Author Profile

Drawn to Cinema

If Brian Selznick were telling this story about his own career, it might open with a series of his trademark pencil drawings: a wide shot of a darkened movie theater. A funnel of light from the projector. A close-up of young Brian, focused on the flickering images, waiting to see... his name on the screen.

"My grandfather's first cousin was David O. Selznick, so ever since I was really little I felt very connected to the movies because films like King Kong or Gone with the Wind would open with the words 'David O. Selznick—my name—up there bigger than life.'"

That Selznick has a genetic predisposition to film has long been evident in his illustrations—he patterned the opening pages of Anello and Eleanor Go for a Ride after scenes from the movie Flying Down to Rio—but never more so than in his newest book, The Invention of Hugo Cabret (Scholastic, Mar.), an illustrated novel set in 1930s Paris. The story, about a mechanically minded orphan and an impoverished, disillusioned pioneer of French cinema, is told through words and in sequential drawings that have the feel of movie storyboards, with establishing shots, cutaways and closeups. The climactic chase scene is told entirely in pictures—over the course of 36 wordless pages.

Selznick's editor for the book, Tracy Mack, has never seen anything else quite like it. "As editors, we're always getting excited about something different, but different just for sake of being different, but truly new," she says. "This to me felt wholly different. It's not a graphic novel. It's not a film. It's more like a picture book where the illustrations are pushing beyond what the words say."

A 533-page picture book, that is, replete with references to the heroes of French cinema, from the Lumière brothers to François Truffaut. Selznick got the idea for a story about George Méliès, often regarded as the father of special effects, after learning the early 20th-century filmmaker had turned out as a magician, a trade that was the subject of Selznick's first book: "The Houdini Box (Scholastic, 1991) was about a boy who meets Houdini, and it struck me that it might be interesting to write about a kid who meets George Méliès," he says.

That idea percolated—for more than a decade—until Selznick came across a chapter about Méliès and his collection of automatons ("very complex windup toys," Selznick explains) in a book about the history of mechanical life. Financial failure led Méliès to donate his collection to a French museum that promised to display them, but instead put them in the attic. A leaky roof, repeated rainstorms: the automatons rusted. A beam collapsed, the delicate machines were judged beyond repair, and thrown away.

"As soon as I read that, I imagined a kid finding these broken machines in the garbage and as soon as I saw that kid, after years and years of thinking about it, I found the beginning of the story," Selznick remembers.
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Though Mark calls him a "natural storyteller," Selznick says writing is a struggle. His degree, from the Rhode Island School of Design, is in illustration, a major he chose because, he says, it had no required courses. He planned a career in set design until he didn't get into the graduate program he wanted.

A friend recommended he apply at the now-defunct Eyre's Books for Children on Manhattan's Upper West Side. The manager, Steve Geek, initially turned him away because he lacked a basic knowledge of children's literature, but suggested he study up and reapply—advice that Geek, now executive editor at Greenwillow Books, says he gave to numerous unsuccessful applicants. Of all the people I made that offer to, there was only one person who ever came back," Geek says. (Selznick had spent the time between applications at the Donnell Reading Room) and became his mentor, sending him home after his shifts with "shopping bags full of books" to read. "He was a sponge," Geek recalls.

He was also versatile, working customer service on the floor and as an assistant to a storybook performer (Selznick is also an accomplished puppeteer) and garnering attention with elaborate holiday-themed displays he painted backwards on the inside of the store windows. "It's sickening to think we would wash them off every month," Geek says.

It was Geek who passed the Headless Horseman manuscript on to Anne Schwartz at Knopf, who published it. Then Selznick showed the finished book to a favorite customer—HarperCol-