

# The nature guardian's quest

Illustrator, writer and academic Gorg Mallia speaks to TEODOR RELJIC about his picture-book *Sigurd and the Tree of Life*, which takes its cue from Scandinavian folklore to weave a fantasy adventure with sobering shades of environmental awareness

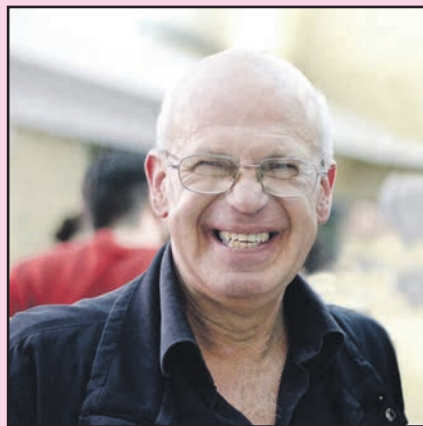
## What are the origins of *Sigurd* for you?

Sigurd is very much a composite character, visually reminiscent of the Scandinavian 'tomtenissar' (loosely translated as 'Santa's Elves'), but in character (humbly) derivative of characters that populate the novels of Tolkien, Le Guin, Peake and the other high-fantasy authors... but scaled down since the book I've written about him is primarily intended for children. In the book, he is the last of the wizards, living in a house he built himself at the edge of a dark forest. He spends his days reading the spells of the ancient wizards, now long dead (though alive in spirit form), while knowing that the world he lives in is dominated by science, and that people have lost their fascination with magic. So he actually lives in the present day, but is cut off from the cities. Modern technology is at times mentioned in the book, but plays no part in it.

Visually I have drawn him and the other characters in *Sigurd and the Tree of Life* in the way that 'tomtenissar' are depicted in Scandinavia, where soft figurines that represent them are very popular Christmas decorations. A long hat, very long beard, robes, nose, but no face to be seen. I find the figurines fascinating and can never stop drawing them, and it was this fascination, leading to a couple of illustrations, that actually set the ball rolling for this book. And I ended up falling in love with the character, which helped hone it into something (may I say so myself?) wonderful. The setting is, of course, the far north, with its intransigent winters and beautiful, leafless trees.

## Is the environmental theme general or based on Maltese themes?

I'm a bit obsessed with the environment and the horrendous damage we're doing to it. That was also one of the themes of my last book before this one, *Il-Professur Ghasfur*, so



Gorg Mallia. Photo by Felix Attard

one is likely to find that theme somewhere in all of my fiction. This time around the ecological theme is a universal one, though that's not that far off from the one we're experiencing on this tiny island, which is slowly losing its nature, replaced by ugliness and claustrophobic skylines.

But I must emphasise that the environmental theme plays second fiddle to the fantasy story itself in the book. It is an understood theme that runs under the surface, certainly, but it's not really what the book is about. The *Tree of Life* and its poisoning by the evil wizard is not an outright allegory... it stands per se as an adventure that pulls Sigurd well out of his comfort zone and into dangers that also shoved all of existence to the edge. Quite a huge agenda for a little book, I think.

## What do you hope readers will get out of the work?

Enjoyment... because of the story... because of the pictures. Loving the main character. Possibly booing at the baddies. Living the adventure with Sigurd and rooting for him as he struggles against forces much big-

ger than him and his capabilities. I would really like my readers to love the character of Sigurd the way I do, and to want to read more stories about him. In the process, I wouldn't mind them thinking a bit about our wonderful world and how important it is (especially for future generations) that its natural beauty not be destroyed. In the real world, we do not have Sigurd's magic to save us.

## Your drawing style: how did it evolve and how did you adapt it to this particular book?

I like to think I'm quite versatile when it comes to illustration, fitting the predominant style to the content and atmosphere of the words I am visualising. I am primarily a cartoonist, but also do realistic illustrations at times, when needed, often using a steady pen line that resembles a scaled down engraving technique. In the case of this book there is a hybrid cartoon/realistic illustration style that befits the fantasy, but which is nonetheless underscored by the need for readers to link to familiar images.

As I tend to, I have drawn the pictures by hand, using a variety of pens – drawing pens, brush pens, fine liners, and anything that came to hand, really, in order to achieve different line weights. The drawings were then scanned and coloured on screen. The backgrounds are from photos I've taken myself in Swedish forests, filtered, touched up, drawn upon, rescanned, coloured, tweaked... you name it. The result, I think, is colourful and "magical".

## What do you make of the local publishing scene? What would you change about it?

Although we're losing publishers thick and

fast because of market limitations, and, I have to admit, sadly, that in spite of all efforts made over the last decades, reading remains something of a rare commodity in Malta, we do have publishers that courageously strive on, even publishing books that they know will be sleepers, or very bad sellers. Logically, the one area that is quite good for books is that of children's literature, though even there, there is no room for complacency or a drop in quality. I think Maltese publishing needs more of an official support structure that can help it tide over rough patches (i.e. all the time!) In much the same way that some areas of arts and crafts are "protected" so they don't flounder, some sort of grants system that goes well beyond what we have in place needs to be implemented, intelligently targeting those areas that lose money on the market. Authors in those areas mainly self-publish, and while I'm not against this in principle, it loses that much needed gate-keeping that often helps assure a high quality.

A number of our publishers adhere to a strict, very useful work ethic and are highly professional. A few don't and aren't. I think understanding the nature of the skill set needed and the number of professionals necessary to make for successful, high quality publishing is indispensable, and even more so when it market is miniscule. Good publishers publish good books. Bad publishers publish mediocre books that flood the market and harm the industry for those who really deserve to be there. Sorry... that turned into a bit of a rant.

## What's next for you?

Oh dear... that's a tricky question! I have so many things going in the academic and creative sides of my life that I think sleeping is becoming a commodity. I'm working on a once-in-a-lifetime book which verges on academic writing, creating and testing a qualitative instrument for the analysis of visual narrative that's at roughly 100,000 words and counting. And as head of the Department of Media and Communications at the University, there's a thing or two to do. But what I would really like to do over the next few months is write another *Sigurd* book (sincerely hope this one does well enough to make it worth *Horizons'* while to publish another one... though reception so far has been fantastic). And I even have the first two chapters of a new *Professur Ghasfur* book in the oven. And a lot more. Yeah, maybe I'll catch the occasional night's sleep in the process. Never mind. Writing and drawing are essential parts of my life I would not be able to live without.

*Sigurd and the Tree of Life* is published by *Horizons* and is available at all book stores

