRAWING

One of our national treasures, the illustrator Quentin Blake, celebrates his 80th birthday this month with two new exhibitions and a book

Words **Tiffany Daneff**
Photographs **Charlie Gray**



◁ gesture – amending and adapting as he goes along.

He turns to the drawing board to paint. Today he is colourwashing the eager faces of children on an Advent calendar for Christmas 2014. The yellow paint bleeds across the lines, lighting the children's features with the warm glow from the plum pudding. Dolls, reindeer, toys and crackers fizz with life.

An apparently inconsequential dot defines the innocent wonder on a small girl's upturned face. With a random scribble he creates a whole character. It's both enchanting and effortless. No wonder he is a national treasure with a CBE and a stack of prestigious awards and prizes.

FIFTEEN YEARS AGO, Quentin started a diary, thinking he was on the verge of semi-retirement. He could hardly have been more wrong – and now he's delighted that he was indeed wrong.

'Two years later I was appointed [the first] Children's Laureate and that gave me licence to start up a whole lot of things.' He threw himself into the role, thoroughly enjoying selecting paintings and illustrations for a series of exhibitions.

Through the Nightingale Project, which brings art and music into hospitals, he reached a new audience. He has illustrated the walls of a mental health ward, an eating disorders unit and, most recently, a maternity centre in Angers, France. This is filled with vast pictures of mothers and babies

swimming about under water. 'Now mothers in Angers can't give birth without being in a room with drawings by me in it! I don't know if that's a good thing or not.'

If Quentin doesn't look his age, he doesn't act it either. 'I still feel exactly the same person,' he says. 'Being 80 is strangely like something that is happening to someone else standing near me.'

AS A PATRON of the Campaign for Drawing, Quentin helped set up The Big Draw, which puts on events across the country. Many were aimed at children but not all. 'The idea was to encourage people to draw but I soon realised you didn't need to encourage them, you just needed to tell them they were allowed to draw.'

Is it ever too late to learn? 'No it isn't,' he says. 'When children reach the age of reason – around 12 years old – and become self-aware, they look at their peers at school and they see efficient drawing and think

'I still feel the same... being 80 is like something happening to someone else'

'I can't do that'. But there is a whole range of imaginative drawing that you can do.

'I tell people to draw what's in front of them. They'll probably be thinking that there's no way to deal with the amount of visual information that is coming at you. I just say, "Draw something, and if you don't get everything don't worry. Put it away and look at it later." You'll see you have caught something that you could not have caught with a camera.'

'The important thing is not to be embarrassed by the level of skill you have. If you have an instinct to do it, there's probably something in there.'

Quentin spent more than 20 years teaching at the Royal College of Art and was Head of Illustration from 1978 to 1986. But perhaps such empathy recalls the two years he dedicated to brushing up his own skills. This was after he left Cambridge (where he read English). He had already had cartoons



Master strokes
Quentin Blake paints in his distinctive style – and makes it look effortless

published in *Punch* but did not consider his drawing good enough and so for two days a week for two years he did nothing but life drawing and lithography. Every evening he would come home from his class at Chelsea School of Art and draw the subject again from memory. 'I felt that was very important. It gave me fluency.'

His work writing and illustrating books has never let up and letters from young fans still pour in. 'It's not as much as Roald,' he says. 'He got sackfuls – but I get something every day. Interestingly, I am now getting letters from people who read me as children and are now reading to their children.' He was interviewed recently by a young woman who told him that his was the first book she had read by herself. 'She said it was because of the pictures,' he says. 'Somehow that seems more gratifying than children just saying they like them.'

He misses Dahl: 'You couldn't not.' They first collaborated back in the Seventies. 'By way of compensation I have the friendship of Licky Dahl, the business of the Roald Dahl Charitable Trust and, of course, there

is work to be done on the books. So in all those ways he's still with us.'

The first books Quentin read as a child were adventure stories and annuals. 'I've still got my *Chicks' Own Annual* from 1936. What I didn't read was Beatrix Potter or Kenneth Grahame or Alice. I read those later.' He doesn't know why his parents didn't have them. 'It might not have occurred to them.'

HIS FATHER WAS a civil servant and his mother a housewife. The family lived in France after the First World War, returning to England in 1932. Quentin was born on December 16, 11 years after his elder brother. 'Once or twice I got an extra special present by combining birthday and Christmas,' he says, though these days he wouldn't mind people forgetting the former and having the latter come round every other year. Understandable with all the cards and calendars he draws, 'It's not easy finding new twists for the familiar elements.'

Does he mind not having children himself? 'No, not at all,' he says. 'This doesn't mean, incidentally,

that I don't like women or don't like children. That's a different matter. I perfectly understand the rewards but we don't all have to do the same things, fortunately. I would not want to be without relationships and responsibilities, but I have those.' He has three godchildren, all now grown up and is 'art-godparent' to a talented girl who is still at school. 'We send each other drawings.'

His childhood was dominated by the Second World War. Twice he was evacuated from the family home in Sidcup, south London. But he remembers being at his aunt's birthday party and seeing lights from the Blitz fill the London sky.

'I think my



aunt's husband was lost at sea – Merchant Navy. I remember being affected – at the time it was embarrassment more than anything. But it must have stuck. I used it twice. In *The Green Ship* and *The Story of the Dancing Frog*.' (About a widow who falls in love with a frog.)

Do children have it better today? As far as books go, yes, he says, because there is so much more choice. But perhaps there are more pressures on the young today? 'Do you mean,' he asks, 'whether they have more to worry about? When I was at school anxiety was more immediate. You worried whether a bomb might fall on you. We used to collect shrapnel off the streets. I don't know whether that is less disturbing because it's immediate.'

The war also brought him a new teacher whose husband was an artist and cartoonist. The teenage Quentin took suitcases of drawings to his house. 'He introduced to me the idea that you could send jokes to *Punch*.' His first was published when he was just 16 and by that age he was taking art seriously: 'I can remember discussing Graham Sutherland and Ben Nicholson, all those neo-Romantic people.'

It was thanks to another teacher, the inspiring English master, J H Walsh, that Quentin applied to Cambridge. Then came national service. He tells a fabulous story of showing his lieutenant colonel his first illustrations for a book intended to help young recruits learn to read. 'Sergeant Blake!' came back the complaint. 'The grass is too long! And the creases in the trousers might be sharper.' 'It taught me what to expect from publishers!' he laughs. But he went back to the drawing board and did the picture all over again. ◆

See Quentin Blake's work in London at Marlborough Fine Art from Dec 12 and at Chris Beetles Gallery from Dec 9, when he will open the show in person. See quentinblake.com. To get 20% off Beyond the Page (Tate Publishing, £19.99) see Saga Bookshop, page 167