

It takes a village: Exhibit reveals collaborative art of picture books

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Whether going on an adventure with a mischievous boy in a wolf costume or falling in love with a selfless tree, picture books have the ability to take people from 3 to 83 on a journey of the heart.

The Learning Center at the W.E.B. Du Bois Library at the University of Massachusetts is hosting an exhibit that offers a behind-the-scenes look at the creation of four picture books by Western Mass authors and illustrators. On view through Jan. 31, 2010, the exhibit "The Making of a Picture Book: The Marriage of Text and Art" gives viewers a glimpse of what it takes to create the books that, as kids, introduced us to the literary world and today, keeps us young at heart.

"It's something that readers don't get the chance to see," said the exhibit's curator, author Corinne Demas of Amherst. "[The exhibit] shows the reader how the writer and illustrator work together; how the text and art work together. I really see [picture books] as a marriage of pictures and words."

The marriage

The "marriage" of author and illustrator can take many forms, beginning at a variety of different places. "It's like how different couples meet," said Demas. Whether it's a blind date set up by an editor, or bringing together old friends, it's always a marriage, ending in the birth of a new picture book.

"The Littlest Matryoshka," written by Demas and illustrated by Kathryn Brown of Northampton, tells the tale of Nina - the littlest of her matryoshka sisters - and the adventure that brings her back home after being separated from her family.

The story was inspired by a set of secondhand Russian nesting dolls Demas bought for her daughter. To explain a crack in the largest of the matryoshka dolls, Demas wrote a story to go along with the gift. The original book she wrote and illustrated for her daughter can be seen at the exhibit alongside Brown's original illustrations.

"It takes a village to raise a picture book," said author Jane Yolen of Hatfield, whose book "The Perfect Wizard" is featured in the exhibit. What the reader sees as a seamless collaboration of pictures and words is a partnership of an author's story and an illustrator's imagery.

"A really good picture book will work with your eyes closed," said Demas, "and without words."

Each has the power to stand-alone. "[But] when they work together," said "Wizard" illustrator Dennis Nolan of Easthampton, "it's bigger than its parts. The marriage is stronger than the individuals."

"The Perfect Wizard," written by Yolen and illustrated by Nolan, tells the rags to riches story of the father of fairy tales, Hans Christian Andersen.

Of his "marriage" to Yolen on "Wizard," Nolan said, "It's good. We've never had an argument."

Having worked together on previous books, Nolan and Yolen exchanged ideas for the style of the book. Yolen did extensive research on Andersen and gave Nolan books with imagery of the author's life.

But once the story was written, Yolen handed it over to Nolan. She said that's not such an easy thing to do. "It's your baby," she said, "but you have to let the child take its own steps. It's important that the illustrator brings their own vision to the book, their own magic."

Separation

"It's human nature to want control of your words," said author Richard Michelson of Amherst, whose book "Ten Times Better" is included in the show.

"Ten Times Better," illustrated by the late Leonard Baskin, combines Michelson's playful verses with Baskin's vibrant animals, such as his mischievous-eyed and sharp-toothed alligator.

In the case of "Ten Times Better," Michelson and Baskin collaborated closely on most of the book - Michelson writing poems for Baskin's pictures, and vice versa. But this is a rarity, Michelson said.

"The rule of thumb is to keep illustrator and writer separate," he said.

From Michelson and Baskin's close collaboration to Demas and Brown's scant collaboration for "Matryoshka," the exhibit shows a wide spectrum of illustrator/author relationships.

For example, in "Once I Ate a Pie," written by Patricia MacLachlan of Williamsburg with her daughter Emily MacLachlan Charest of Stow, dogs tell tales with wags of their tails. While the authors didn't have a lot of contact with illustrator Katy Schneider of Northampton, they did send along photos of dogs that meant something to their family and which inspired the story.

What it takes

As part of the 11th Annual Friends of the Library Fall Reception in early October, the exhibit kicked off with a talk by Demas, titled "Beyond the Book." In it she went beyond the exhibit to speak about the things that authors have to do - the compromises they must make - to have a book published.

"There are lots of changes between what people write and what the reader sees," said Demas. Her talk and the exhibit bring the reader behind the curtain, revealing the village of people that go into making a picture book. Writers, illustrators, publishers and editors all have a role in bringing the story to life.

"Picture book is a collaborative art," Michelson said. "If we do our jobs correctly you shouldn't know the work we put into it."

More of the work illustrator's put into it is on view through Jan. 31, 2010, in the 20th Annual Children's Illustration Show at R. Michelson Galleries, 132 Main Street, Northampton.

"It's always the most fun and most visited show we have each year," Michelson said.

The show presents original art from books such as Maurice Sendak's "Where the Wild Things Are," the 1963 book that spawned the feature film of the same name that opened in theaters across the country in October. With works by over 20 acclaimed illustrators - including "Matryoshka's" Kathryn Brown - the show brings together illustrators from around the Pioneer Valley. At the opening, Yolen received the second annual "Norton Juster Award" for her contributions to the world of children's literature. "It's amazing to look at the original art in all its glory," she said.

For more information about the exhibit "The Making of a Picture Book" visit <http://tiny.cc/picturebook>. For more information about R. Michelson Galleries and the 20th Annual Children's Illustration Show, visit www.rmichelson.com.