



Caldecott Award Acceptance Speech

Seeing Like an Artist

Chris Raschka

Chris Raschka is winner of the 2012 Caldecott Medal for A Ball for Daisy, published by Schwartz and Wade Books, an imprint of Random House Children's Books. His acceptance speech was delivered at the American Library Association Annual Conference in Anaheim, California, on June 24, 2012.



Photo: Catherine Wink

A while ago my neighbor, Dan, asked me, "What's new in Chris Raschka industries?"

I've known Dan for many years. We both left stiffish academic worlds at about the same time to pursue our iffy dreams in New York; Dan became an opera singer, and I, you know, an illustrator.

I said to Dan, "My book won the Caldecott."

"Good night nurse!" said Dan. "This calls for a neighbor dinner."

Over the last twenty years or so, Dan's family and my family have developed the habit that whenever something important happens, we have dinner together. Often what's happened is nothing more than having gotten through the week, or preparing for the next one. In fact, almost every Sunday night, we have dinner with the neighbors.

The neighbors are Dan, Kate, and Catherine. Dan I've known since we sat next to each other in History of American Christianity in college. It was Dan who found us our apartment when my wife, Lydie, and I decided to move to New York City. When we arrived, we moved in directly across the hall from him, with Kate, who is a dancer, living immediately above Dan. We made a happy foursome. Then Catherine was born. Ten months later, our son, Ingo, joined us. Catherine

said hello to Ingo in the hospital when he was two days old.

These are our dear neighbors. Two years after Ingo's birth, we Raschkas moved exactly one block downtown.

Anyway, throughout all these years we've had dinner with the neighbors. "The nabes," as we refer to one another.

I mention all this because I thought I might consider this evening just another dinner with the neighbors. Although what I'm about to say tonight I would never say at a neighbor dinner. Nevertheless, it is the kind of thing we might talk about, only I've expanded it a bit. This is a much bigger room, after all.

And considerably less cozy, of course.

Let us therefore return to the neighbors.

We are in Dan's apartment, a high-ceilinged room in yellows, reds, and browns. We will have hors d'oeuvres. Nuts, olives, and some wonderful cheese, the favorite being a runny French one known to us as the face-plant cheese. A glass of wine or a cocktail. When it is time to eat dinner, we will all get up from where we are sitting and pull the small table from the wall, drawing out the leaves; bring in a chair from the desk in the back room, another from the wall by the breakfront, perhaps the piano bench and one of the stools from next

to the front door. We will lay a lovely tablecloth, crisp linen napkins (ironed by Kate), silverware, candles, flowers, glasses, plates, carafes of water—bubbly and still—and bottles of wine on their silver traylets. Kate will then emerge from a kitchen that could make many an airplane galley look spacious, with delicious plates of whatever is on for tonight.

Dan pours the wine, red or white. Catherine pours the water, bubbly or still.

“Well, Christopher,” says Dan. “Did you ever dream you would win the Caldecott?”

Actually, no, I never dreamed I would win the Caldecott. I never did. Really, I never did. But I did, once upon a time, after some other dreams, dream of being an artist.

Cheers, Dan.

Or maybe what I really dreamed of was *seeing* like an artist. I have never known a time when I didn't want to look at things, wanted to see things and draw them. (I find it almost literally painful if I am denied a window seat.)

And as to drawing, really anyone can do it; you just need a little training. This basically consists of learning to forget what you know or care about. Broadly speaking, the training teaches you to shed, one by one, the thousands of meanings each light impulse hitting your eyes holds in your everyday brain—important meanings that keep you standing upright, get you around corners, recognize your children, and so forth. You slowly must learn to get rid of these and treat light impulses just for what they are, light impulses, which you then transfer through your hand into lines and shapes and colors onto a flat something or other. There are techniques—many, many different techniques—to teach you this. The equivalent of standing on your head is one.

But if you want to skip the techniques and still know at least what it *feels* like to see like an artist, I'll tell you. It is much like traveling to a foreign country,

especially on the first days of your trip. You look about you and nothing registers properly. You walk around in a kind of daze, and then some hand grabs you from behind, jerking you back onto the sidewalk to keep you from getting hit by a bus.

And if you're lucky it's Ryan Gosling who's grabbing you, says Kate, offering more salad.

Yes, exactly. You stare like an idiot at the coins in your palm, uncomprehending. Everything is new. Nothing is familiar. You are no longer on automatic pilot. As a result, your mouth may be hanging open in a slobbery dog way. Your eyes are staring. You apparently are from somewhere else. In short, you look like a blithering idiot.

And not unlike an artist. Because when you look and see like an artist, you are someplace else and the old meanings are gone. It's almost an out-of-body experience.

Anyway, you learn to unlearn everything your mind knows about things. I got that. I learned how to draw what I saw. Look, draw, look, draw.

And then, hanging around in the Borders bookstore in Ann Arbor one day, I picked up a book illustrated by Vladimir Radunsky called *The Pup Grew Up!* And then I began to dream of picture books and of making them myself.

But looking at my own drawings and thinking of them as picture book illustrations, I could see that something was missing.

The “look, draw, look, draw” was not enough to make a picture book. For want of a better word, *time* was missing. *Time* needed to enter the pictures.

Here's what I mean. First of all, what I *don't* mean is a narrative. Every moderately classical picture you can think of is packed to the gills with all kinds of narratives and the questions they provoke. Think of Botticelli's *Venus* (how did she get into that shell?) or Andrew Wyeth's *Christina* (why is she crawling?). Not that.

What I wanted was what Chinese scrolls have, where a bunch of things happen at once, unfolding as you go from one end of the scroll to the other, the point of perspective constantly changing. Or when a scroll depicts nothing more than a landscape, but still time is contained in it as you walk slowly from one end to the other, or as you unroll it, or as your eye travels from bottom to top. And the paintings contain time in another way, too, as you contemplate the movement of the brush itself, which contains the very time of the making of the art.

Now, when you have time, or perhaps even to perceive time, you need memory. If you're reading a book, you must remember the pictures that came before. If you're painting the book, you must remember the pictures that came before as well as the pictures that will come after.

They say goldfish only have ten-second memories. I dispute that. I take care of a turtle named Elmo. I've nursed him since he was a tiny mite. He is now enormous, and one reason he's enormous is because I feed him goldfish. He doesn't eat them all at once. He eats a few at a time. There's actually a long and fascinating story about Elmo, but let me just tell you how one day a little boy named Manuel was watching me feed Elmo. Elmo was making a pig of himself. He had the colorful wriggling tail of a large goldfish sticking out of his mouth and was chomping happily away when Manuel, normally not a very talkative person, said, “That's not good for the goldfish.” No, indeed. And the other goldfish knew it and tended to live in the shelter of the rocks for some time after this. For about a week. Goldfish memory lasts that long—a week.

Now, back to me. Exploring this idea of memory in my own picture book illustration improved enormously the day I threw out my morgue. What's a morgue? A morgue is a collection of images—everything and anything. A morgue is—this is something you used to learn as an illustrator—something that you must have and must constantly update. For me, when I began twenty-three years ago, it was newspaper and magazine clippings of everyday

objects, or settings, or situations; like men shaking hands, or small dogs, or mountains, or goldfish, etc.—in short, a picture reference file. The New York Public Library has an enormous one.

Nowadays you don't need any of this, of course, you just Google it. We are no longer in the Stone Age. Back then, each illustrator was expected to have a morgue and to use it. You used your artist-seeing, staring at the light impulses from your illustrator's morgue, to make a good artist drawing.

So I threw mine away.

Which left me to rely on memory. For better or for worse, I would draw it as I remembered it. Why did I do this? I sometimes wonder. Well, for one reason, I found that when I painted, the better paintings were done at least in part from memory. And, as a matter of fact, in any drawing, memory is essential. Even when drawing from a photo, or a model, or a photo of a model, the split second between looking at the model and looking at your drawing pad is a split second of memory. I merely decided to push that interval further and further, actually, as far as it could go.

This has its drawbacks, of course, and can lead to some awkward moments, like when an art director with whom you have worked for years and whom you respect and admire asks you *if you've ever seen a chicken and know what one looks like* and also suggests Googling it. (Yes.)

To draw from memory requires a whole new set of skills. Rudolf Steiner, the Austrian philosopher, asked his students to name what the last person he or she spoke to was wearing. And if the student couldn't, Steiner suggested that he or she practice noticing. You may now try to remember what your roommate put on this morning. Artists have likewise encouraged developing a split-second visual memorizing. Manet or Monet or Toulouse-Lautrec or somebody said something like if you see someone falling from a roof, you must turn away and draw him before he hits the ground.

For me, the greatest memory-painters come from the ancient line of painters

in the classical, ever-evolving, Chinese tradition. The discipline itself in this kind of painting is a communal act of memory, as each painter spends years copying the masters who came before, pulling into his hands the memory of the physical movements themselves. Approximately half of every show of Chinese paintings I see at the Metropolitan Museum of Art carries within its title "in the style of." Sometimes painters have copied painters copying painters. In this way, the earlier painters are forever remembered.

And when you gaze upon the slowly changing styles of the Chinese painters, who are all painting the same kinds of things—landscapes and flowers and figures—you see what emerges when you paint from memory: a vocabulary, a painted vocabulary, to tell your tale. This is what the Chinese painters are so expert at. Each practitioner in the long line of succession adds to or alters what came before him. Instead of flipping his brush like *this* for a pine tree, he flips his brush like *that*. Instead of dabbing his brush, he drags it. Instead of dots, lines. Or simply instead of thin and refined, fat and rough-edged, which I particularly like.

But back to picture books. You learn to draw what you see. Then you learn to draw what you remember. Finally, you have to learn to draw what you feel. The task of a picture book illustrator, I would say, is to remember a particular emotion, heighten it, and then capture it in some painted vocabulary, so that the same emotion is evoked in the child, in the reader. I must make you feel what I feel, and maybe even more.

And this is why memory is so essential. So helpful. So necessary. Because, really, emotion has always been and will always be embedded in memory. As soon as you work with memory, you have emotion; I think they are nearly inseparable. Sometimes so much so that it becomes hard to draw. It can even be an imagined memory, a future potential memory.

I made a book once about the death of a child, called *The Purple Balloon*. I almost couldn't paint it. I made a book once about the death of a fish, called *Arlene Sardine*, and I didn't have any trouble.

There is less emotion in the memory of a fish, much as I like them. Still, I accept the death of a fish. This ability and inability to draw doesn't surprise me when it happens to me. But I've even seen it in paintings hanging in museums.

There is another room in the Metropolitan Museum that is filled with Rubens paintings. Peter Paul Rubens, one of the great master painters, probably did not use the optical aids—lenses and so forth—that many of his contemporaries used, relying much more on his own preliminary sketches and his memory of them. And this is what makes his paintings grand. They are sometimes more, sometimes less, but always somewhat sketchy (at least the ones he finished himself). Even as they look like what they're supposed to look like, they never look rigid; they're shifty. Sometimes you can't tell where that arm is going or which cupid's leg is whose, but the paintings hold together perfectly. He's a memory painter.

I was walking through the Rubens room a few years ago, really kind of just passing through on my way to the Chinese collection, when I was stopped by the nose of a woman, the painted nose of a painted woman. There was something wrong with that nose.

Peter Paul Rubens married twice. In 1630, when Peter Paul was fifty-three, he married Helena, who was sixteen. (*Ahem.*) From all accounts, he loved her very much and considered her the embodiment of beauty and maternal goodness. And then I knew: Peter Paul was trying to make the nose of his beloved Helena perfect. Over and over he tried to get the nose and mouth just so, and in doing that he actually made it look like Helena's nose and mouth are going in one direction and the rest of her face is going in another. The painting is called *Rubens, his wife Helena Fourment, and one of their children*. (I don't remember the room number; ask a guard.) It's an enormous painting. Look at Helena's nose. Her nose is in profile and there is a veritable mountain range of pigment in the delineating shadow, which you can well see if you bend down and look up toward the skylight. That mountain of pigment tells the tale. Too

much emotion getting in the way of Peter Paul's painting. Now look immediately to the left, at a portrait of a woman in black. The model for this one is Helena's not-quite-so-beautiful (at least one supposes in Rubens's eyes) sister, Susanna. The brushwork is marvelously smooth and easy looking. There is no trouble about the nose.

Let us return to the neighbors because my glass needs refilling.

Kate asks, "Was there any trouble with Daisy's nose?"

Yes, there was a lot of trouble with the nose of my dog Daisy. Lots of trouble. And not just about the nose, but the tail, and the eyes, and the fur, etc. I'll not soon forget what Lee said to me one morning after looking at my latest attempts. Lee is Lee Wade, who, along with Anne Schwartz, is most responsible for *A Ball for Daisy*. Lee said to me, "How did we ever go so wrong with this book?"

I had been working on this book for so long then that I could hardly remember its beginnings. Certainly my son Ingo was very small at the time. And Daisy's ball was *his* ball, which he loved very much. It was yellow, I'm pretty sure. Daisy was the big black dog who lived on the tenth floor of our building and who, in her exuberance, took Ingo's beloved yellow ball and bit down just a little too hard and popped it. That I remember well. What I don't remember is, did it happen at our usual ball-playing spot, the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument, or did it happen in the elevator of our building? I don't remember. But I do remember Ingo's tears and genuine disbelief at the finality of the damage, the irrevocableness of the event, the un-turn-back-able-ness of time.

The Daisy I drew is not big and black, of course. She is modeled on a dog I only

saw once, in a bar on 104th street. She was white, longer-limbed than my Daisy, scraggly haired, and quite amusing. I don't have a dog. I watch them. I imagine what they do. I had two dogs as a child and I remember them well. But Daisy is neither. Daisy is very much a dog I dreamed up, which is to say she inevitably has a lot of me in her.

Well, I hear Dan already washing up, and Lydie is starting to give me the big wink.

All right. I'll close in a minute.

So this is how I see making my picture books today. First, I'll draw what I see. Then I'll draw what I remember. And finally I'll draw what I feel.

I remember when I was a teenager on a family trip to Europe, standing on the balcony of our hotel room in Geneva looking down on the street and then over the lake to the mountains. I remember I had just put down a careful pencil drawing I had been working on, a copy of a photograph of a man on a horse jumping over a fence. I put the drawing down and went to the balcony. Cars and trucks were moving about below me, and a postman was shoving along his three-wheeled cart. I thought then that I would be happy doing any job so long as I could live in a place where I could see beautiful things.

Then some years later I was walking up a long, leaf-strewn allée in the small city of Arolsen in Germany, having hitchhiked there from my job as a caretaker of disabled children in another German city, to visit my friend Bruce for an expatriate Thanksgiving. And as I kicked the leaves I thought, I could be happy living anywhere in the world so long as I had a job that I loved.

I live in New York City now, not far from the room filled with Rubenses,

and the rooms that contain an ever-changing collection of the entire history of Chinese painting. And I have a job: to paint pictures of things I see and remember and care about. For twenty-three years this job has worried me, kept me awake at night, aggravated me, and always entranced me, making me eager to dream of a next picture book again.

I see Kate stifling a yawn. Catherine and Ingo are moving the chairs back and closing up the table.

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Before I go I'd like to make my thank yous.

Thank you, Dan, Kate, and Catherine.

Thank you, Lydie and Ingo.

Thank you, Vladimir.

Thank you, Bruce.

Thank you, Dr. Steven Herb, and all the members of the Caldecott committee for your enormous work and for the great honor you have bestowed on me.

Thank you, Lee Wade and Anne Schwartz, for your persistence, patience, and thoughtfulness. If not for you, I wouldn't like my book half so well.

Thank you, everyone at Random House. You are the nicest security staff. You are the best messenger center. You have publishing's greatest lobby. From the sub-sub-basement to the president's floor, I thank you all. There is no finer publisher.

I thank all of you who have listened to me tonight.

Good night. ☺