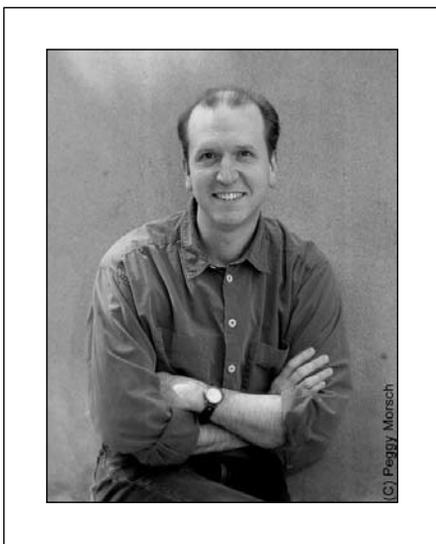


Caldecott Medal Acceptance Speech

Of Flotsam, Jetsam, and Another Caldecott

David Wiesner



David Wiesner is the winner of the 2007 Caldecott Medal for Flotsam, published by Clarion Books. His acceptance speech was delivered at the Annual Conference of the American Library Association in Washington, D.C., on June 24, 2007.

*Got some flotsam?
Yeah, I've got some.
Got some jetsam?
No, but I can get some.*

When I was in the fourth grade, my teacher read a poem by Ogden Nash to the class. I've never forgotten it. From that point on, the words *flotsam* and *jetsam* were part of my vocabulary. They were funny-sounding and interesting in meaning. While *flotsam* technically refers specifically to maritime debris, I like the more colloquial definition referring to odds and ends that can turn up anywhere—on the beach, on land, even in your mind.

Flotsam on a cosmic scale—images, ideas, and memories floating through time and space—appeals to me now.

As a kid, though, I only knew the down-to-earth kind. The most remarkable piece of flotsam I ever found was buried in a brook that ran through the woods at one end of my neighborhood. The woods seemed huge back then, but they were really just an undeveloped acre of land. It was an exciting and mysterious place to play, and, despite repeated severe cases of poison ivy, I couldn't keep away.

One day when I was eight or nine years old, my friend Brian Wilbur and I were digging around in the brook, as we often did. We were probably trying to build a dam, one of our favorite activities. We were soaked. Suddenly, we saw something poking out of the mud under the water. It appeared to be a face. And a leg. And they weren't human.

I dug my hand into the mud and pulled the object out—it was very heavy—and rinsed it off in the flowing water. It was a black metal figure of a bull, about six inches long. At one time it had had ivory horns, but they had been broken off and only stumps remained. Its posture was wonderfully contorted, with the head lowered and twisting to look up. The face was an intense grimace, and the features and musculature were rendered in minute detail.

We were stunned. This wasn't a toy. It was a grown-up thing. How could it have

gotten here, in our brook, in our woods? I was fascinated by the idea that this object had a whole unknown history. I'm sure that my imaginings were far more exotic than reality—but who knows?

I kept that bull on my drawing table for years, right up until 1983, when the apartment building my wife, Kim, and I were living in burned down and took everything we owned with it. Fortunately, we didn't have much at the time. There were a few very hard losses, like Kim's cello and my college sketchbooks. But in the days after the fire, as I mentally went over the contents of the apartment, I can recall the pang I felt when I realized that the bull was gone. It was like losing a little piece of my childhood.

After a long time, my friend Brian and I got together. We hadn't seen each other for at least twenty years, but it took him less than five minutes to ask, "Do you still have that bull we found in the brook?" I was amazed! He hadn't seen this thing since he was a kid, and yet it was still lodged in his mind as firmly as it had been in mine. It was maybe even more remarkable because he hadn't set eyes on the object in nearly thirty years, since I was the one who kept the bull after we found it. How did that come about? Well, it's funny, but my memory gets a little hazy about this part of the story. There seemed to be some dispute over who really discovered it. Let's just say that at the time I was a year older and a lot bigger than he was.

Anyway, Brian proposed that since I had had it all that time, maybe he could have a turn keeping it. Which would have been a great ending to this story, except that I had to tell him about the fire. We were both pretty bummed about losing the bull, but we liked the idea that it was out there somewhere. Maybe it had fallen off the dumpster as the building debris was being carted away. Maybe it was poking through the ground in a landfill that was being developed. And maybe, hopefully, another kid found it.

As a story idea, a kid stumbling across something extraordinary, something with secrets to reveal, had been floating around my mind for some time when I started working on this book. I am not

consciously aware that my childhood flotsam story played a part in this, but I think it had to have been some kind of motivation. Visually, though, this story about finding something has always taken place on the beach. Or, as we say in New Jersey, down the shore.

From before I was born until I was fourteen, my family spent the last two weeks of August on Long Beach Island, New Jersey. Squeezed into the back of our station wagon, I always felt that the trip there took days.

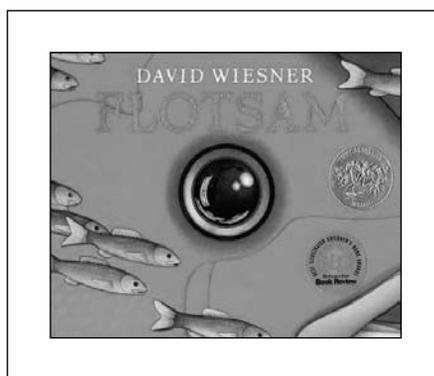
Crossing the causeway to get to the island was like arriving in another world. When we got to the house, I would immediately run down to the beach. Coming up over the crest of the sand dune and experiencing the sight and smell and sound of the ocean was always overwhelming to my senses. The island seemed to me like an enchanted land. It was a shock to learn that people actually lived there year-round. I saw evidence of that enchantment in the permanent residents from whom we rented a house—the Segals. As a kid, I thought, Wow, they live at the beach and they're named the Seagulls!

Sometimes the ocean water would collect in a tide pool high up on the beach. One day I saw a group of people gathered around, pointing at something. I approached and saw a fish trapped in the pool. Actually, I wasn't really sure if it was a fish at all. It was yellow with black spots. It was blown up round, like a balloon. It was covered with spikes. It had a beak. It looked like an alien! It elicited from me the simultaneous reactions of "Ewww!" and "Cooool!" And then I realized that this thing, this puffer fish, had been out there in the water where I had just been swimming. So, there might be more of them. And there might be . . . well, who knew what else might be out there?

After I won a second Caldecott, for *The Three Pigs*, people kept saying such helpful things as, "Gee, how are you going to top that?" Hmm. I hadn't been thinking about topping anything. Maybe, I thought, it would be a good idea to step out of the limelight for a bit. I began to think that I should do a smaller-scaled, quieter book. And, for a change of pace, one with a text. My previous two books

were forty-eight and forty pages and had taken ages to complete. I was determined not to go over thirty-two pages this time, and I wasn't going to let three or four years go by between books again. So, five years later, I came out with a wordless, forty-page book.

The creative process can be such a pain in the neck. It's not like I didn't really try to make that quieter thirty-two-page book with a text. I was concurrently working on three different story ideas. The first, which is the one my contract was for, was about aliens landing in a backyard. It had a great beginning, but nothing as good to follow it. The second idea was about fish living in a house. It had lots and lots of great imagery, but no plot to speak of.



The third idea was *Flotsam*. I knew from the start that *Flotsam* would be the title of whatever my kid-on-the-beach story turned out to be. At first I had no idea what the kid would find. I started by making it a small crystalline sphere. How this object would reveal any hidden secrets, I had no idea. It was really just a placeholder until I figured out what that object actually was.

In its first incarnation, the story spanned from the dawn of time to the present. It then developed two parallel story lines with two different, tightly formatted design layouts that would merge at the end—a visual device that I really liked. Eventually, I decided that a camera would be a great way to show the secrets beneath the waves. In one version it was a talking camera. I then introduced a text. My main character was a girl. For a time the story was about sibling rivalry. For a long time the story focused

too closely on the journey the camera made. At some point my main character became a boy.

All the elements of a story seemed to be scattered throughout the many book dummies that I had made, but I hadn't yet had the "Aha" moment. The story was pushing in new directions, but I was still clinging to a strict design template that wouldn't let the pictures evolve as well. I realized that I had to put aside all my preconceptions and start over. This time I should just tell the kid's story.

The pictures flowed out, the text disappeared, and the parallel stories became one.

As I was working my way through the fantastical undersea photos that the camera would reveal, the final piece of the story fell into place. The camera had shown octopi reading in a makeshift living room, sea turtles with cities on their backs, a puffer fish hot-air balloon, starfish islands, and aliens on vacation. I needed one more extraordinary photo, and suddenly, surprisingly, I saw it—an image of another kid looking directly out at the viewer. And that kid in the photo was holding a photo of another kid, who was holding a photo of another kid, back through all the kids who had had the camera before, finally reaching the child who had started it all.

Aha! At last, this was what my character was meant to find on the beach—another kid. That connection was what I had wanted to achieve all along.

Relinquishing my original, tightly structured, parallel page designs allowed a single, more organic design to develop. Despite my intention to stick to thirty-two pages, I found that I really needed more room to give the book a greater visual variety. At thirty-two pages, the book would have had too many dense multipaneled pages. Forty pages let me alternate these multipaneled pages with single full-page images and double-page spreads to give a visually interesting rhythm to the flow of the pictures. The eye scans the multipanel page quickly. The detail-rich double-page spread is a place where the eye can linger and spend

time slowly exploring. Especially in a wordless book, this kind of visual variety makes for a far more exciting reading experience.

I draw and revise compulsively until each composition is exactly as it will appear in the final painting. The one place I don't plan ahead is in the color palette. Not until I begin to paint the first piece of a book do I truly know what the color concept for that book will be. *Tuesday* was about intense nighttime blues and indigos. *The Three Pigs* was all about white space.

With *Flotsam*, the first piece I painted was the first double-page spread of the boy on the beach looking through the magnifying glass. It's a clear, sunny day. His beachcombing equipment, much of which is made out of primary-col-

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ored plastic, surrounds him. He is lying on a patterned beach towel. Uh-oh, I thought, this book is going to be about bright colors.

I've spent most of my life running away from bright colors, but there was no escape, so I dove into the bathing suits, T-shirts, buckets, shovels, and beach towels. The culmination of this cavalcade of color was the decision to fill the cover of the book with a close-up of a red snapper. There is more cadmium red in that one painting than in all the other art I have ever produced.

Deliberately leaving part of the process open to spontaneity can be scary. But to grow as an artist, I have to be willing to move into unfamiliar territory. It is there that I learn new things and keep my creative process from becoming routine.

It can also get scary when one idea doesn't work out, and then another doesn't, and time drags on. Panic can set in. But I've been through this before. Only two of my contracts have on them the name

of the book that I eventually produced. It would be nice if the path were always straightforward, but, in the end, I simply trust that if I focus on the process, something valuable will result.

There are many people who help me achieve that result. They are the same people I have mentioned previously, when I have addressed this gathering. I like that. I like that a lot.

Dinah Stevenson, Carol Goldenberg, and Donna McCarthy are, respectively, my editor, art director, and director of production. Those titles superficially describe our relationship. They are, truly, my collaborators.

Dinah Stevenson had great patience and great wisdom throughout the *Flotsam* saga. Her input during my creative

meandering was thoughtful and subtly delivered—particularly during the cheese incident. At one point in the process I had the idea of making the camera talk. The Chatti-cam, as I called it, would say, "Cheese!" Not, "Say cheese!"—I thought just "Cheese" would be funnier. So funny, in fact, that I decided I should retitle the book *Cheese*. While her words argued politely, yet firmly, against this, her eyes were saying, "Not in a million years!" Thank you for that, Dinah.

Incredibly, Carol Goldenberg is even more compulsive than I. Who knew simple black lines around pictures could lead to so many sleepless nights? Putting *Flotsam* together was exciting and challenging, and we continually found solutions that added even more to the book.

All this work might be wasted if the book were not printed with such attentiveness and skill. I never lose sleep over this, knowing that Donna McCarthy is overseeing the production of my books. Her care and meticulousness are a joy to behold.

And, once again, to everyone at Clarion Books, especially Marjorie Naughton and Joann Hill, thank you for all you do for me.

For the past twenty-eight years, Dilys Evans has been my agent. Again, that is a term that only superficially describes our relationship. Throughout our many adventures together, she has been first and foremost my good friend.

When I was growing up, artistic insecurity never had a chance to take hold at home. My mother and my father and my sisters and my brother always supported and encouraged my art, unconditionally. It was a wonderful environment in which to create. Likewise, where I work now is all I could ever ask for. I have a studio at home with my family around me. Kim, Kevin, and Jaime are the audience I want to please most. This is the best environment in which to create.

One of the top ten questions that kids ask is, "Which one of your books is your favorite?" They really seem to want me to pick one, but I can't. Each of my books has been a distinct creative experience, with its own struggles and insights. Each is unique to me.

When the phone rang that Monday morning in January, I looked at the caller ID, saw "Washington State Convention Center," and thought, "No way." But when I picked up the phone, Janice Del Negro informed me that, indeed, *way*. It is hard to describe my reactions. Elation over the fact that *Flotsam* had been chosen for the Caldecott collided with the overwhelming realization that I was receiving the award for a third time. Three times is a lot to absorb, and I'm still working on it. For now, I am enjoying the recognition that *Flotsam* is receiving. To be singled out by fifteen people who have devoted an entire year to the jury process is a very special thing. Thank you, Janice, and all the members of the 2007 Caldecott committee, for this incredible honor.

What will I say when people ask me, "How are you going to top this?" Well, I'm thinking about a smaller, quieter book. But you never know.

Thank you. 🐷