

# The 2002 Caldecott Medal Acceptance Speech

David Wiesner

So there I am, sitting at my desk early that Monday morning, getting ready to start working. The phone rings. I answer and a voice says, "Congratulations, you have been awarded the Randolph Caldecott Medal . . . for 1992."

When delivering my speech the last time I won the Caldecott, I never mentioned how I heard the news. Afterward, many people came up to me and commented on this omission. Why hadn't I followed the tradition? Well, now you know. It wasn't very interesting. I wasn't in the shower, awakened from sleep, or caught in some other noteworthy situation. I just answered the phone. I was alone in my studio; my wife, Kim, had already left for work; the Clarion staff was at Midwinter; and my artist friends were all still asleep. So after the initial flurry of phone calls, I, too, went to work.

This year, when the call came to inform me that I had won the 2002 Caldecott Medal . . . I just answered the phone again. Twenty minutes earlier and I would've been in the shower. Kate, your timing is a little off. The big difference this year is that I was not alone. This time, Kim, our son Kevin, and our daughter Jaime were there with me. In fact, the three of them were jumping up and down, holding hands, and skipping in a circle, chanting, "Daddy won the Caldecott! Daddy won the Caldecott!" Being able to share that moment with my family has been the best part of this experience.

**David Wiesner** is the winner of the 2002 Caldecott Medal for *The Three Pigs*, published by Clarion Books. His acceptance speech was delivered at the ALA Annual Conference in Atlanta on June 16, 2002.

The fact that I can use the phrase "the last time I won the Caldecott" is still hard to believe. To be honored a second time is an amazing feeling. I want to thank Kate McClelland and the entire 2002 Caldecott Committee for letting me experience this all over again. Many people have made the comment that it must be nothing new because I've been through it before. I may be familiar with the process, but there is definitely nothing routine about it.

First frogs, now pigs. The animal kingdom has been very good to me. *The Three Pigs* is the culmination of nearly a lifetime of thinking about a particular visual concept. And it all started with Bugs Bunny.

I watched a lot of Bugs when I was a kid. There is one specific cartoon where, as usual, Bugs is being chased around and around by Elmer Fudd. But this time they run right out of the cartoon. We see the frames of the filmstrip flicker by, as well as the sprocket holes at the edge of the film. Bugs and Elmer finally stop, and they find themselves standing in a blank white space. They look around and then run back into the cartoon, which flickers, and then continues running normally. Even more than all the reality manipulation that was happening in the cartoon, I was fascinated by the idea that behind the "normal" reality lay this endless, empty, white nothingness.

I played with this idea in my artwork as I was growing up, and when I eventually realized that making books was what I was going to do, I looked for ways to bring this concept to those books. I wanted to be able to push the pictures aside, go behind them or peel them up, and explore the blank expanse that I envisioned was within the books. I had ideas for so many neat visual things

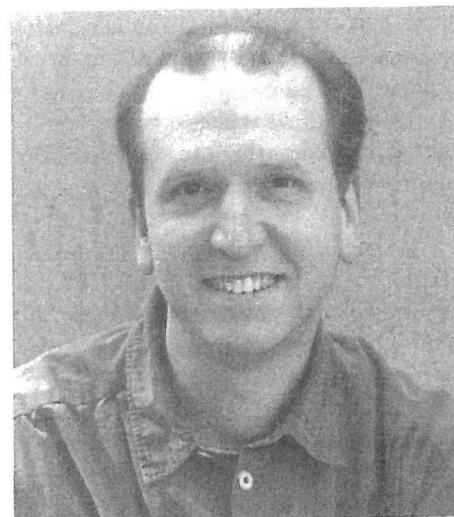


Photo by Peggy Marsch

David Wiesner, winner of the 2002 Caldecott Medal.

that could happen. Characters could jump out of the story. The pictures could fall down, be folded up, crumpled; text could get scattered about. What I didn't have was a story. Every time I tried to turn these ideas into a book, I ran into the same stumbling block. If I created a story and then had the characters leave to take part in a new story, the reader would be left wondering what was happening in the initial story. To make this idea work, I realized that I needed a story that as many kids as possible would already know, so that when the characters took off, the reader would leave the story behind as well and concentrate on the new journey the characters would take.

So, I thought, what are the most universal stories around? In a way, any story would do. "Goldilocks"? "Hansel and Gretel"? And then, right on cue, up stepped those three pigs. Ever since I had pigs float away on the last page of *Tuesday*, I had wanted to use pigs as the

main characters in a book. Here at last was my chance. Everything about "The Three Little Pigs" fit my needs perfectly. The pigs have every reason in the world to want to get out of their story. Every time it is read, the first two pigs get eaten up. This cannot be much fun. They were also clearly in need of a place where they could be safe, a place they could really call home. Interestingly enough, this pretty much described my family's situation at the time I was conceiving *The Three Pigs*. Circumstances led us to move from our home in Philadelphia, not something we had anticipated. For several months we knew we had to move, but we didn't know where we would end up. This uncertainty and sense of displacement very much fed into the story I was creating. I could really relate to those pigs. Fortunately, my family found what we were looking for—and so did the pigs.

Now that I had a story, I was ready to knock it down. When those pigs got behind the pictures they found themselves surrounded by a brilliant, white, overwhelming nothing. Up until now my books and the term *white space* had not gone hand in hand. This was about to change.

When I begin a new book, I always like to talk with the production department to find out how my idea can best be realized during the printing. Donna McCarthy and Andi Stern, masters of the printing process, have always assured me that if I thought it up, they would find a way to reproduce it. This time I think I gave them pause. There was going to be a lot of blank paper in this book. They were concerned that books would be returned under the assumption that there had been a mistake in the printing. And, in fact, there have been phone calls about just that issue. But in the context of the story, that emptiness creates as much of a sense of place as does an elaborately detailed illustration.

Many of my books have had few or no words, which left my art director, Carol Goldenberg, with little to do. This, of course, is not true. But it did often leave very little typesetting, something I know she loves. With *The Three Pigs* I decided to make up for all those years of

neglect and see how many ways I could distort, crumple, and scatter the text to create a typesetting nightmare for her. In the end, it was fun. Painful, but fun. For her years of insight, commiseration, and always-welcome input, I dedicated *The Three Pigs* to Carol.

The word most often used in reviews of *The Three Pigs* has been *postmodern*. The word most often used by me while making the book was *fun*. I saw an opportunity to have some great visual fun, and I wanted to share that with kids who may have thought the way I did when I was their age, and the way I do now. The beauty of the picture book is that despite its seemingly rigid format, it is capable of containing an infinite number of approaches to storytelling. As a walk through any library or bookstore will confirm, those thirty-two pages get taken down a staggering variety of artistic paths.

Getting feedback from kids of any age is always great, but I particularly love hearing from kids in fifth grade, eighth grade, sometimes even high school. There comes a point with books when the words and pictures seem to part company. Whether with novels or textbooks, eventually the visuals fall by the wayside. I find this sad. The picture book at its best is a seamless blend of word and picture, where one is incomplete without the other. And unlike an image on a screen, the pictures in a book do not fly by in the blink of an eye. So I am heartened to hear from those older kids out there and to know that someone is continuing to expose them to this unique art form.

My creative process is a solitary one. It is something I get excited about, struggle with, succeed and fail at, and have a great deal of fun with. In the end, though, it comes down to me and that blank piece of paper. Despite this, there have been many people who have given me encouragement, advice, and inspiration that have added immeasurably to the direction and richness of my work.

First and foremost was my family. While I was growing up, they created an atmosphere where my interest in art was always taken seriously. My mother's approach was unconditional acceptance.

She saved everything I drew when I was little. Finger paintings, pictures of kites with the tail made from string and pasta bows, and scrawl-like crayon drawings. The historical revisionist in me can now point to preprinted pages of vegetables I colored in during kindergarten and say, "Aha! June 29, 1999, started here!" Having these things to look back over is one of the greatest gifts I've ever received.

My father, a scientist, has said that since art was so outside his frame of reference, he felt he had nothing to offer me in the way of guidance. This turned out to be completely untrue. He was so excited by what I was doing that he investigated anything he thought could help me. Through family and friends, he found people in the art field for me to talk to. He researched art schools before I even knew such places existed. When I was about thirteen, he did something I'm sure didn't seem like that big of a deal at the time. One day when he came home from work, a truck pulled in behind him. In the back of the truck was a great big old wooden drafting table and an equally great old chair. They had been discarded at work, and he had brought them home for me. Taking up a large part of my room, this table became my own personal, private world where I could explore the outer reaches of my imagination.

And while most of the time they dealt with me as one does with the youngest in the family, my sisters and brother—Carol, George, Bobbi, and Pat—shared their own artistic knowledge and wholeheartedly encouraged me to further mine.

In art school, I met a lot of kids who had gone through huge family battles to be there or, possibly worse, had endured total indifference. I thank my family for creating such a nurturing atmosphere in which my talents were able to flourish.

Visual storytelling became the main focus of my work while in art school, although I wasn't really sure what form to apply it to. I first became truly aware of the picture book while taking classes with David Macaulay at the Rhode Island School of Design. It was there that I learned the technical process of book design and then was urged to push the

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boundaries of that design as far as made sense in the context of the story. Whether through his teaching or by the example of his remarkable work, David's enthusiasm for the possibilities of the picture book form was and is infectious. *The Three Pigs* represents my application of that creative spirit, and it was clear to me from the beginning that this book would be dedicated to David as well.

After art school I might have entered the illustration world without a real focus were it not for a moment of great serendipity. At the end of my senior year, Trina Schart Hyman came to speak about being a children's book illustrator. She stayed a second day to look at student portfolios. I was on my way out of the Illustration Building when one of my teachers said, "Aren't you going to talk to Trina?" I wasn't. I was considering children's books, but for some now-mysterious reason I was also considering things like science-fiction and fantasy book jackets and editorial magazine illustration. Thankfully, I did show her my work. At the time, Trina was the art director for *Cricket* magazine. As we finished looking at my portfolio, she said, "How would you like to do a cover for *Cricket*?" I thought this might have been some kind of a joke. But she wasn't kidding, and I did the cover, and I never thought about editorial or science-fiction illustration again. Thanks, Trina, for that risky and generous offer, which pointed me down the path to picture books without any wasteful detours.

This generous spirit has been a recurring trait among the people I've met

within this field. I began to work with Dilys Evans as my agent a year after my graduation. This was also the end of Dilys's first year in business. Back then I spent many afternoons at her apartment/office. We would have tea, brainstorm ideas, and discuss work—or the lack of it. Dilys would hold impromptu seminars to fill in the large gaps in my knowledge of the history of children's books. During gatherings at Dilys's apartment I was incredibly fortunate to get to know Hilary Knight and Margot Tomes. Even now it amazes me. I was doing textbook work and little early readers, and they were genuinely interested in and supportive of what I was doing. It has been Dilys's mission from the beginning to help me do exactly what I wanted to do, and to find the best situation to do it in. I can't thank her enough for all these years of friendship and tireless support. It was Dilys who said that when I was ready to write my own stories, there was an editor she was sure would respond to my ideas. That editor was Dorothy Briley, and Dilys was absolutely right. Dorothy taught me many things during the years we worked together. She kept my focus on the important elements of making a good story without ever hindering my wilder flights of imagination. I will always be grateful to Dorothy for that guidance and encouragement at such a formative time in my career.

I was fortunate to have become friends with Dinah Stevenson during the time I was working with Dorothy. She had given me feedback during the making of most of my pre-pigs books, but

*The Three Pigs* is the first time we have worked together as author and editor. It seems to be going well. Dinah and I had great fun making *The Three Pigs*. She asked tough questions and gave great advice. When, for a brief moment, I wondered if having the pigs fly around on a paper airplane was too weird, she responded, "No. Weird is good." Thank you, Dinah. I look forward to much future weirdness together.

Working at Clarion Books, I have found myself surrounded by people who were willing to do all they could to help me do what I love to do. In addition to those I have already mentioned, I'd like to say thanks to Nader Darehshori, Wendy Strothman, Anita Silvey, Joann Hill, and everyone on the editorial and art staffs who have made Clarion my home away from home.

Finally, to tie up some important loose ends, for encouragement and inspiration I want to thank, in no particular order, Jon Gnagy, Jean Shepherd, Jack Kirby, Jim Steranko, Robert Bernabe, Marcia Leonard, Barbara Lucas, the Ramones, Mike Hays, Julie Downing, and the entire Kahng family.

For years my wife, Kim, has been the only person who actually got to watch me work. That part is not a spectator sport. Over the last ten years this small circle has grown by two: our son Kevin and our daughter Jaime. There was a time when the thought of sharing those parts of my creative self with anyone seemed impossible. Now, to imagine it any other way is unthinkable. ●