David Wiesner

Author Program In-depth Interview
Insights Beyond the Movie

David Wiesner, interviewed in his studio in Fox Point, Wisconsin on August 6, 2001.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What are some of your early memories of enjoying art?

DAVID WIESNER: Drawing and painting have always been activities that I was naturally drawn to. My brother loved to draw and paint, and so did my oldest sister. I have another sister who is a singer; she studied opera. So, there was always this creative stuff going around. And there was this big stockpile of pastels and pen-and-ink and things like that in the house that was readily available.

It's always been a part of my life. Fortunately, my parents realized this and encouraged it. I think they recognized in me a real desire. My father brought home from work an old drafting table that was being discarded. It was this wonderful old, big, wooden, six-foot-by-four-foot drafting table, with this great chair. I put this thing in my room and it became my home. I lived at it. My dad may not have known at the time what he was doing, but for me it was this transporting vehicle for me to just totally explore these worlds that I was trying to draw.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Have certain artists influenced you?

DAVID WIESNER: The art that really influenced me when I was young I discovered through sitting in the stacks of the local New Jersey public library. I came across a Time-Life series of books on the great artists. Looking through those things, several artists really struck a chord with me right off the bat. The first were the Renaissance painters, Michelangelo, da Vinci, Dürer, people like that, who were painting in a very realistic, academic style. I just loved the way they could paint. If you look in the background of the Mona Lisa, there's a landscape back there — it could be Mars — it's this alien territory. I loved all that stuff in the background.

Painters like Pieter Bruegel also did a similar thing, where, from the very foreground to the very far background, you could follow little trails and paths and roads all through these landscapes, in and out of towns and stuff. I loved that rich detail – the ability to have a foreground subject, but then just sort of go in the back and almost make up your own stories about what was happening there.

The other group of painters who really just blew me away was the Surrealists — Dali and Magritte, De Chirico, all these guys like Max Ernst, who, in large part, were painting in a very formal, academic style as well, but the stuff they were painting was totally bizarre and totally strange. And that really, really appealed to me. There's long been for me this appeal of, I guess, the odd, the strange, the surreal. There's the line of demarcation: before I discovered the Surrealists and everything afterward. You can clearly tell where my own artwork started to change.

TEACHINGBOOKS: [*David Wiesner took a box of his childhood drawings out of his studio closet. Below are some observations he made about this art that is relevant to the passages above.]*

DAVID WIESNER: I mentioned that there are many visual things that have recurred throughout my drawings. One of the visual obsessions I've had since childhood has to do with vegetables. I have some from when I was very young, as well as my book *June 29, 1999* that's been published. But here, from circa 1969, 1970, when I was in eighth or ninth grade, is my space pepper with little alien bugs crawling out of it.

After discovering the Surrealists, one of the things that I particularly liked is changes in scale, taking normal things and either making them much larger or much smaller than they really are. By doing that, you change the context of the environment to something completely new. A giant pepper sitting in the middle of the landscape makes that place a completely new territory. This picture is from sixth or seventh grade, a giant hand coming out of the ground.

This one is probably from kindergarten, a little vegetable book. Some tomatoes — how prophetic….

TEACHINGBOOKS: You need to be a good draftsman to be able to achieve surrealist art, don't you?

DAVID WIESNER: I think it helps to be a good draftsman and to understand that academic style when you're creating a surreal landscape or environment, because the more convincing you can make the reality that the viewer knows, then taking part of it and adding that strange otherworldly element makes the scene all the more surreal and strange.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Let's talk about some of your books. I want to start with *Free Fall*, which came from a mural you did in college that was called "Metamorphosis."

DAVID WIESNER: *Free Fall* grew out of an awful lot of built-up imagery that I had, which really started to come out when I was in college, in a ten-foot-long painting that I did for an assignment that was the word "metamorphosis." I was encouraged by David Macaulay and some others to "do more with it." *Free Fall* ultimately was what I did with it. For me, it was just an outpouring of a huge stockpile of imagery and ideas that had been building up in me for years.

When I first took *Free Fall* in to a publisher, the dummy for it — I had done an accordion-style book, and it opened up. It was about forty feet long. I was fortunate to have run into Dorothy Briley, editor-in-chief at Lothrop, Lee, and Shepard at the time, who didn't stand back and say, "What? Are you crazy? You can't do this." She sat there calmly. Later, looking back, I think, my gosh, she must have been thinking I was nuts. But I was fortunate to find someone who saw something in what I was presenting that might make a neat book, and to not tell me, "No, you can't do that." She encouraged me to go ahead and do it.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What kind of affirmation was it to receive a Caldecott Honor for the first book that you wrote and illustrated?

DAVID WIESNER: The Caldecott Honor for *Free Fall* was a wonderful sign that I, in fact, had made the right decision to stop doing books for other authors and try to concentrate on writing and illustrating my own, which is what I really wanted to do. To receive that recognition pretty much said, "yes, right direction; keep going."

TEACHINGBOOKS: A few books later, you won the Caldecott Medal for *Tuesday*. This book has a rather rapid and specific genesis. Can you share that.

DAVID WIESNER: *Tuesday* almost spontaneously generated before my eyes. It was suggested, not unlike many assignments that I had when I was in art school, as a reaction to a word. I love having someone else come in and say, "Do something about this," just to be forced to do it. *Tuesday* grew out of the cover that I did for *Cricket* magazine, when I was asked to do something with frogs – that simple. The image that I came up with, with the frogs flying on the lily pads and rising out of the swamp, immediately suggested there was a book here. I liked the characters, so when I sat down to think what the book would be, it just came together – the entire design of the book. The times of the day, the title -- everything just sort of popped out in about an hour. It was frightening how quickly it came together.

I haven't had another book come about this same way, much as I'd been hoping after that — oh, the rest of them, a piece of cake from now on. So it will always probably have this unique spot. But in its own way, each book has its own unique story as well.

TEACHINGBOOKS: I understand *Cricket* gave you a choice of different images for the cover – frogs being one.

DAVID WIESNER: The *Cricket* cover was fun, and yes, I was actually given the choice. This particular issue was March, so they had some St. Patrick's Day things and they had other stories about frogs. I have to assume the green was the link for both of them. I didn't really want to do something with St. Patrick's Day, but when I began to think about frogs, I thought, well, that's neat; they're really cool-looking. They're soft and round and squishy and lumpy and bumpy and funny colors, and just really weird-looking. Fun to draw.

That ultimately is the underlying thing for a lot of my books – what is fun to draw. When *Sector 7* was coming together and I was creating what the place would look like, it was just really fun — buildings and measuring things to draw — really cool stuff. In the case of *Tuesday*, I started to get pictures of frogs and made a little model of a frog, and just started to draw. A fun thing to draw will usually lead to something interesting.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Is it a particular species of frog?

DAVID WIESNER: It is not. It is my own sort of frog/toad thing. It was fun to take the various designs and colorings of the frogs, and then extrapolate them, so that what I ended up doing was almost making them upholstered. They had a very textile feel to them.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Can you please describe the genesis for *Sector 7?*

DAVID WIESNER: *Sector 7* is very much based on my impressions of New York City as a kid. We lived in New Jersey, about 30 miles west of the Holland Tunnel. When we'd go into

Central Park or Radio City Music Hall or something like that, I just loved it. I thought the city was this totally overpowering Oz-like place. And, I've carried that feeling with me. When I finally had a story like *Sector 7*, when it developed, I was able to infuse it with the vision I remembered as a kid. I've also had a thing with clouds, and had been looking to do something with them in my books. If you go back to book covers I was doing early in my career, you'll see I always tried to hide faces in the clouds. Somehow, I used the cloud in the background to help point up something about the story. Like in *Tuesday*, where, late in the book, to suggest what had happened, there are all these frogs sort of floating in the clouds, hiding in the clouds, the clouds shaped like frogs – all suggesting what had happened the night before.

There was a cartoon I loved as a kid, a Peanuts cartoon. Linus, Lucy, Charlie Brown are lying on their backs looking up at the clouds. Linus and Lucy take turns saying what they see. Linus says, "Oh, yes, I see a re-creation of the Battle of Hastings over here." And Lucy says, "Yes, I see St. Augustine." They say, "What do you see, Charlie Brown?" And Charlie Brown says, "Well, I was going to say I saw a duckie and a horsie, but I think I changed my mind."

Somehow, the combination of these really simple, but yet really complex things you can see in the clouds always stuck with me.

TEACHINGBOOKS: The characters in *The Three Pigs* are sort of heroes. They save others.

DAVID WIESNER: They do. *The Three Pigs* developed in wonderful ways, once I realized what the story structure was going to be, the pigs leaving the story and looking for a safe place to live. Along the way, they had a wonderfully wild visual journey, but they also discover in themselves a heroic element, in that they run across other characters in other stories who have been dealing with the same fate they have. They free them and create a new kind of family unit at the end.

TEACHINGBOOKS: And then the wolf gets his.

DAVID WIESNER: Yes. The Big Bad Wolf in *The Three Pigs*, while he doesn't end up in the soup as in the traditional story, goes through a lot. He's folded up into the shape of a paper airplane, flown around, crashed into the floor, scared away by a big dragon and left sitting on a hill at the end knowing he'll never get those pigs again.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Can you talk about the design of *The Three Pigs?*

DAVID WIESNER: One of the exciting things about working on *The Three Pigs* was the chance to do a design that would be very different from the books that I had done up to that point. I've tended to do very full, rich, complete four-corner-bleed paintings in most of my books, and this was a chance to do a book that had a lot of white space in it, and have a book that started out, collapsed and opened into this blank white world — not only to just have some white space, but to have a lot of white space. I had initially, in my book dummy, a page that was a completely blank double-page spread, in which the characters, as they're flying around on their airplane, fly right out of the page, and it takes several pages for them to fly back into the picture. I love the idea that they could just go off someplace where we

couldn't actually see them and then, "Oh, here they are, over here." You really have to kind of find them.

I didn't in the end use the double-page blank spread for a variety of reasons, which pleased the Houghton Mifflin production department to no end. One, it would have taken too many pages to set it up to visually read well. And two, I'm told that bookstores would have seen this double-page blank spread and thought that something was wrong with the book and returned it. This has been confirmed by some bookstore owners when I tell this story.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You really enjoy creating wordless books. Can you describe where this comes from?

DAVID WIESNER: I love sequential art more than just painting a picture. I got into books because I love telling stories, and telling stories with pictures. The wordless book is kind of the purest form of that. I was inspired a great deal by the examples that I came across as I was growing up and then in art school. The fact that this was something that had been done and was a form of storytelling was a great eye-opening experience. As a kid, there were comic books. There was a comic artist I liked a lot named Jim Steranko, who was a disciple of the great Jack Kirby. He used to put in one, two pages at a time of completely wordless storytelling — no word balloons, no "Pow! Bam!" kind of stuff. It was just pictures. That may be the first place that I came across this, and was stunned.

The big turning point for me was Lyn Ward. We all know Lyn Ward from his children's books, *The Biggest Bear*, the Caldecott Medal winner. But back in 1929, '30, and '31, he did a trilogy of books for adults, wordless novels done in woodcuts. They were 200 pages long, about all sorts of incredible ideas of art, life, death, religion, science — I mean, huge social, human issues. They were just the most astonishing things I'd ever seen. I would sit and pore over these pictures, and just the way he was able to convey all this really complex information in purely visual terms was a huge inspiration to me.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You seem to address in your books a lot of unusual situations. "If I were a frog and I discovered I could fly, where would I go? If I was an alien and lost my food, what would it look like down on earth?" And so forth. Do you consciously ask yourself these types of questions?

DAVID WIESNER: I do. I ask a lot of questions of myself as I'm creating the books. I suppose that comes out in the stories themselves. In *Tuesday* I had this picture that I had done for *Cricket* of these frogs rising up out of the swamp, and they could fly. So I looked at it and said, "If I were a frog and if I could fly, where would I go, what would I do?" That just naturally led the rest of the story to where it went.

With *The Three Pigs*, again, for me, it was, what's behind those pictures? I know behind the pictures in the books there's something going on. What is it? How can I get there?

Sector 7 grew out of this idea that there was this place in the sky where these clouds were. The story ultimately came together by my asking myself the question, "How is this boy going to get here? How can he get up into the sky?" Which initially led to all sorts of contrived and trite sorts of -- the magic staircase comes out of the sky or the magic ladder comes out of the sky. Then, okay, we'll put him on the highest thing I can find, the Empire State Building. Now, how do I get him into the sky? The magic staircase. But then the cloud

takes him there. The cloud comes and picks him up. The cloud is, in fact, alive, and the cloud becomes his friend. The story evolved from that.

So there's a continual series of asking myself questions that tend to lead me to the answers that unlock the stories.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Fish and cats appear in many of your books. Any comment on this observation?

DAVID WIESNER: Fish are everywhere in my books. Cats occasionally turn up, but fish are my great sort of iconic image that I use over and over again in the backgrounds. Not every book, but almost every book has them somewhere. I don't know why. I can't explain why. I don't know that I want to know why. They are just this image. Everyone has a reason, from religious to astrological to whatever. It's none of that. Early on I started drawing them, and they just have this muse-like relationship. They will someday be the main characters in a book. They have yet to, but I'm convinced that one day they will.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Let's talk a little about work habits. Can you describe your workday?

DAVID WIESNER: My workday — there have been two types. There was the workday before I had children, and there's the workday after we had kids. Nowadays, it's a very structured workday for me. I get up in the morning and get the kids off to school, deal with breakfast and stuff, and then come up, and by about nine o'clock I'm ready to sit down and start working. I pretty much stay there at my drawing table and work all day, until about five o'clock, and work's done. Sometimes I come back at night and do a little more. But it's very much a nine-to-five type of job right now. Before we had children, I used to work late into the night for these long odd stretches — days or a week at a time — where I'd just work all night and sleep until noon and get up. But life has a way of changing your work habits. I actually enjoy the structure of it now.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What about those times when you're working and working and working, and you're not accomplishing what you had hoped? How do you get through these blocks?

DAVID WIESNER: The creative process works at different paces. There are those times when everything comes together very easily and very quickly, and those times when it's a long struggle. I just always have to keep reminding myself to be patient, to sit there. Even if at the end of the day I have almost nothing to actually visually show anybody else what I've been doing, I've been really working on trying to develop something. Ultimately, it's just a matter of continuing to draw. The temptation is to sit back and think and think and think, but for me I have to sit down and make myself draw, even if it's not necessarily what I'm working on.

I feel fortunate that now I'm at the point where, when I'm painting and working on an actual finished piece of artwork, that I feel confident. Early on, I could go through terrible times trying to finish a piece, but I'm at a level of proficiency where that doesn't concern me as much. I can make the art.

TEACHINGBOOKS: That amazes me. Are you essentially saying that the act of drawing isn't too challenging for you?

DAVID WIESNER: Yes. That's rendering. Ultimately, that's just pure technique. If I can set it there and look at it, I can draw it. The idea of the book as a whole is the thing that I'm creating. I don't find talking about technique and technical matters all that interesting. I think there are people far more technically proficient than I am. I put everything I can into creating the pictures as well as I can. But to me it's the book as a whole that is the true creation. That's the thing that excites me, more than "hey, look at my beautiful picture."

TEACHINGBOOKS: How has your work evolved over the years?

DAVID WIESNER: It's interesting to see how my work has evolved. There are many things that I was drawing when I was a kid, and I'm still drawing today. It's fascinating that I have these visual obsessions that keep haunting me — fish and vegetables, flying things. I've been drawing them since I was four years old, I think. So in one sense it's still the same stuff. Obviously, I've gotten better at drawing them. But the visual obsessions have been there. I've learned how to, hopefully, tell the stories around them better.

Books by David Wiesner

- THREE PIGS, THE, Clarion Books / Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001
- SECTOR 7, Clarion Books / Houghton Mifflin Company 1999
- NIGHT OF THE GARGOYLES (written by Eve Bunting), Clarion Books / Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994
- FROM SEA TO SHINING SEA (included in compilation by Amy L. Cohn), Scholastic Press, 1993
- JUNE 29, 1999, Clarion Books / Houghton Mifflin Company, 1992
- TUESDAY, Clarion Books / Houghton Mifflin Company, 1991
- TONGUES OF JADE (written by Laurence Yep), HarperCollins Publishers, 1991
- HURRICANE, Clarion Books / Houghton Mifflin Company, 1990
- RAINBOW PEOPLE (written by Laurence Yep), Harper & Row, 1989
- SORCERER'S APPRENTICE, THE (written by Marianna Mayer), Bantam Books, 1989
- FIREBRAT (written by Nancy Willard), Alfred A. Knopf, 1988
- FREE FALL, Lothrop, Lee & Shepard, 1988
- LOATHSOME DRAGON, THE (retold by David Wiesner & Kim Kahng), Putnam, 1987
- KITE FLIER (written by Dennis Haseley), Fourwinds Press, 1986
- E.T., THE STORYBOOK OF THE GREEN PLANET (written by William Kotzwinkle; based on a story by Steven Spielberg), Putnam, 1985
- WAND: THE RETURN TO MESMERIA (written by Allan W. Eckert), Little, Brown and Company, 1985
- DARK GREEN TUNNEL, THE (written by Allan W. Eckert), Little, Brown and Company, 1984
- MIRANTY AND THE ALCHEMIST (written by Vera Chapman), Avon Books, 1983
- NEPTUNE RISING: SONGS AND TALES OF THE UNDERSEA FOLK (written by Jane Yolen), Philomel Books, 1982
- OWLY (written by Mike Thaler), Harper & Row, 1982
- BOY WHO SPOKE CHIMP, THE (written by Jane Yolen), Alfred A. Knopf, 1981
- MAN FROM THE SKY (written by Avi), Alfred A. Knopf, 1981

- ONE BAD THING ABOUT BIRTHDAYS (written by David R. Collins), Harcourt Inc, 1981
- UGLY PRINCESS, THE (written by Nancy Luenn), Little, Brown and Company, 1981
- HONEST ANDREW (written by Gloria Skurzynski), Harcourt Inc, 1980

Note: Bibliography created in 2001.