



WORDS AND PICTURES EQUALLY

The wording is precise: title and subtitle read, *The Invention of Hugo Cabret: A Novel in Words and Pictures* by Brian Selznick; an emphasis on the method – words and pictures equally – applied to tell the story. “With this book I wanted

to do something really different. Not one illustration a chapter, or one spot illustration ... but a combination of words and pictures all blending together into a single ‘cinematic’ narrative,” Brian Selznick explained.

“The great French director René Clair used sound in special ways,” he said. “In *Under the Roofs of Paris* he had a sequence in which all the lights went out and in the darkness we heard just the sounds of a fight, until, eventually, illumination came from the headlights of a car. The bursts of sound were used as narrative elements in the film.” This gave Brian the idea of using ‘bursts of images’ as narrative elements – like a series of miniature silent movies – allowing the story to alternate seamlessly between the verbal and the wholly visual, the latter employing the familiar language of the cinema – long shot, medium shot, close-up, etc.

“Think of the way that Maurice Sendak, in *Where the Wild Things Are*, has the words disappear when the wild rumpus starts, and having the pictures take up the whole page,” he went on. “And we move forward in the story by turning the pages. It’s all about the reader being a part of the storytelling process; and the book is part of the story.”

Hugo Cabret is the story of a 12-year-old orphan boy, living a clandestine life behind the walls of a busy Parisian railway station, who through a chain of mysterious circumstances becomes involved in the life of the pioneering film-maker Georges Méliès. It is set at a time, 1931, “when movies were becoming talkies” and, both in content and style, is an effective and affectionate homage to the early days of cinema. (Brian, by the way, has what could be called a genetic predilection to the cinema, his grandfather’s first cousin being the producer David O. Selznick. “I used to love seeing my last name up there, on the screen.”)

“The novel is all about movies – and all about book reading. It’s filled with references to Truffaut’s *400 Blows*, which is also about a 12-year-old boy who runs away and tries to live on his own. And others ... Jean Vigo (I’ve drawn a Café Vigo in the book) ... René Clair of course (the very first line of the book contains the words ‘under the roofs of Paris’) ... as well as Georges Méliès.” He added, happily: “On book tours, kids have been pleading to see silent movies. They would be really into Méliès’ films, if they could see them.”

And as for Méliès: “He *did* run a toyshop on a Parisian train station. His films *were* sold off and melted down for use as shoe heels” (hence Brian’s

supposition about the old man’s hatred of the sound of footsteps). “He was befriended by Surrealists, which was not surprising as his work prefigured theirs to a large extent.

“The book began as a regular novel, just words. But when I got *this* idea, I went back and took *out* all the text I was going to replace with pictures. I listed what I wanted each picture to be in the visual sequence and then made small dummy books to see if it worked.” Only later, when he saw the galley proofs, did he realise that each spread resembled a cinema screen; until then he’d merely thought a black border would be “pretty”.

“All the pictures were drawn a quarter size, then blown up. That way there’s more air around them. Smaller pictures are quicker to draw – less space to fill.

It took me ... mmm ... two and a half years? I was working at the sketches throughout that time. Nine months to do the finished artwork. On a good day I could do two illustrations, five on some. But the really intricate ones – like Isabelle in the bookshop: all those *tiny* books – could take a day and a half.”

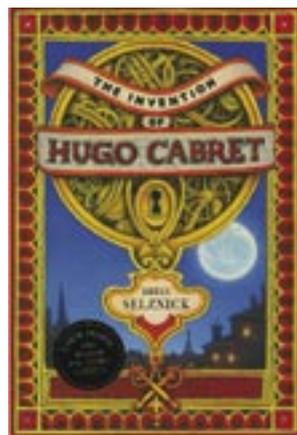
Brian, an amiable, enthusiastic man who was born in New Jersey and now divides his time between Brooklyn and San Diego, studied at the Rhode Island School of Design and – emphatically – did *not* want to be a children’s book illustrator. “Mainly, I think, because people were always saying I should be one! Chris Van Allsburg and David Macaulay taught at the school but I never went to any of their classes; *Maurice Sendak* came to speak and I very pointedly didn’t go to hear him.” He paused, as though reconsidering the enormity of this.

When his theatre studies (at Brown University, “next door to the art school”) came to nothing, “I began to think that maybe I *should* become an illustrator.” He worked in a children’s bookshop, Eeyore’s on the Upper West Side; “I painted windows and did displays, and would be sent home with bags of books to read.” His first book, *The Houdini Box* (1991), was published while he worked there. “It was wonderful, if a customer was stuck

for a book for a ten-year-old I could say: ‘I happen to have this *really great* book...’”

Brian regards *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* as “the accumulation of all the books I’ve done so far”. The final illustration of *The Houdini Box* – a gesturing hand framed by a window, like an image on a silent cinema screen – therefore seems suitably prophetic.

Chris Stephenson



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