

Obituary

David Larkin

by Colin Larkin

After a lifetime of using his eyes, both as an insatiable reader and more importantly, analysing, appreciating and creating the visual image, my brother David passed away peacefully on 2 December 2020. Plagued by ill health in recent years, he had also survived brain surgery that January. The cruellest thing was the deterioration of his eyesight through macular degeneration.



Born in humble surroundings in Dagenham, Essex in 1936, he had a natural left-handed gift with pencil and crayon from a very early age. During the London blitz he sketched perfect Spitfires and Messerschmitts by candlelight in the air raid shelter at the bottom of the garden. After the war he peacefully explored the Essex and Suffolk countryside alone, on his beloved racing bike, with a sketchpad to fill with drawings of trees and the Essex marshes.

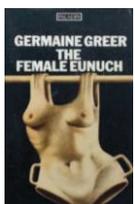


His was a rough school. He was not good at maths and was picked on because of his ginger hair and bad stutter. He left just before he turned 15 – having managed slowly to self-cure his stutter without the help of any speech therapy. His art teacher was his saviour: he saw his immense talent and arranged an interview with a colleague who worked at a jobbing studio in London, Studio Erwin, which employed him as a messenger and gradually gave him some technical line drawing work. Roaming London as a messenger allowed much time to spend in the Tate Gallery and the National Gallery – where he knew every room and every painting.

Back home in the scouts, on camping trips he would entertain the tent with his pencil caricatures, while his schoolmate Dudley Moore would crack jokes. Christian Socialists ran the local youth club/church in Dagenham, and here he became politically aware. Every week while Dudley would play the piano, David would be responsible for immaculate calligraphy in the births, deaths and marriages register. Much to his pacifist objection, he was called up for National Service in 1956 and posted near Belfast where he spent 2 years in the Cartography department, preparing maps for manoeuvres.

On his return in 1958 and with a decent portfolio, he was able to join the Pulford Publicity art studio doing paste up and pencil layouts. They specialised in film poster illustration and many notable illustrators passed through during his time there. These included the prolific Italians Renato Fratini, Gino D'Achille and Pino Dell'Orco when they moved to London in the early 1960s and, before that, Roger Hall, Derek Stowe, John Keay and Josh Kirby who also worked as Pan Books freelancers. It was Josh who encouraged David to join CND and it was Derek, who was also doing covers for Panther Books, who dropped a wink in 1963 that there was a vacancy in their art studio - for which David asked me to pass on his grateful thanks when I was in touch with Derek in 2017 researching my book on Pan cover art (see page 20 in this issue).

It was at Panther Books that David's career really blossomed. In addition to doing the occasional cover illustration, he prepared finished cover layouts and commissioned numerous artists. By 1969 he was Group Art Director of Granada Publishing who had acquired Panther and Mayflower Books along with several hardback imprints. He discovered and nurtured new talent including John Holmes who illustrated Germaine Greer's iconic *Female Eunuch* cover for the fledgling Paladin imprint



From left: David Larkin, William Miller, Carmen Callil, Ken Banerji, John Boothe, and Brian Thompson in 1971. Collectively known as 'the Granada Powerhouse' all of them would be gone within a few months: David to Pan,

David during his time at Pan 1973

from David's initial idea). Similarly he employed numerous future art directors – Dom Rodi, Cherry McGill, Pat Mortimore, Mike Jarvis and Steve Abis – who became his replacement when he was headhunted by Ralph Vernon Hunt to join Pan in 1972, taking his loyal assistant Ken Hatherley with him.



That year he was part of the team that created the Picador imprint – and here he sprinkled some extra fairy dust on their impressive covers, as well as defining the B-format paperback. He gave Pan Paperbacks a shot in the arm and a fresh identity, including a new logo. Since the demise of the 'golden age' covers with the yellow panel in the late 60s, they were looking tired and had lost market share. Once again he bought in young fresh talent for the covers and utilised the agencies of Artists Partners and Young Artists. He also continued the use of creative photography on covers – something he had pioneered at Panther. He consistently pushed the artists to always go beyond their own known capabilities: he often saw things in them that they did not.

The great artist and future Pan Art Director George Sharp told me 'I have to thank David for supporting me with ceaseless commissions which demanded work I always tended to think were beyond my abilities. He always proved me wrong'.

Concurrently with his move to Pan he had been contracted to work with Ian Ballantine who had a joint imprint with Pan. When David moved to America in 1980 and married Sabra Elliott he continued working with him until Ian's death in 1995. By then David had achieved major success with the *Fantastic Art* series, *Faeries*, *Giants*, *Shaker* and countless coffee table books including *Barn*, *Mill*, *Farm* and the *Country Wisdom* series. He regarded his last publication, *When Art Worked*, as his best and final statement in book form.

He had a blotting paper mind, always soaking up information from books and constantly seeing the world through uncannily artistic eyes. From my personal view, 14 years older than me, he gave me values my parents were not able to give. He showed me a world outside Dagenham, and became a father figure I idolised in my first 25 years. He introduced me to libraries, the London art galleries and museums when I was very young. I became a commercial artist and later a book designer because of him. I felt a privileged phoney because unlike him, I went to grammar school and art college, yet had only a grain of his talent as an artist. My four children adored him and referred to him as 'The Oracle'. Right or wrong, before Wikipedia he was the only place to go. He did not tolerate fools gladly and his sharp humour could cut you off at the knee, but he was worth it.

He is survived by his wife Sabra, three lovely daughters, three grandchildren and myself.

The Macmillan Together Network

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