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Coloring beyond the Lines

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I still remember the excitement I felt as a kid when I opened a brand new coloring book filled with illustrations of my favorite cartoon characters. Each illustration was a simple outline, a blank canvas, waiting for me to personalize it with whatever colors I chose. The possibilities were endless. Armed with my box of crayons, I began coloring each page while carefully making sure that absolutely no crayon marks made it past the thick, black lines—not even a smudge.

Half-way through the coloring process, I started veering away from my original plan. I began to embellish the characters with different accessories like a floppy hat or cowboy boots. Sometimes I would even create new characters altogether by adding fairy wings or mermaid fins. Then I would go a step further and add a backdrop to each

page. Now the new and improved characters were exploring a treetop canopy in the forest or looking for lost treasure at the bottom of the ocean rather than floating around on a blank piece of paper. Before I knew it, way more crayon marks were beyond the lines than in between.

Much like my six-year-old self, I still enjoy coloring beyond the lines. When I first receive a manuscript, I begin by brainstorming and asking myself, “How can I use my illustrations to add to this story?” As a picture book illustrator, I aim to not just depict what is written in the manuscript but to go beyond the text. I want my illustrations to convey a complete and believable story and to create a rich visual world that fully engages the reader.

Throughout my career I have been fortunate enough to work on very different stories written by extremely

talented authors—the kinds of stories that immediately get my imagination running and my creative juices flowing. After the initial brainstorming, I typically start a book project with researching even before I begin any sketching. With the Web so readily accessible, it’s usually the first resource I turn to. However, depending on the story, it is also important to verify that those sources are accurate and trustworthy.

Muon Van’s *In a Village by the Sea* (Creston 2015) is a fictional story about longing for the comforts of home. The story is inspired by the author’s father and the author’s ancestral fishing village in Vietnam. Even though historical and geographical accuracy were not imperative for the final art, I still wanted to pay homage to the author’s culture. In this case I was able to do most of the research on the Web

while drawing inspiration from my own travels to Asia and my own cultural heritage. I wanted to pair the spare lyrical text with highly detailed and lush illustrations. To do so, I gathered ideas and color palettes from online images and personal photographs of seascapes, vegetation, traditional housing, boats, clothing, and food from Vietnam and other parts of Southeast Asia. Researching can also spark some unexpectedly great ideas. While browsing images of fishing villages, I randomly came across a sweet photograph of a Labrador sitting on a pier that eventually became the inspiration for the family dog in the book.

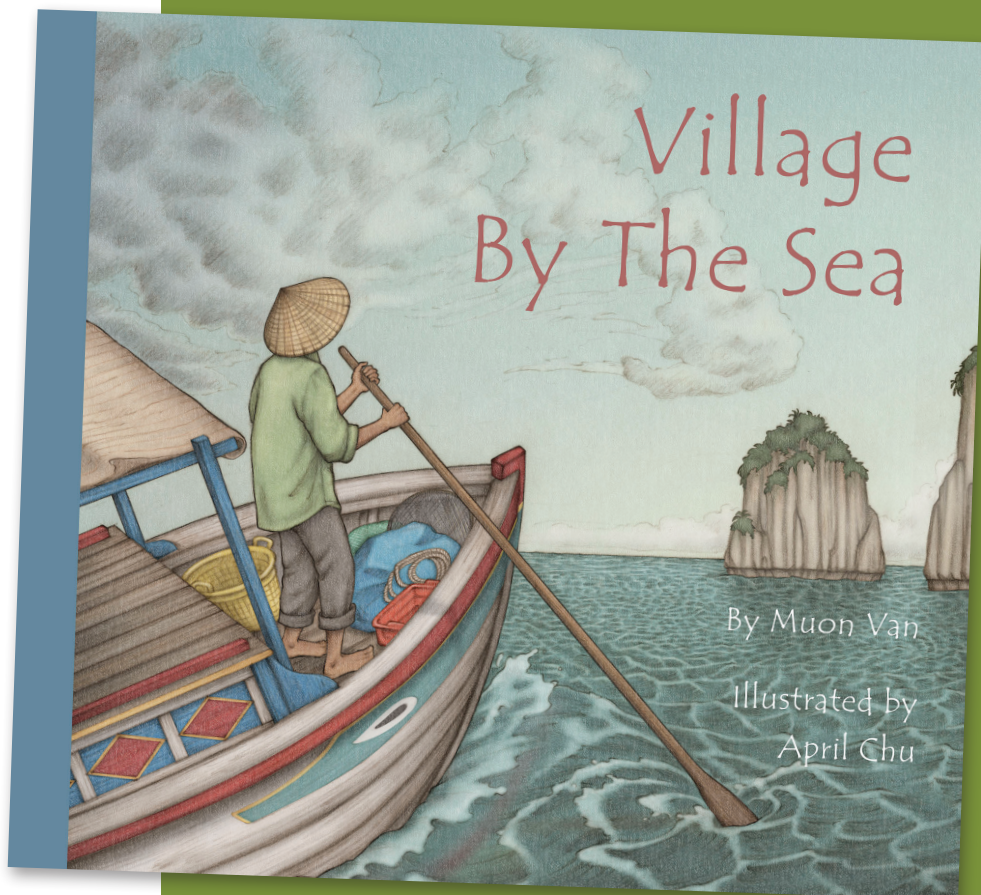
Ada Byron Lovelace and the Thinking Machine by Laurie Wallmark (Creston 2015) is a biographical picture book about the world's first computer programmer. Ada, a 19th-century English mathematician, wrote the first computer program long before computers were invented. She was a fascinatingly complex historical figure much like the complex ornate setting of the Victorian era in which she lived. I wanted the illustrations to be equally complex and rich in content. Since this was a biography, it was crucial that the illustrations accurately depicted her likeness, her surroundings, and her accomplishments. Even though her contributions to the STEM fields have been mostly overlooked, a growing amount of reference material about Ada is now available online and in libraries.

The Web was definitely a good starting point for research about her. Because there are quite a few websites about Ada, I was able to browse and compare notes from different sites to fact-check. To see many of the intricate technical machinery

mentioned in the story, I was able to visit the Computer History Museum in Mountain View, California, and see a temporary working exhibit of Charles Babbage's Difference Engine. The author, who has done extensive research on Ada for this book, was a wonderful resource as well. In addition, I had a good selection of books available to double-check the accuracy of images and information found on the Web. As I read half a dozen books on Ada I discovered many captivating anecdotes about her life. I found out that she had a kaleidoscope collection, played the harp, was fluent in French, and had a pet cat. I was able to incorporate those tidbits into my illustrations, hoping

to make her seem more authentic and more relatable to the reader.

Marissa Moss's *Kate Warne, Pinkerton Detective* (Creston 2017) is a biographical picture book about America's first female detective and her first successful undercover case. The scarceness of information about Kate's life that I was able to find is a testament to the fact that her existence has indeed remained a mystery. Even the authenticity of the few photos of Kate undercover has been questioned. Due to the lack of reference materials about Kate, I took a different approach to researching Kate's life than I had when researching Ada's life. To prepare to illustrate the book about



Kate, I realized that I would have to rely on information about the time period in which she lived and about other well-known people from that era.

While working on the illustrations for *Kate Warne, Pinkerton Detective*, I performed a bit of detective work myself, piecing together information about the time period and its inhabitants so I could form a complete picture and have a better understanding of Kate's life and surroundings. What would Kate wear? What did downtown Chicago look like in the 1850s? How did transferring money work on the Adams

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Express train? While these are concrete facts and details that I can convey in the illustrations—women's attire of the 1850s, architecture from downtown Chicago during that time, a bank chest from the Adam's Express Company, and even a hint of Kate's involvement in thwarting the attempted assassination of Abraham Lincoln on his way to Washington

for the inauguration—the rest of the illustrations were completed with a sprinkling of creativity and a dash of imagination. That was the fun part! In the end I hope that my illustrations portray a sense of mystery along with enough historical accuracy to bring Kate's case to life.

During my school visit presentations, kids are often the most surprised to learn that as an illustrator, not only do I draw pictures but I also read a lot of books. Learning and exploring different topics while I research for a picture book and then relaying that knowledge to the reader through my illustrations are the most rewarding parts of my job. Very much like the feeling when I opened a brand new coloring book as a kid, I still get excited when I read a new manuscript. The possibilities are endless!

April Chu began her career as an architect with a degree from the University of California, Berkeley, but decided to return to her true passion of illustrating and storytelling. Her picture books have received starred reviews from Kirkus, Booklist, School Library Journal, and Publishers Weekly. *Ada Byron Lovelace and the Thinking Machine* (Creston 2015) won a 2015 California Reading Association Eureka! Gold Award for Nonfiction Children's Books, and was included in Booklist's 2015 Top Ten Science and Health Books for Youth; Booklist Editor's Choice: Books for Youth 2015; and National Science Teachers Association's Outstanding Science Trade Books for Students K–12: 2016, a list assembled with the cooperation of the Children's Book Council. April currently lives and works in Oakland, California. For more information, visit www.aprilchu.com.

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