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Uri Shulevitz: The Artist Whose Illustrations Have Life

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In a question and answer session at the Symposium for Young Readers at Brigham Young University (summer 2000), Uri Shulevitz was asked if intentionally created his buildings, trees and other objects to appear as if they have faces. He replied that he tried to make them seem alive. Bringing life to stories with pictures is what Shulevitz has been doing since he was very young, and it was the recurring theme in all he told his audience at BYU.

Shulevitz he began drawing on walls at the age of one. At age four his world fell apart as the Nazis invaded his home in Warsaw, Poland. His sole escape was into drawings. The family fled to Central Russia, where young Shulevitz continued to draw with charcoal and color from flower petals, but he remembers that he was always hungry; money was scarce and he bought his first book with sugar cubes. When the war ended, the family moved to Paris, where the young artist fell in love with movies and French comic books. In 1949, he and his family moved to Israel, where he worked at various jobs during the day and divided the evening between art and school. The quality of his art was recognized in Israel; he was the youngest artist to participate in a drawing exhibition at the Museum of Tel Aviv. In 1959, at the age of twenty-four, Shulevitz moved to New York City.

While in New York, he attended the Brooklyn Museum Art School, and at twenty-six sold his first picture book, *The Moon in My Room*, to the Harper Publishing Company. One of the editors told him that he would someday make money. He hung his first royalty check of seventy-three cents on the wall beside a check for a million, which a friend had given him with the proviso that it should never be cashed. He reminisced that books then were color separated. His illustrations for Arthur Ransome's retelling of *The Fool of the World and the Flying Ship* (winner of the 1969 Caldecott Award) were his first full-color project, and he had to do several drawings of each picture (they were

then printed on top of each other to provide the full color). It took him six months to prepare the dummy of the book. He commented that books produced in this laborious fashion were not always beautiful, but they had feeling; he added that books now are beautiful, but they don't always have feeling.

Amplifying on this problem, he told his audience that children's book departments have grown in size, federal funds have diminished, and the publishers are more and more dependent on bookstores for sales of their books. Unfortunately, the chain stores are pushing the knowledgeable people out of business, and publishers have to attract attention of the public at all costs. As such, they may pick someone with name recognition but not quality, which explains why famous people with no background in writing are authoring children's books. Adding to the problem of quality is the fact that large companies are swallowing up small publishers as children's books join the mass culture. In the past there was less pressure on making money and more emphasis on love of books. Unfortunately, books are now viewed as a product to make money. When questioned, Shulevitz didn't think everything was better in the past or that it is worse now. Perhaps of most importance to readers of children's books, he is not pessimistic about the future.

Returning to the picture books created by Shulevitz, he showed slides from *The Treasure* (1978). He explained that when the hero reaches the city that is almost his destruction, it is actually Prague; he is perhaps harking back to the destruction he so vividly remembers as a four-year-old when the Nazis invaded his native Poland. In *Hosni the Dreamer*, the marketplace is based on his memory of markets in Central Asia—the location the family fled to when they first left Poland after the Nazi invasion. He told his audience that the setting for *Dawn* was in upstate New York. The idea for *Snow* started many years

ago when he watched snow fall and melt in New York City. The snow would keep falling, and little by little the roofs became white. He wrote the words to describe the storm in a book; years later, when looking for ideas, he found the notes and created *Snow*.

Shulevitz's books take on a life of their own. Readers note that crooked houses and buildings seem alive in all of these picture books. One questioner thought he was more influenced by architecture of the past than the present. Shulevitz replied that he did find the older structures more interesting; there seems to be more visual substance to deal with in older buildings and clothes. He found it difficult to find a soul in a concrete building, and again emphasized the point that to him the personal feeling is very important. In *The Treasure*, take a look at the slightly distorted cart climbing a hill; the distortion lets the viewer feel the mighty effort it takes for the horses to pull the cart up the slope. In *Hosni*, the mountains and rocky pinnacles Hosni travels through rival the formations in Bryce Canyon. He told his audience that he loves dry landscapes and prefers to live in a place where the landscape pleases his eyes. It is easy to see how much influence the experiences from his early years play in creating pictures that give his stories life.

When asked which medium he prefers, Shulevitz replied that he was very fond of using the translucent kind of watercolor, but lately he had been mixing ink, including colored ink with watercolors. When asked if he draws pictures the same size as the book or larger, he replied that he used to do them the same size, but as his eyes have gotten older, he works on pictures that are twenty percent larger than the final book will be. His reputation as an artist who gives life to stories is such that editors don't ask him to submit the whole story for a proposed book; he submits a dummy showing the sequence and one finished picture. When asked how he chooses the stories he illustrates for others, he said the story has to speak to him, again emphasizing the importance of the feeling of the stories he chooses to make come alive.

To Shulevitz, creating art that is alive is much more than simply being recognized as a great artist. He wants to create picture books that give hope to the children who read them. In a published essay

(Shulevitz, Uri, essay in *The Illustrator's Notebook*, edited by Lee Kingman, *Horn Book*, 1978), Shulevitz wrote, "A picture book is not a silly plaything. Its message, written in coded language, reaches the child in his prison, is understood by him while often hidden from the adult or parent who is unwilling to listen to its true content or is simply insensitive to it. The key to that prison is a life-affirming attitude. Children are very sensitive to this because their lives depend upon it. A destructive, life-negating attitude will not do. Neither will a saccharine approach. A picture book does not have to be deep, but it does have to be alive—whether it offers pleasure, joy, or sadness. I believe this point of view is essential to anyone in the field."