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Bernard: An Illustrated Children's Book

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Bernard: An Illustrated Children's Book

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

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and Renée Crown University Honors
May 2013

Honors Capstone Project in Illustration

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Date: 7 May 2013

Abstract

My Capstone Project is an illustrated children's book titled, *Bernard*, that I authored and illustrated. It is a 32-page full color illustrated book following the adventures of a bear named Bernard, as he explores what it is like to spend a day in a human town. The idea behind the story was imagined during a serendipitous moment and expanded into a full narrative.

During the creation of the *Bernard*, I learned the importance of elements such as the rhythm and structure of the children's book. Wielding a pencil and paper, I explored how little or how much was necessary to convey a concept. I learned the importance of finding purpose to drive a narrative, and explored the relationship between text and image.

My intention behind this project was to gain a more thorough understanding of the anatomy of the children's book. By going through the process of creating a children's book - from start to finish - I encountered new obstacles and made essential discoveries that I ultimately found valuable to my growth as a children's book illustrator.

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Table of Contents

Reflective Essay..... 4

Summary of Capstone Project..... 19

The Idea

As an artist and illustrator, I take inspiration from observing my surroundings and examining daily thoughts. My process of thinking can be compared to that of the monks at the Ryoanji Zen Rock Garden. In the garden, a person meditatively rakes the gravel into a pattern. As the person rakes the gravel in this repeated motion, the mind is given time to release, organize thoughts, or think nothing at all.

In order to tap into this mode of thought, I try to find moments where I can take my mind into this pattern of thinking. For me, working in food services at the dining hall is my equivalent of raking at the Zen rock garden. The act of keeping the body in constant motion gives my mind freedom to relax and allows me to think in a nonspecific manner. Without any motivation or attainable goal, the mind can narrow in on thoughts that during a routine day may seem mundane or be tossed aside to the subconscious. Thoughts that occur during these moments are the thoughts that interest me.

The basic idea for my children's book narrative emerged from one of these moments while working at the dining hall. The process for creating my work began with conceiving a small, unspecific idea, and allowing it to grow and change form as I continued to work. The idea was simply this: Once upon a time, a bear went to town, did a bunch of things, and left. It was not a concrete script or structured storyline, but a story can be felt or imagined in the mind before it

has been described on paper with words. In this case the images were conceived before the final script was written. Initially I had some images in mind and a feel for the overall flow of the story. I pondered over the idea and decided to further expand the initial thought into a full narrative.

The revised narrative follows the journey of a bear who wanders into a manmade town by fate. The updated narrative provides a look at the interaction between the wild animal and the human town. After this development in the story, I was able to outline the majority of the narrative in a storyboard format. By creating storyboards for the narrative, I was able to visualize the flow of the sequence and make necessary changes. At this stage, however, the story still remained incomplete and seemed to be in need of more structure and purpose. The main idea of the narrative follows a bear as it explores a town, and I felt that I still needed a reason for the bear to (1) go into the town, (2) do the “bunch of things”, and (3) leave. An element to push the story moving forward from the beginning, middle, and end seemed to be missing.

The turning point for the development of the narrative came with the introduction of a new element: a wig. When I finally settled on the solution, it seemed to give the story new purpose and acted as an important constant. The wig was the missing element that provided a motivating drive for the bear to (1) go into the town, (2) do the “bunch of things”, and (3) leave.

First, the wig gave a transition for the bear to travel from the wilderness into human society by providing a connection with the people in the town. The

wig opened an opportunity for the bear to take advantage of his situation and go on an adventure in the human town. Second, the wig also provided a way for the bear to comfortably explore the town without being detected by its occupants. If the bear had been unable to disguise himself with the wig, the plot probably would have taken a different turn. However, with his disguise, the bear is able to have a comfortable experience that allows him to view the town from a person's viewpoint. Lastly, the wig provided a reason for the bear to leave the town. Once the wig flies off of his head and the bear's secret identity is compromised, he must end his exploration of the town and quickly return back to his home in the wilderness.

The time frame that I had originally established changed as I continued to make additions to the story. It is often difficult to follow a strict day-to-day timeline because creating my work is an organic process that involves allowing an idea to grow and take on new forms. The original story served as a skeleton to build upon and underwent changes as I continued to revise the narrative. The majority of the time was spent making revisions to the flow of the narrative and the visual layout. Before I could begin any final illustration, I had to complete the process of preparing all necessary elements involved. Once the script, image compositions, and other artistic choices were completed in the planning process, the creation of the content began.

At the final stage, when I edited down the script, I tried to keep in mind the relationship between the text and image. What I really enjoy about

illustration is that the image can expand on words and take it above and beyond the literal meaning. To me, being literal seems to defeat the purpose of illustration. Even if the illustration is a word-for-word interpretation of the text, I still feel it is important to include an element that pushes it beyond reality. Keeping this in mind, I tried to keep the words simple and relatively ambiguous in meaning.

By keeping the words simple, I allowed myself the freedom to interpret the script in more fun and fantastic ways. For example, one phrase from the book states: “When he started feeling hungry, Bernard picked up something tasty for lunch.” The simple and ambiguous structure of the sentence leaves the possibilities of the illustration open-ended. I chose to break down the sentence to two illustrations, interpreting the sections “he started feeling hungry” and “Bernard picked up something tasty for lunch” individually. For the first part of the sentence, I decided to depict the bear looking at food hungrily. In the final illustration, Bernard the bear is staring at a window full of pastries from outside a bakery. The viewer sees him peering into the bakery and can assume that the pastries have caught his attention. Since I did not specify what kind of food he picked up for lunch within the script, I was able to interpret the words in my own way. The only restriction stated in the sentence was that his lunch had to be something delicious. Without any limiting restrictions, I decided to illustrate a series of colorful pastries as the “something tasty for lunch”.

Structure

When I structured the script in the form of illustrated images, I took into consideration the rhythm of the pages. Initially, I did not realize or consider the rhythm of the book when I had outlined the images in a storyboard format. In the storyboard format, small thumbnail-sized images were drawn side by side in a long layout, on a single sheet of paper. Since I could view all 32 pages at once in the storyboard format, I did not think about the action of turning the page. However, once the action of turning the page came to my attention, the original structure of the book underwent crucial revisions.

The action of turning the page in a book is very important because this means that the reader sees only two pages at a time. If I were to illustrate a book for a mobile app, which may display only one page at a time, the structure would have to be edited once again. In a way, as with music, the number of pages a viewer sees sets a certain tempo for the book. The rhythm and flow of the book must be adjusted while taking into account that the viewer will be seeing the images on two pages every time.

The importance of rhythm was finally made aware to me when I created a book dummy from the storyboards. I realized that up until this point, I had

examined the narrative from the perspective of storyboards, viewing the images and the pages in all at one time. Once I had translated the storyboarded images into a book dummy I felt like I was looking at the story from a new perspective. Illustrators will create book dummies to feel what it is like for the reader turning the pages, to visualize how their images relate to each other in a double-page spread format, and to understand what the viewers will be seeing in the final version. I realized this was an important and necessary part of the process of creating a book that should not be overlooked.

For the book dummy, I prepared all that I could to make the book as similar to the finish as possible. The paper was measured to size and all pages - including the front and back cover - were included. My intention was to gain a better understanding of what it would be like to hold a physical copy of the book in my hand before starting on the final illustrations. In the book dummy, I roughly sketched out each illustration on each page and estimated where the type would be. This helped me gain a better visualization of how the images would read in the actual size as opposed to the small thumbnails I had been using previously. In the process of creating the book dummy I learned how the pages would flow together, and also encountered new obstacles that would disrupt the flow.

The first obstacle I encountered involved the readability of single pages placed into a spread layout. In the storyboard phase, I had drawn one page at a time, forgetting about the relationship between two pages. Once I positioned two

single page illustrations side by side, however, it was made very clear that there needed to be a separation between the two pages. This was an important element in separating the ideas on each page. For example, in one of the spreads there was a page on the left that showed Bernard the bear riding a bus and a page on the right that showed him entering a park. To put these two illustrations side by side, without a pause or separation seemed distracting. In order to improve readability, the solution I applied to all of the illustrations was the addition of white space along the border of each image. The border of each illustration has a loose, wavy edge to imitate the effect one might get from watercolors. This is intended to help the border fit in seamlessly with the illustration, so that the white space does not look like an afterthought.

Another important problem I found in the book dummy was the role of rhythm. When a reader turns the pages in the book, there is a certain rhythm that is conveyed through the change from a full-page spread to two separate images on single pages. In the book dummy, I found a section where I had placed six single pages in a row, one after another. At this section of the book, the rhythm was very quick and there was no time for the reader to rest their eyes. For example, the rhythm of this section of the book read as: single page, single page, single page, single page, single page, single page. Already, written out as words, it is easy to see that the rhythm of the book was paced too quickly and moving forward without any direction. After this realization I adjusted the pages around and changed some of the images into full-page spreads in order to add a new

rhythm to the book. After these adjustments, this section of the book read as: Single page, single page, spread. Single page, single page, spread. The ratio between the single pages and full-page spreads conveyed an improved sense of rhythm. The full-page spreads provided a rest for the reader's eyes and a moment to think about what they had read. The rhythm was also important in the anticipation of the reader. Since there is a simple rhythm to follow, the reader can feel more engaged with the book by knowing when to expect a large spread or a single page.

When I was examining and editing the layout of the book dummy, I also realized that there needed to be a distinct separation in the environment to determine when the bear was in the forest and when he was in the human world. I decided to distinguish the different worlds by playing with the perspective of the reader. For example, when the bear is in its natural habitat in the wild, the illustrations are laid out in a horizontal view. The bear is seen from the side profile view as it walks - left to right - across the page. The images are illustrated from a single perspective, and the composition has a quietness and static mood about it. However, once the bear enters human society the perspective of the illustrations shifts into more dynamic viewpoints. The bear is seen from various angles, including a bird's-eye view. This helped immensely in distinguishing the separate worlds, and made the transition aware to the reader. The variation in the dynamic viewpoints also helped evoke the feeling of adventure. As the bear

wanders, he cannot predict what he will encounter and so the viewer is taken on a similar journey as the compositional perspective shifts from page to page.

Ambiguity

Ambiguity is a crucial part of my illustrations. Ambiguity plays an important role in my artwork by allowing me to explore new visual territory and by directing the viewer's mind to the concept driving my work.

When I create environments I prefer to invent places that do not exist in real life but still have a feeling of familiarity to them. My intention is to keep the location ambiguous but familiar enough so that the reader can relate to it. This way, I am able to create locations that do not exist in the physical world but are accessible via the viewer's imagination. To accomplish this in my children's book, I avoided relying on existing images as my main source of reference. Instead, I created an environment from what I already know, picking and pulling from my own history, memories, and knowledge. Referencing this library of information meant that there may be mixes of culture, which was a natural happening that I embraced. I prefer my images to come from a diverse scope of influences and inspirations so that people from a diverse variety of backgrounds may find a connection to my work.

Ambiguity is also seen in the way that I draw the figures in the book. I made the decision to leave the racial and ethnic representation of the figures ambiguous in the book because I did not believe it contributed to the story. I do not view this decision as avoidance of the issue but rather as a purposeful aesthetic choice. Since the story compares the life of a wild animal against the landscape of people, race is not an important element in the narrative; the story focuses on people as a single entity and not as individual groups. In general, I like to keep race ambiguous in my artwork in order to keep the viewer's focus on the idea, concept, or message behind the illustration. The exception to this is if race is an important element of the story or the main talking point of the illustration.

Aesthetic Choices

For the overall look and feel of the images, I attempted to incorporate a more contemporary sensibility in my color choices and in the layout of the book. Though I admire the work and technical skill of children's book illustrators from a diverse range of backgrounds, I feel that there is a void of children's books that represent the more contemporary voice of artists and illustrators.

The tools that I chose to use are simple. After many years studying and exploring the techniques of artistic mediums - learning to render and flesh out

figures - I am revisiting my initial interest in line work. As a result of this change, I have reverted back to my love for the pencil and the ballpoint pen. I prefer the raw texture of the line that come from a simple graphite pencil or Bic pen. The unevenness and inconsistencies appeal to me. I do enjoy using other materials but often find that my thoughts are overshadowed by the technique. The way to use a pencil or pen, however, is straightforward and leaves my thoughts unobscured by the technique.

I decided to choose a limited color palette for the illustrations. This meant choosing select colors and applying simple “washes” of color to accompany the line drawing. The color is also applied in a manner that is unobtrusive to the drawing. Since the raw line quality of the drawing is an important element of my work, I wanted the color to highlight, rather than detract from, the simplicity of the pencil lines.

More than accurate representation and mimicking nature, I am interested in the process of observation. As a result, my work does not emphasize academic methods of realistic drawing and applications of color. My intention was to illustrate images without the clutter of realistic detail. I wanted to get rid of the clutter and draw only what was necessary to tell the story. To attempt this, I approached my line drawing and color as design elements. For example, rather than painting the nuances of the sky in a detailed and realistic way, I simply applied a solid area of color as one might do in a design layout. Instead of

painting realistic leaves on trees, I chose to use a rough scribble-like line to represent the treetops.

The colors are also not necessarily representative of the realistic colors of objects and figures. For example, at the beginning and end pages of the children's book, the sky is colored a magenta hue to represent sunrise and sunset. The sky does not turn this vibrant hue of magenta in reality, but is expressed in this manner to evoke the mood of sunrise and sunset. The ground and sidewalks in my illustrations are also generally kept white, void of color. The reasoning behind this is that I can suggest the distinction between the sky and the ground without coloring both. I did not feel it was necessary to add detail to an illustration that could be understood in its simplest form.

The limited color palette was also important in terms of working with a time limit. In the making of the children's book, the brainstorming and numerous revisions consumed the majority of the time spent in creating the book. As a result, most of my time was distributed to revisiting ideas and redrawing sketches until the majority of the book was complete. Once this was finished and all elements of the book were prepared, I was able to begin the final drawing and coloring at the very end of the process. As a result, the limited color palette and simple application of color served to be a useful element for working with a time limit.

Influences

From my childhood, I have been heavily inspired by the storytelling of Roald Dahl and Shel Silverstein. Though I am not directly influenced by these writers and do not seek to imitate them, I think their sensibilities have contributed to shaping my personality and interests as an illustrator.

I believe both writers pioneered their own approach to writing for young readers that is uniquely their own. I enjoy the way that both writers include humor into their stories and poems, in ways that may be subtle and not always conventional. I especially admire their storytelling abilities and the stories that they have to tell. I believe, however, the most crucial part of what makes Roald Dahl and Shel Silverstein unique writers is their willingness to be bold and to have an adventurous spirit. With this essential element, they were able to venture into new territory and narrate stories that, though not conventional, were uniquely their own.

My Role As An Artist

There is a distinction between the work that I create as a children's book illustrator and as an artist.

As a children's book illustrator, I hope to illuminate readers with new knowledge and exciting visuals. My hope is to first and foremost bring about a

sense of curiosity to young readers, and to illustrate books that provide enjoyment to those who read them. I would like for my illustrations and storytelling to transport readers into a world of fantasy, a place that extends beyond what we experience in our everyday lives.

I would also like for my illustrations to provide an exciting visual experience for my readers. Often, children are exposed to art and design during their early years of reading picture books, watching cartoons, and so forth. As a children's book illustrator, I would like to create children's books that reflect contemporary aesthetic sensibilities and introduce children visuals that are most current in the world of art and design. I hope that by illustrating children's books in this way, I will be able to inspire an interest in art and visuals to my audience.

As an artist, I hope to bring more sincerity and honesty to our community. Within the rigid structure of approval and rejection in our society, art extends beyond artificial conventionality and exists whether there is approval or none at all. Artists serve as a visual reminder of the variations within our community and celebrate the unique nuances that make people so interesting.

Art also reminds us of the importance of creative thought and open minds in all fields of study. The pioneers of literature, science, and the arts are those individuals bold enough to venture into unknown territory and reinvestigate established order. Art suggests, entertains, and reflects. Wherever there is art, there may be occurrences of hostility toward new ideas. However, hostility is a mere reflection of our insecurities as a society. Addressing this hostility and

continuing the exploration of new ideas can help our society keep an open mind and rid our community of narrow-mindedness. If one individual is willing to speak out loud and voice an original thought, it can spread in a positive manner and encourage others to dispose of their fears, entertain new ideas, and incite a spirit of adventure.

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Summary of Capstone Project

My Capstone Project is an illustrated children's book titled, *Bernard*, that I authored and illustrated. It is a 32-page full color illustrated book following the adventures of a bear named Bernard, as he explores what it is like to spend a day in a human town. My intention behind this project was to gain a more thorough understanding of the anatomy of the children's book. By going through the process of creating a children's book, from start to finish, I hoped to encounter new obstacles and to make essential discoveries that would contribute to my growth as a children's book illustrator.

The idea behind the story was imagined during a serendipitous moment and expanded into a full narrative. As an artist and illustrator, observing my surroundings and examining daily thoughts serve as important inspiration and a driving force behind my artwork. My process of thinking occurs during moments during the day when my mind is given time to release, to focus and organize thoughts, or think nothing at all.

During the creation of the children's book, I went through various steps before arriving at the final product. Some of the major steps in the process included rough sketches, creating storyboards, and making a book dummy.

In the very beginning stages of creating the book, I drew sketches of images that I wanted to see in the book. During this process I also sketched a variety of character designs for Bernard the bear until I settled on one that appealed to me.

Next, I moved onto the storyboard stage. A storyboard is a sequence of drawings, representing the images planned for the pages in the book. It is typically drawn with a rough placement of text, and used to outline the flow of the narrative. After sketching out multiple storyboards, I moved onto the book dummy.

The book dummy is a rough mock-up of the final book, including all of the pages and constructed to the size of the final book. This is an opportunity to examine the weaknesses of the book, and to revise and polish the story. Some areas of weakness that I found in my book dummy included the pace of the story, the sequence of images, and readability.

For the overall look and feel of the illustrations, I attempted to incorporate a simple and minimalistic aesthetic in my color choices and drawing. The tools I used to create the illustrations were simple: a graphite pencil and digital painting tools. After having spent many years studying and exploring the techniques of various paints and pastels - learning to paint realistic figures - I revisited my initial interest in line work. As a result of this transition, I reverted back to my love for the pencil and ballpoint pen. I chose to use a simple line and apply color in a manner that is unobtrusive to the drawing. Since the raw line quality of the drawing acted as an important element of my illustration work, I wanted the color to highlight rather than detract from the simplicity of the pencil lines.

In my aesthetic approach to the illustrations, I also avoided a realistic interpretation of figures, objects, and building structures. More than accurate representation and mimicking nature, I am interested in the process of observation and reinterpretation. As a result, my work does not emphasize traditional, academic methods of realistic drawing and applications of color.

During the creation of *Bernard*, I learned the importance of elements such as the rhythm and structure of the children's book. Wielding a pencil and paper, I explored how little or how much was necessary to convey a concept. I learned the importance of finding purpose to drive a narrative, and explored the relationship between text and image.

While writing and illustrating *Bernard*, I also reflected on the role I play in the world as a children's book illustrator and as an artist. As a children's book illustrator, I hope to illuminate readers with new knowledge, to bring about a sense of curiosity to young readers, and to illustrate books that provide enjoyment to those who read them. I intend for my illustrations to serve as a way to transport readers into a world of fantasy that extends beyond the reality of our everyday lives.

I would also like for my illustrations to provide an exciting visual experience for my readers. Children are often exposed to art and design during their early years in the form of objects they interact with every day. These may include reading picture books, watching cartoons, flipping through comic books, and so forth. As a children's book illustrator, I would like to create more

children's books with a contemporary style of illustration. I hope that by illustrating children's books in this way, I will be able to inspire an interest in art and visuals to my audience.

In addition to being a children's book illustrator, as an artist I hope to bring more sincerity and honesty to our community. Within our rigid society there is often a structure of approval and rejection. Art, however, tends to extend beyond these confines of artificial conventionality and exists whether there is approval or none at all. Artists, and the diverse artwork that they create, serve as a visual reminder of the variations within our society and celebrate the unique differences that make human beings so interesting.

Art also reminds us of the importance of having creative thinking and an open mind in all fields of study. Those individuals bold enough to venture into unknown territory and reinvestigate established order are the ones who can become pioneers of literature, science, and the art. Art suggests, entertains, and reflects old and new ideas. Though there may be occurrences of hostility toward these new ideas, hostility is a mere reflection of our insecurities as a society. Addressing this hostility as a setback and continuing to explore new ideas can help our society keep an open mind and rid our community of narrow-mindedness. If one artist or one individual is willing to speak up and voice an original thought, it may encourage others to dispose of their fears of disapproval and take on a spirit of adventure.