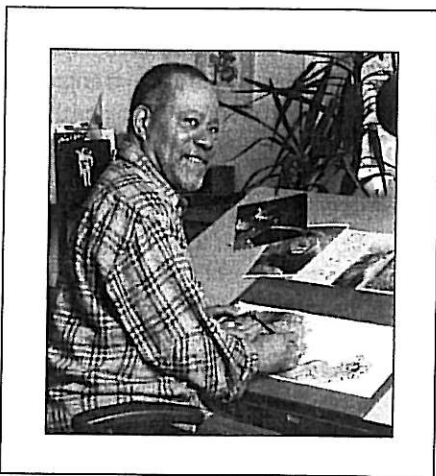


Caldecott Medal Acceptance Speech

A Peaceable, Wordless Kingdom

Jerry Pinkney



*Jerry Pinkney is the winner of the 2010 Caldecott Medal for *The Lion and the Mouse*, published by Little, Brown. His acceptance speech was delivered at the ALA Annual Conference in Washington, D.C., on June 27, 2010.*

In the weeks leading up to the ALA Midwinter conference in Boston, there was little I could do to sidestep the active buzz surrounding *The Lion and the Mouse*. It bounced around in my head like a child on a brand-new trampoline. I understood that everyone meant well with their good wishes. However, as a five-time Caldecott Honor recipient, I couldn't entertain the popular talk of another ALA award. I tried to trick myself by not paying attention to the convention date or to the fact that my publishers would be in Boston.

On the Sunday morning before the press conference that would announce the Newbery and Caldecott awards, my wife, Gloria, and I were attending church services when I felt a gentle tap on my shoulder. A fellow member told me that she had given *The Lion and the Mouse* to her nephew and described with great excitement how he had read it by creating his own narrative. Then, when he read it a second time, he had a completely different interpretation of what he saw in the pictures. This is exactly what I had hoped for—a child claiming ownership of this much-beloved fable.

After the service, I was approached by another church member. With much warmth, she expressed how my depiction of the plains of the African Serengeti brought vividly back to mind her visit to that majestic slice of earth. It seemed remarkable to me that Sunday morning that even though *The Lion and the Mouse* had been published several months earlier, I now felt as if I were watching it embark on an entirely new voyage. I returned home with a deep feeling of satisfaction. I felt content that, even if my phone did *not* ring at all the next morning, *The Lion and the Mouse* was still a winner, to my mind, because of how it was inspiring the imaginations of children and adults.

Nevertheless, when Gloria and I turned in that evening, I brought a cordless phone up from my studio—just in case someone needed to reach me early in the morning. And, indeed, at 6:20 a.m. the phone rang. Both Gloria and I had been sound asleep, so neither of us was certain where the phone was. Gloria exclaimed, "My phone is ringing!"

"I think it's *mine!*" I responded, bouncing out of bed. The voice on the other end of the line was Rita Auerbach, chair of the 2010 Caldecott Committee, informing me that I'd just received "the Caldecott. . ."

Time seemed to stand still as I waited for the word *honor*. And even after I heard her say *medal*, I was *still* somehow waiting for the word *honor* to sandwich itself between those two words. After the call ended, I kept wondering what the cheering librarians in the background must have thought when I took so long to respond. Gloria, who was standing close by, knew something special had occurred. "*The Lion and the Mouse* has just received the Caldecott Medal," I announced. Then, with much excitement, we held each other.

I am honored and humbled by this prestigious recognition. Many warm, heartfelt thanks to the Randolph Caldecott Award Committee for your dedication and efforts. And congratulations to Rebecca Stead for her Newbery Medal.

Looking back over the years, at the age of seventy, I've found it interesting to trace how the early chapters of my life have knitted themselves into my art. As a young boy, my buddies and I were fascinated by all kinds of creatures and insects we found in our urban backyards and vacant lots in Philadelphia.

On family trips to visit relatives in the country—back in the day, when New Jersey was "the country"—there were woods and streams filled with wildlife. Those were my first real experiences with nature. Even then I sensed that I was more centered, more balanced, when I was in touch with the natural world.

My first job after art school was delivering bouquets for a flower shop, where, later, I was promoted to floral designer. If you look at the body of my work, you'll find flowers embellishing many of my images. Sometimes they're used as a decorative device. Often they also lend a sense of harmony between humanity and nature. This interest in living, growing things, planted more than fifty years ago, blossomed in the illustrations

for this adaptation of *The Lion and the Mouse*.

Could my fascination for this tale have been fueled by field trips to the zoo when I was a child? In the late 1940s, zoos were not like the zoos of today. The animals were housed in dark, musty structures with just a little light trying to make its way through thick, humid air. The large cats were in rectangular cages, several feet off the ground, with guardrails in front. The animals paced back and forth with blank eyes staring into space, and I recall feeling that something was not right. I knew little of the big cats' natu-

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ral habitats, but I still felt that animals should not be confined in such a way. I didn't want to be there and didn't want to return.

Many years later, I immersed myself in the natural habitat of animals, frequently enjoying walks in the woods surrounding our home in Croton-on-Hudson, New York, which is situated between a nature preserve and land governed by the Audubon Society. One day, I decided to break from the main path and hike up a hill to a favorite tree, when a plump, speckled grouse limped out of the tall grass in front of me. The grouse dragged its wing with great effort, as if it were broken. I veered out of its way, but slowly it worked its way in front of me again. This awkward dance went on for a minute or two.

Then I remembered I had learned that a mother bird, in order to protect her young from potential harm, might fake an injury. So I allowed her to guide me with her antics, and with deliberate calm, I looked back over my shoulder and saw movement in the grass. It was the grouse's little chicks. When the distance was great enough between her and her brood, the grouse's wing miracu-

lously corrected itself. Then she lifted herself off the ground and flew back to her family.

I've remembered that experience so clearly because it was one of many moments when it seemed as if nature were speaking to me. And, from the very beginning, much of my art for children, at its core, was about nature speaking. *The Adventures of Spider* by Joyce Cooper Arkhurst, published by Little, Brown in 1964, was my first illustrated book, and I'm really pleased to say it's still in print.

But it wasn't until after illustrating over

a hundred books for children that I decided to create my first nearly wordless picture book with *The Lion and the Mouse*. I'm not sure when I first heard this fable, but it's been coursing through my mind for years. I even gave its central characters a cameo appearance in an illustrated collection of Aesop's fables published in the year 2000. It seems fitting, somehow, that the book's only words are the sounds of animals, such as the owl's screech, the lion's roar, and the mouse's squeak. And so nature *still* has a voice in this book.

When beginning the thumbnail sketches for the fable, my intent was to add text after I had a clearer idea of the visual rhythm and pacing. But once I saw those sketches on paper, I wondered, "Did this compact narrative really need words?" The answer came back to me a tentative "no," which motivated me to think about expanding the tale in other ways. I knew of the fascination young children have with animal sounds and how captivated I am by the nature sounds that find their way to my ears when I'm at work in my studio. So I decided to experiment with incorporating sounds into *The Lion and the Mouse*.

I prepared a dummy purely as a visual exercise, and added sounds to the thumbnail sketches as well as animal action words, such as *scurry*, *flee*, and *scamper*. Another set of thumbnails was completely wordless. The two versions were sent to my editor, Andrea Spooner. She had been my editor on five previous books, and so I had great trust in her gifts and ability to listen and, most importantly, the clear space in her own head to see my vision. Andrea's skill in this collaboration of artist and editor is to sometimes push and sometimes pull in her own gentle manner, always bringing me closer to the fullest potential for each project. Her insightful response to the materials I sent was to keep the sounds, but drop the action words. She was right. Sometimes there can be too much of a good thing.

The next question to be answered was the story's setting. I chose the African Serengeti of Tanzania and Kenya in part because the lion was a central character in the story, and in part because of my fascination with Africa. The Serengeti provided me with an expansive backdrop that opened a host of visual possibilities. I began adding other creatures and vegetation of the Serengeti plains to provide a strong sense of place.

The lion and the mouse are two engaging characters, both heroes in this enthralling drama. I've always found it interesting that while the lion may be the majestic king of the jungle, if a gray or brown rodent were to scurry across a library floor, some of us would go running. The drawings of these two players were developed by sketching first in order to determine what I needed their body language to express, then research of the animals' anatomy using pictorial publications. Some days I would stand in front of a mirror and go through a series of expressions and body movements in order to incorporate what I'd learned into my drawings, and have them mimic the expressions of humans.

In my art, you can find the influences of Beatrix Potter, Arthur Rackham, and A. B. Frost, all masters of personification. And if you remove the book jacket, you will find on its back case cover my homage to the artist Edward Hicks's painting

The Peaceable Kingdom. While in my illustration I substituted the animals of the African Serengeti for Hicks's biblical animals, I believe ultimately the enduring strength of this tale is in its moral: no act of kindness goes unrewarded. Even the strongest can sometimes use the help of the smallest. To me the story represents a world of neighbors helping neighbors, unity and harmony, interdependence.

In fact, I learned from a librarian who had introduced the book to her students that the zebra, with its keen sense of smell, and the ostrich, with its sharp vision, sometimes warn other creatures of impending danger. The librarian pointed out to me that my art for the endpapers had both of these species depicted in the same scene with other animals that might depend on them for help. "Did you do that on purpose?" she asked me.

Here is the heart and soul of this book—it's about what *you* discover in the images, what someone other than the artist can bring to them. In many ways, the journey each reader traverses parallels my creative process, that of discovery.

The journey of my own career has been deeply enriched by you, the librarians.

"Here is the heart and soul of this book—it's about what you discover in the images, what someone other than the artist can bring to them."

With much gratitude, I thank all of you for your continued friendship and support throughout my career.

The design, shape, paper, and printing of a good book all lend themselves to a quality reading experience. My thanks to Patti Ann Harris and Saho Fujii for their attention to every detail in the production of this book. Can you believe the jacket spine was scored from the inside?

Thanks also to Victoria Stapleton, Ames O'Neill, Megan Tingley, and all of my friends at Little, Brown and Company and Hachette Book Group for their support of this book, which is so important to me.

Thank you, Shelly Fogelman, my friend and agent of many years, for such strong

support and wise guidance. I can still remember one of our early meetings when you said, "Be patient and wait for that right project that will be something that you're passionate about, but that also has the potential of reaching a large audience."

I can't help but also remember my mother's support when I, as a young boy, dreamed of becoming an artist. Her warm hand was always on my shoulder, encouraging me in her quiet way, saying, "You can do it, Jerry." That continuity of someone always being there for me was kept in place by my wife, Gloria Jean. By the way, in March we celebrated our fiftieth wedding anniversary. Gloria, this award is as much yours as it is mine. To our children, their spouses, our grandchildren, and our great-grandchild, thank you for your love and for keeping me grounded.

At the end of my school presentations there is always a question-and-answer period where I get to ask the last question. The one I most often ask is, "Do you think I am just as excited today as I was some forty-six years ago when I illustrated my first book?" Tonight I am asking you. Do you think I am just as excited today as I was some forty-six years ago when illustrating my first book? ☺

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