

Dear colleagues, dear friends, you have chosen to bestow upon me this remarkable gift, this Newbery award for 2003. Moreover, you have done it most symbolically, for my fiftieth book, in my sixty-fifth year of life. I accept it with the

deepest gratitude. In return I will offer a hope and a promise. My hope is that *Crispin* is not my best book. My promise is that I will always try to make the next one better.

To live a life of books is to know that life is its own sequel. May there always be more to come.

With a heart full of love and gratitude, I thank you. &

Funny in Real Life, Funny on the Page

Eric Rohmann

My Friend Rabbit
Roaring Brook Press
2003 Caldecott Medal Winner

What a strange feeling to be up here, standing here speaking to you. For the past few months I have found myself in unknown territory. The truth is, I'm living my usual life, but all things have the tinge of unfamiliarity. Consider me surprised, overwhelmed, perplexed, astonished, exalted, joyful, and humbled by all that has occurred.

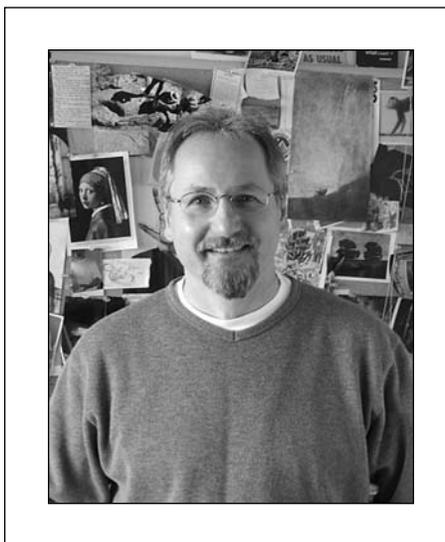
In the breakneck, headlong months of making a book, when you are deeply involved with little choices, when you are propelled by the buzzing energy of the work, when moments of panic rise in the shadow of the deadline, there is not a lot of time for wondering what will happen when the book goes out into the world. In the studio, day to day, you ask yourself small questions. Have I put too much red in that blue? Is the leg of the alligator drawn awkwardly? While working, you never consider that one day people will look closely at your finished book—the result of all those decisions, mistakes, and discoveries—and say, I think this deserves the Caldecott Medal. The imagination encourages such fancies, but the work is always more pragmatic. And then you get a phone call early one January morning.

And speaking of that call, the phone rings at half past six, and I rise to answer. (The verb rise may be a touch too active. On this cold, dark January day I awaken slowly, my limbs bending like stale Twizzlers.) Through the cobwebs of early morning, I hear a voice on the other end of the line—a voice way too enthusiastic for 6:30 A.M.

The voice says, “This is Pat Scales of the American Library Association.” My first thought is that I have overdue books.

And then I think I hear, “Your book, *My Friend Rabbit*, is the recipient of the 2003 Caldecott Medal.”

Silence. If this were a movie, you'd hear a ticking clock, raindrops on the windowsill, a heart beating.



Eric Rohmann

I say, “You mean an honor award?”

“No, the medal.”

“The silver?”

“No, the gold.”

I'm *arguing* with Pat, trying to convince her that this can't be, but she's resolute and I fumble for some articulate response, a meaningful reply, some eloquence equal to the moment, but I got nothing. Silence. More ticking clocks. *My* heart beating.

Even now I'm not sure I know how to respond to this great honor with anything resembling coherence.

I must confess that a few years back I dreamed I was speaking before a crowd much like all of you tonight—and I knew it wasn't my recurring anxiety dream about public speaking because this time I was wearing pants. I stood before the audience and an important man in a blue suit announced that I had won the Caldecott—and the Newbery, the Nobel, the Pulitzer, the National Book Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the Heisman Trophy, an Oscar, an Emmy, a Tony, the Stanley Cup, the World Cup, the Grey Cup, the Pillsbury Bake-Off, and Best of Breed, Westminster Kennel Club, a Grammy, a Juno, the Boston Marathon, the Great Texas Chili Cook-off, and runner-up, Playmate of the Year.

Don't kid yourself, there's something in all of us that wants to be visible from space. But there is also a part of us that is ever-cautious and disbelieving. This doubting part of me is well developed, made muscular through extensive use. Artists and writers are lucky this way. We start with a blank sheet of paper, work until we think the thing is finished, then wake the next day and start all over again. If you're serious, the work teaches humility early and often.

Which leads me to another dream. I had this one during graduate school, the night before I was to read my very first story in my first ever writing class. But in the dream I'm in the fourth grade—Mrs. Cerny's room—and I'm late for class.

“Sit down, Eric,” she says.

I look around and don't recognize any of my classmates.

A bearded kid in a fisherman's sweater sits in Nina Oakrant's seat. Another kid, dressed in a white suit, sits behind me at Alan Holtzman's desk. I turn to him. He looks like Mark Twain.

He *is* Mark Twain. And the bearded kid is Hemingway, and next to him is Faulkner, and Poe, and Melville, and Hawthorne, and Emily Dickinson.

“Now we will read our stories,” Mrs. Cerny says.

One by one the other students read their stories aloud. Stories of courage and human frailty, profound tales of man and nature and the struggles of the heart and soul. Then I read mine, a story about a lost shrimp named Binky. *Binky the Shrimp Comes Home*. The last thing I recall before I wake is glancing around the classroom, the other kids smiling, holding red pens in their hands like drawn swords.

At the time this felt like only a bad dream—I was a novice in a class of graduate writing students—but the dream now appears to have been happily prophetic. Binky probably won't show up in a book anytime soon; then again, every once in a while I wonder how he got lost in the first place.

As a boy, sometime around the fourth grade, I began to read anything that used pictures and words to tell stories. The Sunday funnies, picture books, the illustrated instructions for a model battleship, the airline safety information card (located in the seat pocket in front of you), but I mostly read comic books. I thrilled at all those colored panels and word balloons. And it wasn't just the drawings, it was also that, page by page, the story unfolded before me. Comics always awakened my imagination, drew me into the stories, and suggested further adventures. I was right there with Tarzan or the Green Lantern. Like most kids, I could move between the world of stories and the world around me. I spent my weekends and afternoons after school in the forests and fields just beyond the creek that ran in front of our house. I'd imagine I was in exotic, wild places or on some far-flung planet. The pictures I made at the time were bits of stories, images from a larger, ongoing narrative. My first comic was called *Steve Star—Good Guy of the Galaxy*.

It was also during this time that I became curious about the natural world. I recall that I could never pass a fallen log without turning it over to see what lived underneath. In an effort to understand the things I'd discovered, I began to draw. The pictures I made took place in imaginary worlds by way of the fields and forests across the creek. One time, while playing on the bank of the creek, I mis-



My Friend Rabbit by Eric Rohmann

took a snapping turtle for a rock—its prehistoric head slowly tilting, jaws opening to warn me away. I thought that I'd never seen anything so fierce and wonderful. That same day I drew a comic about a kid who discovers a dinosaur emerging from the drain in his grandmother's kitchen. It was Thanksgiving, and no one believed the kid's story—that is, until the beast ate Uncle Earl, who was a bit of an overeater himself. I recall one wordless panel of Uncle Earl sleeping on the couch dreaming of dinner. The drooling dinosaur loomed above, thinking the exact same thing. When I was a boy, the world around me was always a point of departure.

It makes sense that that boy became this man. I still use pictures and words to tell stories, but now my medium is the picture book. And the medium is unlike any other. Although the picture book may look like a typical book—paper pages, between two pieces of cardboard—it's unique in many ways. A picture book is not just a container for text and illustrations. When you make a picture book, you use words, images, and the book form—the book's shape and heft and physical quality—to suggest the reader's path of

movement through the story: right to left, up and down, in and out, page to page. If a painting is two-dimensional and a sculpture is three-dimensional, then a book brings in a fourth dimension—time. The picture book is a sequence of moments that move through time.

The picture book is a physical object. The reader holds the book in her hands, she turns the pages, forward and backward, as fast or slow as she wants. Reading a picture book involves the eye, the mind, and the hand. When you turn the pages, your imagination—your thinking, feeling mind—fills the moments between page one and page two. Imagine a boy holding a paintbrush and a can of green paint. Behind him stands an elephant. If the image is well-made and the story is well-told, the reader is curious, anticipating and wondering what's next. Turn the page and you see the boy standing beside an unhappy, dripping, green elephant.

When I was working on the storyboard for *My Friend Rabbit*, I'd make small sketches inside a rectangle that represented the border of the finished book. Then I'd place that sketch on a larger sheet of paper and draw the action going on outside of the book. When Mouse looks up at the plane stuck in the tree, we don't see the plane, but we understand that he sees the plane. The reader fills those spaces, and the story is told. Not only by the person who's made the book but also by the reader. The story is incomplete without the reader, and therefore making a picture book isn't only about what you put in, but also about what you leave out. Making a book is a collaborative act. At some point you have to trust the child reading the book.

And kids will see things.

I was drawing at the Brookfield Zoo one morning when a girl, she must have been six or seven years old, asked if she could see my sketchbook. “Hippos are my favorite animal,” she said.

I showed her a drawing I had made of a sleeping hippo earlier that day, and she said, “Which one is it?” I must have

looked puzzled because she continued, “There are two hippos in the pen. Two big brown ones.”

I recalled the hippos sleeping in the mud, and said, “I’m not sure. It’s hard to tell them apart.”

“One has a cut on its ear,” she said.

After my talk with the girl, I walked back to look at the hippos, and she was right about the cut on the ear. This is the way children see—fully, with attention to subtlety and engagement with detail. Children are not visually sophisticated—I mean, they don’t have the experience or vocabulary to describe the complexities of what they see—but they are visually aware, more so than most of us adults because it’s what they do. A child’s primary job from birth to eight years old is to observe the world, to learn how things work. Children are hard-wired to be curious.

Over time, I’ve found that children are the best audience. They are enthusiastic, impulsive, generous, and pleased by simple joys. They laugh easily at the ridiculous and are willing to believe the absurd. Children are not ironic, disillusioned, or indifferent but hopeful, open-minded, and openhearted, with an inquisitive yearning for pictures and stories. To a child, every day is a great invention.

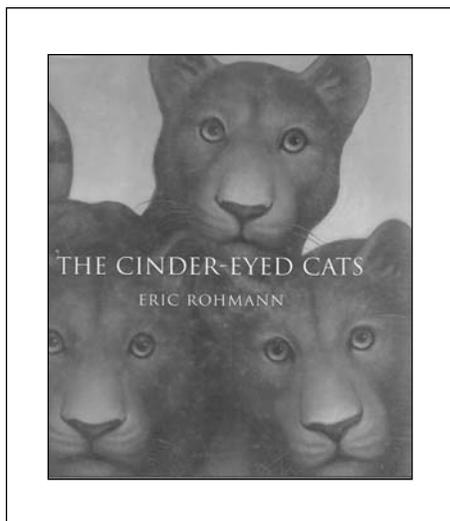
I want to thank Pat Scales and all the members of the Caldecott committee. Thank you for looking at my book and seeing something there. Although I have to admit that a little part of me says, “What were you thinking?” all of me is humbled, thrilled, and deeply appreciative. Also, I want to thank everyone at the Association for Library Service to Children for all their support and assistance.

My congratulations and admiration to the other winners—Peter (McCarty), Tony (DiTerlizzi), and Jerry (Pinkney). I couldn’t ask for better company.

To my family, who never seem surprised when good things happen to me. I treasure their enduring, unconditional support. And then again, my father, who loves only realism in painting, reacted to my news by saying, “They gave an award

to the cartoony one?” Those who love you always keep you from getting beyond yourself.

To my friend Simon Boughton, who also happens to be my editor at Roaring Brook Press. He took a chance on me a few years back and published *Time Flies*. When I spoke with him about making hand-colored relief prints for *My Friend Rabbit*, he



The Cinder-Eyed Cats by Eric Rohmann

never blinked. I treasure his steadfast confidence in my abilities even when I doubt myself. The simple truth is my books are far better for having worked with Simon.

Thanks to Lauren Wohl for the seemingly effortless way she turns difficulty into success. And to all my friends at Roaring Brook who put *Rabbit* on their very first list. Incidentally, if anyone here has a manuscript titled *The Little Publisher That Could*, now might be a good time for submission.

Thanks to my agent, Ethan Ellenberg, who also took a chance on a green, unproven artist. I’ve come to rely on his insight and good sense. Thanks also to Isabel Warren Lynch and Tracy Gates, who were in on this book at the very beginning and provided invaluable ideas and guidance.

To Harold Boyd, the best artist I’ve ever known. And not just because of his drawings and paintings, but also because he taught me—by example—how you can live a life as a working artist. He revealed to me what today seems so obvious: that

telling stories with pictures is the way I engage the world.

To all my friends who have encouraged me in spite of my capricious temperament. Especially to my friend Bob Erickson, for listening to me howl and lament ever since graduate school. When I told him of this award, he said, “I feel as if I’ve won something.” And to my friend, the writer Candace Fleming. When I was confused about the ending of *Rabbit*, it was Candy’s keen sense of story and her perceptive eye for humor that rescued the final page from the brink of ordinary.

Thanks to the kids who send letters, enlightening me to all the things in my books that I hadn’t seen, and for providing me with an endless supply of one-liners. To James, the seven-year-old boy who suggested that on the cover I replace the plane with a Torah scroll, put a yarmulke on Mouse, and call the book *My Friend Rabbi*. And to another boy, Steven, who—in a nod to the comic possibilities of spellcheck—wrote, “Congratulations on your award. The rabbit book is good. You must be very impotent.”

Finally, I spend a lot of time with my friends Mark and Mary Anne Loafman and their sons Nicholas, Ethan, and William. A few years back, after dinner one night, the three boys and I got the idea to build a tower of toys. Our building materials were cardboard bricks, toy trucks, action figures, and stuffed animals. We made the pile as high as possible and topped the swaying, precarious structure with a stuffed toy lion. Then we devised ways to knock it down. The boys called the game “Dead Simba.”

I’m sorry to say that I have never had a lightning bolt moment of inspiration. For me, and I suspect for most artists and writers, revelations come slowly, one after the other. You draw a line and then respond to the line. No heavenly flashes, but a slow brightening.

The falling pile of toys did not give me the idea for the tower of animals in *My Friend Rabbit*, but when I made the first tentative drawings of a bear atop a goose atop a rhino atop an elephant, I recalled those nights playing “Dead Simba” and knew that if that moment was so funny in real

life, it had a good chance of being funny on the page. When I made the drawings, those joyful nights with the Loafman boys returned unbidden and clear—the brightening I spoke of—a confluence of

imagination and memory. When I look back over the past few months, that's what the Caldecott has felt like. Receiving this honor has been another kind of brightening, also unexpected, that has

cleared away the chaff and chatter of doubt and uncertainty, making me more sure of my choices, reminding me of the good and true reasons I make books for children. Thank you. ☺

A Good Picture Writer

Eric Carle

2003 Laura Ingalls Wilder Medal Winner

I have to confess that I had never given much thought as to how the American Library Association awards are chosen. So when Ginny Moore Kruse phoned me and began to inform me of the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award, I thanked her and attempted some small talk, interrupting her carefully scripted announcement. Then she, in turn, interrupted me to continue what she had to say.

In the meantime, I have learned that the committee secretly, painstakingly, and in long sessions into the middle of the night, arrives at their decision about whom to honor and then calls the recipient. Therefore I wish to apologize for my rudeness and to thank you for honoring me and my work with the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award.

Even in my earliest childhood, long before I knew the words artist and art, I enjoyed making pictures. My first-grade teacher, Miss Frickey in Syracuse, New York, where I was born, was the first of many people I have to thank for believing in me as an artist. She made an appointment to see my mother to make sure she was aware of her son's talent, making a strong point that my mother and father should nurture that gift. And they always did.

However, I never finished out the happy year in Miss Frickey's class as about halfway through it my parents, German immigrants, decided we should return to

Germany. There I would spend the next seventeen years before returning to the United States, the land of my birth. I still have unpleasant memories of both my art class and my regular classes in grammar school in my new country. I also remember with a shiver something new of which I had previously no inkling: corporal punishment.

ber him as a shining example of what an educator can be.

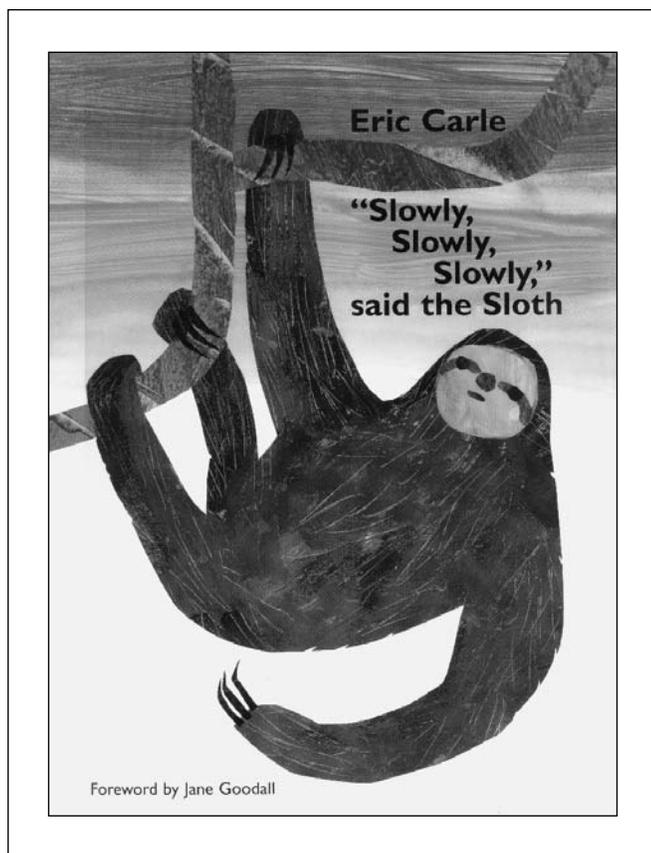
When I was fifteen, the war ended. Much of Stuttgart, where I lived, was reduced to rubble. But life somehow went on and schools reopened. There I began to study graphic arts under Ernst Schneider, my professor and mentor whom I admired so much then and still admire to this day. After my graduation, I went on to practice the art of the poster, an influence that is still evident in my present-day work.

Then, just before my twenty-third birthday, I returned to New York, where I began to work as a graphic designer and art director, mainly in advertising.

When I was in my mid-thirties, the poet and educator Bill Martin Jr. saw some of my work in an advertisement and commissioned me to illustrate his text for a children's book, *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* It was an assignment that set me on fire and changed my life.

But what about books and literature and librarians and reading?

Isn't this what ALA is all about? In my childhood home, there were no sagging bookshelves. I don't remember being read to, unless having the funny papers read to me by my father on Sunday mornings counts as such. I did have two fat comic books—one Mickey Mouse, one Flash Gordon. Ah, Flash Gordon. How I loved his space adventures, which often involved beautiful women.



"Slowly, Slowly, Slowly," said the Sloth by Eric Carle

In high school, my art teacher, Herr Krauss, who also believed in my talent, secretly introduced me, an unsophisticated boy of about twelve, to the beauty of abstract, modern, and expressionistic art. This was actually a very risky thing to do during the Nazi years, as Hitler had declared these kinds of art to be degenerate. It was *verboten* (forbidden) to be practiced by artists and forbidden to be shown. Herr Krauss was a dedicated and courageous teacher. I will always remem-