

2024 Hans Christian Andersen Award

Acceptance speech by Winner for Illustration, Sydney Smith 39th IBBY World Congress, Trieste, Italy, 31 August 2024

Thank you for having me here in Trieste for the IBBY Congress.
I am honoured to receive the 2024 Hans Christian Andersen for Illustration.
I want to thank the Hans Christian Andersen jury and president and IBBY Canada for your faith in me.

Before I sat down to prepare for this speech, I was given the advice to not be solemn. I'm sorry, but have you seen my books? There isn't a story on my list that isn't steeped in solemnity. I believe that I am standing here before you in part BECAUSE don't shy away from seriousness and sincerity.

But that has always been my way from my early childhood. I wasn't a serious child, but I dabbled in the melancholy as well as joy.

Talk about complicated emotions.

Well, here I am at what may be considered the peak of my career. It's a lofty peak from which I can look back, across the vista and see the path that got me here. My path has not been direct and there were swamps and jungles, but I have been really lucky. I have been given directions by many along the way. Friends and family, teachers, and mentors. There are too many to name in the time I have. But the few that deserve a special mention are my family, my mother and father, my mentors and editors Sheila Barry and Neal Porter, and the love of my life, my wife, who has supported me and stood by me in my highs and lows, who has been my friend and companion, encouraging me all the way up here to this peak that I am standing on.

From up here, I can even see where I decided to head down the path of picturebooks. It was not a popular choice. In my Art school there was no illustration department, and most students were engaged heavily in conceptual and post post-modern art making. But since I was already making art that used narrative themes of childhood, it was not much of a reach to imagine myself as a picture book illustrator. It may have even been apparent to everyone but me, including that one instructor who respected the art of picturebooks and encouraged me to follow my heart.

I was not a good student.

I have a hard time following instruction. I need to discover the basics on my own, through experience. That's the only way I learn.

But the excitement surrounding these basic discoveries and fascinations are what propel me from one picture book to another. In one project I discover a property of picture book storytelling or a particular power inherent in the image/text dynamic and in the next project I attempt to implement what I have found.

In this way the books are all connected and it's just one long conversation.

And this conversation started with a girl in a red coat.

When I look back, I can see where I was when I received the email from Sheila Barry, editor at Groundwood Books, inviting me to illustrate a wordless book about a girl walking through the city, picking flowers.

In fact, there's a good chance that I am here today I part because of the distance that book travelled introducing me to sixteen regions and countries and multiple languages and establishing relationships with publishers around the world that continue to this day.

This book also changed the way I worked. As the illustrator of a wordless picture book, I was front and center. The story was written by JonArno Lawson, a poet, one who identifies through his words but in his and Sheila's insightful wisdom, the words were removed. * They could see the story was stronger in silence. The reader could extract more if they witnessed the gentle, mindful activities of the character, picking flowers in the city, giving them out, rather than if they were told how to feel by text.

The power was in the silence. The power was in the image.

This way the reader was an observing bystander, and the character had a certain privacy with a distance that preserved the sanctity of her actions. As if in this silence the story was happening whether you were reading the book or not. It gives the character's emotions more validity and sincerity. It makes them real.

It was then I started to become fascinated with the components of picturebooks that work together or against each other to create new meaning.

In *Town Is by the Sea*, beautifully written by Joanne Schwartz, it occurred to me that the illustrator of a picture book has ultimate control over the story. The illustrator has the final say.

If the text and image mirror each other, there is little work for the reader to do. Reading remains a relatively passive activity. But when the text and the image do not align, if the reader receives conflicting information, who do they look to for the ultimate truth? The text or the image? The answer is the image. The reader believes what they see in the illustration before they believe what they are told. The text is suddenly received as unreliable. And that invites a closer look at the narrator. In this case, the character of the boy.

In *Town is by the Sea* the reader follows the boy and the father throughout the day. The boy is above ground, the father is in the mine.

The father is seen to be in an accident but the text, the voice of the boy, does not acknowledge the potential disaster.

This leads to interesting questions.

Why would he not describe what we see?

Does the reader know more than the character?

Does he choose not to acknowledge the possibility his father could be dead?

This invitation to look closer allows the reader to become an active part of the storytelling.

Suddenly the reader feels challenged. Suddenly they feel respected.

When the reader is challenged it is always met and often surpassed. If you open the door to interpretation the reader will look closer than you can imagine.

Now this. For me, this is where it gets really exciting.

Much of this is about anticipating the emotional reaction of the reader. It is a skill that every author or illustrator should have and it could be the most valuable tool in the tool chest. How will the reader feel when they turn the page? How will they react to the information they are given? When they discover that the character is withholding their true emotions or details? Or if the story is not what they thought it was? How will they feel?

In *Small in the City*, I posed these questions and put these new thoughts and theories to test. I would write and illustrate my first book set in my own neighborhood in Toronto.

My ultimate goal was to tell a story that could not be told just through text or just through the image. It required a considered mix of those active ingredients.

Looking back, I can see that exact moment when everything came together. I was on a two-hour drive on the highway, listening to music and mishearing lyrics. I had been working on a story about a child walking through a busy city during a snowstorm but there was something missing. It needed something to hold it together. I had recently met with editor Neal Porter and shared with him my thoughts. His suggestion was to add a lost dog. I thought, he must be joking! A lost dog?! But then I thought, what about a cat?

And what if the reader did not know at first. *

At the heart of the story is a twist and a reveal. A twist that changed the way the reader understood the previously read text. The character, at first, was assumed to be speaking directly to the reader. When the character says "The city is so busy, it can be hard to know what to do sometimes. But I can give you some advice." It's that simple word. "YOU". The reader immediately assumes it refers to them and relaxes into the assumption that they are being led through the city in a picture book that probably feels predictable and familiar. But as the story continues there is a moment where the advice given by the character becomes pointed, aimed at someone in particular. Not the reader but instead to another unseen character. A lost cat.

The switch occurs in the mind of the reader. The word "You" now refers to the cat, not the reader. They are no longer being addressed by the narrator; they are no longer known by the character as if the fourth wall had been there the whole time. The dynamic changes as they realize they were never invited in but are only there to observe, just like in *Sidewalk Flowers*. And they are suddenly observing a vulnerable and emotionally complicated person, saying one thing and meaning something different. Someone who feels alone in their grief, over a lost friend.

Up until this moment every character I have worked with has been observed from a distance, allowing their complicated emotions to feel undisturbed by the readers involvement.

Then comes along a new challenge. *I Talk Like a River*, beautifully written by Jordan Scott, is about a boy who struggles with accepting his stutter. He is at odds with himself.

I knew I could not give the reader the chance to distance themselves from the character. Because they would. If they observed from a distance they would say, "That's too bad but I don't have a stutter, I'm not like him". I needed to put the reader in the mind of the boy. Look in the eyes of the boy. Look through the eyes of the boy. Feel, through the messy fluidity of the paint, that the anxiety the boy feels may look different on the outside but feels familiar on the inside. Because we have all felt that same anxiety. We are so much more similar than we think. And of course, there is the moment of catharsis. Seen in the mind of the character. As a gate fold *Slide gatefold*

In my most recent book, I have chosen to speak about memory.

The beauty of shared memories between a mother and child. The explore painful memories and pleasant memories alike that explore perspective and points of view.

Since my wife and I have had our two children, I have shifted my thinking about picturebooks. Instead of the independent character of sidewalk flowers, *Town Is by the Sea* and *Small in the City*, I have been preoccupied by the relationships we have with each other; Parent and child. We are here, with our lives overlapping, for only a moment with these complicated, beautiful, and unique humans. Existing together, sharing our lives with each other, teaching each other, challenging each other.

I am of the opinion that picturebooks have the ability to speak equally to every generation. Connecting us not only with distant cultures and exposing us to the beautiful diversity around us but also connecting the people sharing that moment with a picture book.

It has been said before, but it bears repeating. As picture book creators, we are invited into this sacred place. Into the bedtime ritual, the morning quiet time, the classroom circle, the library story-time. And we lend our words to be spoken by the voice of the reader, the teacher, the parent, the child. To be heard by the child. Those words could be said in a way that the child hears it for the first time from the person they need to hear it from the most. The person who hasn't yet found the right words. And we say, here, take mine.

And what if those words were:

You are loved, you are not alone, everything will be alright.

It would not take long to discover that every book I've made and will make ends with that very sentiment.

Now, from here I see this the view that allows me to see further than ever before. I can see the winding path behind me but I can also see the paths ahead, to other exciting endeavors. I can see an entire mountain range spread out in front of me with countless destinations. More peaks and more jungles. I choose to receive this prestigious honor as an invitation to explore and continue following my compass, following my heart.

But first I might just sit and enjoy the view for a while.

Sydney Smith, 31 August 2024