



Caldecott Medal Acceptance Speech They Read My Book!

Jon Klassen



Jon Klassen is the winner of the 2013 Caldecott Medal for This Is Not My Hat, published by Candlewick Press. His acceptance speech was delivered at the American Library Association Annual Conference in Chicago on June 30, 2013.

A lot of good creative work is achieved as much by avoiding the things you know you can't do as it is by doing the things you know you can. Choosing picture book illustration as a job was, I assumed, a great way to avoid the things I don't feel especially strong in. It is a long and varied list, but somewhere near the top of it are fielding compliments and public speaking. Giving a speech to everyone I work with and admire within the context of the biggest professional compliment I could ever hope to get is kind of a perfect storm of things I set my life up trying to avoid. I would ask you to wish me luck up here, but it seems like I've gotten enough luck wished to me as it is.

When the Caldecott Committee called to tell me I'd won this award, I was just putting the phone down after getting a call from a cab driver who was waiting downstairs to take me to the airport to catch an early flight. I don't remember what I said to the committee, and I remember even less about what I said when they called again three minutes later to tell me about the [Caldecott] Honor for *Extra Yarn*. The cab could've dropped me off in the Los Angeles River after that and I wouldn't have noticed.

But I felt bad later, sitting on the plane, thinking I'd sort of botched my reaction and hoping I came off as surprised and excited and stunned as I really was. As foggy as my memory is about what I said to them, I have a strangely clear record of my internal reaction, especially to the first phone call. I'd like to break it down in stages here, partly to give the committee my proper thanks and partly because I think it goes some distance toward explaining how I feel about making books in general.

My internal reaction when they were telling me that they'd decided to give *This Is Not My Hat* the Caldecott Medal can be divided into three distinct phases. If you were going to give titles to these phases, the first phase could be called "They Had Been Looking at the Book."

They had been looking at the book. I don't know if I'll ever get used to the idea that all the copies of any book I write and illustrate myself aren't in my own house.

I get a box of them around publication time and I think, "Here are the books!" And I put them on a shelf and glance over at them whenever I walk through the room. And if someone comes over and they see the books and they want one, I give one to them and then *they* have one of the books. And that's as far as it goes. Then later I'm in a library or bookstore and I see copies of the book for sale, and it's like seeing a picture of your family in a frame on a store shelf. You think, "That's not supposed to be outside!" and you glance wildly around the store, as if everyone around you is devoting their whole minds to all the mistakes that might be on the cover alone.

The only way out of this kind of anxiety, now that the book is apparently out in the wild, is to convince yourself, for the moment, that regular people don't concern themselves as much with all the details that might be wrong in these books. It's not that they are incapable of seeing them, but we see so many things all day, we don't have time to pick apart everything we don't like. This argument holds, barely, and it's just enough to stop the impulse to grab all the copies and sprint out the door.

But the realization that the *Caldecott Committee* has had your book amongst them is something this argument has no power against. They are a group of beings assembled entirely to notice things. Here is what the Caldecott Committee looks like: there is a dark stone room, probably underground. It has only one source of light, a hole in the stone ceiling, engineered using long-forgotten mathematics, that lets in a single round shaft of light. That shaft of light comes down and rests on a huge wooden table, and at the center of the table is the book that a group of cloaked and hooded figures is murmuring about in a language reserved only for these proceedings. Their glowing eyes under their hoods scan the pages and widen at problems unsolved and errors hastily patched.

At one point or another, weeks or months ago, I was sitting somewhere, eating a burrito or something, while this huddled and sacred ceremony was being applied to my book, and I didn't know it. What did they talk about? What did they see?

In the bedroom where I was taking the phone call from the committee, there was actually a copy of the book sitting on a pile of stuff, and I glanced over at it accusingly, thinking, “You didn’t tell me any of this happened!” The cover looked back at me. The lettering of the title, and my name under the title, and the little fish. Making this cover had scared me so badly. Interior illustrations are one thing, but covers fall squarely under the heading of Graphic Design.

I love doing covers and lettering, but there’s so much formality that can be applied to these things. There are people who spend their whole lives on lettering and the rules that make it work, and here I am drawing my own letters like a jerk. Who knows what rules of kerning and line width I am running off the road with my shenanigans? And none of the worries about the type go anywhere near the worries about the placement of that fish.

I once bought a book on grid systems as they can be applied to page layout. It was written in English on one side and in German on the other. It was beautiful, and absolutely impenetrable. When the time came to design the cover for *This Is Not My Hat*, there was no grid to decide the placement of the little fish in his

You don’t really come to terms with that so much as you decide not to think about it anymore. And so when you finally decide not to think about it anymore, you move on to the next phase. You’d think that after “They Had Been Looking at the Book” had run its unknowable course, the next logical step would be “They Liked the Book!”—but that would be running too far ahead. That is the last step. There is a step in between, before I allow myself that level of back-patting, and it can be called “The Book Makes Sense!” The book makes sense. That’s a big deal.

The idea for the structure of *This Is Not My Hat* owes quite a bit to a little-known story called “The Tell-Tale Heart,” by an author I think is showing a lot of promise named Edgar Allan Poe. In his story, we have a narrator talking to us in the first person about something he did that was wrong. He is given the whole floor, without narrative interruption, to try to make an argument for his reasonableness and sanity by telling us his version of how things went down. Not only is this the same setup as in *This Is Not My Hat*, but I think it is also very close to what it feels like for anybody to do any kind of creative work at all, because they both involve so much hope.

should be, “What do I hope to get out of my work?” and the answer is that I just want to check with everybody else to make sure I’m still OK.

There’s a spread early on in the book where the little fish is describing to us where he is going to try to hide after having stolen the hat. He is describing where the plants grow big and tall and close together. In the first few drafts, this spread was filled with an illustration of the plants he was talking about. It had already been established that the narration was being used as sort of a voice-over to what we were seeing, accurate or not, and that the little fish didn’t need to be on the page for us to know he was talking.

I thought since this had been established, it would be OK to show these plants even though he hadn’t reached them yet, the idea being that when he did get there, there would be no confusion that he’d arrived at his destination. I thought it was a really cool idea, and I loved the spread. But people who saw the roughs kept reading that page as if it were in real time, as if the fish had already gone behind the plants and was talking to us from there. I was so sad, and confused that my thinking wasn’t lining up with everybody else’s.

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sea of negative space. There were only two or three afternoons of blunt nudging, and grunting, and nudging some more, and then having lunch and coming back and nudging again. Surely these magical Caldecott Committee creatures had held the cover containing the little fish against all of these ancient grids to find that his placement violated all the morality the golden section carries with it, their glowing eyes widening to their widest, glowingest size.

They had been looking at the book. Jeez.

Storytelling, in any form, is an essentially hopeful thing to do. I don’t mean anything as ambitious as hoping you can change your audience or even educate them in any broad sense, but just in the fact that you, as a storyteller, are hoping that your mind and the minds of your audience are close enough that you can know what they need to hear in order to follow along with your story. When I’m asked what I hope people get out of my work, I always feel that it’s kind of a backward question. I never really know what to say, because the real question

It stayed like this for weeks, until finally I was showing it to somebody new, and as I turned the page to the plant spread, I saw it. I saw that it did, in fact, read that the fish had already gone behind the plants. I was so relieved. I didn’t have a solution yet, but the problem was real to me. I didn’t have to pretend to understand it, and I knew what everyone was talking about. As an aside, the solution that involved putting the plants on the endpapers is my favorite idea in the book, and I’ll always be a little bit jealous of my editor, Liz Bicknell, for thinking of it.

The first time you show anything you came up with by yourself to anybody else, you feel the same kind of fear you feel for the narrator in “The Tell-Tale Heart” or the little fish in *This Is Not My Hat*, who has every hope that he is

And the third phase, sometimes, is you asking them, “Do you like it?” I’m beginning to learn that the more you do creative work, the less you ask this question. It’s not that you don’t care about the answer. You care very much. But I think

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talking to like-minded people who will understand his actions as soon as he gets a chance to explain. What makes both characters sort of doomed from the outset is that, even though what they’re saying makes sense to them, they’ve actually drifted off into a place where we as an audience can’t back them up anymore.

Putting out a creative piece of work is sort of an experiment, like the ones sailors might have done to navigate in olden times. When you’re done telling your story, you can look at whomever you were telling it to and ask, “Do you get it?” And every “yes” you get, it is like a shining point of reference twinkling in the sky to navigate by, and there is no feeling like having the sky fill up with those points. I’m still OK. The book makes sense.

you begin to realize that you can’t own the answer either way. It’s not really your question to ask. Your job, and the things you can take credit for, end largely at the previous stage, when the book makes the most sense that it can. I guess this is assuming that you yourself like it. I’ve had the huge luck to be given a position where I can take the time to make sure I like the things I make. And I do like them. These books are my little guys. But that doesn’t mean anybody else has to like them.

One of the things in the book that is still kind of a mystery to me is the crab. The crab’s purpose in the story is not to change or advance the plot. I think the big fish probably would’ve found the little fish anyway, without the crab betraying what he knew. I put the crab in, initially, because I felt like it was too sad that nobody else in the story knew what

had happened. But the crab isn’t simply an observer—he has done something wrong, too. He’s at risk of drifting off into the same place the little fish is, where we can’t connect with him anymore.

But the crab is given a spot on the second-to-last page, where we see him again, watching the big fish swim back home, and we get to see him think about what he did, and I think we get a moment to forgive him. Not because he deserves it, but because we can relate to him. And that, I think, is what makes the book work.

An audience can take in the information they’re given, and understand the events and what the characters do. This understanding, them “getting” the story, and by extension telling you that you’re still OK, feels like a kind of grace. It’s something you’ve asked your audience for, and have mercifully been granted. But when it goes further than that, when they think it’s a good book, and they tell you so, it comes as something like a next step to being declared OK—something extra that nobody really deserves and I suspect very few people get. It feels like a kind of forgiveness, and that’s what that last phase felt like, and still feels like. “They Had Been Looking at the Book,” “The Book Makes Sense,” and “They Liked the Book.” My little guy.

I can’t thank the committee enough for this honor, or my publisher, my agent, my family and my friends, and all of you, for your encouragement and enthusiasm for something I feel so lucky I get to do. Thank you very much. ☺

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