

Authors and Artists

An essay by Walter Wangerin, Jr.

Publishers tend to keep the artist and the author of a children's picture book apart. Editors and book designers communicate directly with the artist, taking into account the author's suggestions, certainly, but then offering their own directives regarding which parts of a story should be illustrated and what the illustration might convey. They're somewhat fearful that, should artist and author talk directly, the author would dominate, demanding that his or her own imagined vision *become* the pictures in a children's book. That can diminish the book, the published presentation, by destroying an important dimension of the book whole.

I agree.

There ought to be a creative equality between the author and the artist. Neither should serve the other; rather, both the word and the image should serve, each according to its peculiar form and craft, the *story*. For me this is one of the greater delights of writing: to discover an entirely new vision for the story I had delivered in words. It is in a real sense the fruit of a marriage: just as a man and a woman together produce the child which is *of* both, bearing characteristics of both, but which is its own thing, finally, detached from both parents and altogether the image of neither one, so the children's picture book bears characteristics of its two progenitors, artist and

author, but becomes its own thing, the thing it could *not* have been if the vision of one "parent" absolutely dominated the other.

I recall being impressed—delighted!—by the choices Arthur Rackham made when he illustrated in the early years of the twentieth century. A full page might be devoted to a tree, to the *roots* of that tree: twisted, dramatic, taking a rough-knuckled grip on the stone and the earth and the forest. The tree as a tree was only tangentially related to the tale. Ah, but the mood of the tree, the mute force of its presence, the grizzled animation it lent to every natural thing—these served to drive the tale to new levels of complexity and effect, bearing the child along, for such art needs no analysis to be understood; it needs only to be experienced. And children can experience what they see. So the very *sounds* and *music* of the words found rhythmic companionship in the very *lines* and *colors* of the art.

"Art." I think of the best children's book illustrators as more than just illustrators: I think of them as artists. Their work does more than to reflect my work; they comment on it. And more than simply adorning my language, they offer the second half of an experience whole.

I have been remarkably fortunate in the artistic transformations that my children's stories have received over the years. Deborah Healy painted the pictures that attended *Elisabeth and the Water-Troll* at its publication in 1991. She created a green Troll of slant eyes, swept-back whiskers, lynx ears, a narrow blade of a foregoing nose. The effect was something between an animal of acute attentions and a human of confusions. He had a slick cat-like beauty. But if one—awaking as Elisabeth did in a strange place—had expected to see a man nearby, the bestial element in Healy's Troll would be terrifying. Her work put me in mind of a French film directed

by Jean Cocteau in 1946, *La Belle et la Bete* ("The Beauty and the Beast"), in which the beast is an actor whose face is savage, but whose body moves with articulate grace. At one point the beast leans against a closed door; on the other side is Beauty, sleeping; all his animal desire is to enter and possess her, but his goodness restrains him; and the eloquent bend of his body expresses the unspeakable torment the victory of goodness causes in him.

Whether she intended it or not, Healy created an artistic allusion, even as the story makes allusion to several tales collected by the Grimm brothers and to a whole history of sacrificial love. Her allusion is more than ornament. It understands and makes visually manifest the very core of this story, an accomplishment that requires the artist. The author cannot do this.

Nor is it necessary (let me quickly assure you) for anyone, child or adult, to "get" the allusion. Readers don't have to know or recall Cocteau's film. Rather, the allusion imports into the world of this story whole new worlds from other arts and other artists. What once moved the artist (or the writer) can, in artistic reproduction (infused with that artist's own past experience), move the reader, too.

In another children's book of mine, *Potter*, published in 1994, the artist Daniel San Souci shows a father carrying his sick son down the stairs, the mother immediately behind. The boy is nearly naked. His left arm hangs loose, inert, his eyes closed, his whole person unconscious. I looked and looked at that scene when first I saw it, wondering why it had such a mournful effect on me. Then, suddenly, I realized what it reflected and remembered a particular scene which artists have been recreating for centuries: it's called *The Deposition of Christ*. It shows Joseph of Arimathea carrying the corpse of Christ down from the cross—and Mary follows behind in a mother's crush

of grief. Ah-ha! San Souci painted the grouping which generations and generations of artists have refined, gathering into this one page an entire history of loss and sorrow. Of course it is moving, whether or not the reader recognizes the countless hands that long have shaped it. Likewise, San Souci touches lightly upon another traditional theme of painters, most famously found in St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome, executed in marble by Michelangelo: the *Pieta*. In our book, *Potter*, his mother leans over her son in bed, dabbing his forehead with a cloth, while he ... well, sleeps, though the posture and expression could be that of one dead. Even so, depictions of the *Pieta* are representations of Mary mourning over the body of her dead son, Jesus.

Now, *Potter* is in fact about death and resurrection. (For children ought not be sheltered from the event that they must learn even now—when they are most faithfully and spiritually limber—to face and overcome.) But it's a friend of young Potter's that dies—one whom we never see in the story. He has died aforesaid, off-stage, so that tender children needn't actually encounter the dying. Potter grieves the loss. And Potter himself grows sick unto death. But he doesn't die. He, in real effect, rises from the possibility of death and learns the joy that passes sorrow. Whereas my telling of the story could not repeat over and over again the presence of death, and whereas my words could not *announce* the resurrection to come without spoiling the plot's power; yet San Souci's art could do both, silently, compellingly, by reference to Christ's death (whatever the artist's spiritual inclinations), which not only holds the notion of death before the reader palatably, unconsciously, but also signals a glorious resurrection to come.

Art. And artists. I've been very fortunate over the years to have had extraordinary partners in the creation of these children's books.

Deborah Healy painted, too, the pictures for *Branta and the Golden Stone*. Tim Ladwig, with swooping, soaring, breathtaking points of view, painted the pictures for three of my books so far: *Probity Jones and the Fear Not Angel*, *Mary's First Christmas*, and *Peter's First Easter*. His characters are flush with character, absolutely accurate to their historical circumstance, and completely engaging with subtle emotion, the tiniest twist of expression communicating whole universes of interior thought.

What a benediction upon an author's career: to have worked with artists of other crafts, other forms, other media; to bear babies with visual artists, composing musicians, actors on stage, dancers, film directors.

But in every case, let the author approach such companions with a perfect (but never an abject) humility. For unless one accords honor and wonder unto the other, no newness can come of the marriage ... servility only. And an enforced servitude kills the art in an artist.

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