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Peter Parnall: From Would-be Veterinarian to Children’s Book Illustrator

by Lillian Heil

Peter Parnall grew up thinking he wanted to be a veterinarian. During a period of restricted activity (because of a serious childhood illness), his room became a zoo of horned lizards, snakes, parakeets, hamsters, and a squirrel. He was the local source for exotic creatures for the whole community of children, until a young neighbor politely asked Peter’s mother if his boa constrictor had arrived yet. When Peter’s mother discovered that the child’s parents didn’t know about and didn’t want a large snake, Peter’s business activities were more closely supervised. Peter Parnall has had close associations with animals from his earliest memories of fishing with Grandy (his pet name for his grandfather Parnall). Although his growing up years involved a lot of traveling (his father was in the air corps), he always seemed to collect animals, especially horses. While attending Cornell University, Peter Parnall realized he was still interested in animal behavior, but not to a lifetime of sewing up cats and dogs. He wandered through various jobs, working for two years as an art director for magazines and in freelance photography in New York City. He thought his career in the world of advertising was beginning. But when his oldest son was killed in an accident on their Delaware River farm, Parnall quit work in New York City, to be closer to his family. He decided to leave the fast-paced advertising world and sell his art work to editors of juvenile books. Atheneum gave Pamall his first two jobs, and his career as an illustrator of children’s books was launched.

Parnall’s unique style of pen and ink drawings resulted from his love of etchings and his lack of funds. He could not afford the equipment for etchings, so he created ink drawings that had a touch of color and enclosed large areas of white space. Parnall has illustrated more than 50 children’s books. Parnall’s use of curving lines around large areas of white space and spots of color has been particularly appropriate for Byrd Baylor’s books about the beauty and wide open vistas of our western deserts. Readers who haven’t discovered the unique chemistry of Baylor and Parnall’s books will be pleasantly surprised. Some of their works include The Desert is Theirs (1975); Hawk, I’m Your Brother (1976); Your Own Best Secret Place (1979); The Other Way to Listen (1980); and I’m in Charge of Celebrations (1986). Baylor’s free verse and Parnall’s
expansive illustrations can communicate the freedom of these wild areas without one ever actually seeing them. (But be forewarned, after reading these books, you’ll probably find yourself planning a trip to the desert to see hawks, rainbows, and dust devils with your own eyes.)

In recent years, starting in the 1970s, Parnall realized that writing books for children was as fascinating as illustrating them. The impetus behind this was his desire to share his knowledge of nature and ecology, the "things children of ten ignore" (Something About the Author Series, Volume II, p. 272). Parnall’s books concentrate on the small and simple things in nature, which may transpire near a woodpile or a stone wall. The Daywatcher (1984), one of those books, is about birds of prey. The drawing opposite the table of contents shows Parnall’s skill with the pen and his love for the sharp-eyed, fierce birds that are members of the raptor family. A detailed line drawing of the head of one of these efficient feathered hunters captures its majesty and elegance.

Parnall’s recollections of birds began at age three and include an amusing encounter with a red-tailed hawk, who failed to catch a rabbit after somersaulting on his first dive, ran 30 awkward yards after the zigzagging rabbit, and finally gave up when his prey took to a stream. Actually, Parnall describes red-tailed hawks as very efficient hunters of pheasants—but I guess even a hawk can have an off day. In this drawing, he shows a more successful red-tailed hawk about to capture a pheasant for dinner. Parnall sketches the bird’s superb hunting equipment—his
eyes and his curved beak—and the upraised head of the cornered pheasant, communicating the frantic fear of the desperate victim. The sketchy lines showing the feathers and wings of both birds give the illustration a feeling of flight and of catching a dramatic moment amidst a fluttering of wings.

Taken from The Daywatchers. Copyright © 1984 by Peter Parnall. Reprinted by permission from Macmillan Publishing Comany, New York.
Stuffer (1992), a more recent book, reflects Parnall’s love of horses. It also illustrates his unique use of touches of color in his special ink drawings (which you won’t be able to see in our black and white reproductions, so you’ll want to find and look at the actual Stuffer). This is the story of a pony named Stuffer, whose little girl outgrows him. He is sold, mistreated, and overworked, and finally sent to an auction, where he is purchased by another little girl whose gentle pats and sugar treats help Stuffer remember the happy days of his youth. Look for pictures of Stuffer as you read through this issue of the BYU Children’s Book Review.