1994

An Interview with Gerald McDermott, Recreator of Yesterday's Tales for Today's Children

Lillian H. Heil

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cbmr

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cbmr/vol15/iss2/3
An Interview with Gerald McDermott, Recreator of Yesterday’s Tales for Today’s Children

by Lillian H. Heil
Associate Professor, Department of Elementary Education
Brigham Young University

Traditional tales (also called folktales and myths) have always spoken to Gerald McDermott. At age nineteen, his first movie (done at Pratt Institute in New York City) was based on a Japanese tale of a stonecutter. This tale was taken from his treasured childhood collection. Upon graduation from New York’s Pratt Institute, Joseph Campbell, world authority on mythology, became McDermott’s mentor, helping him to see that folktales carry important ideas that act as guideposts and make connections for us with our earth and its people. For twenty years McDermott’s aim has been to make yesterday’s tales available to today’s children.

Now at the threshold of the twenty-first century, McDermott has joined the Joseph Campbell Foundation as the builder and tester of a K-6 curriculum based on important ideas from mythology. McDermott’s travel schedule can be frantic as he works with two schools in Michigan, two in California and one in New Mexico. When asked if he noticed any consistencies or differences in children’s responses compared to twenty years ago, he said children still have a great sense of wonder in the early grades, but third and fourth graders of today are more sophisticated; they can and do make connections between traditional tales and the world around them.

But how does Gerald McDermott choose the tale to recreate? His answer was, "The tale chooses me." After he has focused on a particular culture he reads hundreds of stories until one of them leaps out at him. He said he could not spend the time and creative energy on a story about which he was not excited. Then he works on finding ways for the story to speak to contemporary audiences. The result has to be a combination of tradition and his own deep feelings about life. As he put it, "Half of the story is you and half is what has come before you. If you don’t put yourself into it, the recreated story is a kind of fraud."

Among all the world cultures, how does McDermott decide on his cultural focus? His reply: "It is usually determined by art or music. With the Irish
tales it was a direct result of listening to 'The Chieftains,' musicians who perform traditional Irish music." For *Papagaya*, a recording of Brazilian Jazz inspired the action.

So we know that both the culture and the tale have to capture McDermott's attention. Whence comes his uniquely abstract and symbolical art style, one that often seems more difficult for adults to appreciate than young children? McDermott replied that all of us come into the world as artists. His art speaks to young children because they think symbolically. Whatever is of central importance is the largest image, no matter what its actual size, and photographic realism is unimportant. He says this imaginative perspective is "ground out of us by the time we become adults." He has retained this creative way of seeing, perhaps because he began his study of art at the early age of four. The Detroit Institute of Art and the great works in the museum were his teachers until he turned age fourteen. As a nine-year-old, his experience as a radio actor let him feel the power of integrating sound, music, and drama. Art courses based on Bauhaus principles at Detroit's Cass Technical High School also added to the background from which his modern techniques, stylized shapes, and vibrant colors have evolved.

It is apparent from his picture books that his style and medium vary—on what are such art decisions based? He replied, "The medium, shapes, and colors grow out of the demands of the story." One comical example was the difference between his first sketches of a rather conventional rabbit for the trickster, Zomo. The rabbit kept getting fatter and squatter until the final version became the plump stylized little rabbit you will see in the book—a perfect image because roly-poly little guys often have to live by their wits. Notice that in our reproduction from *The Stonecutter*, the shapes have sharp edges; they have been cut out and pasted on the page (technique called collage). These sharp edges fit the stoncutter's character along with his ax head, while his kimono and his stylized upward metamorphosis from prince to sun have a distinctly Japanese look that McDermott created from his study of Japanese prints. *Arrow to the Sun* (Caldecott winner for 1974) transports the reader to a different place and culture. Desert colors, rectangles, triangles, and the kachina-shaped people, reminiscent of Pueblo pottery and rugs, invite the reader to the desert southwest. Contrast these images with the green colors, much more realistic characters, and colored pencil medium in *Tim O'Toole* and *Daniel O'Rourke*. McDermott is a master at combining shapes, colors, and medium to suit both culture and story.
Children's Book and Play Review 7

But after a culture and story have chosen McDermott, where does he begin his work—with text or pictures? His immediate answer was "The text. I wander around the house talking out loud. I keep telling the story aloud until the rhythm feels right. It has to have the rhythm of an oral tale." If you’ve heard or read powerful versions of folk or traditional tales you’ll know this means strong verbs, interesting sounding words, and vigorous rhythmic patterns. Good storytellers (like McDermott) choose language as carefully as a poet. During that period of telling himself the story McDermott says he may have images come to mind and he develops a feeling for character and a color scheme.

When asked what kind of a work schedule he has, McDermott laughed and said, "I don’t have one. It’s an organic process." After the first draft is written, he makes a story board showing the sequence of the illustrations to go with the text. He knows he has fourteen double-page spreads (for a thirty-two page picture book). He makes a "mock-up" or dummy copy—actually a small book; from it he can check the color scheme and transitions. This is the time to make major visual changes. When he’s satisfied, he starts working in pencil with full-size paper. A book takes four to six months of drawing and painting, sometimes for twelve to fourteen hours a day. He feels free to alter the text up to the last minute, especially if the text is made unnecessary by information in the illustrations. But major changes in the compositions are made in the dummy copy stage.

When asked to select illustrations for this issue of CBPR, McDermott chose the ones from *The Stonecutter* and *Arrow to the Sun*. The third was from *Raven*, his trickster tale from the Pacific Northwest. After deciding on the one of Raven stealing the sun from Sky Chief and his people, he remarked that he had chosen three pictures with something in common. When you’ve found the Raven picture in this issue, figure out the commonality. Compare your answer to his (upside down under the Raven illustration). If your answer is different, write in care of his publisher and tell him what you saw.

McDermott’s new trickster tale is *Coyote*. As you can see from our reproduction, Coyote is a jaunty-looking buffoon who will inspire both your affection and your laughter. Don’t miss the actual book—the colorful earth tones enhance the brilliant blue of coyote, who decides to sing, dance, and fly like the crows. (In this tale crows are tricky too).
10 Brigham Young University

Asked if he has made movies in the twenty years since The Stonecutter and Arrow to the Sun, McDermott replied that he hadn’t, but he is planning to produce videos of his trickster tales. Like the heroes of his stories, McDermott has gone on a journey and come back to a starting point of making films—perhaps to start a new journey.