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## Wonder Boy

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Brian Selznick is having a very, *very* good year. Next month, Scholastic releases *Wonderstruck*, his new novel "in words and pictures," with a hefty first printing of 500,000 copies. And Martin Scorsese's much-anticipated 3-D take on Selznick's bestseller, *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* (with a stellar cast that includes Ben Kingsley and Jude Law), arrives in theaters just in time for Thanksgiving.

As Selznick's fans well know, this isn't the first time the gifted author-illustrator has been on a roll. Long before *Hugo Cabret* (2007), the story of a young orphan who lives in a Paris train station, unexpectedly won the 2008 Caldecott Medal, Selznick nabbed a 2002 Caldecott Honor citation for his meticulous artwork in Barbara Kerley's *The Dinosaurs of Waterhouse and Hawkins* (2001). And the following year, his heartfelt renderings of opera star and civil rights activist Marian Anderson played a key role in *When Marian Sang* (2002, all Scholastic), Pam Muñoz Ryan's Sibert Honor winner. To date, Selznick has lent his artistic talents to more than 20 books by other writers, and before *Hugo Cabret* crept into his life, he'd written and illustrated three books of his own, including *The Houdini Box* (Knopf, 1991), his first children's book. But it's the boyish-looking 45-year-old's massive novels—the 544-page *Hugo Cabret* and the even beefier, 600-plus-page *Wonderstruck*—that have secured his claim to fame.

While Selznick produced 284 pages of detailed pencil drawings for the groundbreaking novel—and yes, picture book—*Hugo Cabret*, he's upped the ante in *Wonderstruck*. This time, he presents two interconnected tales—one told through text, the other exclusively through 460 pages of exquisite black-and-white images. The prose narrative traces the 1977 journey of 12-year-old Ben Wilson as he leaves rural Minnesota for New York City, a few months after his mother's death, in search of a father he's never known. And the wordless companion story follows a New Jersey girl who's

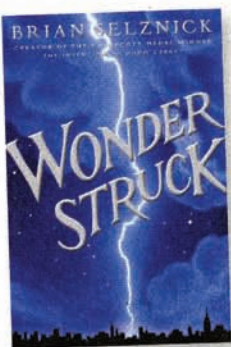
**By Ken Setterington**

PHOTOGRAPH BY TIM MANTOANI



deaf and who embarks on a risky quest of her own, in 1927. If you liked *Hugo*, odds are you'll be bowled over by *Wonderstruck*—it's that good. In fact, taken in tandem, these two titles have redefined the creative possibilities for novels and picture books.

The New Jersey native now divides his time between Park Slope, a hip Brooklyn, NY, neighborhood, and the San Diego seaside community of La Jolla, with his partner, David Serlin, an associate professor at the University of California,



San Diego. Although Selznick has in-house studios on both coasts, he finds that he gets more work done out West because there are fewer distractions. Besides, he says, it's wonderful being able to look out at the ocean and draw. The La Jolla apartment was purchased after the success of *Hugo Cabret*, and Selznick affectionately calls it "Chez

Hugo." I spoke to him about the challenge of creating his latest novel, whether ebooks figure in his future, and what his rocketing success really means to him.

**Some of *Wonderstruck* takes place in New York's Museum of Natural History. Did you do a lot of research for those scenes?**

I did a huge amount of research, and I spent a lot of time at the Museum of Natural History. I have several friends who work at the museum. In fact, the main genesis for this book started back in the early '90s, when a friend of mine, who I met at Eeyore's [Books for Children], got a job at the Museum of Natural History painting dioramas and making displays. He invited me to come for a backstage tour. I remember walking around behind the scenes of the museum and seeing the workshops—a lot of the things that I actually describe in *Wonderstruck*—and thinking this would be a really amazing place to set a story one day. And that idea sat in the back of my head until it was time to start working on this book. I spent many, many hours touring the entire museum. You know, anytime you're in a place that's closed to the public, you feel a great amount of excitement. I found out that a friend of mine who I'd gone to college with, her grandmother was Margaret Mead. My friend was able to talk to me about visiting her grandmother behind the scenes at the Museum of Natural History, where she had an office.

**How did you learn about what it's like to be deaf?**

I read as many books as I could, and then it turns out that some of my boyfriend's colleagues at the university, Carol



Padden and Tom Humphries, are two of the leading scholars of deaf culture and deaf linguistics. They were an incredible help for me while I was working on the book. Carol was born deaf to a family with many, many deaf members. Tom had a much more typical experience, where he became deaf when he was a child in a hearing household and didn't meet anybody else who was deaf until he went off to college.

From their two very different perspectives, they were able to gently guide me when I had either made assumptions that were incorrect or imagined something that one of my characters would be experiencing that just was not something that was accurate to the experience of a deaf person. It totally transformed the way I worked on the book.

There's also a deaf girl who I'd known for a very long time. So when I started working on this book, I interviewed her about growing up deaf. I asked her if she dreams in sign language, and her parents said that they had never thought of asking her that before. She said that she does in fact dream in sign language. I absolutely could not have done it without the talented people who are deaf, who helped me understand something that I just simply cannot imagine as someone who is not deaf.

**Your grandfather was a first cousin of legendary film producer David O. Selznick. Did you imagine movie adaptations of *Hugo Cabret* and *Wonderstruck* while you were working on them?**

When I was working on *Hugo*, I saw a documentary on PBS called *Through Deaf Eyes* about the history of deaf culture. And that's really what got me thinking a lot about this for a possible narrative. They talked about how in 1927, when sound was introduced to movies, it was a terrible blow to the deaf community because before that, deaf people could enjoy popular culture along with the rest of the population.

**Right. Suddenly there wasn't any need for subtitles.**

I had never thought about that before, and that really fascinated me, and that's one of the reasons I wanted to try to set the story in 1927, which is the year that sound was introduced. I wanted to have a certain freedom to invent a biography for someone involved in the cinema at the time. I had a lot of





Illustrations from *Wonderstruck*. Copyright 2011 by Brian Selznick. Used with permission from Scholastic Press.

fun creating this silent-movie star named Lillian Mayhew. I was looking at people like Lillian Gish, Bette Davis, and Joan Crawford and some of the big divas from a while back in cinema, and a very obscure silent-movie actress named Margarita Fischer. In fact, in some of the drawings, Lillian Mayhew is wearing Bette Davis's dress from *All About Eve*.

**You're a natural-born illustrator. So was it tough to write *Wonderstruck*?**

I love writing and illustrating, but the writing still feels very much like a foreign language to me, because I'm thinking in pictures and I'm writing down the words. It's sort of like I'm translating from pictures to words. If I need to draw someone running down the hallway, I just know how it's supposed to look. But if I have to describe that same scene in text, I don't know how to say it. Do I say, "The boy who ran down the hallway"? Or do I say, "The boy who ran quickly down the hallway"? That's why my editor, Tracy Mack, at Scholastic, works very closely with me to help me craft the text in the best possible way. I was able to write the text for *Hugo* without almost any description because the description appears in the pictures. In terms of the action and description and a lot of the emotion, I left all of that to the pictures. With *Wonderstruck*, with two different stories—one is all pictures and one is all text—if I had to describe anything in the story that was all text, I had to actually describe it with words. So there's a lot more text description in *Wonderstruck* than there was in *Hugo*. And it's hard! It was really hard to write all of this description.

**Both of your novels are packed with gorgeous artwork. So are there any plans to turn them into ebooks?**

My books will not be available in electronic format. If you want to read *Hugo* or if you want to read *Wonderstruck*, you will have

to read them as [print] books. There will be other ways to experience the stories. We did make an audio version of *Hugo*. But if you read the book of *Hugo*, along with the audio book, they're two different books. They're two different experiences, not only because one's audio and one's a physical book, but because we had to actually change some of the text because there's no sound equivalent for a pile of ashes, which is something that we see in the book. So the text in the audio book is actually quite different from what you get in the book. And then, you know, you'll be able to go see the movie version of *Hugo* on Thanksgiving. By its very nature, the movie is going to be different. And I don't know what will happen with *Wonderstruck* or what sort of adaptations there might be. But in terms of the book itself, I have no plans and no interest in releasing either of those as ebooks.

**'I love writing and illustrating, but the writing still feels very much like a foreign language to me, because I'm thinking in pictures and I'm writing down the words.'**

**Were you shocked when you found out Martin Scorsese was interested in *Hugo*?**

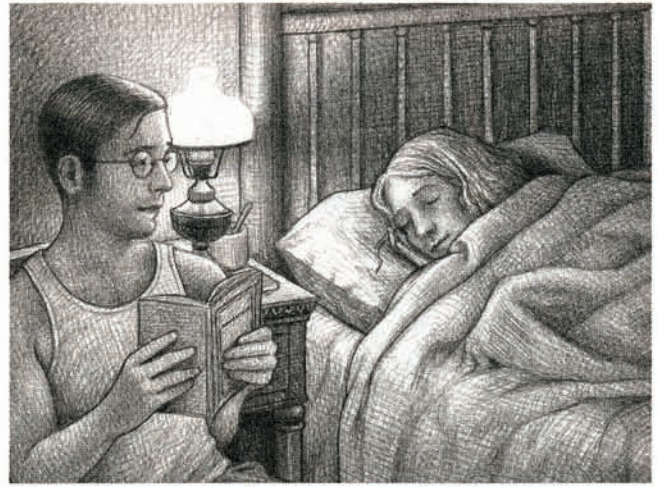
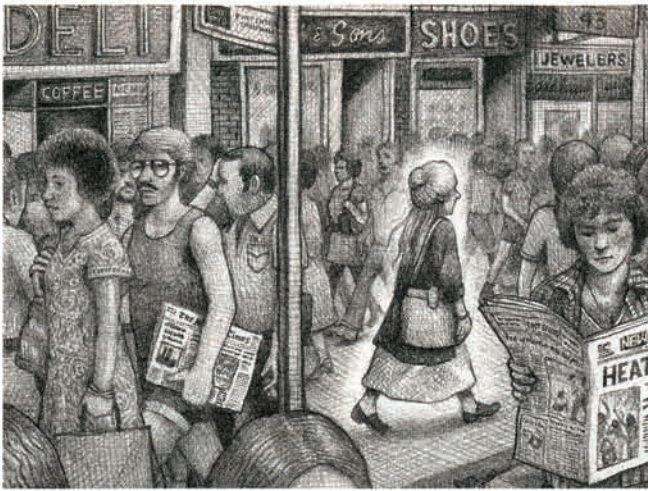
You just can't imagine something like that. When I finally spoke to a person at the production office, she told me that Scorsese had read the book and loved it and wanted to adapt it. It just seemed unreal. I would never have in a million years imagined Martin Scorsese making this movie, but the second his name came up, I'm thinking about the fact that he's one of the greatest directors of all time, that he is a film scholar, that he has worked very hard to save early movies that were being lost, and suddenly it became clear that he

was not only the perfect person to make it, but it felt like he was the *only* person who could make it.

**What was it like visiting the set?**

I was just walking around the set and looking, and like, that's my train station! And those are the metal grates that I drew! It's all there! I mean it's bigger and more beautiful than I ever could have imagined, but it's clear where it comes from. When





Martin Scorsese makes a movie, he has his team of people: Thelma Schoonmaker is editing the movie; and Dante Ferretti, his brilliant set designer, who began work designing movies for Federico Fellini; and Sandy Powell, who's won three Oscars for her incredible costume designs. They're all bringing their incredible visions to this story. While they're making it their own, as they should because it's their movie, the fact that they are being as respectful as they are with my book, it's really beyond anything that I could have dreamed of. I had people on the set tell me that they've never seen a director be more faithful to the source material than Scorsese was with my book.

**That's a long way from working at Eeyore's. What was that experience like?**

I moved to New York after I graduated college in 1988. I worked at Eeyore's for a couple of years in the early '90s, and that's really where I feel like I learned everything I know about children's books. Steve Geck was my manager at Eeyore's and really took me under his wing and taught me about books. I feel like it all started when I was at Eeyore's.

**How so?**

I think because everybody told me in high school that I should illustrate children's books, it made me really, really not want to do that. I sort of rebelled against it. For college, I went to the Rhode Island School of Design. I was going to go to grad school and study set design—I didn't get in. But I just decided maybe this was a sign or maybe I needed to reassess a bit. So I traveled for a little while, and I came back, and I realized that the things I love most are telling stories. I love drawing, and I've always loved kids, and that's when I realized that in fact maybe I should be illustrating children's books. So that's when a friend of mine suggested that I get a job at a children's bookstore. I kind of charmed my way into the job because you were supposed to have an extensive knowledge of children's literature to get the job, and I certainly did not. I knew *Where the Wild Things Are*



and *Green Eggs and Ham* and *The Borrowers*, which was one of my favorite books when I was a kid.

**What other books influenced you while growing up?**

I had almost the entire collection of Remy Charlip's books. His books are some of the few that I actually remember from when I was young. At Eeyore's, I was reacquainted with Remy's books. I really marveled at what he was doing with the page turns and what he was doing as a bookmaker. And then I was reintroduced to *Where the Wild Things Are*, which I knew about because it's so famous, but I didn't remember reading it as a kid. And studying *Where the Wild Things Are* was definitely a revelation in terms of what you can do when you turn the page, how the structure of a book can underscore the story itself, and the emotions of the plot can all be played out in how the book itself is built. Where the pictures are, what the pictures are doing, when you turn the page, why you turn the page, where there's text, where there's no text. That was probably the most influential book on the work I do as an adult, and I feel like every book I do is just a riff on *Where the Wild Things Are*.

And that's probably something that most illustrators working since 1963, when that book was published, can say, that we're all just working from the DNA of *Where the Wild Things Are*.

**You have a huge autumn coming up. How does it feel to be such a popular author?**

The main thing is that it's nice to make books that people are reading. To be at a point where people are really enthusiastic about the

work that I'm doing and reading the books that I'm making, it's a great feeling, and I'm very, very happy.

*Ken Setterington (ksetterington@gmail.com) recently retired from the Toronto Public Library, where he was a children and youth advocate. He was a member of the committee that selected Hugo Cabret as the winner of the 2008 Caldecott Medal.*