



*Rather than trap my readers' imaginations in a web of ink lines and color washes of my own choosing, my art should serve instead to set readers' imaginations soaring.*

# Let Your Imagination Soar

## COLLABORATION BETWEEN CREATORS AND READERS IS ESSENTIAL

**Charles Vess**

[cbcknowledgequest@cbcbooks.org](mailto:cbcknowledgequest@cbcbooks.org)

I've been in a room filled with my best friends. Everyone around me is relaxed and happy. A conversation begins. Someone answers one vocal outburst with another. More words spontaneously follow. And round and round an idea bounces, from one person to the next, and suddenly the collective "you" has arrived at a joke or a play on words or an idea that I would never have articulated if I'd been sitting in that same room alone, perhaps trying to reach for the very same creative idea.

We've all been in a room just like that one, I think.

At its best, the collaborative process involved in the creation of a book is much the same.

Of course, the friction of two creative minds rubbing hot against each other can just as easily produce a torched field, empty of life, as it can burn away any barriers that either may have tried to erect around a fragile artistic ego. If they're both lucky, that fire will leave in its wake a "new" aesthetic persona that will inherit the combined wisdom of two lives rather than simply one.

However, with any illustrated fiction, whether it's a graphic narrative or a picture book or an illustrated middle-grade book, another—and perhaps an even more important collaborator—is involved: the reader of the book.

Respecting that reader's imagination is one of the most important tasks at hand for either the illustrator or the writer. Deciding which scene he or she is going to put onto a given page and how much detail will be lavished on it is crucial to the success or failure of any book. Only when the book's illustrator and its writer allow the reader to become an active participant in their story can a book be truly successful. As an illustrator I feel that I must carefully choose what I want to show my readers; I'm always trying to balance within that image certain elements that can be clearly seen, as well as those that exist only in each reader's imagination.

It seems to me that any illustration that is overwhelmed by detail from

corner to corner has very little to offer viewers in terms of their actively participating in the story the illustration is intended to tell. Of course, the readers' eyes may widen with amazement in recognition of all the time spent on the lovingly rendered elements of that picture, but their minds, with little to engage them, will soon travel on to the next page and the next and eventually to another story altogether. Rather than trap my readers' imaginations in a web of ink lines and color washes of my own choosing, my art should serve instead to set readers' imaginations soaring:

All of these visual tropes will activate alert readers' minds and, without their realizing it, make the story exist in a far more expansive world than readers first see on the page.

That dappled light *has* to come from an unseen tree or forest that grows just past the picture plane.

The twisting limb *must* fall from a tree that I haven't drawn.

That unseen something exists *only* in the reader's imagination as does the world that lurks softly behind the mist that rolls across the hills in my story.

Charles de Lint and I have been friends for over thirty-five years. We'd collaborated many times before on both illustrated books and graphic narratives, so when it came time to create over seventy paintings for *The Cats of Tanglewood Forest*, I felt pretty comfortable with our shared vision.

However, the other Charles had written an exceptionally evocative scene that appears about midway through the book. In it, three young people sit in a field of high grass; two dogs rest at their feet. Our protagonist, Lillian, is listening to one of a set of twins tell a story. Once, long ago, a young girl, the daughter of the great spider spirit, was thrown into a deep, deep well. And there she stayed until one night, thousands of spiders dropped from the sky, leaving behind tiny holes, filled with light that became our stars. With their webbing, these spiders wove a ladder with which the girl climbed from the well and overcame her captors. Later in our tale Lillian will remember this tale, and it will help her escape from her own set of captors.

*The dappled light that is cast across a field of grass*



*A figure staring past the viewer at something unseen*



*A twisted limb intruding into a given picture plane*

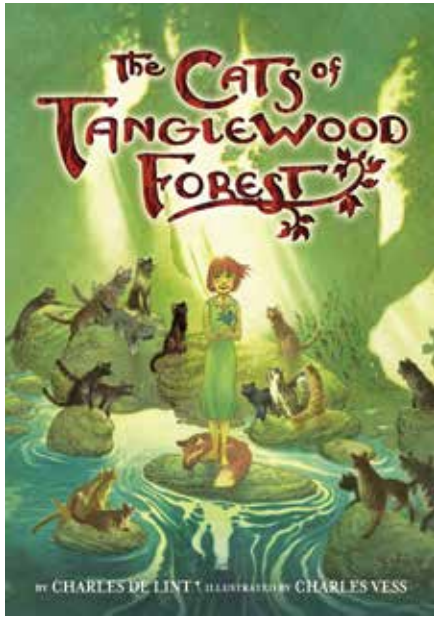


*A rising mist obscuring a portion of landscape*



Both Charles and his wife, MaryAnn Harris, expressed their anticipation in seeing how I would draw this scene.

But, in the end, I choose not to.



with only slight variations, his characters (Gran'ma Ben, Lucius, The Great Red Dragon, etc.) and the landscape they inhabit. So in this instance my collaborative choices became not so much about how a character looked, or what he, she, or it wore, but about how I would actually draw the character.

And finally, I think that my chosen method of rendering an illustration is yet another collaboration—this one between my art and my reader's mind. By using a pen outline, which I later fill in with color—a style directly inspired by such great Edwardian book illustrators as Arthur Rackham and Edmund Dulac—I offer a

look that is decidedly *not* highly finished or minutely rendered. Faced with my stylistic choice, the viewers must complete for themselves the conceptual space left unfinished between my hard outlines and the color within. They, in effect, render the image into three dimensions themselves.

This collaborative process—this pact between writer, artist, and reader—provides, I think, the essential elements that, when combined correctly, will produce a book that will be read and enjoyed again and again and again for years to come.

*Enjoy the process!*

I decided that such a delightfully evocative image would be best left to all of our readers' imaginations.

Adapting Neil Gaiman's poetry into two children's picture books (*Blueberry Girl* and *Instructions*) became a delicate trip across an aesthetic tightrope. The poems were filled with powerful symbolic metaphors, but neither offered anything in the way of a narrative impulse or a protagonist for the reader to identify with. Here my collaboration involved supplying both of these very essential elements to each book. I had to be very careful to add to—but never get in the way of—Neil's lovely words or distract the reader from understanding those words.

My graphic novel *Rose* was an exhilarating plunge into another artist/writer's already fully developed world. This prequel to Jeff Smith's *Bone* series (which should be familiar to you all) features characters that Jeff had firmly established in over thirteen hundred pages of art and story. It was my job as the painter/illustrator of this particular story to picture,

**Charles Vess** is a world-renowned artist and a three-time winner of the World Fantasy Award, among several others. His work has appeared in magazines, comic books, and novels including *The Coyote Road: Trickster Tales* (Viking 2007), *Peter Pan* (Macmillan 2003), *The Book of Ballads* (Tor 2004), and Neil Gaiman's *Stardust* (Titan 1999), which was made into an acclaimed film by Paramount Pictures in 2007. Charles has also illustrated two picture books with Gaiman, *Instructions* (HarperCollins 2010) and *Blueberry Girl* (HarperCollins 2009), that were *New York Times* bestsellers. His art has been featured in several gallery and museum exhibitions across the United States as well as in Spain, Portugal, the United Kingdom, and Italy. He lives on a small farm and works from his studio, Green Man Press, in southwest Virginia.

STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

Knowledge Quest, Publication No. 483-860, is published five times per year by the American Association of School Librarian, American Library Association, 50 E. Huron St., Chicago, IL 60611-2795. Annual subscription price, \$50. Printed in U.S.A. with periodical class postage paid at (Ohio). As a nonprofit organization authorized to mail at special rates (DMM Section 424.12 only), the purpose, function, and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for federal income tax purposes have not changed during the preceding twelve months.

INDEX TO ADVERTISERS

ABDO . . . . . Cover 2  
American Association of School Librarians (AASL) . . 8, 10, 11, 57, 75  
Bound to Stay Bound . . . . . Cover 4  
LMC. . . . . 71  
Oxford Press . . . . . 1