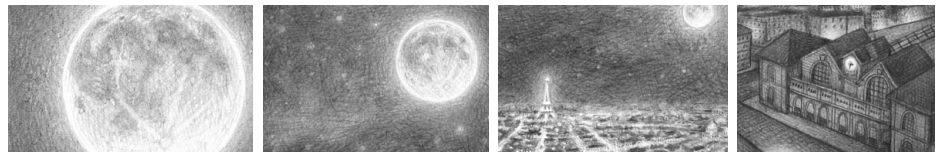


Editor's Note: The images accompanying the text here were part of a DVD author and illustrator Brian Selznick used to introduce his acceptance speech at the Newbery/Caldecott Banquet. His finely detailed images follow protagonist Hugo Cabret upon learning that the book had won the Caldecott Medal. All images used with permission. ©Brian Selznick.



# Caldecott Medal Acceptance Speech

## Make the Book You Want to Make

Brian Selznick



Photo by David Serlin

**Brian Selznick** is the winner of the 2008 Caldecott Medal for *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*, published by Scholastic Press, an imprint of Scholastic. His acceptance speech was delivered at ALA Annual Conference in Anaheim, California, on June 29, 2008.

The speech I am about to deliver takes place in 2008, under the roofs of Anaheim. It concerns a young boy named Hugo Cabret, who once, not that long ago, starred in a book that changed his life forever.

But before we turn the page, I want you to picture yourself sitting in the darkness, like the beginning of a movie. You'll remember how you zoomed toward a hotel in the middle of the city, rushing through the halls into a crowded ballroom. On screen, you will eventually spot a boy, asleep in his secret apartment. Watch out for him, because this is Hugo Cabret. He's unaware that in a city he's never heard of, a man he doesn't know has taken the stage, and a speech all about him has just begun.

Which brings us to tonight.

The Caldecott Medal was first presented in 1938, having been established the year before by a man named Frederic G. Melcher, who in 1921 had also created the Newbery Medal. For the Caldecott, his intention was to honor the work done in picture books by American illustrators. But right from the start, there was a question of what exactly defined a picture book. In her *History of the Newbery and Caldecott Medals*, Irene Smith states that Melcher believed that the "dominant feature must be the work of the artist."

When I began work on *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*, I had no idea that the "dominant feature" would be the work of the artist; that the story would be told so prominently through images. So tonight, members of the Caldecott committee, esteemed colleagues, fellow honorees, friends, and family, I'd like to talk a little bit about how I came to make a 550-page picture book.

The story begins, as everything does, with childhood. I grew up drawing, reading books, and watching movies. I had my favorites, and among them were the artist Leonardo da Vinci, the hilarious picture book *Fortunately* by Remy Charlip, and the movie *King Kong*, produced by my grandfather's first cousin David O. Selznick. I eventually grew up and became a writer and illustrator of children's books, a job that combines all my childhood loves. But about five years ago I came to an impasse. I needed some kind of change, even though I didn't know what, exactly. Something about my work wasn't satisfying me. I stopped illustrating. Everything came to a standstill. I grew quite depressed.

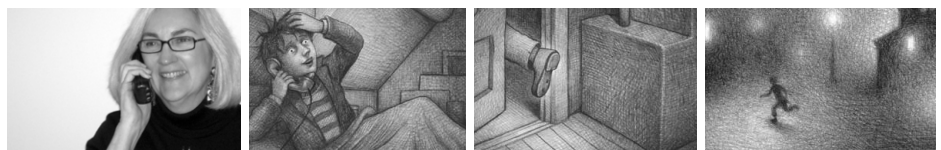
This lasted for six months.

During this time, there was one thing that graced my life and saved me from going completely crazy. I met Maurice Sendak.

He talked to me about my work, which he said showed great promise, but he steadfastly maintained that I hadn't come close to reaching my full potential yet. These words resonated with me very strongly. I think I had secretly felt the same way. I talked to him about how lost I felt, about how I didn't know what I should do next. His words were simple but powerful: "Make the book you want to make."

I didn't know what that meant at the time. I had no new ideas.

So, with nothing else to do, I decided to turn this period of my life into a sort of apprenticeship to Sendak, even if he didn't fully know it. I surrounded myself with the things he loved, like *Moby-Dick*, Mozart, and the paintings of Vincent van Gogh, and I studied Sendak's own work even more closely. I read, and I tried to





leave myself open for things to come. But as for my own work, I created nothing.

*The Invention of Hugo Cabret* grew out of this period in my life. I came across a book called *Edison's Eve* by Gaby Wood, where I learned that Georges Méliès, the man who made the first science-fiction movie, *A Trip to the Moon*, in 1902, had owned a collection of automata, and at the end of his life they'd been destroyed and thrown away. I had seen *A Trip to the Moon* long ago and loved it. As soon as I learned about Méliès's lost automata, I suddenly, mysteriously, imagined a boy climbing through the garbage and finding one of those broken machines. It was almost like a flash of light had gone off in my head. Here was the beginning of a story.

Perhaps this was the book that Sendak was talking about.

I was both greatly relieved and terrified, because it quickly became clear that this book would incorporate everything I'd learned about book-making up to this point, while at the same time it would be unlike anything I'd made before. I wanted to create a novel that read like a movie. What if this book, which is all about the history of cinema, somehow used the *language* of cinema to tell its story? How could I do this?

I looked to picture books for the answer.

And the secret was in the page turns.

Think about the wild rumpus in *Where the Wild Things Are*. The pictures grow until they take over the entire book and there is no more room for words. Only the reader turning the page can move the story forward. We are put in charge at the exact moment Max himself takes

charge. We become Max, all because of the page turns.

Think about my favorite childhood book, *Fortunately*, by Remy Charlip, which employs page turns so brilliantly to tell its story. We watch what happens as Ned, page by page, tries to get from New York to a surprise party in Florida. Having *fortunately* borrowed a friend's airplane, which has *unfortunately* exploded, he *fortunately* finds himself with a parachute that *unfortunately* has a hole in it, and so on. The story moves forward after each line of text, always bringing a surprise when we turn the pages.

Through my friend Dan Hurlin, I met Remy Charlip a few years ago, and we became friends. This friendship is one of the great joys of my life. I was so excited to meet the creator of *Fortunately* and to really get to know him. While I was working on *Hugo*, I tried to explain to him what my book was going to be about and how I wanted to use page turns. He said, "Oh, I wrote something about that a while ago. I'll send it to you." This brilliant little essay, called "A Page Is a Door," ends with this paragraph:

A book is a series of pages held together at one edge, and these pages can be moved on their hinges like a swinging door. . . . Of course if a door has something completely different behind it, it is much more exciting. The element of delight and surprise is helped by the physical power we feel in our own hands when we move that page or door to reveal a change in everything that has gone before, in time, place, or character. A thrilling picture book not only makes beautiful single images or sequential images, but also allows us to become aware of a

book's unique physical structure by bringing our attention, once again, to that momentous moment: the turning of the page.

In the end, Remy posed for me as Georges Méliès because of his uncanny resemblance to the filmmaker, and I'm extremely proud that he is one of the stars of *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*. Amazingly, Remy told me that he's long loved Méliès and that he even used drawings by Méliès as inspiration for pictures in one of his books. It is beautiful little coincidences like this, which occur again and again while I work, that convince me I must be on the right path.

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I should mention here that *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* would not exist at all without my editor at Scholastic, Tracy Mack. The first book we did together, in 1995, was Pam Conrad's *Our House*, and since then Tracy has pushed me to be a better artist and writer than I ever could have been without her. From the moment I told her I wanted to write about a boy who meets a famous French filmmaker, she and editor Leslie Budnick embraced the story and the format and helped me craft every line, every word, every image. I share this award with them and will forever be grateful for their guidance and friendship. Thank you, Tracy and Leslie.

And I must extend these thoughts to art director David Saylor, who, along with his partner Charles Kreloff, made the book more beautiful than I could have imagined. I must also thank Scholastic Press for publishing *Hugo* so exquisitely. Everyone understood that even though *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* is a book about movies, and it's told *like* a movie, the main concern was still *the book*. We





wanted readers to be aware of the object in their hands, to fall in love not just with Hugo but with the book itself, the thing with covers and pages and pictures and words.

While I was making *Hugo*, I also shared early drafts with friends who helped me with the story. I have to especially thank Pam Muñoz Ryan and Sarah Weeks for their insights and comments. You helped make Hugo the man he is today.

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This speech probably should have begun slightly differently. It should have begun with the door opening into Eeyore's Books for Children in 1989, because this is where my life in children's books really started.

The manager of the store took me under his wing, and I learned what it meant to truly be a bookseller . . . getting the right book into the right child's hand, something everyone in this room has in common in one way or another. I also learned how difficult this could be. I remember the time a customer, an elderly woman, wanted a book for her grandchild. Nothing I recommended was right: one book was too long, one too short; the pictures were not good enough, or bright enough, or engaging enough. Finally, in desperation, I said, "Here, this book is a classic. Your grandchild will love it. It's Dr. Seuss's *Green Eggs and Ham*." She looked at it and said, "They're Jewish. Do you have it without the ham?"

When I was finally ready to start making my own book, it was the manager at Eeyore's and his girlfriend who helped me first get published. The manager soon left the store and eventually became a wonderful editor himself. Steve Geck, now at Greenwillow, married his then-girlfriend

Diana Blough, now at Bloomsbury, and I must say a profound "thank you" to you both. In so many ways, I'm here tonight because of you.

Noel Silverman has been my lawyer, advisor, and very close friend since my first book was published, and I have to thank you for all your guidance and wisdom.

Thank you especially to my parents, Lynn and Roger Selznick, who have been endlessly supportive. My mom traveled with my first book in a Ziploc baggie in the trunk of her car in case she ran into anyone who hadn't seen it.

My dad, an accountant who had wanted to be an archaeologist, never liked his job, and because of this, both my parents made sure their three kids followed their dreams. As a kid, I wanted to be an artist, my sister wanted to be a kindergarten teacher, and my brother wanted to be a brain surgeon, and that's what we're each doing today.

My dad died just before I began work on *Hugo*, and for a long time while I was writing the story I didn't know what was going to happen to Hugo's father. I didn't want Hugo's father to die, so I kept him alive. But there were huge holes in the story—the plot simply wasn't working. I still remember the moment when I realized what needed to happen. It was a profound and complicated moment. I was sad, but also uplifted. Hugo's father's death gave reason to the entire story. It meant everything that happens to Hugo would be connected to *his* father. I discovered, a year into writing the book, that it was his love for his father that gives the plot power and meaning and makes the story matter, for Hugo himself, for me as the creator, and hopefully, by extension, for the reader.

I certainly don't have the words to thank my boyfriend, David Serlin. I think I can only be described as *unbearable to be around* while I'm working. If he says, "Your drawings look good," I get angry because he obviously knows nothing about art and can't see all the flaws that I'm trying to fix. And if he says nothing, then I get mad at him for being unsupportive. He's really in a no-win situation, yet he manages to handle me with patience and understanding and love. He's a brilliant thinker, a respectful listener, and, well, I'll say it again, a very, very patient man. I know that I wouldn't be here tonight without you, D. Thank you.

And finally, to Karen Breen and the Caldecott Committee, thank you for this great honor. Tonight's banquet marks the seventieth anniversary of the Caldecott Medal, Frederic G. Melcher's brainchild. Melcher had wanted to define what exactly picture books were and how best to honor them. I think he would be proud to see that his intentions are still being discussed so seriously, and that we are still passionately debating what exactly a picture book *is*.

But however we choose to define or label them, I think the most important thing to remember is that kids want good books, with good stories. That's what we're here to provide—books that are serious, or funny, or true, or made up. We need to give children the books they want, and the books that they don't yet know they want. And sometimes, we have to remember, the one thing a child *really* wants in their book is a little bit of ham. 🍖

