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Robert Duncan, a Realist Illustrator

by Rita Christensen, M.L.S.

Former Children’s Librarian

Robert Duncan, a popular Utah-based artist, is a realist painter of rural themes. Realism started out as a nineteenth-century movement in painting that supported the idea that everyday life is a suitable subject for art. It is apparent that Duncan is a contemporary realist: "I decided I ought to be painting things that are good now... just everyday things and everyday life."

Duncan grew up in the Salt Lake City metropolitan area. His childhood summer retreats to his grandparents’ Wyoming ranch inspired his interest in painting Western Americana scenes. Duncan’s grandmother gave him his first paints when he was eleven and this gift influenced his future livelihood.

As Duncan perfected his skills as a painter, luck came to him in the way of mentors. Sculptor Ed Fraughton was an inspiring Salt Lake City neighbor. Another artist, John Climber, also gave him advice on art. John, who had studied art with Newell Convers Wyeth, often told Duncan stories that Wyeth had told him. Wyeth, who has completed more than 3,000 paintings, is one of Duncan’s favorite artists.

After attending the University of Utah, Duncan had his first art show in a Wyoming dry cleaning establishment. Here he sold his first painting. After his humble debut his résumé soon listed grand achievements—including his election into the Cowboy Artists of America where he won two silver medals in the annual exhibition.

Gallery work keeps Duncan busy these days, and the public exposure often leads to independent projects. An editor for Dial Books for Young Readers was vacationing in Montana when she saw a Duncan print hanging in a gallery. Finding his realist painting style perfect for the illustrations for a children’s book she was editing, she contacted Duncan and sent him the manuscript. He was moved by the story and accepted the project. It took Duncan over a year to create the eighteen oil paintings for Toni Johnston’s *Amber on the Mountain*, a story about friendship between two young girls and the power of literacy. Shy and lonely Amber makes friends with newcomer Annie, who teaches Amber to
read. Annie’s family moves when a new road is completed, but Annie’s letters to her friend inspire Amber to learn to write.
Duncan lives with his wife and six children at the foot of the Wasatch mountain range. The peaks above his valley, which have served as backdrops for many of his paintings, also show up in Amber’s story. The action in the tale is presented to the viewer against backgrounds of prodigious mountain scenery.

Duncan’s compositions are strikingly strong, enhanced by the rich handling of color and light. A pleasing balance of warm and cool tones is achieved. People, animals, fields, and everyday objects of the home are sensitively rendered with delicate and regular brushwork.

The quiet intimacy in Duncan’s character portraits makes one feel as though he knows them personally—and he does! Duncan uses his family and friends as models for his illustrations. Annie is a daughter; Amber is a neighbor.

Will Duncan continue to share his artistic talents in the form of children’s illustrations? After Amber on the Mountain was published, Duncan turned down illustration offers from several publishers. The manuscripts did not hit a chord with him as did Johnston’s story; however, he does have book ideas of his own that revolve around family life.

For now, we can see how Duncan is able to "glorify a little bit of what’s good about people" through his first children’s illustration project. Johnston and Duncan’s book can be used for a variety of storytime and booktalk themes: friendship, hard work, diligence, learning, hope, letter writing, literacy, and country or rural living. Duncan’s skill as a realist illustrator—the ability to make everyday scenes warm, inviting, and human—helps draw children into the story of Amber on the Mountain and identify with its characters.
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