

*Aaron Becker*

273: Words, Pictures, and How Story Brings Them Together

Gabriela Pereira: Hello, and welcome, word nerds, to DIY MFA Radio, the show that will help you write more, write better, write smarter. I'm Gabriela Pereira, instigator of DIY MFA, and your host for this podcast. Now, let's talk writing.

Hello. Hello, word nerds. Gabriela here, and welcome back to DIY MFA Radio. Our show notes are at diymfa.com/273 because it's Episode 273. Also, if you enjoy the podcast, please subscribe on iTunes, Google Play, and you know, all those usual places where you might listen to podcasts; and please, leave us a review. This will help other word nerds out there, discover the show as well.

Now, today I have the pleasure of interviewing Aaron Becker. Born in Baltimore, Aaron moved to California to attend Pomona College where he scored his first illustration job designing t-shirts for his water polo team. Since then, he's traveled around the world, from Kenya to Japan, Sweden to Tahiti, looking for good things to eat and also feeding his imagination.

He now lives with his family in Amherst, Massachusetts, where he's busy at work on his next book project. You can find out more about what he's been up to at his website, storybreathing.com.

Now, a little aside; my family has been a fan of Aaron's work for basically as long as it has existed because I've been paging through his wordless picture books with my kids from when they were barely able to hold books in their hands. And so it is such an absolute honor to have you Aaron, on the show today. Thank you for being here.

Aaron Becker: Oh, it's my pleasure. Thanks for having me.

GP: So, I want to start with the story behind the story, but you've written a ton of books and I've basically read all of them multiple times. So, let's start with the Journey, Quest & Return trilogy. What first inspired that trilogy, and why?

AB: Wow. Well, so Journey was my first book. And, when I was in my 20s, I started to get into picture books as a possible career choice; or, at least, as something I was really interested in and wanted to know how they worked. So, I joined The Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. I went to conferences, and I tried to get a portfolio together. And so it was sort of in the back of my head as something I really wanted to do.

And so, fast-forward, I don't know, I guess it would've been 10 years later; maybe more than 10 years later, I had been doing different types of illustration, but not children's books for a long time.

And, I suddenly lost my job with a film company and was sort of at this crossroads of my life where we had moved, we had just had a kid. I was like, 'you know what, it's now or never, I'm going to-- Instead of just trying to get another job at another studio, let me see if I can do this book thing that I've wanted to do for a long time.'



And the creation of that first story was sort of like, I remember hearing an interview with Bob Dylan, where he's talking about his first album; and how going into his second album, it was very difficult for him. And the reason being that like that first album was his entire life experience poured into one thing quite organically.

And, the same thing happened to me with Journey; was that I'd been thinking and thinking about wanting to do a picture book, and kind of analyzing all the components of it and how they worked, sort of, in the back of my head while I'm doing all these other things in my life. And so when I came to that moment, it all came about very quickly and I wouldn't say easily, but it definitely was an organic process where I knew I wanted to write a story.

The story that came out was the one that was going to come out. I didn't have to workshop it or think about it too hard. It was basically all of my life experience and ideas and interests poured into one object, into one story; which was quite an amazing thing to finally have the space and time to do that instead of working for someone else. And, that was the genesis of that, and then it took off. And, then I realized, in fact, remember talking to my agent at some point.

We were talking about, Journey still hadn't come out. So, we were still dealing with like technical issues of printing and the cover design or something, but it was still a good year-and-a-half away from publication, but I was finished with the artwork. To me, it was like a done deal; and I was back to my film work. And, I was like, you know, "I was thinking maybe I could do another book."

And, my agent's like, "Yeah, yeah. Do another book." So, it actually, like, it never was like this thing where I decided to like switch careers and do books from then on; it was just that this one story came out of me from my life experience and from the circumstances I was in. And then, it all grew out of that.

GP: So, let's talk a little bit about the Journey, Quest & Return sequence, because it's interesting to me that like, you didn't have the next ones already in your head when you wrote Journey, because when I look through the three of them in a-- Like, we can't read just the first one.

[laughter]

GP: Like, when we sit down, we do like the whole trilogy. It's kind of like when you're watching like the original Star Wars, because like, you know, you can't stop after Empire; like, you just have to watch until end. So, it's like, to me, it's fascinating that Quest wasn't like already in your head.

And, I was actually asking my kids before this interview because it's not often that I'm interviewing authors, who they, like, read their books of. And so I'm like, you know, "What do you want to say to the author?" And, my daughter's like, "Quest is the best one. You make sure to tell him that Quest is the best one."

AB: Yeah.

GP: So, let's talk about like Second Book Syndrome, and writing the second book because they can often like be so hard for the writer. Like, it's sort of-- It's like Sophomore Slump; and yet, Quest is the best one, apparently. So, tell us about, how do you make the second book even better than the first?

AB: I think it's really interesting that you mentioned Empire Strikes Back and the Star Wars films in terms of like the need to complete a story because I was born in 1974; so, like, you know, the Star



Wars films were basically my introduction to mythology and storytelling and the love of character and everything. And so, to me, it was like, as soon as I decided I wanted to do another book, I knew that it was going to be a trilogy, an arc of three stories.

That was not anything I had to invent or think about. It was just an automatic thought process for me. So, coming up with the idea of doing a three-story series, wasn't the hard part, but the hard part was figuring out what the elements were going to be. And, again, this is before Journey was published, before-- You know, obviously, we didn't know if it was going to be well-received or even seen by anyone.

I mean, my hope was that kind of knowing how the Picture Book world works, my hope was that Journey would stay on the shelf for more than three months; you know, long enough for people to like see it for it to exist. I had no idea it was going to grow into what it became, but my publisher had a sense or they had faith in the artwork at that point.

And, they were okay with giving me a contract for a second book, not the whole three, but they gave me a contract, first, Quest before Journey published. And, I finished the artwork for Quest before Journey published so that it could come out, you know, the next year, basically. So, the stories sort of did evolve almost one after the other. It wasn't like I had a long period of time where I wasn't thinking about this world.

And, there's a moment in Journey at the very beginning when we see her sort of the character's arc begins with her not being met by her family. In a classic Picture Book structure or story structure, that initial problem is solved in the third act. But it's not, if you recall in Journey--

GP: Yeah.

AB: She does not get fulfilled by her family finally realizing that they-- [laughs] There she is, they can meet her on her playing field. And that was okay for that first story, but it always was nagging at me because when I was doing those sketches for Journey, I was like, how can I bring the family back at the end? There wasn't space for it in 40 pages, and it worked much better to have this boy show up with the purple bird. And, that was that.

So, I knew that the trilogy was going to be about the family. And, the way that a story arc of three works is that; you know, the first one is where you sort of lay the rules. And, the second one is where you can expand on this universe you've created, and kind of get deeper into it and up the stakes, so to speak. And then, in the third act is when everything gets resolved. So, the reason your kids are into Quest, and kids generally enjoy Quest the most, is that is the promise of the premise.

GP: Yeah.

AB: That is like, that's the payoff. It's like; it's the fun, the adventure. It's the 30-minute serial adventure. And, kids are into that. There's like an immediate, like, 'what are they looking for? It's very clear. They get it; and And they win.' And, adults are like, 'okay'. [laughs] But kids are so into that. It's just very-- It's like the formula of kind of creating tension, and joy, and all that adventure kind of stuff.

And, that was what I loved as a kid too. So, it was like, I knew exactly what Quest needed to be. And then, I knew what Return needed to be in terms of bringing the family back in and having her ultimate needs of her heart fulfilled. And, that was very powerful story for me. The first few times I read that aloud to kids at school events, I would tear up at the end totally unexpectedly.



GP: So, you know, I wanted to follow up also; one of the things that I love, you know, you mentioned how Quest delivers on the premise. It also has like a little bit of like Pokémon-ess to it in the sense that like, you know, you got to catch them all; like they're going on this quest, you know, hence the name, to find all the different things in the world.

AB: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah.

GP: And so like, there's that feeling-- I know kids love to like collect stuff. So, there's that idea of like, the kids are going on that quest too. And, can they find the things that the characters are going after? So, I love how you work, tapping into kids' psychology for those books, whether it was consciously or just naturally; it just works so well.

AB: Thank you. Yeah.

GP: So, one of the things I wanted to like talk about, speaking of, sort of, like the kid brain, is obviously, wordless picture books are different from books that have words in them. We read them differently. So, can you talk a little bit about how one reads a wordless picture book, or rather how you envision your reader reading a wordless picture book?

AB: Yeah. So, I think the biggest difference, actually, the way that they're different the most is how we interact with pacing. So, like, if you imagine a picture book that has text: as a parent, when you're reading it to a kid, especially, or if kids are reading it to themselves; when you finish the sentence, you turn the page.

GP: Yeah.

AB: Just like you are Tinker Bell with her chime and you turn the page.

[laughter]

AB: With a wordless book, you don't; and this was not something that I realized ahead of time before I started making books. But as I went along, I realized the reason I can jam so much detail into these illustrations; and what I loved about picture books as a kid, especially was the detail in some of the books that I liked.

And so a kid's eye is, as you're reading the text, is wandering around the picture and picking up details, right? And, if you've noticed in the last 10, 15 years of picture books; there's been far less text and going along with that, the imagery has gotten simplified. There's a lot more whitespace.

GP: Yeah.

AB: There's often just one beat per page. Like, there's a character and they're doing something; and that's all there is to pick up on. There's not like something going on in the background, or there's not like a huge scene in the background or lots of little details to sort of search around for.

And, that kind of bugs me because I think that the whole experience of these picture books, at least for me as a kid, was getting lost in them, getting lost in the image. And by taking the text away, I give the opportunity of controlling the pacing to the child because they're not ready to turn the page yet if they haven't soaked in all the detail.



GP: Yeah.

AB: And, they're telling the story they want to tell at the pace they want to tell. If they're reading it by themselves or if they're reading it with a parent; like they're kind of both or a caregiver; you're involved in the same activity of discovery and exploration. I mean, how much better does it get? [laughs]

It's like you might as well be out in the woods looking around, but you're in a book in a place where you can do all of these other things; beyond just exploring the physical world, you can explore your internal world. You can explore the world of story, the emotional world, as well as just sort of the puzzle-solving nature, which-- Like what you were saying about quest, it's like this puzzle that they're trying to solve; and, likewise, the readers doing it at their own pace.

GP: Yeah.

AB: And, that is the key because we all, our brains all work at different paces. And, if someone just turns the page before you're ready, because the text is done; that's it. You sort of lost that moment of getting lost, which is why I just love this format, and love seeing--

I think when it's done well; you know, it really does affect people on these very different personal levels. So, they'll come to me and say, "Oh, this really meant a lot to me because, at the time, my mother was sick," and, you know-- Or something like, I'm like, 'oh, I didn't mean to put that in there, but you found it'.

[laughter]

AB: And, it's because every one's taking it as their own, it's their own story. And, a lot of that has to do, I think, with the pacing and the difference of those two worlds, not to bemoan picture books that have text. But I do think like the picture books that inspired me in my 20s, when I was sort of starting to research the world of picture books were Chris Van Allsburg's books. And, his books, I was just looking at *The Wreck of the Zephyr* the other day.

It's literally like a huge block of text next to a picture on a single spread. Like, not even Full Bleed, just like a framed picture. And, every page is the same, but when you're a kid and you're reading that, you don't see it that way; your brain is like totally immersed in this illustration while someone's reading you a story, and a story that takes a while to read. So, you have this time to explore those images and get lost in them.

And so effectively, like by taking the words out and just having the images, I'm giving more space to that one activity, and what you lose is that kind of getting lost with the sound of your caregiver's voice, kind of telling you the story, which is totally wonderful. And so, they're two different things, but effectively, it's like the same thing of getting lost.

GP: Absolutely. You know, it's interesting also what you said about pacing, because I noticed that in subtle ways, there is some maneuvering of pacing in the books. Like, for instance, in the beginning of *Journey*, when the girl is starting to explore the crayon; and we kind of have these smaller illustrations, multiple illustrations on the same page that are kind of building, and then we get to that big, full-page spread.

Like, there is some pacing that, like, some; not control, but like some sort of artistry around the pacing that the author can have in wordless picture books. It's not just like the reader. Like, you can't kind of nudge the reader along, depending on how you lay things out.



AB: Oh, absolutely. And so what I'll do is like, when I have my general sketches finished of what I want to happen and the action of the story, I'll literally do a version of the story with, you know, just drawing it with little teeny thumbnails and you don't even see the-- I don't even draw the pictures. All I draw is like, is this page a three-spot action spot? Is this page a Full Bleed? Is this page a half-bleed? You know, so, I'll look at the visually and see how that pacing works. Like, is it, da, da, da, da?

GP: Yeah.

AB: You know, like, what is the rhythm? And, there's actually a logic to it, you know, about like, how are you leading someone into a story? How are you letting them sit there for a while? How are you taking them back out into action? How are you resolving? And yeah, it's totally, you know, like a marionette with strings. So, it's like, yes, the reader has their own sense of when they want to turn the page, but I'm also kind of secretly nudging them along or holding them back. And, it's all part of the creative process.

GP: Love it. So, another thing that you mentioned too, is like-- And also, by the way, I want to just mention, the fact that you talk about how wordless picture books take away the sound; and yet, you describe the pacing with rhythm: to me, that's just awesome. So, like, clearly, there's some sound in there because there's a rhythm to the pace, even if that rhythm isn't like actually audible.

What I love also is how like, kids can engage regardless of how old they are, and whether or not they're able to read. And so I'm curious, as you've gone to school visits, as you interacted with kids of many different ages and grades, do you notice whether kids engage with the book differently? Like, do they read it differently if they're pre-reading versus post-reading, or if they're older, younger; like, or is it kind of a similar experience or individualized, no matter what? Like, do you notice any patterns?

AB: Oh, absolutely. So like, if you're with a Pre-K group or I would say first grade and below, so you're like, I guess that's exactly what you mean is like pre-reading. They have no pre-conceived notions about what should happen or what's going to happen; they're totally in the moment. And because of that, the experience of reading these books for them is all about wonder.

And I get more 'oohs' and 'ahs' from the little ones than I do from the older kids, but then when you get into language and the kids are constructing a story and predicting, and kind of trying to label things, which is so amazing that that's what's going on, right?

It's like paralleling language development; then suddenly, there's like deeper levels of interest. Like they want to explain the world, they want to know, like, why is this related to that? Or they have ideas, or-- Generally, they don't ask me questions; they just tell me.

[laughter]

AB: Like, they figure out things that I didn't even put in there, or they see the things that I hope they were seeing. So, yeah, it totally evolves to the point where I can work with high school students on these books. And, it's no longer about the wonder of getting lost and the imagination of the story, but more about like story structure; and how does this work, and why does it work, and how do the page turns work?

And so there's like, at any different age group-- In fact, I'll often talk about: if I'm with fourth, fifth grade; I'll talk about body language and different forms of emotional intelligence with these books. So yeah, I gear my talks and my presentation entirely differently, depending on the age of the audience.



GP: And, this is great too, because it means that like the books grow with the kids too, like it's a different reading experience, no matter whether they're pre-reading or in high school, or like; I, as a grown up still read them and I find new things, which is exciting. You know, it's interesting-- So, my kids-- My daughter, Ladybug, is pre-reading; she's going into kindergarten.

My son, Little Man, is going into second grade; and I totally see what you were just describing. Like my daughter, it's all about like, whoa. And, my son is already like picking at the pictures. And, he's like-- He was telling me like, "Mommy, at the end of Return, the man gets the black crayon." And, I was like, "What are you talking about?" And, then, of course, like I had to scour the pages and like, at the very end of Return, the guy's got the crayon in his pocket. And, I'm like, "I didn't even notice that freaking crayon."

[laughter]

AB: Yes.

GP: Yeah.

AB: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. The kids are growing up with these stories, and they'll go back to them if they have a younger sibling or the book's lying around the house; and they'll pick it up, and they'll see it in a whole different way. Man, I didn't plan any of this. I have to say.

[laughter]

AB: Like, I'm just a spectator like you. I'm just-- I'm in awe of, you know, this was nothing I intended, to be honest. It's just really what I wanted to make as a story, and how my imagination and how my childhood; what kind of like fed me, and what excited me. And so the fact that there's something universal, not even universal, but like everyone finds their own universe within it--

GP: Yeah.

AB: -it's just mind-boggling. [laughs] It's really mind-boggling.

GP: It's what we all hope for, right, as writers. So, things shifted a bit when you moved into A Stone for Sascha, which is still a wordless picture book--

AB: Right.

GP: -but very different in terms of tones, style.

AB: Very different.

GP: In some ways, as epic, but also quieter and more personal. Can you talk a little bit about that shift? Was there anything that-- Like, was there any motivator behind shifting in this direction or was it just like the next story that called to you?

AB: It was the next story that called to me. There wasn't really anything going on in my life that had changed. I spent a long time, you know, my sophomore effort was A Stone for Sascha, not Quest because the trilogy worked as its own experience of my life. You know, it flowed pretty-- It was hard to crack the story code and like really figure out what that arc was going to be in terms of--



I knew what the arc was going to be thematically, and to some extent, action-wise, but how that like literally plays out was something that took many, many, many drafts to figure out. But that said, it was an easy process compared to coming up with like, what's after that? And so I spent a lot of time-- I wanted to explore different avenues of storytelling.

I didn't want to get pigeonholed into being the adventure, imagination, wordless Picture Book guy. And so, I just explored tons of stuff. I mean, I was doing like Activity Book ideas. I started writing a YA novel right after I finished *Return*, which I'm still working on. And so, eventually, I did so much exploring that I was like, I hadn't produced anything.

[laughter]

AB: And, I was like, 'all right, I better do a wordless picture book'. And, I had finished *Return* while we were living in Spain in this like really old-- We went abroad for the year, and brought our daughter and put her into school there. I did my watercolors there for *Return*. We were living in this really old city.

And, it got me thinking about history and the nature of human beings on the planet; and sort of what it all means as an individual, and how we relate to like history and the larger scope of time. Because in these old towns, I mean, you've got like Roman structures on top of more structures or underneath more structures, which are underneath Catholic structures, which are underneath modern structure.

It's like all the same rocks used for the same, you know, foundation stones of these buildings. And so that's sort of the genesis of *A Stone for Sascha*. And the fact that it became a more grown-up series book was not something I meant to do. It just was what the story was. And if I wanted to serve that story, it became a little bit more--

Like you said, it's epic, but in a totally different way; it's more mind-boggling for older kids. And, I think for a younger kid, maybe they might get something out of the story with the dog and the girl. But, for the most part, I was writing it for myself. [laughs]

GP: Yeah. So, one of the things that I'm curious about is you mentioned how like being in Granada, and seeing these structures and sort of structures on top of structures, inspired like the epic pieces, but did the dog component happen after, as sort of a way that you framed that epic stuff?

AB: Bingo. Yeah.

GP: Or did it-- Okay.

AB: No, that was it.

GP: So, like, that was an after thing?

AB: It was definitely. It was like, how do I make this compelling and emotional? Because you're trying to-- The question I asked myself before; I was like, how does one experience time? Like, what's the first way that we understand that there's a beginning and an end to things? And, I was like, oh, right, death. [laughs]

And, I was like 'oh, now, I'm doing the death book'. And so at first, I thought, 'oh, maybe there's a relative, like it's a grandmother or something'. And, then I thought, 'well, a child's first--' Usually, a child's first experience with death is that pet that the parents got before they had their first kid. [laughs]



GP: Right.

AB: It's like getting old by the time the kid is coming of age of having a sense of beginning, middle, and end. So, it seemed like the perfect solution. And yeah, it was more of a story structure idea. I shouldn't admit this, but I'm not a dog person.

[laughter]

GP: Well, I'll tell you, I'm not one either. I'm a cat person.

AB: Yeah. Like most book people, I grew up with cats, but cat was kind of like, I don't know, it just didn't have the same oomph as a dog. You know, people relate to their dogs generally in a much more intense, personal way on average, like cats kind of come and go; they're not quite as consuming as a dog emotionally. And so it just seemed-- It seemed like it was a necessary thing to make that leap. And then, yeah, that was how that story happened.

GP: I love how you sort of problem-solved your way. I think like that also gives writers permission. Like, it doesn't have to be a heavy, deep book from the get-go. Like, you can kind of work, maneuver the mechanics in order to make it this meaningful experience. But like, I love that it sort of came as a frame afterwards--

AB: Yeah.

GP: -and that it wasn't something that-- I would've been like completely jaw-dropping in awe if it had been all in your brain from the get-go, but it's a bit of a relief. I'm like, okay.

AB: Yeah, no, for sure. Like the story started out as a tree witnessing the rise and fall of human history from one location. And so every page was more of like a Matsumoto honor book where it was like, you're seeing the same scene over and over again from different seasons and different centuries. And, it changed from the tree's perspective.

And, that was the whole book. It was like, by the end of the book, the tree had reincarnated it from its own seed and was on its own cycle of rebirth. But there was no emotional-- Unless you really, like, almost like on a giving tree level, sort of cared about this tree; there really wasn't much going on other than observing the changes from page to page, which had its own interest.

GP: Right.

AB: I mean, there's books that do that. And, I find those books fascinating, but I felt like it needed another level of an emotional arc. So, I had to sort of switch things up a little bit.

GP: Love it. So, your most recent book, *You Are Light*, is that out already at this point or by the--

AB: Oh, *You Are Light*, yeah, that came out in the spring.

GP: Okay. So, for folks who are listening, it's already out; and this book totally blew my mind. And, it's interesting because now we've gone for like the artistry of the, sort of the illustrations to almost like a feat of engineering.

[laughter]



AB: For sure.

GP: Can you talk about that? Like, where did this come from?

AB: My poor publisher!

GP: I know, right? Like, how did you get your publisher on board with this?

AB: Oh, my god!

GP: Because like, it's awesome, but also like, whoa.

AB: Well, so to explain the book a little bit more, it's like very die-cut heavy. So, it's like holes are cut in the book; and it also has colored acetate sandwiched between the pages so that when you hold the book up to a window, the light comes through the colored acetate and illuminates the book, literally.

GP: It's sort of like a stained glass window.

AB: It is a stained glass window book. And, that's where the idea came from. As I was looking at a stained glass window and I was like, 'wow, I've got to make a book that has stained glass; and, how can I do that?' So, I started cutting up shapes with exact O blades and, you know, put in, just playing around with ideas.

And, I built this dummy, which is very close to the final one, except in the book, there's these watercolor-illustrations in the center of these ring of circles. And those watercolor illustrations used to be cut-out pieces of paper that were going to be illuminated as well. It looked amazing. And, my publisher like bought it on that premise. But then when they went to reproduce that as an idea, it was going to be like a \$50 book.

[laughter]

AB: Every page was going to have to be laser-cut and instead of dye-cut. And so it would've been too expensive to build. And so we kind of scaled back the ambition, the build of the book to just be the ring of circles. And, I say just like, it's still a lot of work for them to figure out, but they did figure it out; like, thank God. And, I'm really pleased with the way it came out. I've heard nothing but enthusiastic things from readers, who've discovered this one.

GP: Well, and we need to like break the down the awesomeness of these circles too, because the way it's set up, for our listeners, is not all of the circles have the acetate, the colored acetate; and they overlap in different places so that you actually get, when they're all overlapping, like when the book is shut and you hold it up, there's a rainbow. But then the individual pages have like only one color of acetate on them.

So, it's like this interesting layering upon layering of color that I just play with that book. Like, as a graphic designer, I have fun just like playing with the different colors and being like, what happens when we put these two together? And, it's so great. And, the kids, like kids who are in first or kindergarten or first grade who are learning to mix colors, it's such a great tool also for showing them like, 'oh, you know, pink and blue make purple, and that sort of thing'; like, how the colors combine and stuff. So, yeah.



AB: Yeah. That's it. When I was a kid, my mom had gotten this picture book-- Well, first of all, my mother was a physics teacher at like--

GP: Oh, so that's where that comes from.

AB: Yeah, like an adjunct professor at local colleges in Baltimore. And, she taught all these different classes; and one of them was Light & Color, literally. And, she would come home with these lab experiments, with like various spectrometers; and who knows what else? Lasers and crystals, you know, just like the craziest stuff that most kids would never have exposure to. And so this was just like normal stuff I was breathing as a kid. We also had--

She had found this picture book where it used acetate and colored acetate to combine, not against the light, like stained glass, but against white paper. And so you got like, you could see very clearly the magenta and the yellow forming orange. It was a very different book, but it gave me that notion of like, 'oh, you can do this. It's doable. I could build something like this, or the publisher could figure.'

[laughter]

GP: There's also something really cool about-- Like, you mentioned how those, the watercolors were cut-outs originally, but there's something really cool about the watercolor, which is a very soft image, like, form of art. Whereas like these, sort of, hard-cut colors and the, sort of, more graphic images that we get. And so like, there's this nice pairing of the two things that's sort of graphically designed and built, but then there's also an artistry, sort of, meshed together, which works really well, I think.

AB: Yeah, thanks. And for sure, like building the dummy was like; it was definitely like this object of art, and it felt very personal. And then as soon as you start to mass produce it, it starts to have like harder edges and, like you said, more graphic. And initially, like when they said, "Oh, we can't do these interior cuts of the shapes, so what do you want to do?" I said, "Well, why don't we just print a color of that shape?"

And so the first, we had, like-- It was going to go to press this way of it just being a solid block of pink or red and then yellow and then green. What ended up being watercolor, initially, was just like a solid block of color. And, they printed all these books to send out to reviewers and like everything.

And, I was like, "This doesn't look good." [laughs] It's like, there's not enough interest or texture to it. And so, literally, in one day, I sat down and did those watercolors. I scanned them, I sent them to my publisher, I sized them correctly; I made them like the right format and everything. And, they plunked them into the file and they sent it off to the printer, and the next day it was printing.

GP: Wow.

AB: [laughs] You never know how these things evolve, but yeah, that's interesting what you said. It is like ethereal and gives a softer kind of more personal, organic feel to what is otherwise a very graphic experience.

GP: Yeah. I like the word 'texture', like that really captures the texture between the graphics sort of bold shapes and colors versus the sort of soft watercolor. It's interesting too, like if I were to pick a word that describes all of the, like your entire body of work, 'texture' is very much a thing that's throughout all of them.



Like there's a lot of interesting stuff going on with different textures and color palettes in the Journey, Quest & Return, and the use of like the more sepia versus the Full Blown, you know, like once we're in the Technicolor world of the magical stuff. And, then in Sascha, we get a totally different texture with the more Pastelli feel.

And then, of course, here; we've got this like interplay between graphic and watercolor. In fact, I meant to ask you, can you talk a little bit about how your art process changed going from Journey, Quest & Return to A Stone for Sascha?

AB: Well, it was more like starting before Journey where it really changed because I went to art school for a very brief amount of time. There I was doing like charcoal and oil paint and all that, what you would expect. And then, I got a job in the film industry where everything was digital. And so for 10-plus years, all I did was digital painting. And so when it came time to do a book, I was like, I am not doing this book digitally.

You know, at the time, a lot of people were starting to do digital books, but they still sort of felt digital to me. I wanted to make something, you know, it's almost like what you were saying earlier in terms of texture, I think, what you're-- In some ways, what I was hearing was like, it's almost like there's something kind of handmade about these, right?

GP: Yeah.

AB: And so I wanted something handmade, and all of the books I liked were watercolor and pen and ink, which like, if you look at the history of illustration, it started out with them being able to reproduce black & white liner cuts; and then they could add like a wash of black & white. So, then you had the black line work, which was the only way you could print a picture was with like black and white, very distinct edges.

And then it evolved into softer grays with black & white printing. And then, eventually, the three-color-- Well, first they did separated colors like Frog and Toad or something like that. And then, eventually, you had like, you could do whatever you wanted, but people were so used to line art with washes that that's what is like the norm for illustration. It's like totally technically-driven by what was able to be produced by printing presses.

GP: Right.

AB: And so, because of that, like there I found myself having to learn pen and ink and watercolor; I'd never done it before. And, I spent a summer just like learning this craft and trying to figure out-- I repainted that forest image with the lanterns like five times until I started to figure out like, 'oh right, you need a better paper or you need to have a better brush or you need to use these inks or apply it this way'.

And, it sort of became this process of craft and figuring that out. So, when I was done the Journey series and it was time to do another book, it wasn't like, 'oh, I've done watercolor my whole life and now I'm going to do another watercolor book'. [laughs] It was more like, "All right, now what?" And, I started to sketch A Stone for Sascha digitally on an iPad because the iPad had just come out with this like pencil thing. And, it felt really natural for me to draw right on the glass, as opposed to like a Wacom tablet, which is removed from the screen.

GP: Yeah.

AB: And so that was really an interesting process that I totally just meant for my sketches, for developing the dummy. And, the dummy was finished; and I was like, 'wait a minute. This is like



working. It looks like oil pastel, and I love using it.' So, I just finished the artwork and color on the iPad. And, that's how that came about.

And then, yeah, it's like-- I'm not tied to a medium and the books that I'm working on right now, or like You Are Light, there was some watercolor, but mostly it was using an exact O blade. So yeah, go figure.

GP: Right. I love how you, like, all of the books are sort of an exploration in the medium as well as like the story itself; like that to me is so cool. My inner graphic designer is like going, yay! So, you touched on the idea of what, you know, your upcoming book. So, can you tell us, what do you have coming up next?

AB: So, right now, I'm working on many books at once. I think the first one to come out will be next fall; so, that'd be 2020.

GP: Okay.

AB: And that is actually a follow-up to You Are Light. So, it's another--

GP: Yay!

AB: Yeah, it's another book with the same format, the same acetate, but a totally different concept. I learned so much doing that book that I was like, 'wait a minute. We've figured out this form of making this possible to print.' And, I learned so much about what was possible on how to push it, that I wanted to take it a whole another level.

So, this one is like taking those-- That was like elementary school for me, and now I'm like graduating to middle school or something. [laughs] I'm trying to do the next iteration of elaborate cuts and colored combinations. And, it was a pretty neat book.

GP: So, like basically, you know, circling back to our initial discussion of Star Wars, You Are Light was the Mos Eisley airport or, you know, right?

[laughter]

GP: And like space for it, and now you're doing Jabba's Palace space for it.

AB: There you go. Yeah.

GP: Yeah.

AB: It's fun to be able to-- In fact, like going back to that, not to belabor the Star Wars link, but, you know, those films got increasingly more technically interesting as they evolved--

GP: Yeah.

AB: -because people's ability to make special effects were growing, and the stories got more complex. Like, you're starting with like a really basic good versus evil story with one hero at the beginning. And then, by the end, it's like, there's all these elements going on.

And, I always thought with like the Journey series that I wanted the second book to delve way more into the mythology and to grow stories that way. I think the You Are Light thing is more of



like; it's strictly a technical growth. Like, 'wow, we can do this? I'm going to do more with it.' It's a playground, you know; and I'm going to see what else I can do.

GP: Yeah. It's kind of like, you know, George Lucas used to say that his vision for the Cantina scene was like way more elaborate than they were able to do. And so then when he got to do the whole Jabba the Hutt scene, that's when, like he finally had the money to like--

AB: That makes sense

GP: -actually build the puppets he wanted to build and do all that cool stuff.

AB: Oh, that makes sense.

GP: Yeah. So, it's kind of like You Are Light in that way.

AB: Right. Right. That one is called My Favorite Color, and that's with Candlewick Press. I'm also working for the first time with another publisher. And, this came about simply because, every once in a while, my agent will send me a manuscript from someone else. And they're like, "We know you do your own books, but would you be interested in illustrating this book?"

And, generally, I'm like, "Eh, this doesn't necessarily resonate with me. I like doing my own stuff." And, will just politely decline. But this book came in through the door-- It's by Marcie Colleen. And, it's about the tree at the base of the World Trade Center Towers that survived the collapse of the towers.

GP: Yeah.

AB: And, it is like, holy cow, this story-- I mean, the story itself is amazing, but her text just blew me away; and immediately, I could envision the imagery. And, I said, "Yes, let's do this." And so that book comes out on the 20th anniversary of September 11th. So, that'll be out in end of summer, 2021.

GP: Wow. I was actually-- I'm in New York, and I went down to the World Trade Center and saw that tree. And apparently it was picked up and they put it in The Bronx or something for a while--

AB: Yes.

GP: -because it like couldn't-- You know, when they were cleaning things up and then they replanted it back there; it's incredibly powerful.

AB: So, I went to do some research; and, of course, I go to the Memorial. I'm taking pictures and walking around, and getting a sense of the geography and just the feeling of being there. I only had one day in New York; I had to take the train back the next day. And, I was like, you know what, I've got to get to this place in The Bronx.

And so the next morning, I woke up at like 6:00 AM. I took the train all the way to the end of the line. I walked through these woods in this park, and landed at this sanctuary where they-- They actually grow all of the trees for all of New York's parks at this place. I walked in there; everyone's just showing up to work at like 7:30. And I'm like, "Hey, I'm doing research on this tree; I think it was grown here."

And, they're like, "Oh yeah, let me call so-and-so." They call this guy who had just retired, he shows up. He's the guy who actually did all of the work on the tree. He takes me around, and I talked to him and he



told me all these stories. I was just like such an amazing experience of getting to know this tree; and a little bit more about what fueled this story, but it's a beautiful text. I hope to do it justice with the illustrations.

GP: Wow. Wow. Yeah, it sounds like it's going to be a powerful, powerful story. So, I always like to end with the same question. What's your number one tip for writers?

AB: Oh, wow. Number one #1 tip for writers: you know, I don't know if there's a piece of advice that anyone could have given me that would've helped me along my way to some extent, because-- Maybe the piece of advice is like, don't listen to people's advice and follow your own path, because this is something that you're either going to be able to find your way through on your own or not.

I mean, certainly making connections to other people is helpful and finding inspiration from other people, and having those conversations; if you can meet someone who does books or know someone. But everyone has their-- This is such a personal thing. It's almost like if you're a musician or a composer, or like, what's your advice, or if I want to be a composer-- I mean, how do you explain how to make amazing music or find your muse or what have you?

I think that that's really my best piece of advice is to follow your own-- It sounds so corny, but I think that the things that sound corny are true, [laughs] that's why we hear them so often. Yeah. You got to find your own path. Also, I guess, in a more practical sense-- I mean, that's my dreamy answer. And, then in a more practical sense, when I gave a keynote at the SCBWI conference, I remember thinking about this question quite a bit.

What I sort of came up with was a lot of people who are trying to write, are beating the same dead horse over and over again, and wondering why it's not working. I do the same thing. Like, I just spent a year-and-a-half on a manuscript for a Middle Grade novel that I eventually had to abandon, because I thought I was improving every time I went back to the draft and I just wasn't; I wasn't evolving.

I think knowing that happens to people who are published is really handy to realize. Like, there's a point, which I think it's handy to realize that what you're doing isn't working. We get so attached to our egos and our creations and thinking that we're like, it's just the world that doesn't see our genius.

When, in fact, there are things that we need to do to step back from what we're doing; listen to feedback and listen to what people are saying and realize that maybe there's some truth in that. So, as much as you're trying to find my ethereal, like advice is, listen to yourself. [laughs]

But I guess my practical advice is, you have to do that, but at the same time, be willing to humble yourself and realize that maybe you need to step away from that, you know, book you've been trying to write for seven years; and realize, maybe there's a reason it's not working. Maybe this isn't--

I'm approaching it from the wrong direction versus trying again and again; I'm going to scratch this draft and try all over again. Like, you know, it's a very difficult call to make. I think we can only make it on an individual basis. But I know I reached a point on that Middle Grade novel where I was like, you know, 'maybe one day I will write this, but not now. I got to move on'.

GP: I totally hear you on that. You know, it's easy for us to get tunnel vision and sort of forget, like not have that perspective. And so to be able to step back and realize like sometimes, yes, writing is hard, but sometimes if it's like really ridiculously hard, that might be a sign that like, you need to try another project, you know?



AB: Totally.

GP: I've had like those projects where like I was beating my head against the wall; and I'm like, 'why is it so hard?'

AB: Yeah. Yeah.

GP: And then I'm like, 'oh, it doesn't have to be this bad'. And then I like course-correct, and I'm like, 'oh, that was easy'. So, it's not always that cut-and-dry, but there is that point where we need a reality check. And, you're totally right; having other people whose opinions you trust to give you that reality check, can be pure gold.

AB: Yeah. Yeah. You just have to listen to it. And sometimes you're not ready to listen to it; and so you'll work for another two years on it and then they'll say the same thing, and you're like, 'oh, yeah, you're right'. [laughs]

GP: Or sometimes like me, you're just boneheadedly stubborn. And you're like, 'I know you're right, but I'm going to do it my way, anyway'.

AB: Yeah.

GP: Then like two years later, you're like, 'all right. Yeah. That didn't work.' [laughs]

AB: There you go.

GP: Yeah. Well, it's been such a blast chatting with you today, Aaron. Thank you so much for being on the show.

AB: Thank you, Gabriela. It was really fun to talk about creativity in this way. I don't get to do it very often.

[laughter]

GP: All right, word nerds. Thanks so much for listening. Keep writing and keep being awesome.

