

Arts and Leisure: Illustrator brings a strong dose of magic to 'Hugo Cabret'

by Robert L. Pincus

About 2 1/2 years ago, Brian Selznick, a prolific, prize-winning illustrator of children's books, was feeling desperate. It's fortunate that he was. "Some projects had fallen through," he recalls. "I thought well, I've had a good career, but I thought it might be over."

BRIAN SELZNICK - 'The Invention of Hugo Cabret' is the fourth book for which Brian Selznick has created the story and images. CNS Photo by Peggy Peattie

MAGIC - Brian Selznick uses sequences of drawings as often as words in 'The Invention of Hugo Cabret' to tell his story; in the pictured pair of pages, Isabelle, one of his major characters, falls in the train station and an important key around her neck becomes visible to her friend, Hugo. CNS Photo courtesy of Scholastic Press. This scenario sounds a touch pessimistic. After all, one of the volumes Selznick illustrated, "The Dinosaurs of Waterhouse Hawkins," had earned a Caldecott Honor award in 2002 and another, "Walt Whitman: Words for America," the American Library Association's Robert F. Sibert award for most distinguished informational book in 2005.

But with nothing immediate to do after his Whitman project, Selznick decided to write a book of his own, "The Invention of Hugo Cabret," doing much of the work in the San Diego apartment he calls home for part of each year.

This book, as it turns out, does something genuinely new with drawings. And people have taken note. "Hugo Cabret" has been greeted by great reviews and it has been at the top (or near it) of The New York Times list of best-selling children's chapter books for several weeks now. Warner Bros. is finalizing a movie deal with Selznick; Martin Scorsese says he wants to direct the film version.

Selznick's pencil drawings don't illustrate his novel. Nor does he use the images in the style of a graphic novel, mixing picture and text. Instead, they appear as cinematic sequences, moving the story along at crucial

junctures. (To create the audio book version, sound designers Cheryl Smith, Chris Camp and Ben Bocardo substituted a wealth of sound effects for the sequences with drawings.) One of Selznick's main characters is historical: Georges Melies, the French magician who became much better known as a pioneering filmmaker. Melies has earned an enduring place in cinema history for his 1902 effort "A Trip to the Moon," loosely cobbled from books by Jules Verne and H.G. Wells.

Tantalizing shreds of Melies' biography were the inspiration for his book. When the filmmaker fell on hard times, a collection of automatons he had amassed were given to a museum and then lost.

What if one of those mechanical figures had survived? Selznick wondered. And that became the catalyst for his story.

Hugo Cabret's mission is to restore an automaton he finds in the ruins of an old museum - a robotic figure his father had first unearthed in the museum's attic. When the story begins, Hugo is living alone in Paris' main train station, tending to its clocks, pilfering parts and other things from a toy stand in the station to restore the damaged automaton.

Of course, the reader ultimately learns how he came to live alone there and why the automaton is so vital to him. The story itself is elegantly structured and full of great plot twists. But from its opening pages, Selznick signals this is no conventional novel for young people.

His pencil drawings come first, locating us in Paris and then narrowing the scene to the train station. They have us follow Hugo along his path to the interior of the clocks and introduce the toy stand and its proprietor.

"I use the drawings like a silent movie," says the slim, scholarly looking writer-illustrator.

"I watched a lot of early French movies and how they used images to tell stories," Selznick says, "So, the illustration sequences are inspired by them. "I hadn't seen anything exactly like it, but it made the most sense to tell the story in this way."

Still, he had his doubts that a story with such a strong element from French silent movies would find an audience.

"I didn't know if kids would like it or even if adults would. But an editor once gave me good advice when he said: 'If subjects are important to the main character, they will be important to the reader.'

"Now, I'm finding out that those who are reading it are interested in seeing silent movies and that's just thrilling. I find that people have set ideas about what children are interested in, busy graphics and lots of color, and some of that is just not true. When offered the opportunity to rise to the occasion and be challenged, kids will."

AGAINST HIS GRAIN

Selznick, who grew up in East Brunswick, N.J., seems destined to have become an illustrator and writer of books for children, though he initially chafed at that notion.

"I always loved to draw and I loved to tell stories," he recalls. "So people told me maybe I should become an illustrator."

He decided to study art instead, at the Rhode Island School of Design. The faculty had highly accomplished and successful illustrator-writers of children's books on its faculty: Chris van Allsburg and David Macauley. But Selznick pointedly avoided them.

"I might have had a condescending attitude at the time," he admits.

"In college, I did set designing and I did a lot of acting." (He could take advantage of classes at Brown University for these disciplines.)

"I applied to grad school at Yale in their set design program. But when I didn't get in, I thought maybe it was a sign I should do something else."

He moved to New York and got a job at Eeyore's Books for Children (now defunct) in 1991, one of the oldest bookstores of its kind in the country.

"It's where I got my complete education in children's books," he says. He credits manager Steve Geck, now an editor with Green Willows Books (an imprint of HarperCollins), as a pivotal mentor.

Geck guided him toward many children's writers and illustrators he should consult. He was also vital in helping Selznick to publish "The Houdini Box" while he was still working at Eeyore's - and other projects seemed to follow quickly. His interest in the theater has found a outlet in toy theaters, which he creates and uses as the settings for his own adult puppet shows, many of which he has presented a kind of artist-in-residence at the St. Ann's Puppet Lab in Brooklyn.

RISKS AND RESEARCH

With the publication of "Hugo Cabret," crossed the country doing book signings and is traveling to other events that promote and spread the news about his book. But when he began writing it, he knew the notion of a novel told through pictures as much as words would be a risk.

"I didn't really know what it would be, but the idea kept growing. I felt like I might be up to my idea, but truly I spent 2 1/2 years feeling anxious. At the same time, I was supported by great people, by my editors and friends. "I also felt like I couldn't have done it without having done my other books. Everything I have done is in here."

Looking at the earlier books he's written, you see his point. All of their themes get a new life in "Hugo Cabret." "The Houdini Box" (1991), which marked his debut as a writer and illustrator, focuses on a boy's infatuation with magic; "The Robot King" (1995) is about a girl who builds mechanical toys and ultimately a robot that triggers fantastical adventures; and "The Boy With a Thousand Faces" (2000) centers on a young protagonist's love of movies - specifically, monster movies - as the jumping-off point for a scary Halloween story.

Immersion in historical research has been another big part of earlier books. With "Words for America," he visited the homes in which Whitman lived, looked at his notebooks and photographic portraits in archives, and read the available biographies on him along with "Leaves of Grass."

Selznick was just as devoted to legwork with subjects like the Victorian-era sculptor Waterhouse Hawkins, who built the first life-size models of dinosaurs, and the African-American opera singer Marian Anderson, who broke the color barrier and is the subject of his images in "When Marian Sang" (2002).

Though Selznick took three trips to Paris for "Hugo Cabret" and was intent on seeing where Melies lived and worked, another aspect of his preparation seems to have given him the greatest pleasure.

"Part of what's been satisfying for me is all the research on French cinema. I completely fell in love with these movies," says Selznick. And he isn't referring only to silent films, but the bigger sweep of French film history and classics like Jean Renoir's "The Rule of the Game" and Francois Truffaut's "The 400 Blows."

The success of his new book seems to have genuinely surprised him.

The first printing was 100,000 copies and the book is already in a second printing. Before this, his most popular book took 10 years to sell 77,000 copies. "I think I've been a little surprised to learn that kids love carrying around a 550-page book that they can read in about two days. It gives them a sense of accomplishment. Another surprise is that older kids like it, even those who don't like to read. I had originally thought it would appeal mostly to a younger audience, but an eighth-grade boy told me that this is the only book he ever finished and that it's his favorite book. That gave me a great feeling."

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