

DRAWING INSPIRATION

by Francie Latour

THE STORY I AM ABOUT TO SHARE WITH YOU TAKES PLACE IN PROVIDENCE, RI. It's here that you will meet **David Wiesner 78 IL**, **Brian Selznick 88 IL** and **Jarrett J. Krosoczka 99 IL**, three young students—each a decade apart—moving through the Illustration department at Rhode Island School of Design. Picture their paths—to RISD and beyond—taking wildly different turns. Follow them, and you will discover one opening countless rejection letters from publishers; another failing a test for an entry-level job in a bookstore; and a third with such laser focus on making a wordless picture book that winning a Caldecott Honor for his debut effort seems like destiny.

This is a story about fantastical worlds made real through lyrical text and convincing illustrations: frogs flying on lily pads at night, a Parisian orphan obsessed with the dawn of silent movies and lunch ladies who fight crime. It's a story about how Wiesner, Selznick and Krosoczka transport readers to those worlds by combining words and pictures—at times using traditional forms to amazing effect, at others by breaking traditional storytelling norms wide open.

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David Macaulay BArch 69



In *Flotsam* David Wiesner 78 IL was so successful at creating a wordless picture book—his longtime goal—that he collected his third Caldecott Medal for the effort.

below: Though his award-winning *Lunch Lady* series has really hit a chord with the elementary school crowd, Jarrett J. Krosoczka 99 IL still loves making picture books for younger readers, too. His latest, *Ollie the Purple Elephant*, just came out this fall.

“In the end, the goal is for everything to feel inevitable, as if there were no other way the story could have fit together or unfolded, even though you’re making a million different choices along the way and you don’t know if they’re right or wrong,” says Selznick, whose genre-defying kids’ novel, *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*, will be released in December as a feature film directed by Martin Scorsese. His new novel, *Wonderstruck*, just came out in September and pushes the entire notion of illustrated books even further, with two separate narratives of deaf children: one entirely in words, the other entirely in pictures.

“Being a good storyteller,” Selznick says, “means wanting it to feel like there’s nothing else that story ever could have been.”

The paths of these three author/illustrators offer lessons about struggle and success, about knowing or not knowing exactly what you want to be in life. But ultimately, the stories of Selznick, Wiesner and Krosoczka are stories about story, revealing how a tale can lie dormant for years in the back of a storyteller’s mind, how it can surface by embracing or rejecting a mentor’s advice, and how, when it works, it compels readers to do the one thing authors spend untold amounts of time thinking about: turn the page.

CLARITY AND DRIVE

When Wiesner was in third grade, his teacher sent a note home telling his parents that little David would obviously rather draw than do his schoolwork. By 15 he had a thing for painting stuff that was flying. In one piece that shows his fascination with René Magritte, he painted eerily realistic refrigerators floating through a blue sky with perfect puffy clouds. “I thought appliances in the air looked pretty cool,” says the artist, whose books conjure up surreal, dream-like worlds.

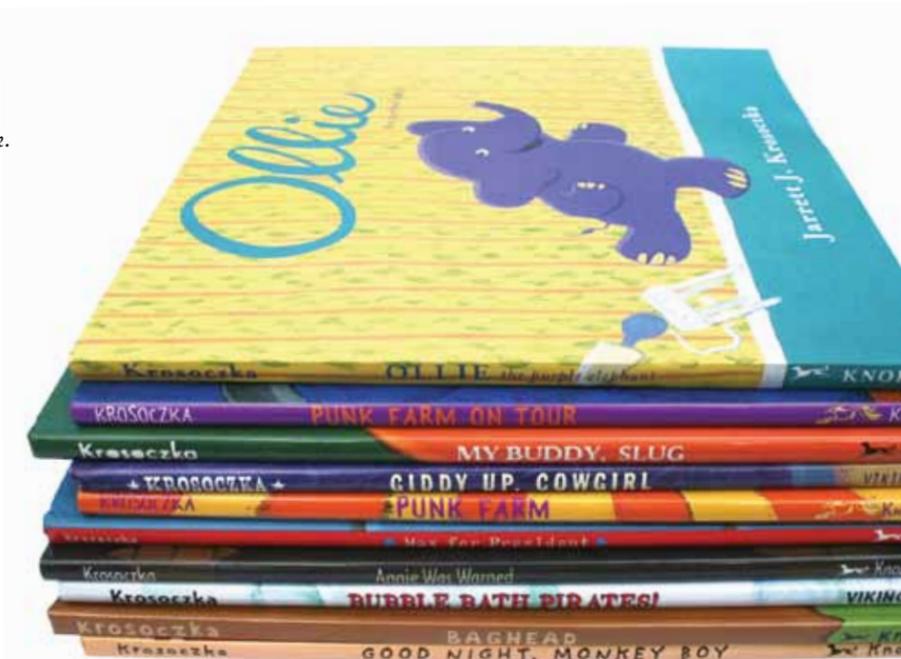
Wiesner lived for the hand-me-down supplies he inherited from his siblings, who were also artistically inclined. Unbeknownst to him, his father had begun looking into art schools early, and he still remembers the RISD grad who came to speak to his high school class. “When he left I was like, ‘Take me with you. I’m ready to go now!’” he recalls.

But talking to Wiesner, you get the feeling that even if he had grown up with nothing more than pencils and paper, he’d still be right where he is now, making some of the most acclaimed picture books published in recent years.

David Macaulay BArch 69, the MacArthur “genius” who taught at RISD for many years and had Wiesner as a student, noticed his clarity and drive immediately. “I just made a point

of trying not to get in his way. He was that very rare student who had such a clear sense of where he was going,” says Macaulay, best known for such groundbreaking classics as *Cathedral*, *Castle*, *Pyramid*, *Mosque* and *The Way Things Work*. “RISD is a place where I don’t expect people to necessarily see clearly where they’re going, because that’s not really what the school is about. It’s more about being perfectly trained and prepared to do whatever it is you ultimately recognize to be your path. To see David already beginning to blossom at that level before he even left school, that was a gift for me.”

Single-mindedness was something Krosoczka also had in abundance—and something he needed: How else do you convince grandparents who lived through the Depression that you should go to art school? “My grandparents raised me, and my grandfather ran a factory. He was a self-made man in the truest sense,” says Krosoczka, who grew up in Worcester, MA. “I’m sure he thought to himself, ‘How is this kid going to support himself drawing pictures for a living?’ But he always believed in me.” His grandfather continued believing in him even after the rejection letter arrived from RISD, relegating his devastated grandson to the University of Hartford [CT] instead.





Jarrett J. Krosoczka 99 IL has almost as much fun reading his books to crowds of kids as they do listening to him. His wild and woolly picture book *Punk Farm* is now being made into a feature film, as is the *Lunch Lady* series.

Krosoczka's plan worked brilliantly: Having already amassed a pile of rejection letters, he landed his first book contract six months after graduation. And he has been incredibly prolific ever since, with two new titles, *Ollie the Purple Elephant* and *Lunch Lady and the Field Trip Fiasco*, just out this fall alone.

But for a young artist trying to prove himself to a factory man and father figure, those six months seemed interminable. "My grandfather would call and ask, 'Do you have a job?' And I would say, 'Yes. I write and illustrate children's books. No one is paying me just yet for that, but that's my job.'"

REBELLING AT RISD

By the time Selznick got to RISD, people had been telling him for years that his future lay in children's books. That's what happens when you start sculpting dinosaurs from your grandmother's tin foil as a toddler, and mesmerizing your kindergarten friends just by drawing a seal balancing a ball on its nose. But unlike Wiesner and Krosoczka, the inevitability of picture books sent Selznick running in the opposite direction.

"The effect it had was to make me really, really hate children's books and to never want to illustrate them," he says. After a guidance counselor advised he get a liberal arts education rather than risk becoming an artist, he was on the verge of attending Syracuse. And visiting RISD didn't help matters. "I kept thinking, 'Who the hell wants to walk up these hills all the time? Syracuse is nice and flat. There's no way I'm

going to this school,'" Selznick says. "That was my mindset, believe it or not—choosing a college based on which campus would be easier to walk around for four years."

Still, Selznick opted for RISD despite the hills. As a student, he devoured anything that pushed him conceptually and can still remember the blood and sweat he poured into building a violin from one continuous piece of cardboard. But although some of the biggest luminaries in children's literature surrounded him—Macaulay was teaching in Illustration then and Maurice Sendak came to RISD as a visiting artist—the Illustration major studiously avoided them. Instead, he spent the majority of his time at Brown as the resident set designer for student theater productions. "Set design encapsulated everything I loved to do—it was art, theater, painting, drawing," Selznick says. "All of a sudden, I had a goal."

Selznick had his sights set on moving on to Yale School of Drama after RISD, but he got rejected from the graduate program. After bumming around Europe for a few months, he landed in Manhattan and found himself in front of Eeyore's, the iconic children's bookstore. But even entry-level jobs there required extensive knowledge of children's literature, and his didn't go much past *Green Eggs and Ham*.

"Of course, I failed their test," Selznick says. "I realized then that I was supposed to be a children's book illustrator, and I had just squandered four years of what could arguably have been the best opportunity in the world to learn about children's books."

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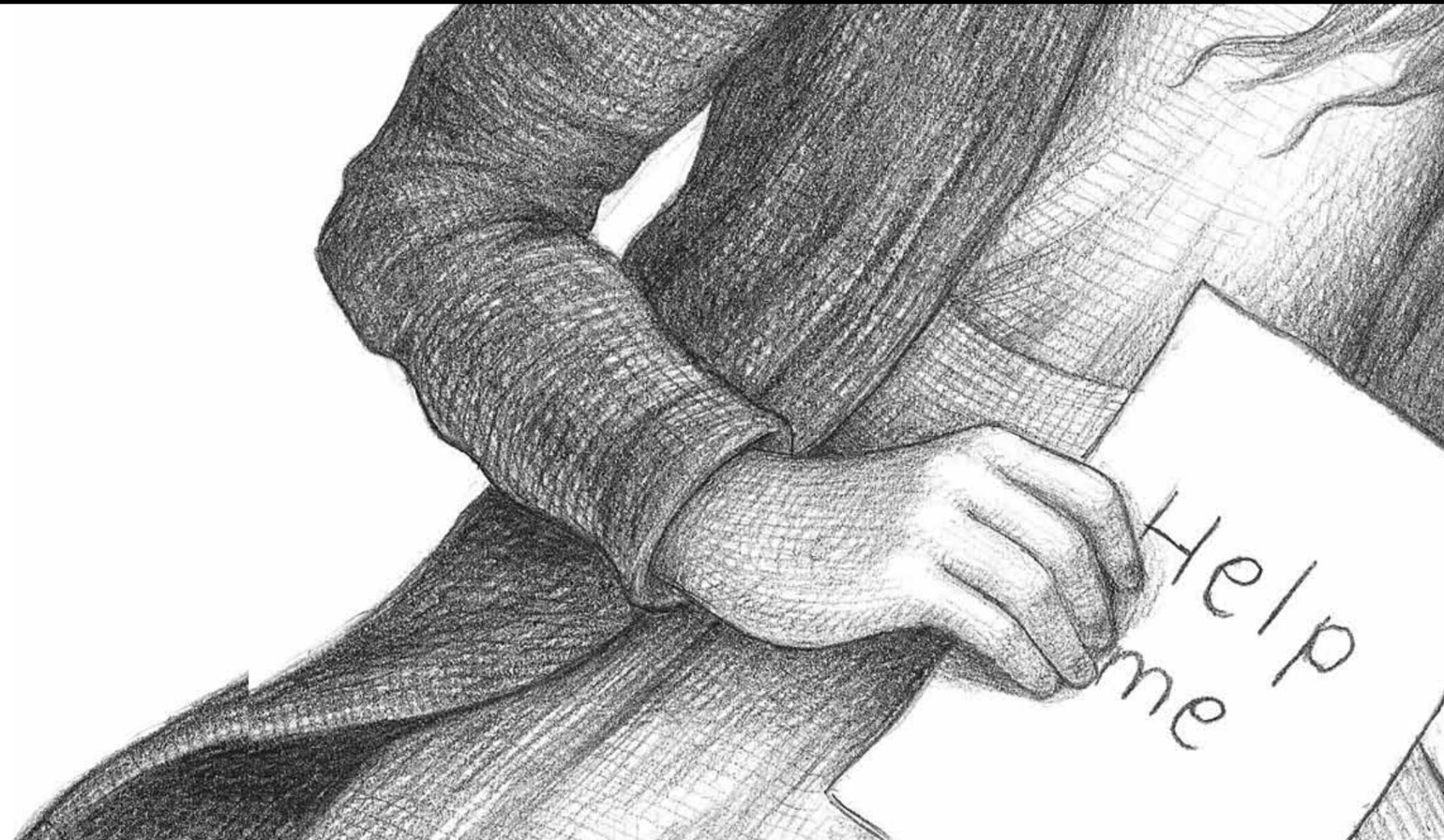
Jarrett J. Krosoczka 99 IL

Not surprisingly for an artist who's as high-energy as his now signature style, Krosoczka quickly got bored at his fallback school. The idea of reapplying to RISD as a transfer student lingered in the back of his mind, which is where it stayed until he ran into a former high school teacher who urged him to try again. Shortly thereafter, Krosoczka was in—a RISD transfer student who just couldn't fathom the complaints of overworked freshmen. Instead, he relished every assignment and crit, and soon became obsessed with the art of the children's book.

Illustration faculty member **Mary Jane Begin** 85 IL, an accomplished children's book illustrator in her own right, remembers watching her former student's style evolve. "He really discovered that style of thickly applied acrylic in my *Color Works* class," she explains. "It's a really intense palette that's solid and happy with a vibrant energy, like candy. I knew he had found something—but more importantly, *he* knew he had found something—and it was click-click-boom. As a teacher, when you see them find it and run with it like that, it's incredibly exciting."

The projects Krosoczka completed at RISD didn't just go into his portfolio; starting in his junior year, he began a methodical process of submitting the two picture books he made on assignment to publishers. And he got rejected dozens of times.

"I'd always been told most authors or illustrators get rejected for a few years before getting published," Krosoczka says. "So I did the math and figured, 'If I start sending them out now, I'll get all that rejection out of the way by the time I graduate.'" Though he was devastated each time he got rejected, years later he realized that "the rejections all sounded really nice, and I was like, 'Wow, how thoughtful! The editors were passing on my books, but offering critiques of my stories!' That showed that they had actually read my books! Not everyone gets that. It was an invitation to revise and resubmit."



“I remember sitting there and it was like the sky parted and the light came shining down.”

David Wiesner 78 IL



In *Art & Max* Wiesner created two charismatic lizards to tell a story about the creative process itself. The book won more than half a dozen ‘best of 2010’ awards and earned him the Illustrator of the Year award in the Children’s Choice Book Awards.



SHOW, DON'T TELL

For Wiesner, the idea of marrying pictures and narrative kept getting clearer and clearer while he was at RISD. He had explored filmmaking and loved it. But it was the book itself—an object with pages to turn—that kept calling him. One day when he was visiting his RISD roommate in Pittsburgh, he went to the library at Carnegie Mellon University. In a climate-controlled room, a librarian brought him *Six Novels in Woodcuts*, a two-volume boxed set of wordless images by pioneering illustrator Lynd Ward.

“I remember sitting there and it was like the sky parted and the light came shining down,” Wiesner says. “I’m not sure there were any trumpets sounding, but it was close.”

After graduating from RISD, he began getting steady work illustrating textbooks, chapter books, anything he could find. But Wiesner wanted to tell his own stories and he wanted to do it without using words. “Fortunately, my editor didn’t tell me that what I wanted to do was something that wasn’t in the commercial mainstream,” he says. “She actually wanted to see if I could pull this off.”

It took a few years, but in 1988 Wiesner’s book *Free Fall* finally emerged and won a Caldecott Honor award. It’s the story of a nameless boy who falls asleep and enters a surreal world of giant chessboards, castle mazes and a bedspread that transforms into an aerial map of earth. *Publisher’s Weekly* called it “an unbroken dreamscape...blending ancient and modern motifs.”

This debut effort as an author-illustrator earned Wiesner a Caldecott Honor, an achievement he has since far surpassed: Of the eight books he has published to date, two have won Caldecott Honors and three have won Caldecott Medals, including *Tuesday* in 1991, *The Three Pigs* in 2001 and *Flotsam* in 2006. The most recent is a wordless tale about an underwater camera that washes ashore to reveal deep-sea wonders: a puffer fish floating as a hot-air balloon, an octopus clan chilling out in a family room of upholstered chairs and a chain of beachcomber kids who discover the camera before tossing it back into the deep.

Dinah Stevenson, Wiesner’s editor and publisher at Clarion, says the reason kids lose themselves in his fantastical worlds is because they are as fully realized emotionally as they are technically. “He is scrupulous about getting as much reality

into his fantasy as is humanly possible,” she says, noting that Wiesner builds 3D models of his characters so that he can capture their expressions from multiple angles. “I think in part it’s the solidity of the visuals that allows the fantasy to play out so fully, because you feel you’re in a real place and everything makes sense, even though it’s impossible.”

Wiesner likens his creative process to a plane circling an airport. “I have to draw it first. I have to wallow in all those visual pieces lying around, and then I find the story behind it,” he says. “But the story has to coalesce too, because the story is the thing on which it all hangs. A good picture book can’t just be about, ‘Look at how cool my art is.’ It has to be about, ‘Are kids going to want to read this?’”

COURAGEOUS EXPERIMENT

In 1991, the year that Wiesner won his first Caldecott, Selznick won the sympathy of the manager at Eeyore’s. Despite not knowing much more than when he had first applied, he returned and got hired, intent on becoming the student of children’s books he hadn’t been at RISD. He read the speeches of illustrators he admired and burned book covers into his memory banks.

“People would come in and say, ‘There’s this book with a red cover, and I think it has a house on it,’ so I got really good at knowing what every book was,” Selznick says.

Within a few years, he had actually started the career he thought had passed him by—illustrating children’s books written by others. They included the kids’ cult classic *Frindle* and standout biographies about Amelia Earhart, Eleanor Roosevelt and Marian Anderson. But Selznick wasn’t satisfied. “I just didn’t want to spend the rest of my life doing picture-book biographies,” he says.

And then, after ignoring him when he visited RISD, Selznick met Maurice Sendak, author of *Where the Wild Things Are* and *In the Night Kitchen*, and was struck by his sage advice. “You have to make the book you want to make,” Selznick recalls him saying. He wasn’t exactly sure what it meant, but it brought him back to something he had had in the back of his mind—a historical fiction book about Georges Méliès, a pioneer of French film. He loved the idea himself, but wondered: What kid would want to read about the silent-movie era in France?

“The father of film fantasy, the mechanics of automatons, museum history—these are things that on the surface are not going to be interesting to children,” says Tracy Mack, an executive editor at Scholastic Press who has worked with Selznick for years. “Except Brian is so passionate about them, he makes them interesting.”

Despite the risky subject matter, Selznick began taking huge risks with form, too. He thought about the comic book format, with small panels moving the narrative forward. What if he blew up those panels so each drawing filled an entire page, building wordless sequences that were the length of chapters? He had a highly nuanced vision for how the frames would unfold—more tightly sequenced than a graphic novel, less tightly sequenced than a flip book, with cinematic movement that would pan wide in some frames and zoom in for others.

“I would take out one line—‘The boy followed the old man home’—and I’d have to draw 12 pages of pictures to replace that text,” Selznick says. “Because if you’re going to see the boy following him home, you’ve got to make them go through the streets, around corners, into the graveyard, to the front door. Suddenly what had been a 100-page novel blew up into this gigantic 500-page thing.”

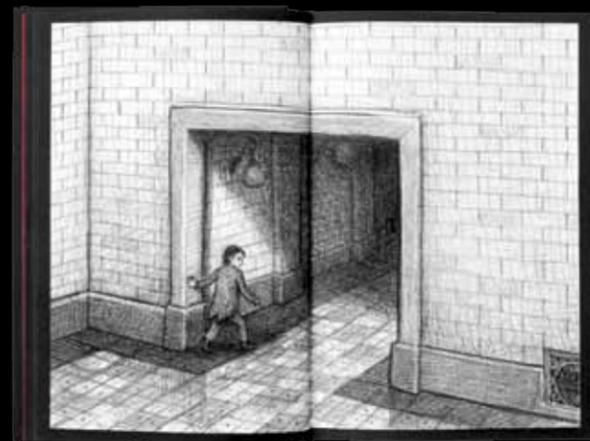
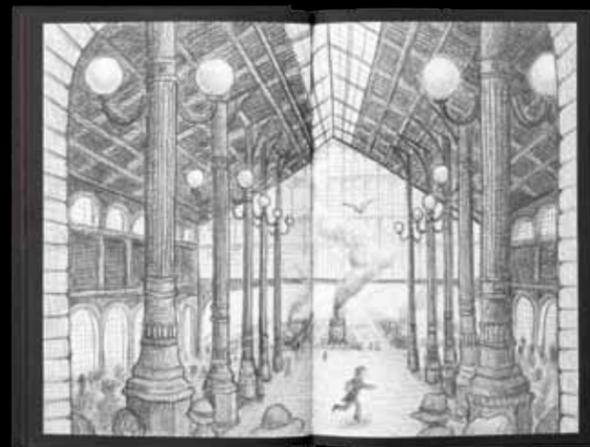
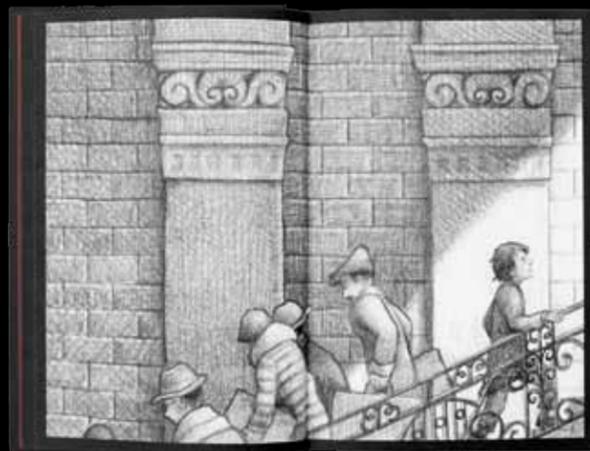
The book proved to be gigantic in more ways than one: *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* won the 2008 Caldecott Medal and became a #1 *New York Times* bestseller. Moreover, it dramatically reinvented the entire notion of a children’s book. Macaulay, the professor Selznick never had, calls *Hugo Cabret* one of the few books he’s truly jealous he didn’t create himself. “It was a book about magic, but the book itself was a box of magic,” he says. “It was sheer courage to construct a novel where entire chunks of the story were verbal and others were visual.”

Selznick points to two distinct moments when he fully felt the impact of his book. One was the day he found himself walking through the 1930s Parisian world that had previously lived only in his mind, with hundreds of period-dressed extras and a larger-than-life, operatic train station on the London movie set of *Hugo Cabret*. “It was artistry on a scale I’d never seen before,” he says. “At first, I felt like an interloper.”

The other moment was the very first day of his book tour, when Selznick walked into a school auditorium and he saw a student holding *Hugo Cabret* like a treasured possession. As Harry Potter geeks and chronically reluctant readers all told him how much they loved the book, Selznick thought, “Brian, whatever you do, don’t cry. It’s pathetic to cry in front of children.”

THE JOY OF FISHSTICK NUNCHUCKS

As picture-book makers, Krosoczka and Selznick share similar worlds: the solitary work of sketching and storytelling, the relentless book tours visiting schools and libraries, and the surreal rollercoaster ride of selling the film rights to their books. Two of Krosoczka’s prize-winning books are now in active development for the big screen—*Punk Farm* as a computer-animated feature directed by David Silverman (*The Simpsons* and *Monsters, Inc.*) and the *Lunch Lady* series as a live-action movie, with A-list comedienne Amy Poehler signed on as its star.



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Brian Selznick 88 IL



The silly, nonstop action in the *Lunch Lady* series has earned so much adoration from elementary school readers that Krosoczka is already finishing up number seven in the series and is moving on to number eight, which is due out next fall. *facing page*: The story told in Selznick’s Caldecott Medal-winning tome, *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*, piqued the interest of film director Martin Scorsese, who has brought the book to the big screen in a film due out in December.

But if Selznick’s densely crosshatched characters move mysteriously in storyboard frames, Krosoczka’s super-saturated acrylic characters pop like jellybeans in a penny candy store. His genius doesn’t have to do so much with shattering formal conventions or building surreal worlds of make-believe. It has to do with finding the ordinary touchstones of kids’ everyday lives—the lunch lady, the barnyard animals at the petting zoo, the rituals of Halloween or bath time—and then turning them into visually rich, wild narratives. In 2003, just two years after publishing his first book, *Print* magazine named him one of the top new visual artists under 30.

“He is so good at creating this joyous feel,” says Robin Adelson, executive director at the Children’s Book Council. The organization has twice honored Krosoczka with the Children’s Choice Book Award, the only national award of its kind selected entirely by young readers. “There’s a really accessible sense of humor and earnestness, and a lot of action. But there’s an intelligence to [his books], too. He never writes down to kids. He takes real situations and plays with them brilliantly. Why shouldn’t the school lunch lady be fighting crime and saving the world with fishstick nunchucks in her spare time?”

Mary Jane Begin, his former professor, says the contagious, kid-centered energy of Krosoczka’s characters is an extension of the author himself. “Like Jarrett and a lot of other children’s book illustrators, I go to schools and do presentations. But he takes it to a completely different level,” she says. “He genuinely enjoys the kids’ company and gets ideas from them and is just completely jazzed about what they bring to the table. Not every illustrator feels that way.”

Krosoczka was at his own elementary school in 2001 when he got the idea that catapulted him into Hollywood. “I was

there to talk about *Monkey Boy* when I ran into my old lunch lady from when I was a kid,” he recalls. “She starts telling me about her grandkids and being the family matriarch. And what was amazing is that up until that moment, I hadn’t thought about her as a real human being with a life outside of serving us fishsticks.”

Krosoczka became fixated with the idea of a lunch lady serving up justice as a crime fighter, but struggled for four years just drafting ideas. It wasn’t a story he could tell as a 32-page picture book. To have something go terribly wrong and have the lunch lady investigate it, stop the villain and save the day, he’d need at least 90 pages. He was on the way to his first graphic novel.

“It was a huge learning curve, because I had never taken a book to 96 pages,” Krosoczka says. “If you look at when the first *Lunch Lady* came out, in 2009, that was eight years after the encounter with my lunch lady. But now, I have a rhythm to it.”

As in his RISD days, it’s a rhythm that’s steady and methodical; the sixth book in the series came out in September, a seventh is due out in March and an eighth in fall 2012. But Krosoczka doesn’t know how far *Lunch Lady* will take him, and like Wiesner and Selznick, he’s already much more interested in the next challenge.

Though he doesn’t yet know where that next challenge will lead, he knows that it will revolve around platypuses. This idea came to him during a school visit, too, though he initially envisioned a penguin police squad and had to switch gears after the recent deluge of penguin movies. “It was such a blessing, actually,” Krosoczka admits. “With the platypus, it’s fun and it’s got the same alliterative quality. But it’s just way, way more bizarre.”