Citation

Varga-Dobai, K. (2008). Reading pictures. An interview with David Wiesner. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education* [Online], 4(2), 86-89. Available: _____

Reading Pictures: An Interview with David Wiesner

By Kinga Varga-Dobai

Two-time Caldecott Honor winner (Free Fall, Sector 7) and three-time Caldecott Medal winner (Tuesday, The Three Pigs, Flotsam) David Wiesner is regarded as one of the most remarkable creators of visual storytelling living today. Wiesner is well known for his innovative and unique subject matter and his sophisticated painting-like illustrations through which he draws readers, both children and adults, into the imaginary worlds of his books. In this interview, he talks about his childhood as a source of inspiration, the origination of the idea of wordless picture books, and the relevance of reading and art in the lives of children.

Kinga Varga-Dobai: *For many of us childhood tends to be a place full of excitement and memories to which we always return as adults. For children's book authors and illustrators especially childhood often becomes a source of inspiration. How important was your childhood or young adult experience for your development as an artist? What kinds of books did you read as a child?*

David Wiesner: My childhood experiences clearly had an influence on the kinds of stories that I'm telling. To me it seems like I had a classic suburban American childhood. I grew up in New Jersey, and there were all these families that moved to this area at the same time with small children, so there were kids everywhere and we just played outside and ran around all day and had this real freedom and independence. Our neighborhood was surrounded by a cemetery, a swamp and a dump and for us kids this was a great place to play; we left in the morning and we came back at dinner, practically. And so the world that I was involved in as a child is pretty much the place where all my stories tend to take place, in ordinary situations where something extraordinary happens. When I set a story someplace I always like to go back to those situations that are just ordinary and mundane where you introduce a fantastic element. The books that I really remember having an effect on me were non-fiction types of books. Our World Book Encyclopedias had supplements to them about the weather, the evolution of the Earth, scientific things. We also had another couple of big Time-Life books, nature related things, and I loved looking through those because they often had lots of illustrations in them. What was really compelling to me about these illustrations was that they were not photographs, but rather paintings and I can remember at some point as a kid I came to the realization that a person had actually painted these pictures, and *maybe*, someday, I could actually do that. That was, I think, the first place where I made a mental link between what I saw around

me and the possibility of what I could maybe do. I also loved to pore over art history books. I could get lost in all the pictures. All these things clearly had an effect on me.

KVD: *Why did you choose picture books as an art form to work with? Why wordless picture books?*

DW: I like it that the picture book is a relatively set format: 32 pages. Looking at it from the outside, it might seem like a restrictive format, but that's part of the fun of it: to see what interesting and new things you can do within those 32 pages. I really liked the storytelling process since I was quite young. I made some 8 mm movies when I was in high school and I was involved in some filmmaking later when I was in art school too, so this was all part of this storytelling with pictures. And while I was in art school, I began narrowing down where I thought I could see my work. I knew enough about the film world that much as I loved it, it was a place where I could lose so much control over my work. So I began to see books as the place where I really wanted to work and it became clear to me at some point that I wanted to tell stories with the pictures I was making, rather than just creating free standing pieces of art. The novels of Lynn Ward, who used woodcuts to tell stories, was one of the works that had touched me profoundly and later studying with David Macaulay had a great impact on me as well. He was a great teacher but also a phenomenal bookmaker who showed me what the possibilities of the book as an art form could be. So, it was during my last two years of art school when I began to really discover picture books and see what they were about. It started to become clear to me that the picture book was a place where the stories that I was thinking about might fit. My senior degree project was an attempt to make a wordless picture book and after graduation when I began thinking about writing my first book it was a natural thing to do a wordless picture book. Later I was fortunate to meet an editor who was interested in my work and when I showed her the idea that I had for *Free Fall* she was willing to take a chance and trust me that I can pull this off. I was not actually aware that what I was trying to do was something out of the mainstream, a little unconventional, and fortunately she was thrilled by what I was going to do and gave me a chance to pull it together.

KVD: *How do children respond to wordless picture books?*

DW: Their responses are extremely creative and interesting responses, and I couldn't certainly have predicted this when I first started to work. I began doing wordless picture books because it was interesting to me on an artistic level. I wasn't saying, "Well, I will make wonderful books for kids to read and I'll think about their needs and what they really want." I was not at all thinking about what the reaction is going to be; it was instead a personal thing, how I was reacting, how I was being engaged in an artistic endeavor. The really great thing was once *Free Fall* and *Tuesday* came out, I started getting all these letters from teachers and librarians or kids and that's when I began to realize how the books are read and how kids interact with them, how they turn the stories around and re-tell them, sometimes with words, sometimes with pictures, sometimes with both. I guess, because these books don't have text or me and my words telling the story to them, they can tell it the way they want it to and this seems to inspire them to want to come up with their own stories. Teachers are always sending me big packages of written

versions of the stories that kids had done, or the class has done. So, I think it's a great springboard for creative writing just to let the readers tell the story the way they want it to. And of course it's not that my stories are better or worse than other stories with text, it's just a different way to approach the storytelling itself, it is more like a collaboration between me the creator, and the child the reader, and this seems to be inspiring for children. I also hear a lot from the teachers of second language learners, reluctant readers, and it seems to be very empowering for these kids to have the chance to come up with a story of their own, to be able to tell their own story without having to struggle with the text. I am frequently contacted by these teachers and children and these are wonderful responses to get. It is also fascinating that there is an international audience for my books, which are the products of such a typical American upbringing. It's very exciting to find that there is something universal happening in these stories that transcends the setting.

KVD: *Many artists do not like themselves to be categorized within one style or trend. In several of the articles that I have read about your work you are described as working in the tradition of surrealism or postmodernism. Would you describe your art as such?*

DW: It is certainly nothing that I am consciously thinking about. When people talk about my work and use terms like postmodernism or surrealism, well, I think they are fine, but it usually encompasses only a part of what I'm doing. If it's helpful in a way to discuss it critically, that's okay but certainly these are not terms that I myself use or deliberately think about. I can look at *The Three Pigs* and say, oh yeah, I can see the postmodernist take on the old story. But at the time I was doing it, it was just a really interesting idea to examine. The characters and the story of the three little pigs just happened to fit this idea. Reimagining a fairy tale didn't begin as a conscious choice.

KVD: *I think there are significant differences between the way kids were educated at home or in school in the 60's or the way they are educated and raised today and I was wondering how the reading habits of children have changed from one generation to the other? Do you think children have a different relationship with books or reading today than let's say, 40 years ago?*

DW: I think there is a real resistance - for a lot of good reasons - for people to let their kids have the freedom and independence that my friends and I experienced. I thought it was the greatest thing to be able to have all that freedom. But the world is a different place now and kids today seem very scheduled and every minute of their life is overseen by an adult and I think that kind of omnipresent supervision takes away the ability to just be by themselves or to figure out what to do by themselves using their imagination. Running around outside unsupervised may not be as safe an activity as it once was, but reading is still a great way to use your imagination. I had my own relationship with certain kinds of books when I was young – I didn't really get into reading until around eighth grade, but my kids have been voracious readers from the start. This has been great fun to be a part of – both by getting to read the books myself and by continuously searching out books for them. When I was a kid I had a friend who had to read for an hour every day. I would knock on his back door, ask if he could come out and play and his mom would say, "No, he has reading to do!" And I would think, "Wow, he's reading

at 2:00 o'clock in the afternoon?!" But now I see my kids and their friends reading all the time and talking about this book or that book and it's great. I never saw an author or an artist when I was a kid. Now authors and artists frequently visit schools making presentations about their art and their books. So, I guess children are given the exposure to books and art and the process isn't as mysterious as it used to be. Some kids may even be inspired to want to write or draw when they grow up. And *that* I think is a wonderful thing.

KVD: *Is there a new trend in the picture book industry that publishers go for? Do you think there's a bright future for the picture book as it is now or will it change in the face of new, electronic media?*

DW: I think picture books will always be around. Every few years the picture book industry will talk about how the picture book is dead and we cannot sell them. But they always seem to bounce back. I honestly don't know how it will evolve. There is nothing that has been done or talked about either electronically or any other new form that so far seems to me to be an improvement. It might happen. I have nothing against new forms if they do happen but I do hope that there will always be a place for the picture book. It is the first place where kids come in contact with art and the great thing about most of them is that they are of such good quality. It is a great responsibility to provide kids with their first exposure to art. I certainly want to do the best that I am capable of.