# Michael Rosen on making of ‘We’re Going on a Bear Hunt’ – transcript.

## Michael:

Well my name’s Michael Rosen and I write books, poems, stories that sort of thing and sometime around the nineteen-seventies and eighties I came across people doing various versions of ‘We’re Going on a Bear Hunt’. Sometimes the brownies, part of the world scout movement, would do we’re going on a lion hunt and then I saw some folk singers who doing something like ‘We’re Going on a Bear Hunt’ and I gather there were people in America doing it as a song at summer camp in the United States. So I started performing it, with my own version of it. I was doing it in a school and David Lloyd, who was at the time the chief editor at Walker Books, came along and saw that and said: “Hey I love that Bear Hunt thing! That was terrific! That would make a really good book.” And I said “Yeah you should do it” and he said “No, no. I want you to write it down”. I said “Well you write it down”. He said: “No you write it down”, I said: “You write it down”. So we stood there arguing as to who was going to write it down and he said: “No, no. I want you to write it down. So I went away and I remember on the train home writing it down and I could see that it didn’t really work on the page in the way that I was performing it. Mostly because I did sounds rather than words for a lot of it, so going through the mud I’d go “sqcccuelch”, which is quite difficult to write down you see. Or if it was going through the river I’d be diving into the river going “splashhhh”. So I had to think of some of those and then when I wrote it down it wasn’t long enough. Picture books have to be exactly the right length and it wasn’t long enough; I only had about three places for people to go when they’re chasing the bear, and so we had to add some others. So I came up with the forest and the snow storm. There were one or two other little bits like that and so I gave it to David Lloyd and that was how the book began.

What happened next was really rather extraordinary because I don’t think I heard from Walker Books for about two years. They said that Helen Oxenbury was doing the pictures and then after about two years I was invited in to Walker Books. They said “Come in. Helen has done the pictures”. I don’t know what I had in mind, I think it was something maybe along the idea that there’d be a group of people at carnival or something and maybe the bear wasn’t a real bear or something but I man in a bear suit. I don’t know just some vague idea like that. I arrived and they took me upstairs to a darkened room and said “Come in, come and have a look what Helen’s done”. They opened the door and there was a great big pile of what looked at first like rags. It was in fact handmade paper and it was piled up on the table with that coloured paper, that thin coloured paper, tissue paper over the top. They peeled it back and there was the first picture. I think it was of the children coming down the hill with all the poppies and I looked at it and I thought “What’s that got to do with a bear hunt?” I thought that’s an incredible picture, it reminded me of I think it’s Bizarro, one of the impressionists, and then they took off sheet after sheet and I kept looking at it going “What’s that got to do with a bear hunt?” I thought it looks like a summer holiday, a bit like the kind of summer holiday I went on as a child. You know on the coast, somewhere like Cornwall. I kept on looking at it and the people at Walker Books were going “What do you think? What do you think?” and I was going “Mmmmm”, but I didn’t get it. But quite seriously I have to say I didn’t get it so I stood there just staring at it and then they said “We think it’s incredible. It’s marvellous. It’s going to be an incredible book.” Then I went “Mmmmm”. Then the book came out and they said “Don’t you think it’s incredible?” and I went “Mmmmm. I didn’t get it!” Then bit by bit over the years I’ve got it because the incredible thing that Helen has done is that she’s made a book where really there are two stories; there this rhyme that trundles along and then she has created this story of this family going through these terrible problems and dilemmas. You can see it on the man’s face as he sits there like that; these terrible obstacles, and then the worst one of all, the cave and the bear. What are they going to do? Then they run away and like a lot of children’s books it ends up with them being safe. And of course anybody of any age, from nought to a hundred and fifty or something, can look at that and can experience their own troubles in Helen’s pictures. Whatever level your troubles are you can experience it and that rhythm, that old folk rhythm, that’s in it – du-dum, du-dum,du-dum – carries you through so that in a way you have hope taking you all the way through. So it keeps repeating itself. There’s that wonderful rhythm going along which I didn’t invent it comes from the folk rhyme, then these awful problems and it’s cosmic. It’s right out there, it’s the whole of the snow storm and the whole of the great big forest and sometimes it’s quite small with the mud. So that’s an incredible book that Helen and Walker Books made from a folk rhyme that I adapted. That’s how I see that book.

## Voiceover:

‘We’re Going on a Bear Hunt’ celebrating twenty-five years. Jointhebearhunt.com, Walker Books.